

LANDSCAPE AND ITS DISCONTENTS – ART AND RUINS, A CRITICAL TOPOGRAPHY  
IN WORD AND IMAGE

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## ABSTRACT

Landscape and its Discontents — Art and Ruins, a Critical Topography in Word and Image

Mark Allwood

From Altdorfer and Poussin to Cézanne, Monet and to the Group of Seven, landscape has been a focal point of artistic inspiration for most of what we think of as modern art history. In contemporary times the concept and representation of landscape has shifted from visions of an idealized and exalted place to notions of the landscape as a ruins and site of ecological disaster. Because of this seismic inversion, artists are no longer solely making visual the beauty and serenity of nature but are rather finding novel ways of problematizing it and incorporating themes of its eventual disappearance, its inescapable transformation into ruins. The following dissertation puts forward a critical topographical study of three sites and three different artists who deal with this new found relationship to landscape. The three landscapes are located in different parts of the world and from different artistic contexts yet showing that they retain an aesthetic and conceptual character that links them together is part of the work of the dissertation. The first site is *El Sol del Membrillo*, a film by Víctor Erice in which the filmmaker chronicles painter Antonio Lopez García's attempts to paint the ephemeral, he attempts to paint that which is in the act of disappearing. The second site is The Mill St Cemetery in Cambridge, England where artist Gordon Young has contributed a work of public art titled *Bird Stones* that blurs the line between landscape, sculpture, monument and artwork. The third and final site is **Tommy Thompson Park** in Toronto, Canada that presents itself as an ecology park of retrieval, recovery and as a public art space. My investigation of this last regional research site is offered both as a chapter and as a videography about wilderness as wasteland.



**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Aesthetic Chorography, Anthropocene, Antonio López García, Art, Artwork, Cambridge: Mill Street Cemetery, Cinema, Cinematography, Critical Topography, Document, Documentary Images, Ecology, Environmental Poetics, El Sol del Membrillo, Experimental Cinema, Gilles Deleuze, Gordon Young, Jonathan Bordo, Landmarks, Landscape, Madrid, Mimesis, Monuments, Painting, Place, Raymond Williams, Reclamation, Ruins, Site, Sound Design, T.S. Eliot, Toronto: The Leslie Spit, Tommy Thompson Park, Víctor Erice, Videography, Walter Benjamin, Wasteland, Wilderness, W.J.T. Mitchell

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This dissertation is dedicated to my father who without his unwavering support, encouragement, and belief in my academic career none of this would have been possible. It is also dedicated to my mother who always believed in the arts as a viable future for her son and who encouraged me to follow all my dreams.

## Table of Contents

<u>Abstract</u> : .....	ii
<u>Keywords</u> .....	iii
<u>Acknowledgements</u> .....	iv
<u>Introduction</u> : Critical Topography, from dream world to wasteland .....	1
<u>Part 1: Discourses</u> .....	27
Chapter 1: Discursive preparations for <i>El Sol del Membrillo</i> .....	28
Chapter 2: Analysis of <i>El Sol del Membrillo</i> .....	42
Chapter 3: Conceptual framework: The Commons and Landscape .....	110
Chapter 4: Visual, poetic, and theoretical encounters with Tommy Thompson Park .....	148
Conclusion .....	215
<u>Part 2: Videography</u> .....	219
<u>Part 3: Appendices</u> .....	220
Appendix 1: Translation of <i>Responsabilidad y significación estética de una crítica nacional</i> by Víctor Erice .....	221
Appendix 2: <i>El Sol del Membrillo (Dream of Light)</i> : A Map of the Film .....	243
<u>Bibliography</u> .....	272

## Introduction – Critical Topography, from dream world to wasteland

### 1. *El Sol del Membrillo* and critical topography

The film *El Sol del Membrillo* is a culturally valuable exemplar of an aesthetic document of place. It serves both as a document of the process of an artist by giving us an inside look into his methods, inspiration, and labor but it also operates under an aesthetic register by being, itself, a work of art that imitates the methods, labor, and temporality that characterize the work of the painter Antonio López García. The way I have studied this film is not through the typical lens of film studies/theory but rather through an emerging approach referred to as *Critical Topography*. The discipline, which I have learned through my academic mentor Dr Jonathan Bordo, seeks to create a complex network of texts, theories, and discourses for the critical study of place. The underlying approach of Critical Topography is concerned with the poetic, mental, and critical forms that make up a place and which reflect on the ways place can both be a geographical location, a text, and an image of thought. In my adaptation of this method, I have chosen to study the film *El Sol del Membrillo* by Víctor Erice, Gordon Young's site-specific sculpture *Bird Stones*, and the site of **Tommy Thompson Park** in Toronto, Ontario.

The approach, in the words of Jonathan Bordo, is a combination of the root word *topos, topic* and *choros*. *Topos* concerns a writing of place; “geographically as a bounded space of human inscription and dwelling; rhetorically as a space which holds a pattern of thought.”<sup>1</sup> *Choros* concerns the x that marks a spot; “just that place, exactly there, nowhere else. Its ascription is marked by the momentary, here and now existential of a subject asking what place is this. [...] It is the address. The place here is *choros*, which is the singular specificity of a place here for me at

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Bordo, “The Homer of Potsdamerplatz—Walter Benjamin in Wim Wenders's *Sky Over Berlin/Wings of Desire*, a Critical Topography,” in *Images 2.1*, 2008, 95.

this moment.”<sup>2</sup> Visual artists select and demarcate places, they often select a place they love to be the site of their labour and temporal/aesthetic investment. A painter selects a place, in many cases one that is significant, and that place there at that moment becomes the site of labour and psychic investment. A sculptor, being committed to the poetics of space, carefully selects a spot for his work to dwell in, knowing that that place there is the ideal destination for his construction (that place and no other).

López García – specifically in the time of work that is presented by Erice’s film – constitutes place in his backyard, next to a quince tree he will paint for an entire season. Outside and around the site of his investment is his house, his beloved city of Madrid, members of his family, friends, and spaces of work and dwelling. But his destination, the site of his aesthetic investment and sojourn, is a specific tree in his backyard at a certain time of year beginning in the early fall. A quince tree is the x that marks the spot in which the labour of a season will elapse, and which also points to a deeper – psychically significant— memory trace dating back to a memory of his childhood, a time when his parents were alive, when they shared strolls in the city of Tomelloso. This memory trace, as presented in a latter dream montage in the film, reveals that the time spent with his parents was significant because young Antonio had one of his first aesthetic experiences when noticing the golden and decaying fruits hanging from beautiful quince trees. That spot in his house, and no other, marks the site of an existential here and now for this particular painter, which gets actualized through the carefully designed choreography –the mapping of the tree involves an axiomatic deployment of a Albertian grid that will facilitate the emergence of a tree on the canvas in accordance with the laws of symmetry. Nails on the ground mark the spot where he is to stand every day to achieve the alignment of eye and object; the existential alignment

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<sup>2</sup> Bordo, *The Homer of Potsdamerplatz*, 96.

of I and the object. Furthermore, the choreography involves a physical presence of the painter at the site on a daily basis, after deploying the Albertian grid to honor solemnly the presence of the tree through its symmetrical formal properties, the painter's body is there to survey, describe, and map all the changes that affect the tree's form throughout the temporal sojourn between the two. The painting of the tree, in this way, becomes a writing of place; the *choros* is the quince tree in the backyard as his work site and the *graphos* is its painting onto canvas, a kind of writing as pictorial representation.

In terms of the film that depicts this work it was also my responsibility to acknowledge it as a work of art and a critical topography of place in its own right. If for López García the *choros* is the quince tree and the *graphos* is the act of painting it onto canvas, then for Víctor Erice the *choros* of his work is Antonio López García in conjunction with his tree and the *graphos* is the inscription of their duration onto celluloid. There is an act of imitation (mimesis) at play between the painter and the filmmaker here, Erice faithfully reproduces as film the practice of the artist. He mirrors the painter's painstaking attention to detail and his philosophical/aesthetic approach of accompanying a site in space. Antonio accompanies the tree throughout its permutations and Erice accompanies the painter throughout the trials and tribulations of painting this tree in his backyard. What makes this film more than a documentary is the aesthetic mimesis involved within the medium of cinema and the practice of a painter that honors and bases his work around place and its solemn condition. Antonio creates place through an obsessive ritual in his garden that prioritizes the real duration of the object to be represented. Víctor Erice, in turn, creates place by focusing on the material localities that make up the work of López García during the artistic sojourn of painting this quince tree.

Instead of focusing on the differences between a filmmaker and a painter, which seem

rather obvious, I chose to look at their commonalities and the way in which they both confront time and place in their respective works. Some of the commonalities I have observed at play in both works are place, materiality, formal operations, temporality, memory, and failure. Both Erice's film and Antonio's work have an existential character that confronts questions of place and time insofar as both artists present to the viewer a materialization of the passage of time; their work prioritizes duration both in the process of creating the work and in the experience of its spectatorship. Erice's use of long shots and durational scenes and Antonio's choice of a mathematical depiction of reality have a similar effect on the viewer, evoking in us a meditative and slowed down appreciation of the work. I explore these similarities at some length in the first chapter of this dissertation, but it is to me the event of failure in which the two mediums converge most deeply. Antonio's failure to finish the oil painting of the quince is only possible to perceive through the documentation of his work by Erice's camera. The camera and by extension the documentation of his work creates the aesthetic event of failure, one which would not exist without the presence of this film. The film elevates the dimension of this artistic sojourn by enabling the concept of failure to exist beyond the privacy of the painter's practice and making it available to the masses to witness and reflect upon.

The most pronounced similarity between the artist and the filmmaker has to do with their relationship to *place* and their artistic engagement to *time*. It is clear that both artists have their differences, but they can both be seen as artisans of place. Place plays a central role in the production and creation of their work, but only insofar as we think of place as both the geographic conditions that envelop an individual and the resulting affectations a place receives by contact with a subject. This latter part pertains to the way in which individuals assign 'meaning' to a place, by way of their psychological, aesthetic, and spiritual investments. In this context, I have approached

the medium of film both with topographical eyes- creating a map/sourcebook that deals with the empiricism of its constitutive parts - and chorographically with a discursive section that focuses on the conceptual reading of the film. The map I have created for this film allows me to cite specific sections and scenes of the film in order to approach the film from a topographical point of view without generalizing its content.

Film in the dissertation is treated as place, and as such I have surveyed and demarcated the content of the film into the composite durations that make up the complete film-work. I chose to divide the film by durations, and not by frames, because durations provide an independent consistency that exceeds that of frames (frames have consistency on their own but for this project segments of duration provide me more continuity). It is not an attempt to say that this is how films should be divided, but it serves a functional purpose towards the documenting and studying of filmic works. The decision to separate the film into its individual durations allows me to treat it as a “space” composed of independent sections. It is a method that allows me to study the physical features of moving images in the way geographers study natural environments, by empirically describing and mapping the regions of each film. Understanding that the filmic work is constructed of a fast-streamed multiplicity of snapshots, or still images set in motion by a mechanism; I came to the conclusion that the best way to study a film is to begin by breaking it down into its composite parts. **This contributes to defining my initial topographical iteration of the project and the way I have put my understanding of critical topography to work as an approach for reading a cinematic work and speaking about its interaction with a painting practice. My understanding of critical topography informs the very way in which I developed my analysis.**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines topography as: “n. the study of geometrical properties and spatial relations which remain unaffected by certain changes in shape or size of



figures<sup>3</sup>.” This definition is not necessarily the one I am considering for this study, but it provides a common sense understanding of the way in which topography can influence the study of cultural objects. This dictionary definition tells us that topography invites analysis which I have undertaken by studying the film and by dividing all the minutes of the films and breaking them down into descriptive/isolated segments. The reason for this approach lies behind a philosophical notion that concerns the innate inability of spectators to see and interpret a film in its totality; so, to study the geometrical properties and relations closer, I had to find a way of slowing down a rapidly moving medium into a more static linguistic state. Every viewer of movies has a fragmented experience, since film itself is fragmented and composed of the ceaseless flow of snapshots, one can never see the “whole picture” and is left only with afterthoughts and individually selected memories. By breaking down film in this seemingly tedious way, I hope to teach the reader and myself to pay closer attention to the language of cinema, and additionally create a linguistic document of these filmic works.

This step of topography required the laborious task of transcribing the language of cinema (sequencing of images) into what we can call another realm, the realm of writing.

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<sup>3</sup> Maurice Waite, ed. *Oxford English Dictionary Seventh Edition* ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 452.

## *El Sol del Membrillo (Dream of Light): A Map of the Film*

### Key:

1. The Painting/The tree \*\*
2. Maria/Her Work \*\*
3. Drawing \*\*
4. The Workers \*\*
5. Time: \*\*
6. Contemplation \*\*
7. News Broadcast \*\*

### **Madrid: Fall, 1990**

1. **Saturday September 29<sup>th</sup>** (Begins the process). \*\* Film Duration: **(00:00:00-00:04:32)**
  - a. Credits roll. **(00:00:00- 00:00:40)**
  - b. The film begins with a long still take of a street in Madrid, Spain. It is a fairly quiet street, presumably a residential area composed of large houses hiding behind their high walls. Antonio Lopez Garcia is seen at the distance walking towards the camera. He is carrying with him a rolled-up canvas and a suitcase. The camera follows him until he reaches the door to his house, he unlocks the door and enters. **(00:00:41-00:01:08)**
  - c. At the other side of the door, Antonio is greeted by his dog Emilio. He goes towards his studio, unlocks its door and enters. **(00:01:09-00:01:39)**
  - d. The studio is dusty, Antonio proceeds to sweep the dust and prepare the area where he will be building the canvas. **(00:01:40-00:01:54)**
  - e. Antonio begins to build the canvas, he constructs it piece by piece<sup>1</sup>, starting by nailing together the wood that will make up the frame. He then measures and cuts out a rectangular piece of wood that will serve as background to the canvas. He nails this piece into the completed frame. **(00:01:55-00:04:32)**
  
4. **Tuesday, October 2<sup>nd</sup>** **(00:35:40-00:37:31)**
  - a. Heavy rainfall confirms that the bad weather has persisted, and the sun appears covered by rain clouds. The dimmed sunlight is producing a sombre atmosphere. Antonio is forced to bring a tarp to cover the tree, the painting, and himself. The workers help him cover the site; they place the tarp carefully making sure not to obstruct or touch the tree. Antonio directs them. **(00:35:40-00:37:17)**
  - b. The camera presents the site covered by the tent at nighttime. The day has ended, and Antonio has not been able to paint. **(00:37:17-00:37:31) \*\***
  
5. **Monday, October 8<sup>th</sup>** **(00:37:31-00:37:33)**
  - a. The camera presents another still image of the painting, this time it looks more advanced. However, not much progress has been made in the last five days presumably due to the bad weather. \*\*
  
6. **Tuesday, October 9<sup>th</sup>** **(00:37:40-00:37:46)**
  - a. Another still shot of the painting reveals a more advanced version; more leaves have been added to the work and it now possesses a more visible body. The screen fades to white. \*\*



Illustrations of the map of the film

## 2. The delicate work of translating image to word

Keeping in mind how different images and words are, I have attempted to use words to describe the images in *El Sol del Membrillo* in the most empirical/straightforward fashion in an attempt to make an archive that is both reflective of the objective properties of the film and the subjective act of my looking. This will allow the words to function as labels that will point towards something that is already there and absent in the image. My aim was not to say words are more important than images but to engage in a work of translation that keeps language as a mark or sign for the actions that took place in each sequence. So, aside from the writing being formally about translation – the translation of film language to written language – the language of the maps pertains to the linguistic activity of description, *the map acts as intermediary in the translation*: explaining the “thing” but describing its form in the most empirical way possible; making visible and describing its geometrical properties and spatial relations. This approach opens up the way for a treatment of cultural objects that remains true to the form of the object, without clouding its description with explanatory deviations or conceptual meanderings. In this sense, the mapping aspect of the dissertation is also concerned with creating an imitation that serves as a tool in the pursuit of the study of artworks.

Here I must clarify that I am not claiming that these textual copies precede the original or that words are better than images. The approach has simply emerged from the innate perceptual impossibilities presented by films, which like time itself run their course ceaselessly, and to grasp a moment in its entirety the student of film must demarcate/slow down their passage. However, besides the map of the film I have also – and conceptually separated from the map– opened up a space for theory and reflection in the appearance of footnotes in the map. Many of the footnotes’ ideas deal with the meta-narrative of each film. The point was to keep these two modalities of

writing separate from each other, and despite the maps being the first step I undertook; they will be located at the end of the document in the appendices section. This theoretical move allows me to have a more concrete/static object of reference, and through it, remind the viewer of films that to see already involves a mode of internal (selective) imitation. Or in other words, that seeing a film involves a degree of forgetting – one needs to forget the current frame to begin to see the following one – and this state of visual amnesia must be addressed if one is to talk about films analytically.

In doing things this way, I am not addressing film only through a set of concepts, but primarily addressing the issue through the arduous work involved in creating a critical imitation that is the first stage of my study. Because my reflection is grounded in the double object of the painting within the film and the film itself as aesthetic object, I have tried to provide a faithful account of both and thus I am involved in a *critical imitation*. The point of creating the evidential document of the film was to ground it into my own subjective apparatus; I had to include my own act of looking before making claims about the content of this film. The map is my looking, my seeing, which often gets overlooked when the writer talks about films. Because unlike paintings and photographs which are static sights for witnessing, films remain in constant motion and are composed of the consecutive movement of a multiplicity of frames. That poses a problem for the researcher who is then forced to pause this movement in order to analyze specific frames, scenes, or sequences. To combat this problem with which the researcher is faced, I had to remediate the entirety of the film into language prior to speaking about it conceptually. In addition to this philosophical strategy, I have also sought to deploy a critical topographical approach into the study of movies by treating this film as a place with spatial points and borders to be described, mapped, and surveyed for the purpose of analysis.

### 3. The Leslie Spit and documentary aesthetics

The way I conducted the film analysis has been informed by a curriculum of film studies together with a critical topography approach. These two modes of thought, alongside a close reading of films, led me to the idea that I should make my own film, specifically a documentary videography as an exercise in critical topography in view of my interests in landscape and cinema. My fascination with cinema, and in particular a European cinematic tradition, began during my undergraduate studies at Trent University when the films of Werner Herzog, Alain Resnais, Alfred Hitchcock, Agnes Varda, Lars Von Trier, Wim Wenders, Víctor Erice, Francois Truffaut among many others changed my perspective on life in general and on the possibilities of cinematic language in particular. Watching Godard's *Breathless* and Truffaut's *400 Blows* opened up my imagination and allowed me to think of cinema as a medium with endless potential (not only limited to traditional forms of narrative). What inspired me the most about the directors of the French New Wave was their unrestrained experimentation and their ability to be both playful and lyrical in their expression.

I specifically related to these auteurs perhaps because they were not classically trained and instead learned to make movies from watching and critically engaging a diversity of world cinema. Their practice was less informed by theory per se but rather by the active practice of spectatorship and by a critical *métier* of viewing, analyzing, and criticizing films. This was in some ways my training at Trent, where I watched hundreds of films in my classes and in my spare time and soaked up all the details, motifs, angles, and diverse cinematic languages from these works I studied closely. My viewing of cinema became more so a studious observation rather than a distracted entertainment-based spectatorship; in many ways this is the kind of viewership the films I was

watching expected from me, but it also had to do with the theoretical training I had begun to undertake in the Cultural Studies program.

Up until this moment of profound self-realization my conceptualization of what cinema could be was limited to Hollywood films and mainstream forms of storytelling. That being said, cinema was always a part of my life and I had been an avid fan of movies as long as I could remember. But it was not until I began conducting my critical studies at Trent that I was exposed to radical, avant-garde, and experimental examples of filmmaking. It must be mentioned at this time that it was at this moment where I arrived at the distinction that would mark my relationship to the medium, the distinction between movies and films. In many ways this distinction emerges from Adorno's differentiation between low and high art in which the lower form of art served the purpose of ideology and its counterpart provided respite from the capitalist ideological machine which entertainment helped propagate. This distinction—albeit in many ways still true—is a problematic one because it introduced a hierarchical, and in some way classist, categorization of art. Some of my professors at Trent really believed in this form of categorization and despised the cookie-cutter aesthetic of Hollywood movies and the way in which these films provided distraction instead of intellectual stimulation.

However, the aesthetic partition of low and high art is one that I find problematic and too polarizing for any real-world theorizing of art. So, the way in which I understand the distinction between movies and films is in fact a more technically driven understanding that does not condemn any style for its ideological effects. It was my reading of André Bazin that led me to this realization, in which films that prioritized duration, naturalism in acting and montage, and an overall realism as their foundation appeared richer to me for the study of film in an academic context. These are the kinds of films that appear more philosophically interesting and which depart from what I see

as movies that are generally made with a box office performance in mind. Bazin drastically influenced the directors of the French New Wave by preaching a dramaturgy of nature that stood in opposition to the artificial, staged, and over-acted content of cinema of their time.

Being steeped in these cinematic traditions, learning about the history of the medium, watching films all the time, and having taken courses taught by Professor Jonathan Bordo led me to conduct a critical topographical analysis of two films in my M.A. thesis one of which included *El Sol del Membrillo* by Víctor Erice. The film which I first watched in Dr Bordo's Visual Studies course, really challenged my expectations of what a film could be and the ways in which our spectatorship can be tested. *El Sol del Membrillo* with its meditative slow pace, obsessive attention to detail, and its use of duration as a principal motif might have bored many of the students in the class but it inspired me so deeply that it became one of the films to be studied in depth in my thesis. Víctor Erice taught me that even in a slow-paced film one could extract an infinitude of concepts, ideas, and lessons. His approach to filmmaking really resonated with the aesthetic precepts I had become familiar with during my initial theoretical training at Trent. Specifically, I felt that Erice deeply understood and made visible Bazin's concept of the dramaturgy of nature by prioritizing the duration of scenes and by extension providing viewers a realistic portrayal of the characters and events being depicted.

My undertaking of filmmaking as a personal practice really began in the third year of my undergraduate studies when I took a course in experimental cinema in which we were provided with analog equipment that included 8mm and 16mm film cameras and were inspired to create with these arguably outdated tools. The experience was incredibly inspiring and educational and through the exercise of metering light, learning how to edit through splicing film, and understanding cinematic projection I gained a newfound appreciation for what constitutes the work

behind the final product you see on screen. I felt especially inspired by the materiality of analog cinema and the ways in which celluloid felt connected to the reality I was attempting to represent by way of projecting it. Having read Bazin, Benjamin, and Barthes I felt a true affinity to this analog form of filmmaking and considered it to be closer to reality than the digital forms of video capture that were so readily available. I had, therefore, a difficult choice to make about what medium I would choose to create with. I debated thoroughly what it would mean to choose digital over analog and came to the conclusion that the potential for sharing and presenting my work to a larger audience was rather limited in the analog domain since it was contingent on projection, economically restrictive due to the costs in developing and the cost of film and the old equipment, and the cameras themselves were harder to fix when they inevitably broke down.

Therefore, I decided I would become a digital filmmaker, or videographer to be more precise, and the decision felt justified because in many ways the advent of digital photography and videography represented a revolution in media, a revolution in art and culture that would forever demystify and democratize the tools that were once only available to those with the money to acquire them. This decision led me to look at mirrorless cameras which were starting to become the standard for hybrid photo and video shooters. These were smaller and lighter than the DSLR models that were available throughout the early 2000's and they represented a revolution in the space of entry level professional equipment. That being said, the price was still somewhat restrictive for an undergraduate student like myself without a steady income. It was only after my wedding, and thanks to the generous Canadian tradition of cash gifts, that I was able to save up for my first serious camera.

After much research I purchased a Sony a6500 mirrorless system, mainly due to its highly rated 4k video capabilities and the diverse selection of lenses available for the system. The choice



was not just based on hours of research in video forums, but it was rather a more autobiographical one. My connection to Sony dated back to one of my father's first businesses during my childhood in El Salvador. There he was one of the main representatives of Sony cameras and equipment for television and other forms of broadcasting. He dealt with really expensive cameras, tapes, sound equipment, among other broadcast specific equipment. Due to this, I grew up idealizing Sony—in part because every kid idealizes whatever their parents do—because of how present it was in my life and because my father always told me that no one made better equipment than Sony for broadcasting. The landscape is very different today—in fact I have made the switch to Fujifilm in the present—but my father's statement still holds true as no camera does mirrorless video as well as Sony (they still lead sales and innovation in this field).

It was a few months after purchasing this camera that I was able to envision and materialize my first serious cinematic and photographic endeavor. After completing my master's degree, and focusing almost exclusively on traditional pictorial representation, I had become very interested in the topics of dark ecology, ruins, and destruction as both philosophical and aesthetic concepts. These topics stood in sharp contrast to the more traditional aesthetic concepts of landscape, ecology, and architecture that I had been focusing on in one aspect of my thesis through the work of Víctor Erice. However, the second half of the thesis focused on the work of Andy Goldsworthy, a British sculptor and site-specific artist who incorporates decay and destruction of the work of art into its existence, reception, and archiving. This radical notion of assigning value to destruction and seeing beauty in decay informed my own artistic gaze and led me to look for sites that expressed this paradoxical form of beauty.



Photograph of the demolition of Sears department store in Peterborough Ontario.

From the start of my discovery of alternative cinema, I always strived to point my camera to topics that challenged hierarchical categories of aesthetics and which forced viewers to think about beauty in different ways than they are used to. All of these aesthetic preoccupations led me to point my camera and gaze to Tommy Thompson Park in Toronto, Ontario. My parent-in-law Gin Marshall told me about this park in 2017 after visiting a few weeks prior and being aware of my particular ecological and aesthetic interests. They did not say much about the park itself but emphasized I had to go there with my camera because it was full of beautifully horrific sites and sights. Upon arriving at the park, the feelings of sublime horror and aesthetic joy were overwhelming and immediate.

I knew right away that this site would be important to me for years to come and after that first visit it took only a few days and a few academic articles to know that it would be one of the

topics of my dissertation. I took hundreds of photographs and shot hours of video in the first few visits that year. I did not have a clear intention on what a videography would look like, but I kept going back to this sublime wasteland with camera and tripod in hand and continued to work diligently in documenting the most aesthetically impactful areas of this massive park. Since one cannot really walk and film the entirety of the park in one day I kept going back and taking on new locations every time. My visits culminated with a bike ride to the tip of this man-made peninsula where one can find the clearest skyline and an aesthetically haunting abandoned lighthouse.

Tommy Thompson Park became the site of my labor and psychic investment inspired by the way in which López García's backyard and the quince tree are the x that mark the spot. This park became and continues to be the site of my aesthetic and conceptual sojourn for a number of years. While studying the cinema of Víctor Erice for many years and learning the complexities of what constitutes an aesthetic document, I gained the knowledge and inspiration to conduct a similar study for myself. The place was the Leslie Spit, and my philosophical and aesthetic preoccupations lead me *here and nowhere else*. There were many ways available to conduct a study of this place, ranging from geography to archaeology, but I decided to approach it the way I knew how which stemmed from my training in cultural theory, my study of aesthetic documentary cinema, my newfound videography practice and my academic affinity to critical topography as it has been articulated by Dr Jonathan Bordo and Dr Blake Fitzpatrick.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Bordo and Blake Fitzpatrick (editors), "Place Matters: Critical Topographies in Word and Image," (McGill Queens University Press Spring 2022)

#### 4. The Commons

During the initial articulation of my dissertation project – which was now informed by documentary cinema and the discovery of Tommy Thompson Park—I was tasked with coming up with a tangible idea and a committee to oversee it. It was during the second year of my doctoral degree that concepts, themes, and topics started to become more apparent. In the Special Field Bibliography exam, which is a mandatory stage of the program, Dr Bordo introduced a number of questions that allowed me to start thinking about ecology, commons, and parks in a more concrete way. But perhaps the most inspiring and creative aspect of the exam had to do with a photograph that professor Bordo had taken himself during a visit to Cambridge, England. The photograph, which I will include below, shows Gordon Young’s site-specific public art exhibit *Bird Stones*. The installation remediates an already existing cemetery and inscribed stones local to the site with poems having to do with birds. Birds became a theme because they populated the cemetery which after being an integral landmark of the city of Cambridge had become a sort of derelict no man’s land that was frequented by underhoused people in the community and those managing their own mental health and addiction struggles. The project was commissioned to Young as a way to revitalize this once historically significant public space and make it a desirable destination for city dwellers and tourists to visit. In a few words, the city was looking to clean up the cemetery and make it a desirable and family-friendly destination once again.

Art in this context becomes a way to refigure, revitalize, and rehabilitate a commons that had become a location for illegal activities, underhoused folks, and general loitering. It is from this photograph—taken as a case study of the commons—that I was able to arrive at the similar ways in which Tommy Thompson Park was transformed from terra nullius to an emerging habitat for

wildlife and a popular destination for cyclists, bird watchers, city dwellers, and site-specific sculptors. The Leslie Spit is a reclaimed marshland that became a new habitat for wildlife and a space for public art exhibitions that showcase reclaimed industrial waste in the shores of the peninsula. The connection to Mill Street burial ground, Cambridge was evident and my thoughts around these themes materialized during this special field exam which proved to be a valuable pedagogical exercise that allowed me to articulate a coherent dissertation idea. I articulate this conceptual thread in much more depth in the second chapter of this dissertation.



“Robin” by Gordon Young. Photograph by Dr Jonathan Bordo

## 5. Critical topography and methodology

The dissertation is divided into two main sections, both with their own style and intention. First, it is a theoretical and descriptive analysis into the ways that an artist and a filmmaker create art from place. Secondly, it is my own attempt to create a writing of place, an aesthetic mapping of a site—the Leslie Spit—which I have treated as the place for my own psychic and philosophical investment for a number of years. The first chapter of this dissertation is involved in discussing the conceptual and aesthetic threads that converge on this place, the Spit, here and now. The *choros* is the park sitting on the edge of east Toronto with its extensive trails and burgeoning ecosystems, the numerous beaches and lookouts, and the many areas for waste disposal that are both historically significant and presently in use. The *topos* is the merging—through writing, photographs, and video—of all these geographical spaces into a cohesive/collaborative discourse that takes into account the contradictory and resonant connections that these places have with each other and seeks to both amplify and problematize their connections.

Critical topography frames the three sites that constitute my dissertation in numerous ways: it informs the ways in which place is integral to a film about painting a tree in the same site every day, it modulates the theoretical and site-specific direction of my philosophical study of the commons, it inspires my videography by allowing the content to be a sort of cinematic writing (the filmmaker writes with time-images) about Tommy Thompson Park. There is a sense of locality that reverberates in these three chapters or studies and informs the structure and intention of the dissertation as a whole. With *El Sol del Membrillo* the scope centers around a garden in Madrid, Spain, in the discursive section about the commons we go from a cemetery in Cambridge, England to an urban wilderness in Toronto, Ontario. Finally, in the videography—*The Waste Land- A kino-*

*poetic adaptation*— the entirety of the film is shot in one location, Tommy Thompson Park, Toronto, Ontario.

The purpose of the videography was to mediate and frame a place as both an aesthetic sign and a document about an ecologically problematic place on the fringes of Toronto, Canada. The Leslie Spit has been historically *terra nullius*, in the context of the city of Toronto, dating back one-hundred years when it was only a marshland with no real urban utility. Fast forward to 2021 and what used to be a no man's land is now a burgeoning site for new ecologies and urban recreation that the city touts as an exciting urban wilderness where citizens can escape their urban lives without leaving the city and where new natural habitats are being fostered and created. The reality, however, is that it only became a significant wilderness because of its state as a site of environmental ruination by the hands of industrial progress. In other words, Tommy Thompson Park only became a park and a wilderness area, accidentally, as a side effect of industrial dredging and the destruction of the environment in which it stands. The park is a fortuitous wilderness that emerged from the destruction and pollution of Lake Ontario as a reaction to the “useless” marshland existed in its place one-hundred years ago<sup>5</sup>.

It was intrinsically a non-place that became a site of human investment fortuitously and through this anthropogenic transformation it was transformed into a hybrid wilderness, an urban wilderness. It is such an interesting site for human thought to dwell in since because of its anthropogenic condition it mimics what Thoreau felt to be a true wilderness as “a place that is at the same time, a non-place since it would prohibit human dwelling.”<sup>6</sup> When you arrive at the spit you see the exclusionary boundaries all over the place, with signs demarcating zones of human

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that the practice of merging ecological creation and destruction is commonplace in Canada. For example, a place like Algonquin Park with its pristine woods and lakes shares within its space a logging reserve.

<sup>6</sup> Bordo and Fitzpatrick, *Place Matters*, 6.

exclusion where wilderness and emerging wildlife are being born anew within this arid wasteland. Foxes, coyotes, migratory birds, wetlands, and myriad plants are among the species that have found a new opportunity to grow and develop in the most unlikely of locations, a useless waste disposal ground that houses all kinds of industrial rubble and actively encourages the dumping of said matter. It is worth mentioning that parks are generally speaking created from the extraction of pre-existing nature reserves and in this sense The Spit follows the protocol of most parks in Canada while being completely different in “nature” as a wasteland

Because of the philosophical/ecological paradoxes one encounters at the spit, the aesthetic questions that informed my writing and videography of the site were in line with the work of Edward Burtynsky, Sebastiao Salgado, and philosopher Timothy Morton all of who have paved the way for artists and academics to talk about ruination and environmental catastrophes without falling in the trap of being excessively pedantic, too descriptive, or overtly political in the presentation of aesthetic images that deal with such salient topics that face us as a civilization on a daily basis. When discussing Burtynsky’s work Bordo and Fitzpatrick explain that “His exquisitely beautiful photographs and minimal captions avoid explicit political statements in favor of an implicit understanding of the disastrous effects of extractive industrial processes on the environment. Discursively understated, while descriptively intensive, his approach is in keeping with what Jenkin’s identified as the New Topographics open question on the photograph’s status as a document.”<sup>7</sup> *The New Topographic movement* which influences Burtynsky’s work is one of the main inspirations of this dissertation the overall approach of its topics and specifically the style of the videographic capture. The aesthetic philosophy behind this movement is one that depicts mundane and ordinary man-altered industrial landscapes with a gaze that portrays/shies away from

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<sup>7</sup> Bordo and Fitzpatrick, *Place Matters*, 14.



any aesthetic gimmicks or shrills and instead depicts these industrial sites/sights in their unrefined topographic character.

At first glance these kinds of photographs look like mundane documents of industrial spaces but there is a conceptual overtone that, through this very mundane presentation, seeks to evoke a thoughtful response from the viewer without being overtly suggestive. There is an almost radical objectivity present in this stylistic approach that gives these works a documentary aesthetic that speaks to the viewer from the point of view of knowledge rather than through prioritizing commonplace aesthetic enjoyment. My videography of Tommy Thompson Park follows in this tradition insofar as the style I have chosen for capturing the images is one that allows them to behave like still images, offer very little camera movement, and are about presenting the objective topography of a site where humanity coalesces with and infringes upon the natural landscape. In this sense my work is more inspired by Burtynsky's aesthetic documentation of the Anthropocene rather than traditional modes of visual storytelling centering around landscape.

That being said, there are some differences in my work when it comes to the influence of the New Topography movement. In terms of the content my work does resonate and pay homage to this movement and Burtynsky—being about a new ecological paradigm in the Anthropocene—but it is in terms of the form where my work differs slightly. I opted to affect the images, and by extension the viewers' experience, by slowing down all of the sequences with the purpose of making the experience of each landscape slightly more hypnotic and psychedelic. I also opted to include a psychedelic soundtrack that reverberates and imitates the metallic clanking oscillations we encounter at the Leslie Spit instead of providing the natural sounds of the place. These two aesthetic choices differ from some of the “rules” of new topographic work that seeks to remove the ornaments from the image, but I found them quite useful to the project at hand and necessary

to the composition of the images alongside Eliot's poem *What the Thunder Said* from the book of poems *The Waste Land*.”

Overall, it is Critical Topography that informs the form and content of the studies in this dissertation. In the case of my work with *El Sol del Membrillo* the methodology is present in a twofold manner: it informs my analytical approach of mapping the durations of the film prior to giving my conceptual analysis; it informs the content of the film itself by being about a place—a garden in Madrid—and the artistic inscription of a tree in this garden into the medium of painting. In the research creation component of the dissertation, Critical Topography plays an important role in the general methodology of the discursive section and the videography that follows. In the discursive section I approach the theorizing of the Leslie Spit from the point of view of a commons and I problematize its state as both a park and waste disposal zone. The discursive section behaves topographically by going from a public art exhibition by Gordon Young in a cemetery in Cambridge, England to a public park/waste land in Toronto, Canada. The trajectory is composed of numerous theoretical and geographical steps that make the connection between a cemetery and a waste land—that is presented by the city as a park—visible.

With the videography that complements the discursive section, I have sought to visually document the most relevant sites in this park to enhance the philosophical conversation. Furthermore, I have taken an experimental approach by including segments of TS Eliot's *The Wasteland* and weaved them with the documentary images with the goal to evoke a more conceptual/poetic response from the viewer. The inclusion of poetry allows me to further enhance the connections to a Cultural Studies métier and more specifically to a theorizing of the current state of environmental crisis that we find ourselves in. By including Eliot's poem, I am able to provide commentary on the environmental crisis via a poem that alludes to it somewhat indirectly

while placing the videography within an academic context that makes it accessible to both the general audience and the niche academic readership to which I belong. My hope is that both my analysis of the film *El Sol del Membrillo* as well as my experiment in research creation contribute to an emerging academic field of Critical Topography and to a more general field of Cultural inquiry in the *métier* of Cultural Studies and Film Studies.

## 6. Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation is composed of three distinct yet related studies that take as their inspiration the approach of critical topography, a research creation methodology, and the intellectual heritage of Cultural Studies at Trent University.

**Chapter 1** will comprise a detailed discursive preparation that will give context to the analysis of *El Sol del Membrillo* that will follow in the next chapter.

**Chapter 2** will put forward a comprehensive analysis of the film *El Sol del Membrillo* and provide a reading of the film in the context of critical topography, place studies, site-specific art, and more importantly as an exemplar of a documentary aesthetic cinema. This first chapter will be divided in two sections with the first one addressing the themes of time, duration, and slowness that permeate the form and content of the film. I will also address the metanarratives we encounter inside the film and which address—through the lens of a Benjaminian critique—the ontological value of cinematic and photographic images in relation to the aura of painting.

**Chapter 3** consists of a discursive exploration of the keywords *commons*, *landscape*, *landmarks*, and *ecology*. This discursive exercise begins with a site that provided me with a number of entry points into these concepts, the Cambridge Mill Cemetery and its contemporary

reclamation into a space for public art. After unpacking the mechanisms that allow for such a place to be reclaimed as a site of aesthetic consumption, I address the aforementioned keywords as a way to root my analysis in the *métier* of Cultural Studies dating back to Raymond Williams' work and to provide a prelude to section 2 of this chapter. The Cambridge Mill Cemetery in England and the discussion of key concepts that follow it serve as a precedent and connective thread to my work in Chapter 1 and my endeavours in research creation. This section also paves the way to my own "field work" at Tommy Thompson Park in Toronto, Ontario. This park shares many of the discursive elements that I extrapolate from the Cambridge Mill burial ground and some of which include the themes of environmental reclamation and art as urban rehabilitation.

**Chapter 4** puts forward an analysis of the Tommy Thompson Park that differs from the previous section in that it follows a more auto ethnographic/research creation approach when it comes to talking about the Canadian park. The approach was deemed appropriate because of my physical proximity to the site and my ability to travel back and forth to the location. Out of this embodied relationship emerged a collection of photographs, poems, and academic texts that became central to this section of the dissertation and which I have assembled together in an attempt to put forward a kind of discursive/multimedia bricolage that resembles the seemingly random collection of diverse objects and activities that one encounters at Tommy Thompson Park. From bikers to birdwatchers, from industrial waste to emergent ecologies, and from dirt to metal, Tommy Thompson Park is a bricolage in the truest sense of the word which is why it made sense to write/think about it in a manner that imitated it. Imitation is the highest form of flattery, but in this case the kind of mimesis I pretend to put forward is similar to the aesthetic mimesis that Víctor Erice engages in when creating a slow-moving film about a realist painter that values the passage of time over being prolific.

Finally, as a culmination of the research creation component of this dissertation, I created **a videography entitled *The Waste Land- A kino-poetic adaptation***. It incorporates experimental techniques, slow cinema aesthetics, realism, and excerpts from T.S. Eliot's poetry in *The Wasteland*. All of the differing approaches are brought together to reflect on the disparate elements found at the park itself and to, once again, engage in a form of aesthetic mimesis that I have learned after many years of studying Erice's *El Sol del Membrillo*. The videography, through its form and content, reflects on the philosophically complicated and aesthetically rich sights one encounters at this Toronto park that presents itself as both wasteland and landscape.

## **Part 1 – Discourses**

## Chapter 1 – The Aesthetic Document and Víctor Erice’s *El Sol del Membrillo*

The central question of this dissertation has to do with the status of what scholars Dr. Jonathan Bordo and Blake Fitzpatrick have termed *the aesthetic document*. The term refers to a cinematic and artistic style that emerged after the second world war and which we can observe shaping and influencing the cultural sphere since then. The aesthetic approach—which merges the art of documentary and fiction seamlessly—arises from a post-war sensibility that sought to react to the sociopolitical conditions of fascism and the injustices that it produced. The aesthetic document’s origins can be traced back to Italian Neorealism, a cinematic movement that sought to take reality as the foundation for culturally relevant fictional narratives that resonated with the fascist atmosphere of the 1940’s and 50’s. The movement, spearheaded by directors such as Vittorio De Sica, Federico Fellini, and Roberto Rossellini, can thus serve as the genesis of and inspiration to what we can categorize today as aesthetic documentary cinema.

An exemplar of this newfound cinematic language was Rossellini’s 1945 film *Rome Open City*. The 1945 film takes as its subject matter the urban and social reality of Rome after the devastation left behind by the war. The film represented a significant step away from the fascist propaganda cinema that Mussolini funded and passionately heralded as the most important weapon. Italian cinema before the end of the war was explicitly patriotic and imbued with nationalist sentiments. These films mainly functioned as propaganda and idealizations of national identity, a trend that was perfected by Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* and which was modeled to some extent by sympathizers of the German regime. Neorealism thus represented a direct attack on these propagandist tropes by favoring the presentation of the true ordinariness of Italy during this trying political epoch. It was only after Mussolini and the Nazi occupation of Italy

ended that directors like De Sica and Rossellini were able to produce and distribute their radically realist films<sup>8</sup>.

In *Rome Open City* Rossellini took to the streets of Rome merely two months after the end of the German occupation and relied on the city in ruins as the set and main character for the narrative to unfold within. Location shooting was prioritized over fabricated studio shooting and being so close to the end of the occupation allowed the director to show the real ruins left behind by the violent destruction of the war. Once again, the cast of actors was mainly composed of non-actors which in synchrony with the location shooting of post-war Rome added a powerful documentary and historical character to the film. The decision to shoot in the real world and the inclusion of real people who were themselves coming to grips with the terrible events that had unfolded just two months prior, gave *Rome Open City* a documentary aesthetic that situated itself in direct opposition to the fascist cinema being produced during the war. Rossellini encouraged improvisation from the actors and their powerful portrayal of suffering at the hands of German soldiers mimicked the real-life suffering and pain many of them had truly experienced during the occupation.

What is remarkable about Rossellini's approach is the way in which he merged more traditional dramatic narratives and tropes with improvised scenes of suffering, misery, and pain that the actors were able to channel naturally due to the recent trauma they had experienced in their own lives. The merging of drama and reality is the signature of Rossellini's work and neorealism as a whole and it carved the way for a new genre of filmmaking to come that allowed the coexistence of truth and poetry, of history and metaphor. Rossellini's films were not only a vital

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<sup>8</sup> It has to be stated that Rossellini's involvement with and even collaboration with Mussolini was widely known but, in some ways, we can think of him as an opportunist. With *Rome Open City* I want to think of his attempt at redemption from these ties and to look at the film for its formal characteristics rather than its ideological ties to the fascist regime.



steppingstone in the development of a new cinematic language, but they succeeded in bringing into the theaters a much-needed dose of social healing and reparations at a time where meaning and language found themselves in crisis. Rossellini and neorealism as a whole created an aesthetic space for *truth to exist within fiction* and it gave cinema a newfound purpose in the context of the fascism and propaganda that preceded it.

The work of Rossellini prior to the production of *Rome Open City* was tainted by the stain of fascism and the Mussolini regime. His non-involvement in the resistance (unlike directors like Visconti who were actively involved in the resistance) is one we can reproach and even use to condemn his early work. That being said, it was more of a sign of conformism and opportunism as an artist; something that is somewhat despicable yet not enough to discard his work altogether. What interests me about this work in relation to neorealist techniques is his innovation to create within a seemingly real historical moment (as I pointed out with *Rome Open City* and which is also exemplified with his film *Germany Year Zero*).

Rossellini's 1948 film, *Germany Year Zero*, is yet another relevant exemplar of this emergent aesthetic category and its influence in the development of a cinema of truth is far-reaching. The story chronicles the social and human devastation left behind by the destruction of Berlin through the eyes of young boy Edmund Köhler as he struggles to find work and make a life for himself amidst the ruins left behind by the war. The cast of the film was made up almost entirely of non-actors who Rossellini discovered through the scouting process many years before its initial production. The Italian director was already known to cast non-actors for his films and instead of relying on the rigidity of a script he encouraged improvisation for the dialogues and this approach was no exception for the 1948 production, as most of the characters were played by "ordinary people". Many of the exterior scenes of the film were shot on location in a city of Berlin full of

rubble and destruction left behind by the bombing, adding to profound realism that was enhanced by the improvisatory nature of the dialogues and the unorthodoxy of the actors. Furthermore, the ruins of Berlin are both the site/stage as well as the very object of this film. In other words, the film does not only present the ruins of Berlin as the location for the action of the narrative to unfold but as the main motif and the documentary aspect of the film itself.

Köhler's sojourn of survival faces the viewer with the real-life hardships and effects of post-war society in Germany and the hopeless struggle many German citizens faced in light of the devastation left behind. *Germany Year Zero*'s unique realism is grounded in the fact that Rossellini relied on the ruins of Berlin as the setting for the action that unfolds, making the ruins of a recent Nazi past a central character in the plot and tone of the film. The character of Köhler finds himself in tragic situations that ultimately lead to him poisoning his father in order to make a living for himself. What is unique about this story is its lack of conventional melodramatic tropes and a feeling that what you see on the screen had a real connection to the events of post-war German society. In fact, while the film was being shot in Berlin, the real inhabitants were struggling to find a living for themselves in a society that no longer had the infrastructure it once had. Köhler's story testified to the precarious existence of a German youth that was forced to come to terms with the alliances and actions of their parents that resulted in the total destruction of their present and their future.

Following the second world war and what philosophers termed the linguistic turn, there was a pronounced shift in the form and intention of the cinematic medium. Walter Benjamin's famous quote in *The Storyteller* perfectly exemplifies this cultural context when he writes: "experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness. Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low, that our picture, not only of the

eternal world but of the moral world as well, overnight has undergone changes which were never thought possible. [...] For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by which those in power.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, during times of social upheaval and political turmoil, classical forms like storytelling lose the cultural healing power they were once able to impart. Hence, in this kind of cultural crossroads new forms of communication are both necessary and important to speak about and make visible the new sensibilities of a sociocultural atmosphere in a state of flux.

Influenced by the documentary aesthetic of Rossellini, films like Alain Resnais’ *Hiroshima mon amour* and Wim Wender’s *Wings of Desire* can be considered as advancing of a style that enhanced the poetic and aesthetic components of neorealism while still being indebted to contemporary socio-political realities. What is really important about the style and methodology of these films is the way in which the directors merged documentary and narrative form of filmmaking. There is, in these films, a referentiality to the narrative tropes of the past that delve into the world of fantasy and poetic images while maintaining a realist foundation that provides the viewer with documents of important historical periods. In Resnais’ *Hiroshima mon amour* we get a similar dialectic of historically relevant archival images and a captivating love story that is full of metaphor and poetic fabulation. The use of flashbacks to illustrate the past trauma of the lead actress, played by Emmanuelle Riva, give the narrative a non-linear flow that pushes the viewer to think about the ways in which stories are told and the ways in which the past informs the present. This nonlinear narrative style is something which was unique to the time and instead

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<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller” in *Illuminations* Edited and with an Introd. by Hannah Arendt, (New York City: Schocken Books, 1978), 83.

of borrowing tropes from other cinematic narratives before it, it echoes Faulkner with its novelistic approach by being scared of jumping back and forth through different temporal narratives.

Resnais' film also relies on place as one of the characters of the film by showing the remnants left behind by the nuclear bomb that changed the destiny of the city of Hiroshima forever. Unlike Wenders, Resnais' relies on a kind of photojournalistic approach whenever he presents images of the chaos, pain, and suffering that resulted in the bomb. The opening sequence begins with an exquisitely illuminated montage of the main characters in the act of making love and quickly transitions to shots of victims of the bomb in the hospital and the in the museum for the victims. The addition of music and a poetic voiceover describing the impossibility to talk about one of the world's most tragic events gives this opening sequence an almost dream-like ethos. But the images that precede the love-making scene are all mostly brutally real images of the physical and emotional devastation caused by the bomb and it places the viewer in front of a serious subject-matter. Some images in the hospital and Hiroshima museum show the real impact of the victims of this event and force the viewer to internalize and relate to the pain of the many innocent lives that were destroyed and changed forever by the bomb. Unlike the other exponents of the French New Wave, who favored playfulness, sharp jump-cuts, and an improvisatory style, *Hiroshima mon amour* does not play around when it comes to presenting hard facts about the reality of an unthinkable catastrophe. Reality and place are the ground of the film while the literally and visually poetic narrative frames the authorial perspective from which this story is told.

In the case of Wender's *Wing of Desire*, the inclusion of Daniel and Cassiel as the invisible angels that watch over the city of Berlin, along with the figure of Curt Bois as Homer, the storyteller, give the film its poetic and narrative character rooted in ancient mythological tropes. However, the inclusion of real images of the Berlin Wall, that still divides Germany one year prior

to its demolition in 1994, gives an archival and documentary value to the footage that goes beyond fantasy and cinematic fiction. These images of the wall serve as a reminder of the problematic history of Germany and present some of the most powerful images of the Berlin Wall ever recorded on celluloid. This is why the film is at once a poetically lyrical cinematic narrative and a culturally realistic perspective of city on the verge of tearing down one of the last remnants of its Nazi past. Wim Wenders excels at weaving together archival images of cities and landscapes with exquisite screenplays and character development as is also seen in a film like *Paris, Texas* which includes one of Harry Dean Stanton's best on-screen performances and some of the best documentary shots of a remote urban Texan landscape

In Spain it was director Víctor Erice who invested in the neorealist approach and specifically the way in which this genre was able to combat fascism through the medium of cinema, His film *El Espiritu de la Colmena* does this very well and it is able to condemn fascism through the realistic story of an ordinary family's struggles in post-civil war society. The film dives deep into the inner world of a fractured and divided society affected by a bloody civil war and the fear and censorship of the Franco regime that came along with it. Interestingly, there is a conceptual thread in this movie that sets Erice's work apart from other films that sought to speak out against the oppression of the current regime. The film is, of course, a brilliant story that highlights the effects of the civil war and the "hive mentality"<sup>10</sup> produced by the oppressive regime while maintaining a metanarrative that runs parallel to the story. This metanarrative has to do with Erice's fervent love of the cinema and as in much of his work he includes moments of cinematic self-reflexivity. In this specific film, a mobile cinema production has brought the movie Frankenstein into a small Castilian village and the children of the family we are following are both enchanted and inspired

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<sup>10</sup> *El Espiritu de la Colmena* translates to *The Spirit of the Beehive*. Quite obviously the beehive is a metaphor of the rise of fascism and the psyche of a society after a divisive and violent civil war.

by the arrival of the film. In many ways the disappearance of Anna and the stress and anxiety it causes to her family is a direct form of life imitating art in which Erice, to a playful extent, distinguishes the events of the film the protagonists have just viewed together. This is what differentiates his cinema and where he shows his affinity and love of the medium by expanding a traditional film of fiction by incorporating a meta narrative about the impact and social potential of the medium. The introduction of *Frankenstein* as a collective event for the town to behold and be enchanted by testifies to the power and social reach of cinema and it is his way of saying (beyond the narrative's message) that cinema has the potential to create social change amidst all the political turmoil.

The protagonist Anna is captivated by *Frankenstein* and delves into the world of dreams and imagination after having watched the movie. Through this form of mimesis Erice is stating that cinema has the power to entertain but more importantly change lives and that even within a fascist context it could become a democratizing social adhesive as it is capable of bringing people together. In fact, this trope of children's dream worlds and imaginary monsters explored by Erice is one that directly inspired Academy award winning director Guillermo del Toro who directed important films such as *Pan's Labyrinth* and *The Shape of Water*. Erice's 1973 film follows a tradition of Spanish art and filmmaking that reacted to the atmosphere of fear and control inflicted by the Franco regime. The tradition which included Luis Buñuel, was one that sought to criticize and oppose the current authoritarian regime via narrative (as in the case of Erice) or through coded symbolism (as is the case with Buñuel). In the case of the latter, his surrealism in films such as, *The discreet charm of the Bourgeoisie* created stylistically surreal but succinct criticisms of the elite ruling class that thrived during this tumultuous period. Though Buñuel's films approached

fascism from a more psychoanalytical angle both directors were certainly involved in combating and addressing the negative effects fascism in Spanish society through their art.

*El Espiritu de la Colmena* marked Erice's arrival as one of Spain's most respected filmmakers and we begin to see glimpses of stylistic approach that is defined by the fabulation of historical facts. This dynamic is present in the film we will focus on later, but it is one that dates back to *Italian Neorealism* as a style that sought to depart from conventional narrative tropes while maintaining a grounding in social realities of the time. During the high period of Italian Neorealism, we see a dynamic similar to his first film insofar as directors like Roberto Rossellini created films that exalted the ordinary lives of those that were stricken by oppression, poverty, and other injustices. These films took as their subject matter the often-brutal realism of everyday life after the war but told these stories with a poetic candor that was unique to the medium. What we have roughly termed as the aesthetic document in cinema has its origin in Rossellini and the Italian Neorealists and the aesthetic reaches its climax in the films of Alain Resnais, Wim Wenders, and Víctor Erice as we will make evident in this chapter of the dissertation.

Even though the examples I have provided represent different modes of filmmaking, they all share the stylistic elements of what we consider to be aesthetic documents. The films' realist foundation can be traced back to neorealism and later on to the playfulness and aesthetic innovations of the New Wave. Thus, one can argue that these films reconcile truth and poetry in ways that had not been explored previously. I like to think of the aesthetic document as a way of merging two genres—often at odds with each other—by presenting the truth poetically and the visual embodiment of the poetics of truth. Víctor Erice's *El Espiritu de la Colmena* borrows its narrative structure and attention to a serious subject matter from this cinematic tradition and it is

seen by many critics—despite its reliance on fantasy and character development— as a staunch criticism of Spanish society during the Franco regime.

These judgments of the negative and tragic consequences of fascism are presented and explored through the poetry of drama and fiction without losing the foundation of realism and documentary storytelling that characterized much of Erice's oeuvre going forward. *El Espíritu de la Colmena* is his nod to neorealism, and it represented his own attempt to resist and oppose the fascist tendencies at work in the film industry and in Spanish culture as a whole. Erice was a vocal critic of fascism and he wrote a great number of articles about the role of cinema and realism in the context of Spain's fascist past, present, and future. The director expressed his dissent toward the current modes of critique and realism during his time and proposed a radical reconceptualization of these criticisms in order for Spanish cinema to begin distancing itself from nationalism and ultimately its fascist heritage<sup>11</sup>.

The focus of this dissertation, however, will be on Erice's aesthetic documentary work in the 1992 film *El Sol del Membrillo*. Even though films like *The Spirit of the Beehive* and *El Sur* were critically acclaimed and launched his career, it is the latter which marks a more direct incursion into a novel genre of filmmaking that served as an inspiration for most of my academic and artistic work. The film, in my opinion, stands as one of the most important works in the field of aesthetic documentary; both in its subject-matter and storytelling techniques. The film is centered around prolific Spanish realist painter Antonio López García. The film goes beyond conventional styles of documentaries about artists, by including the city of Madrid, the art practice of his wife María Moreno, his family, his best friend, and in particular a tree in his backyard as the adjacent protagonists of the plot. *In short, the film sought to imitate the realist motifs of the painter by*

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<sup>11</sup> See the appendix of this dissertation for a translation of Erice's article about the ethical responsibilities of national criticism.



*incorporating the ordinary life of the painter, the reality of the city that surrounds him, and by prioritizing a realistic style to tell the story of an iconic Spanish cultural figure.*

Antonio López García is celebrated for his hyper-realistic paintings that, although they follow traditional conventions of realism, often face us in the same way a photograph does. A quick Google search of his work can reveal the almost magical realism I speak of and compared to other works in the same field they often feel so viscerally real that they force the viewer to question their materiality. López García was born in Tomelloso, Ciudad Real, Spain in 1936 and was born to a family of farmers shortly before the beginning of the civil war. It was his uncle who introduced him to the practice of landscape painting and inspired by his teachings, he attended the Real Academia de las Bellas Artes in Madrid from 1950-1955 to become a full-time painter. After graduating from the prestigious academy of the arts he quickly gained a public following for being part of the emergent New Spanish Realist movement. This milieu of Spanish painters followed in a long tradition of realists that communicated in their work a strong, and characteristically austere Spanish, attitude towards reality.

Parenthetically, López García was a close friend of Canadian filmmaker and painter Jack Chambers who lived in Madrid in the 1960's. Chambers' work differed from López García's, being influenced heavily by the surrealist movement in Spain and the existentialist philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. and he often chose topics related to dream worlds and personal memories. The Canadian worked closely with López García and Pablo Picasso and his own hyper-realistic style borrowed from the surrealism of Picasso and the austere realism of Antonio. Chambers lived in Spain from 1954 to 1961 during which he attended the Escuela Central de las Bellas Artes de San Fernando (the same art institute López García attended) from 1954 to 1959<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Cheetham, "Jack Chambers" in *Art Canada Institute - Institut De L'art Canadien*, ([www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/jack-chambers/credits](http://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/jack-chambers/credits), 2013)

It becomes evident after examining the progression of his work, and his close relationship to Jack Chambers, that Antonio's art went through an evolution that culminated in an almost surreal and dream-like style of representing reality<sup>13</sup>. His style evolved from a traditional realism that he studied and perfected in the Art Academy to a hyperrealism that was influenced by the advent of photography and the heritage of surrealism. During the period of his association with the New Spanish Realist movement and Jack Chambers in the 1960's, the Spaniard's work started to display a non-traditional approach to realism by often depicting subjects and objects without their surrounding context, his subjects appeared as if floating in space devoid of the environment that constituted them. His success at the art academy and his prominence within the context of the New Spanish Realist movement allowed him to become an established figure in Spanish and global art circles and is considered by critics as one of the world's best realist painters. His works have been exhibited in Paris, New York, Nagasaki, Cambridge, Baltimore, Boston, Hamburg, and other cities around the world. He also taught painting at his alma mater in Madrid from 1964 to 1969 and he remains an honorary member of the prestigious institution today.

*El Sol del Membrillo* presents us with an intimate portrayal of the artist undertaking what has become a yearly ritual of painting a quince tree in his backyard. His work with this tree, which he repeats every year, does not form part of his most known oeuvre so the film centering around this work really takes us behind the curtain of his personal work and life. What is truly radical about this film, in the context of the documentary genre, is not only the unpretentious portrayal of an iconic artist but the way in which the movie itself straddles the line between documentary film and

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<sup>13</sup> Chambers' unique photo-realistic style had a profound influence on Antonio's style which saw a transformation from conventional realism to a more ethereal realistic approach in his later career. The importance of Jack Chambers for the Canadian art landscape and the development of one of Spain's most significant artists cannot be understated and it makes this research all the more relevant in terms of fostering a connection between Spanish and Canadian culture. Chambers is a vital link between Canadian art culture and Spanish realism from the 1960's to the late 1980's.

poetic fiction. Let me expand on this point further as it will be crucial to the analysis of this film and the dissertation as a whole. The *Aesthetic Document* can be simply defined as both an object of knowledge (truth) and a work of art (fiction). This term may seem ambiguous since it could be argued that all documentaries have an aesthetic dimension, and all works of fiction have some facet of truth to them. But what differentiates this style from both of the aforementioned ones is the way in which an aesthetic documentary is simultaneously a document of truth and a work of fiction.

*El Sol del Membrillo* treads this line brilliantly and ambiguously; many of the scenes that seem like spontaneous occurrences have been planned previously and staged to a certain degree. That being said, the essence of the film is still about the ordinary life of an extraordinary artist, showing him as he naturally engages his artistic subject, spends time with his wife and daughters, and sings in the backyard with his best friend Enrique. The film, in its essence, concerns itself with the assemblage of individual and multiple lived temporalities that constitute the work and life of Antonio López García during a season of work. The camera is there to record these events from an objective standpoint while also making the argument that an artist's work is ultimately inspired by that individual's relationship to the material effects of her surroundings. That is not to say that the film is not about López García as a person, but rather that it seeks to represent him by showing how his identity is constituted by place, time, and the people in his life.

The overall pace and style of filmmaking is slow, methodical, and reflective which requires a special mode of attention from the viewer who is accustomed to fast cuts and montages. The chosen tempo of this film is quite obviously not coincidental since it mirrors the style and workflow of López García (whose work also requires patience and reflection from the beholder). The topic of time, which becomes the most important trope of the film as whole, is arguably a necessary side

effect of working alongside a painter who prioritizes taking his time and working slowly with each piece he begins anew. Being around 57 years of age drives Antonio to treasure every living minute he is able to spend painting and, in many ways, he paints in order to counteract the fast passage of time and his own proximity to death.

During a poignant scene in his backyard, he is having a sincere conversation with his friend Enrique in which they both reflect about the effects that age has had on their outlook towards art and life. Enrique tells Antonio: “By the way, someone once told me that painters, middle-aged painters in Paris, men who are now the same age as us, work with feverish intensity. I didn’t understand it then, but I admired them for it. Now that I am at that age, I understand it. I too work with intensity. Time is precious. I work non-stop now. I know we have much vitality; I know that but time as such (real time) can’t last much longer. We still have a few years but unconsciously our mind pushes us (Sourcebook, 01:01:11-01:02:06).”

This scene brilliantly encapsulates the artist’s fervent desire to create as a way to combat the passage of time. Throughout the entirety of the film, Erice makes the argument that it is time itself which constitutes his work, process, and inspiration. In this sense the film is not just about the artist but also about life itself; the numerous ways in which individuals – human and non-human– relate and react to the passage of time. Beyond a document, it is the view of this researcher that the film carries with it a thread of philosophical, artistic, and political notions that are explored alongside the work of a painter. The painting which he undertakes during the recording of this film is at the center of this temporal network, but neither it nor the artist are the protagonists per se. *El Sol del Membrillo* sets forth an objective portrayal of the artist while he sets out to complete a work, but the aforementioned ideas are articulated implicitly through the use of a metaphoric film language and are presented to the viewer as open systems of interpretation. What I mean to say

here, and which will be explained in more detail, is that Erice never leans wholeheartedly into fictional narratives and maintains the line between fiction and document ambiguous throughout. It is the time of the artist which dictates the time of the film.

## **Chapter 2 – *El Sol del Membrillo, Analysis***

### **1. Antonio López García and a cinematic diary of time**

Víctor Erice's realist masterpiece, *El Sol del Membrillo*, chronicles Antonio López García's yearly ritual of painting a quince tree in his backyard. The film makes time the central character in the plot by being structured in a diary format that chronicles the artist's labor from September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1990 up until the moment when the painter finally gives up on the oil painting on December 10<sup>th</sup>. Each scene begins with a date and from start to finish Antonio is chronicled for 27 days of work between aforementioned dates. It has to be mentioned that on Tuesday, December 11<sup>th</sup> he created a sketch of the tree after giving up on the oil painting entirely. The film creates the illusion that from September to December Antonio works every day starting in the morning but there are some days which do not get filmed and other days in which the weather (rain or cloudiness) prevents the filmmaker and the painter from spending time outside.

So why does Erice rely on this format for the film? And what does this format provide in terms of its aesthetic classification in the context of documentary and poetic filmmaking tropes? The stylistic choice to structure the film in this way and of including markers of time make this film a credible document of an artist's process and work ethic. But the overall style and the slow pace of the narrative give the film a poetic element that goes beyond the genre of documentary filmmaking. The timestamps along with the general slow pace ground this filmic work in a

tradition of realism that can be traced to the Italian neorealist movement and a proper Spanish tradition of realism of which Erice has been an exponent of. Furthermore, the adoption of a realistic chronological narrative approach works in mirroring the process and style of one of Spain's most important realist painters.

The decision to include all the dates of labor transforms this film into a temporal document of the life and work of López García. However, Erice expands the subject of time and realism by including the sights and sounds of Madrid, the labor time of a group of workers on a job in his house, the process and work of his wife María Moreno, images of the sky and the changing weather, as well as the inclusion of other members of his family and friends. The decision to expand his scope to the characters that surround and play a part in the painter's life give *El Sol del Membrillo* a unique place amongst other films of its kind. But as I have previously mentioned there are a number of stylistic and formal decisions that elevate the movie into the world of poetry and silent reflection; its long takes along with its slow pace give the film an aesthetic dimension that transcends objective documentation. I will now provide you with what I consider to be entries in the film and provide both a literal narration of these sequences as well as a thorough analysis of their meaning in the context of this dissertation's main theme, the aesthetic document.

#### 1. Saturday, September 29<sup>th</sup>: The process before painting (00:00:00-00:04:32)

It is Saturday, September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1990 and we are in Madrid, Spain. The image begins with an establishing long shot of a busy residential street in Madrid and the painter is seen at a distance walking towards the camera while the credits begin to roll in. We hear the sounds of cars, trains, and inhabitants of the city in the background. The artist is carrying a rolled-up canvas and a suitcase presumably containing his paints and other materials necessary for the work he will commence

this day. The camera follows him walking down the street until he reaches his home studio. As he enters, he is greeted by his dog Emilio and heads towards the studio on the second floor of the dwelling. There he begins to build a new canvas; he starts by nailing together the pieces of wood that will make up the foundation and proceeds to cut out the rectangular pieces of wood that will hold it all together. The credits continue to roll in as the painter nails the pieces of wood together and classical music plays in the background.

We witness the durational complexion of a process that often gets overlooked when thinking about painting: the construction of the canvas, the mixing of colors, and the selection of brushes. The opening sequence is both durational and didactic in that even without context the viewer understands that a painter is preparing to embark upon a new work. Erice makes sure to show us a long sequence that lasts around four minutes and deviates from the kind of abbreviated introductions found in most films of this kind. One is made aware of the time it takes to select the wood, nail it together, stretch the canvas, and allow it to integrate overnight. Antonio López García's process of painting a quince tree in his backyard is patiently documented from beginning to end. The very first sequence of the movie shows the artist in his studio preparing a canvas while the credits roll in. This slow durational sequence sets the tone for what is to come, and while he prepares the canvas patiently, we are immersed in what will be the general tempo of the movie.

## 2. Sunday, September 30<sup>th</sup>: Shaking hand with a place (00:04:32-00:15:18)

One day after building the canvas Antonio steps out into the garden and the camera reveals him contemplating the trees that adorn the space. His gaze is fixed upon a quince tree with predominantly light green fruits hanging from its branches as the sun highlights the natural pigment of their flesh. The radiant sun acts as a spotlight illuminating the trees, its branches, and

its fruit which are now unveiled to have a yellowish hue, a sign of their transformation in the fall<sup>14</sup>. In the next scene we see Antonio brings a ladder and places it next to the tree where he begins assembling a perspectival plane constructed of string and two vertical poles. He ties up the string from one pole to the other and then ties a pendulum in the middle that will produce the proper amount of tension to center the planes accordingly.

He lowers the pendulum to eye level and places his easel in front of the grid in a way that allows him to stand directly in front of the scene. After that he digs in two nails on the ground that serve as markers for where the tips of his shoes have to be positioned at all times. This assures he is standing in the same place every day. The perspectival grid and the place markers on the ground allow Antonio to frame his composition flawlessly and maintain the utmost degree of mathematical realism in relation to the tree. The painter then pencils in a vertical line on the canvas corresponding to the one he has created with the string on the grid.

Next, he uses white paint to create a horizontal line on the wall behind the tree and he uses this as a visual reference for the vertical line on the canvas. The XY grid is complete and, seemingly arbitrarily, he begins to mark different sectors and objects in the tree with white paint. His markings look like small white crosses and they are there presumably to help him establish the proper distances in relation to the grid and his eye. This entire scene is of great interest to me because it reveals a painter's direct contact and relationship with his object of representation. His method is so precise that it almost becomes invasive and in a later part of the film, one of his daughters laments the poor shape the tree is left in with all of her father's white "marks". The

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<sup>14</sup> Dr Angelica Fenner pointed out in my dissertation defense that the film centers around the theme of mediation. In one very specific way the entirety of Antonio's work seeks to remediate "light itself which becomes a medium for what, for lack of better words, we could call spirit or the spark of life, something immaterial that has real palpable effects and without which life in our planet would be inconceivable." In other words, it is the sun itself as the final frontier, an elusive and incredibly difficult element to pin down on canvas.



painter, however, treats the tree with utter delicateness and allows nobody to touch it while he is painting. Thus, one should interpret this activity as an act of marking, a symbol of presence that testifies to the initiation of a symbiotic relationship between painter and tree, subject and object.



I call this moment the artist's "handshake" with the place. I have borrowed this term from site-specific artist Andy Goldsworthy, who has his own initiation ritual whenever he arrives at a new location to create his time-based sculptures. Goldsworthy meditatively walks around the sites where creates his ephemeral sculptures and he gathers materials from the space in which he works and in which his works will ultimately decompose. However, this activity is not exclusive to site-specific sculptural art and in the case of the Spanish painter much of the emphasis of the film is on his relation to the particular space he will be working within. In other words, one can argue that his work, depicted in the film, falls under the category of site-specific art. The painter, in innocent naivety, walks around the space getting intimate with its silent voice, its message which is not a singular sign but a collection of affects, forces, and tendencies that for lack of better words can only be "felt" or "sensed". He is already familiar with this site and the subject he will set out to

paint (we later learn he has planted this tree four years prior to filming) and this is not the first time he attempts to represent this particular tree in paint.

The brilliantly documented *ritual of salutation* (shaking hands with a place) and the inevitable failure to complete the painting imparts an existential harmony between the artist—as a human agent—and the external non-human actants that surround and shape the work of art. López García doesn't just look at the tree as a singular Cartesian object to be represented but he is able to view it as an assemblage of material and immaterial forces such as roots, trunk, leaves, sun, wind, weather, color, and so on. All of these co-existing forces compose the topography of a place and by extension play a role in influencing the outcome of his artistic endeavors. The painter conducts an obsessively rigorous procedure in order to preserve the symmetry and perspectival integrity of the scene before he has even applied a single dot of paint on the canvas.

This disciplined method is not only applied to the scene and the painting, but he also makes sure— by applying physical markings— that the place where he is painting remains the same throughout the entire process. He makes sure that the tree is always centered in relation to the plane he has drawn on the canvas and to his eyes by standing at the same place during every painting session. Having trained at the Royal Academy of Art it is no surprise that he works with such discipline and mathematical rigor. It is unknown, however, if the process has been dramatically enhanced by the presence of the camera but by including it Erice achieves in conveying one of the most important concepts of the film: the role of painting in the age of technological reproducibility. Throughout the entirety of the movie Erice delivers to the spectator a dialogue between the film camera and the painter. López García is seen working on representing the scene for the whole movie while the camera shows us its own perspective of that which the artist works diligently to capture.

### 3. Monday, October 1<sup>st</sup>: First declaration of intent (00:15:20-00:35:31)

Erice provides an extreme long shot of the painter's home seen outside from the other side of the road. The following cut shows Antonio inside the dwelling cleaning his brushes diligently in preparation for a new day of labor. A group of workers arrives at the house and we hear them discussing the reason for their being here today. As they settle in their quarters and change into the appropriate workwear they vocalize: "if we don't finish soon, we'll lose shares (00:15:46)." The choice to include the workers expands the scope of the film immediately and brings into the picture a parallel temporality and deadline. In this moment we are made aware of another labor-time that will compliment and run parallel to Antonio's artistic labor-time.

Antonio is smoking a cigarette and having a beverage while he contemplates from inside his studio. He then walks out to the garden and resumes painting and at this time the workers begin their labor of repairing a wall in the house by tearing it apart. Antonio's son is woken up by the demolition of the wall and the sounds of a street vendor using a megaphone to promote what he is selling on this day. María, his wife, enters the room where Antonio is and greets their son who tells her, somewhat disgruntledly, that the construction and Emilio's barking has been going on all morning. He informs her he is leaving for his first English lesson and María proceeds to her studio where she starts working on an engraving which she is carefully tracing with the aid of a magnifying glass. From her studio we can hear the rumble of the construction alongside the spirited singing of Antonio who is now in the garden painting again.

Antonio paints cross-shaped white marks on a leaf and a quince and we now hear him singing loudly and clearly. The flow of life inside the dwelling is presented as slow moving and the different characters are all depicted working on their respective tasks on this day. As María diligently works on her engraving, Antonio continues his work outside, and the workers continue

the renovations the camera gives us a look into the world outside of the home. We see numerous buildings, some of which look abandoned and in some of the apartment buildings the camera zooms into the windows illuminated by television screens. Cars drive by the street and we hear the amalgamation of birds humming and cars honking. A group of children play soccer by the train tracks and the sequence concludes with a long shot of a train passing by the scene which we have just described. This sequence ingeniously encapsulates the documentary spirit of the film by including the labor time of the workers, his wife's artistic practice, their son's daily life, and the hustle and bustle of the city they inhabit.

It is in this moment that Erice expands the breadth of this documentary by including the numerous temporal narratives that take place alongside Antonio's own artistic labor. Víctor Erice's cinema of time expands its vision to the material temporality of all events taking place outside and inside the dwelling. While the film is indeed about Antonio López García, it becomes far more expansive by also setting its gaze on the passage of time in general and the effect it has on the singularity of Antonio's labor. The meditative and patient rhythm of the artist is juxtaposed with shots of the deadline-focused workers, María's microscopic practice, the hustle and bustle of Madrid's trains and apartment buildings, and the ruthless passage of time affecting all of the above and most dramatically the tree which is slowly but surely beginning to decay as the artist paints it. Erice synthesizes all of the aforementioned temporalities in a montage that includes all of the agents' relationship to time, labor, and finitude. The montage is conceptually one of the most important in the whole film since it encapsulates all of the different actors<sup>15</sup> relationship to the passage of time and the effect it has on their life and work. While Erice presents, in visual form, the passage of the ordinary as it takes place inside and outside Antonio's house the world changes

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<sup>15</sup> Here with the word actor, I am attempting to denote an agent who has a being in the world and a relationship to time. The people in the film are more agents with a being than they are actors in a movie.

and moves around him as the artist continues his endeavors in paint with a Zen diligence and stillness that is characteristic to his style.

The sequence that follows this montage shows Antonio and María in conversation next to the tree and the camera pans to the sky where we see the sun being eclipsed by dark clouds. For the first time we hear Antonio speak about the work at hand and lament the change in weather conditions before him. The conversation unfolds in the following way:

Antonio: “It’s gone. A little while ago, the sun came out over there from the right. But it went and hid behind those clouds.”

María: “The day is pretty bad isn’t it?”

Antonio: “You can’t imagine how pretty it was. The golden fruits...Really pretty!”

María: “Yes I see. The season isn’t going to help you much.”

Antonio: “I’m going to try it anyway. I think I have to paint the sun. Even now it looks lovely. Just look, isn’t the fruit lovely?”

María: “How long will this sun last?”

Antonio: “That’s the worst part, very little. Maybe a couple of hours in the morning. I mean for the light I want. Later, it’s on the tower. During that time, while it is on the house, the upper part of the tree is lit. It’s very pretty too, lovely. The tree is plunged in shadow except for the golden upper part. All the quinces...That quince over there, all that area. It’s lovely. It’s very good too. And then, the light comes from over there. The tree is lit from behind. But the morning light has something special. The early sun, the most golden of all.

María: “The fruit is lovely with the sun.”

Antonio: “I’ll paint it with the sun. I’ve never done a fruit tree with the sun.” (00:23:49-00:25:29)



This dialogue between the painter and his wife marks the first declaration intent in the film and we get a sense of what the artist is seeking to capture given the temporal limitations he will have to face in order to complete the work. By repeatedly juxtaposing images of the film camera and the painter throughout the film, Erice is essentially putting forward a Benjaminian argument about the radical existence of painting and the ways in which it differs from the perspectival distance of cinema and photography. A painter like Antonio is not trying to create an exact replica of an object— but through the synthesis of paint, symmetry, canvas, external stimuli, and memory— he is putting forth a signification and language unique to the art of painting. He does not simply create a simulacrum<sup>16</sup> by replicating a photograph of the quince tree (many realist painters often do this to simplify their workflow) but rather sets out to “be there” in an existential sense by being witness to the natural developments of the tree and accompanying its growth in time with the position of the sun.

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<sup>16</sup> In the age of simulacra and simulation the art of photography and the moving image have taken a steady hold of the task of artistic representation. To echo Peter Greenaway’s famous proclamation about the death of cinema: the social (all-encompassing) omnipresence of moving and still digital images in our lives has created a crisis of representation. It is in a time like this where the work of a realist painter becomes an almost nostalgic endeavour.

Antonio sets out to be there when the ideal conditions of shadow and light manifest themselves in front of his eyes. This only happens for a very small window during the morning and this is when he spends most time outside working diligently accompanied by Erice and his camera crew. Observing his rigorous approach to symmetry and perspective one could easily categorize his method as detrimentally formalistic and almost formulaic – emulating the representational exactitude only a camera can reproduce. But the truth is that his rigid formal operations do not originate from a concern about space and aesthetics, rather he deploys this formal apparatus as a way to solemnly capture and make visible the appearance of a singular event.

López García goes out of his way to create the conditions of capture that will enable him to glacially fix a fleeting event into the canvas; allowing him to suspend a moment of ephemeral beauty which is ever-changing and always in the process of disappearing. Erice brilliantly portrays this philosophical aesthetic dimension of his work by constantly juxtaposing his work with everyday events happening in real time. The painter's obsession with capturing a fleeting moment becomes increasingly difficult as the days go by. His work begins in the fall but as winter arrives the position and luminosity of the sun changes in relation to the grid he has constructed and in relation to the tree's surface. Antonio is forced to make the necessary adjustments in the grid and in the canvas, but he is faced with the insurmountable problem of increased cloudiness and the grayness of the approaching wintertime.

López García displays a tireless obsession to capture a scene that is quickly disappearing in front of his eyes and in front of the film crew by continuing to work despite all the adversity. This creates a separate conceptual thread in the film as a whole supplementary to the thematic exploration of the art and life of a painter. At this point *El Sol del Membrillo* transforms into a meditation on the temporality of art making and an exploration of the effects of time on the lives

of human and non-human agents. While the film begins with a focus on Antonio and his relationship to time, we are— at the point of his struggles with the sun— presented with a multiplicity of lived temporalities that run parallel to his labor time. In addition to presenting the duration of Antonio's art and the changes the tree goes through, Erice extends his gaze to the temporalities of a group of workers renovating the artist's home, the art practice of Antonio's wife María Moreno, and the temporality of the city of Madrid during the shooting of the motion picture.

The journal entry for Monday, October 1<sup>st</sup> concludes with the painter leaving the site with his wife to go for a stroll around the neighborhood. Erice provides a long shot of the couple walking into the horizon and transitions to the work site he has just left vacant. The workers are standing in front of the tree, gazing with curiosity at the markings and perspectival grid. They speculate about its progress and come to the conclusion that Antonio probably started to work on it in the early morning. They return to their quarters where they practice their Spanish, and they are repeating the words corresponding to the seasons. The words are otoño (fall), verano (summer), invierno (winter). The shot fades to black, time has elapsed, and the worker's quarters are now empty. In the next scene the workers resume their activities, shoveling debris from the floor and taking in the bricks they will use for the new wall. The next scene reveals Antonio, his son, and the workers all working on their respective tasks while classical music plays from a stereo Antonio has brought out to his workspace.

His daughters arrive at the house and they have a new pair of shoes and a coat that Antonio proceeds to try on. They ask him about his work in progress and the camera gives us a close-up shot of the painting while his daughters lament the markings he has left on the tree. The shoes they have brought to him are too tight, he returns it to them, and they say goodbye and leave the house. Antonio continues to paint while the sun remains hidden behind the clouds and the stereo from



which we heard classical music is now tuned to the daily news broadcast. As he joyfully paints, we listen to the news playing from his stereo player and the announcer discusses current world issues. While we listen to the broadcast, the film transitions to a montage of aerial shots of the city and the sun begins to set on the buildings and train tracks as a train passes by. The broadcast continues playing in the background, the news anchor talking about Israel and the Soviet Union establishing diplomatic ties, the Spanish president has addressed the war in Iraq and expressed discontent over ongoing speculation about conversations on how to proceed with the Arab nation, and Saddam Hussein, in his latest speech, proclaims “holy war” against the foreign troops established in Saudi Arabia. On that same day it was announced that the following day, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, Germany will no longer exist as a democratic republic<sup>17</sup>. The unification ceremony will take place in Berlin, United Germany’s new capital. Finally, the broadcaster announces the death of thirty-three people in traffic accidents during the previous weekend.

These extraordinary events are special occurrences that are worthy of reportage and they truly stand out from the mundane flow of the ordinary news cycle. To quote Žižek: “*something shocking, out of joint, that appears to happen all of a sudden and interrupts the usual flow of things; something that emerges seemingly out of nowhere, without discernible causes, an appearance without solid being as its foundation.*”<sup>18</sup> Erice makes the aesthetic decision to include the fragments of real life in order to contextualize the film and the painter’s work within a historical moment and details like this, despite the many choreographed sequences, give the movie a spirited documentary quality. The master painter embarking on a new work appears in the film as an event

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<sup>17</sup> The intentionally audible radio broadcast gives the film a very special sense of social context. Erice makes the news audible, a cinematic device which provides a future audience a scope of very important historical and social upheavals that took place at the same span of history that the Spanish artist worked on this painting.

<sup>18</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “All Aboard: Event in Transit,” Essay in *Event: A Philosophical Journey through a Concept*. (London: Penguin Books 2014), 2.

that is as noteworthy and relevant as the world's most relevant events that we listen to on the radio. The event in his backyard is mostly an aesthetic one, but it transcends the space of art insofar as it's something visually striking on its own accord; an almost sacred light that visits the backyard and only Antonio and Erice's camera are there to witness it. It is thus the role of the artists (both filmmaker and painter) to prevent this event from disappearing into oblivion and preserve it in the realm of memory.

Antonio has left the site. The day is over, the sunlight has almost dissipated entirely, and the workers are leaving the house. María and Antonio go out again and the young painter arrives at the house and takes the dog Emilio indoors. The camera takes us into the city at night; it appears illuminated by the artificial lights emanating from television screens inside almost every building. We see the site at night-time, the tree, easel, and strings. The site of the artist's work is illuminated only by strong cinema lights. The camera slowly zooms to a close-up of the painting in progress. The cinematic capture of Antonio's quince tree is done at numerous occasions during the movie and the camera is able to immediately represent the sight which will take the artist weeks to paint. Antonio spends at least a day preparing the canvas, setting up his perspectival grid, and drawing the first outlines so the fact that the camera is able to capture the tree immediately in all its illuminated glory is cause for reflection. Erice is in no way arguing that the camera does what the painter attempts to do in a far more effective way, but he is rather shining a light on the differences between two mediums in the pursuit of the same objective.

The camera is not automatic per se since one has to load film, conduct a light reading, program exposure settings, and later develop the film but it will capture a scene or subject in the most realistic way possible. Conversely, the painter has to go through the construction of a canvas, the mixing of the appropriate colors, the assemblage of a perspectival grid, and ultimately the

painting itself. But this painter in particular is not just concerned with creating an exact replica of an object suspended in space but rather he is focused on following its evolution through time. Furthermore, this is not just any tree but a tree he has planted and nurtured himself. Besides this personal attachment he is also captivated by a glow that is unique to a particular moment in the day when the sun is refracting on the treetop in a magical way. The camera is capable of capturing this moment through its alchemical process – and it does so impeccably and effectively – but there is a humanity to the labor-intensive procedure the painter undertakes.

Walter Benjamin gives this intangible labor and temporal presence the name of *the aura*; that which connects a work of art to a specific time, a place in history, and a lived experience. In the case of painting, the aura has to do with the lived experience of the subject painting and their connection, via memory and perspective, to the event being depicted. As Jonathan Bordo points out in his essay *History Lessons: Imitation, Work and the Temporality of Contemporary Art*, “Benjamin critically situated the work of art as an object that falls precariously between its source in ritual mimesis and its demise in the processes of technological reproduction.”<sup>19</sup> Because of its automated processes a camera is only able to imitate this dynamic through a complex set of chemical and mechanical operations. Hence why a painting will always feel more distinctively singular than a photograph or a movie. It will always carry with it the psychic and material conditions that constitute a human presence, a painting is by definition always a far more carnal experience.<sup>20</sup> A body’s interaction with paint, canvas, and tools is a primeval dynamic that produces a trace, a mark in the most primitive sense of those words. The markings of Lascaux and

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<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Bordo, “Chapter 11 History Lessons: Imitation, Work and the Temporality of Contemporary Art” in *Theorizing Imitation in the Visual Arts: Global Contexts* by Paul Duro, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2015, 215.

<sup>20</sup> That is not to say that cinema and photography don’t have their own aura, but they will always lack the visceral human embodiment that painting and other plastic arts are known for. In terms of the aura Benjamin teaches us to rethink its relationship to new media that rely on processes of technological reproduction.

other prehistoric caves prove this point and from a strictly anthropological sense the evolution of this cultural activity has remained at its core the same. The cultural significance and intentions have changed with time, but the practice of sublimation remains the common denominator of cave painting and its contemporary counterpart. Both can be defined as the diversion of instinctual impulses and psychic energy into a tactile/visual form. This connection to a psychic entity alongside a connection to a specific time and history is ultimately what sets apart the medium of painting from cinema and photography.

Jonathan Bordo's reading of Benjamin's aesthetic theory helps us further elaborate what we have identified as the destruction of the aura in the context of the artwork. Bordo makes an important distinction between artwork and art when looking at the effects of digital reproductions on artworks and other historical artifacts which he calls art. In both cases the digital simulacrum/ the digital copy provides both objects with a newfound context but specifically in the case of an artwork (like is the case with a painting) what is lost is far greater than what is gained. He writes: "The deterioration of the artwork and its loss of place, not the disabling of the copy or its verisimilitude as a copy, is the thrust of Benjamin's investigation and his difficult-to-enunciate allegation of the withering of the aura that seems to have gained, not lost, traction in the era of digital screens. The allegation may be formulated as a proposition: *the work of art has been diminished to the point of disappearance by and under the conditions of (its) technological reproducibility.*"<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Bordo, "Imitation, Work and the Temporality of Contemporary Art," 216.



4. Tuesday, October 2<sup>nd</sup> to Wednesday, October 10<sup>th</sup>: The first intrusions of time (00:35:40-00:37:347)

Heavy rainfall confirms that the bad weather has persisted, and the sun appears covered by rain clouds. The dimmed sunlight is producing a somber atmosphere and Antonio is forced to bring a tarp to cover the tree, the painting, and himself. With the painter's direction, the workers help him cover the site by placing a tarp carefully making sure not to obstruct or touch the tree. There is no painting on this day and the diary entry concludes with a shot of the site covered by the tent at nighttime, illuminated by a pair of cinema lights. On this day there is a feeling, due to the changing weather, that painting with the sun will be a difficult task to undertake. Because of this one could argue that the film's topic is about a painter working with and against time more than about the individual specificity of trying to paint a tree on canvas. Erice beautifully renders the unforgiving passage of time as we move on from the romantic notion of painting a tree with a special morning light to the failure to complete this work because of the disappearance of good weather conditions. Up until October 2<sup>nd</sup> the film presents a romantic vision of a painter that has set his sights on a special natural event of light and shadow; the tree's top is subtly illuminated by the sun and glimmers of light adorn a few of its fruits while hints of shadow gently envelop the rest of its body.

It is truly a photogenic natural moment that a filmmaker or photographer would capture in the time it takes to load film, meter the light, set the exposure settings, and depress the shutter button. But this is the existential quandary a painter must face when undertaking such a romantic and poetic profession. One cannot rely on the mechanical speed of a technological device of capture but rather it takes the entirety of human effort and labor to complete such a task. There is no immediacy to painting, it is temporally constricted to real time and the duration it takes the individual artist to complete a chosen representation. Such a task is threatened by the volatile and uncontrollable passage of time and if light conditions change then a painter is forced to either paint from memory or paint from a copy (usually a photograph). But Antonio is a classically realist painter that belongs to the old guard and his hyper realistic compositions are always based on reality outside his visual scope.

His works are radically rooted to the here and now and they carry with them a *weltanschauung* that is present both in its form and in its content. As Walter Benjamin tells us the *weltanschauung* of a work of art is found in all works of art, insofar as they are part of a specific moment in history and speak to the feelings and attitudes of a specific epoch. But in the case of Antonio López García's oeuvre and his overall methodology, all of his work has a material *weltanschauung* and aura that are characteristic of his relentless dedication to be present in a moment, to an event that is developing in front of him. This is the moral of *El Sol del Membrillo* in the way it shows him toiling incessantly with the difficulties of depicting a moment that is disappearing. The declining shimmer of sunlight and the advancement of the season all work against Antonio's willingness to remain present, but this is why his work is so special as failure is an often-accepted outcome of any work. During the beginning of the film, we are witnesses to the poetic pursuit of a beautiful event but as the days go by, and the season progresses, the weather

becomes harsh and unforgiving. When we reach October, Spain's rainy season, the work becomes increasingly difficult for Antonio to complete as is testified by the stills provided by Erice alongside each of the inscribed dates of shooting.<sup>22</sup>



From the first to the ninth of October heavy rainfall stalls the progress of the work and the still images that follow every sequence testify to this standstill. Despite the pause to the process, we are still presented with Antonio's effort, during these rainy days, to cover and protect the scene he has worked so hard to curate and frame for painting. Nature provides some respite on October 10<sup>th</sup> and the painter is able to resume the work up until the 12<sup>th</sup>. It is from this day up until October 25<sup>th</sup> (Sourcebook, 01:03:31-01:12:21) that the film shifts towards what I will provisionally term a *chronicle of failure*. During these dates Antonio has set up a tarp to protect himself, the canvas, and the tree from the rain in an attempt to complete the work with the hope that the weather will eventually revert to the sublime sunniness he was so captivated by. Erice documents him struggling

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<sup>22</sup> One of Erice's most brilliant documentary tools is to include the date of each shoot alongside a still image of the work's progress during that day. This documentary technique allows the viewer to follow the chronology of the film and it puts into the context the race against time that is at play for the painter.

to paint amidst heavy rainfall and lack of sun and we can tell that the enthusiasm at the beginning of the film is starting to falter.

5. Wednesday, October 10<sup>th</sup>: Enrique's visit and aesthetic critique of the painting (00:37:47-01:03:30)

The diary entry begins with the recurring long shot of Antonio's street in which we see a man walking towards the house. He reaches the door and rings the buzzer; María recognizes Enrique's voice immediately and opens the door. He greets María and they talk about his trip and how it was really good to have time to read on his way there and back. Enrique asks for Antonio and María informs him he is in the garden already waiting for him. He goes out to the site where Antonio is painting. They greet each other and Enrique explains he was on his way to buy new acrylics and decided to stop by for a visit. They have a conversation about the beauty of the tree and the difficulties of painting against time.

Antonio: "You can't imagine how much the light changes. The sun starts over here. It finishes over there. I'm aiming to catch a little at midday when the sun lights the upper part. Most of the tree is in the shadow. The light here. That's what I am aiming for."

Enrique: "Well it's splendid. The quinces are so full. They're truly beautiful, truly beautiful. They're tempting (he reaches to grab one)."

Antonio: "No, don't touch them."

Enrique: "I barely did. Plus, I wouldn't touch them too much since this could erase those little marks you have drawn on them." (00:40:54)

Antonio asks Enrique what he thinks of the size of the canvas. Enrique thinks it is appropriate and Antonio explains that María told him he should have used a bigger one. Enrique



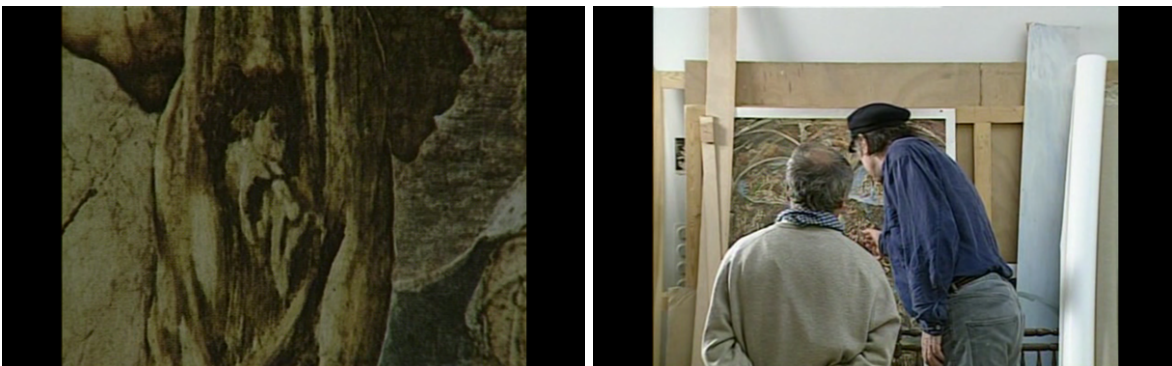
agrees it could have been a little bigger, but its current size suits the forms of the tree. Antonio confesses to his friend that he is considering lowering down the body of the tree about 6 centimeters to give the tree more space to breathe. Enrique, after standing in the exact position Antonio does, agrees and says it does look kind of short and could use more space to breathe. The two artists reminisce on some lessons they learned during their time together at the San Fernando School of Fine Arts and how one of their teachers always passionately asked their students to make their compositions fuller. The painters reflect on how things change over time, Enrique says that teachers demanded too much respect and kept their distance from the students. It is because of this distance that students like Antonio gave too much respect to Soria and were not able to ask him what he meant by making things fuller. But today it's very different. "Kids in college don't say "sir" ... to their teachers."

They continue to reflect on the past, Antonio mentions that the best part about those days was being able to work alongside a good friend like Enrique. They remember the music they listened to, intense friendships, love affairs, the few leisure hours they had, the coffeehouses they frequented (some of which no longer exist) and their wonder at discovering the world for the first time. Antonio didn't frequent the same places as Enrique did, since he was 14 and Enrique was 21. Enrique also remembers seeing from the window of a coffeehouse, a young and introverted López García humming and directing with his hands Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> symphony. The camera moves backwards and gives us a still wide angle shot of the site. In it we see Antonio painting, Enrique sitting by his side, the stereo on the ground, the tree, and the carp behind it (in case it started to rain again). Classical music plays in the background and they comment on how important music was during those times. The camera pans to the sun which appears partly covered by clouds.

The next scene takes us inside the house where the two painters contemplate a replica of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*. The camera focuses on the faces of the spectators at the scene; they all have a frightened look in their eyes. They both contemplate the aesthetic scene with amusement and begin to deconstruct its meaning. They comment on how old the artist was at the time he painted it. They are impressed that at the age of 63-64 he was able to paint such a masterpiece.<sup>23</sup> They discuss how it took Michelangelo 4 years to finish it, completing it when he was 67 or 68. They laugh at the macabre idea of the artist to include a self-portrait in the flayed skin being held by St. Bartholomew, probably in contempt to being commissioned by the church to paint it. Enrique brings up the rumor of Michelangelo being mad. For Antonio, however, this was not the truth. He believed Michelangelo simply had a bad outlook on life due to the power and influence the church had on people and on artists like himself at the time.

Antonio: "Isn't it rather macabre to paint himself as Saint Bartholomew. They discovered it last century."

Antonio: "He wasn't mad. But he had a terrible outlook on life, didn't he? To create a god who threatens not only the damned but also the innocent. They all look kind of intimidated by their god."




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<sup>23</sup> In their theorizing of Michelangelo's work, both artists come to the conclusion that all painters get better with age. For them, it has to do with the fact that as one gets closer to death, life is experienced more intensely.

The scene fades in into a beautiful shot of the sun moving in between the clouds. Next, the camera fades into the site where it reveals Antonio painting, Enrique sitting down beside him, the tree, the radio reproducing its music, and the painting. Enrique begins to reflect about the effects of aging on painters and their own practice as it is affected by these temporal changes.

Enrique: “By the way, someone once told me that painters, middle-aged painters in Paris, men who are now the same age as us, work with feverish intensity. I didn’t understand it then, but I admired them for it. Now that I am that age, I understand it. I too work with intensity. Time is precious. I work non-stop now. I know we have much vitality; I know that but time as such (real time) can’t last much longer. We still have a few years but unconsciously our mind pushes us.” (01:01:11-01:02:06)

Antonio keeps painting while Enrique sits quietly and meditatively. The sun starts to set, and we listen to the news broadcast on the radio. Antonio stops painting and they begin to take the materials indoors. We can still hear the radio and the broadcaster discussing global issues. The broadcaster discusses the Israeli conflict, Saddam Hussein’s call to all Muslim people to fight for the liberation of Jerusalem, NASA’s Discovery shuttle’s successful landing, and in Spain, the district attorney requests a sixty-year jail sentence for two police officers. Officers Amedo and Dominguez have been involved in a terrorist operation, resulting in 6 failed attempts of murder. The camera shows us the site as the sun has faded away and Antonio takes the canvas inside his house. The screen fades out. (01:02:06-01:03:30)

6. Friday, October 12<sup>th</sup> to Thursday, October 18<sup>th</sup>: The battle against time (01:03:31-01:05:24)

From October 12<sup>th</sup> to October 18<sup>th</sup> Erice provides little footage of Antonio working at the site since the weather has taken a turn for the worse. On October 12<sup>th</sup> the diary entry is only a close-up still shot of the progress so far. In it we see some minimal progress. On the 15<sup>th</sup> the filmmaker includes the same style of shot with a few details added. Antonio is reinforcing the white marks on the quinces in an effort to adjust the composition to the changes in light he must work with this day.



On October 16<sup>th</sup> the bad weather persists and the sun hides behind black rain clouds. It is raining, but with the protection of his carp, Antonio continues painting. The film transitions to the inside of the house and the camera shows us a close-up of María's work in progress (the etching). We are shown her empty workstation and a disconnected phone beeping. The image fades to the workers building the wall, they are taking measurements and cementing the bricks that will compose the wall. Antonio is working outside and despite the heavy rainfall, with the protection provided by the tarp, he continues working. Two days later the film cuts to yet another still shot of the progress during these days with minimal progress.



7. Tuesday, October 23<sup>rd</sup> to Wednesday, October 25<sup>th</sup>: Accepting failure (01:05:25-01:13:21)

The diary entry on this day begins with a close-up of the painting. This time it is more advanced with the addition of some main branches and other details. However, on this day, work has come to a complete standstill because of the relentless bad weather. Erice provides a shot of the abandoned site and even the young artist's apartment is out of electricity. He calls María but it is too late to get anybody to fix it. He is upset because he was in the process of painting before the power ran out. On October 24<sup>th</sup> Antonio is painting outside amidst the inclement weather. It has continued raining and the tent covering him is starting to leak and as the rain gets progressively worse, the artist looks up to the skies in despair and contemplates the situation. He attempts to light up a cigarette but disposes it immediately since the rain does not even allow him to use his lighter. He quickly takes the canvas and materials inside.

The following scene takes us inside the artist's home where, with the help of his wife, Antonio is building a new canvas. They continue preparing the canvas, hoping that it will be ready the next day. Antonio looks distraught, we can infer that he is thinking of abandoning the painting, and at this point he mentions beginning a new work in the form of a drawing. María is trying to help but the frustrated painter refuses her help. The power goes off, Antonio looks at the rainy sky,

lights up a cigarette, and leaves the room alongside María. The camera turns to a dark corner where the oil painting stands against the wall in abandonment as the rays of the moon and the streetlights undulate around its colorful surface. The sequence testifies to the end of the painting, a battle lost against time.

It is Thursday, October 25<sup>th</sup> and the camera stands in front of the house witnessing the light of dawn subtly illuminating the abode. Antonio, painting in hand, makes his way down the stairs to the basement. There he stores the painting in a storage room where he keeps finished and unfinished works. The painting has been officially abandoned. The fact that he has accepted failure in relation to painting this specific tree<sup>24</sup> proves that he is humbled by and willing to listen to the voice of time and nature. Despite the visible frustration on the previous day, Antonio seems at peace with the result, accepting the sublime and ephemeral character of nature instead of forcing his gaze and technique to work *against* it. Invisible forces such as the weather, the luminosity of the sun during a certain time of a season, and the passing of time as such, all bring with them material changes such as decay, fluctuation in lighting conditions, and physical changes in the natural objects being represented.

The cruel indifference of nature's temporality has made its presence felt. The film which we have characterized as an aesthetic document or a narrative documentary contains within it the conceptual thread of time running through and shaping the narrative and documentary motifs. The realism of time is felt the most through the titles that Erice has included to structure the temporal narrative of the days it has taken Antonio to work on this piece. He begins in September when the sun is still full of a vibrancy that is characteristic of fall but as we get closer to winter the vibrancy

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<sup>24</sup> Failure is one of the most powerful aesthetic concepts conveyed by this film in that it concludes with the painter's inability to finish the painting we have seen him painting throughout the entirety of the cinematic journey.

and the consistency of the luminosity the painter is fixed on representing on the canvas begins to dwindle. As is characteristic of autumn and winter the sun becomes less intense and the days become shorter and cloudier. At some point during a candid conversation with his wife López García confesses he has never painted a fruit tree with the sun as a part of the composition. When October comes around and the sun becomes more and more absent, he realizes the difficulty and unpredictability of this endeavor; the sun has its own relation to time and the changing season. On top of this, the tree is going through its own natural metamorphosis as the leaves and the fruits begin to change, fall, and decompose with the passage of time.

The definitive moment of failure takes place on Wednesday, October 24<sup>th</sup>: The scene marks the end of the oil painting amidst the inclement weather that has arrived in Madrid during late fall and it symbolizes Antonio's failed attempts to complete the work on time while the sun remained in its desired position. During the entirety of the narrative documentary the painter has remained optimistic, but this day is the one that finally breaks his will to complete the task at hand. Despite this tragic outcome the artist is not distraught or resistant to it, he instead embraces this fate for the work as a natural outcome. This is all part of the ritual of painting the quince tree every year. There is an implicit acknowledgment that his desire to capture an event in paint is no match to the infinite passage of time and the indifference of nature as a whole. There is also a Zen disposition about his reaction towards failure that embraces it as a part of art and life without the sorrow and despair that often accompany the experience of failure.

The unfinished painting goes back to the vault never to be consumed by a buyer or a museumgoer but to remain alone in its sublime authenticity. Unfinished it encapsulates a unique moment in time; it is evidence of a *being there* and in many ways the unfinished painting alone in the basement of Antonio's studio has more aura than any completed work as it will always live unabsorbed by mass viewers and tell a story of a representation in a state of radical potentiality and testify to a ritual of failure. To echo Benjamin again, a photographer or a filmmaker will never take an incomplete photograph or shot; she can discard a shot she doesn't like but that shot has already achieved its full potential once the shutter has been released and it has gone through its development in a lightroom.



With photography and cinema, being there and the labor time involved is much more ephemeral and thus it is easier to achieve a desired composition without the need to toil for days in order to achieve it. This is the paradox of mechanized art forms; the automatization of capture will emulate the painter's role in representing a composed moment in the duration of a click, but the final product will always be devoid of the presence and aura of a painting. The negatives of photography already carry with them the information necessary to be developed and finalized but the unfinished painting in Antonio's basement will never be again; that moment in his backyard will never be again and if he were to attempt a new oil painting of the tree it would have to begin



anew and what was once there will never be again. While the technological witness of the film camera is present to the short public life of a painting that never was, the audience is witness to its archiving and its storage in Antonio's special repository of failure and incompleteness.

López García intuitively knows when the work's time has reached its conclusion and when the desire to complete it is at odds with its natural fate. Just as when the time to finish a work is clear to him so, is the end of a work that never reaches this conclusion; he renounces himself to the inevitable fate of the work of art and the unpredictability of life itself. To elucidate this point further let's look at a quote he gave during an interview for Boston's Museum of Fine Art:

*“Percibí que ya había llegado al final del camino que inicié. En otros casos el cuadro está sin acabar, se vende sin acabar, lo entregas a los demás sin acabar podías haberlo continuado pero hay que respetar los motivos por los que el trabajo se ha interrumpido. El cuadro se acaba por muchos motivos: o porque realmente llegas al agotamiento en relación al tema, porque el motivo desaparece de tu vista y no lo puedes seguir. Translation: “I perceived that I had arrived at the end of the road I started on. In other cases, the painting remains unfinished, it is sold unfinished, you hand it over to the others. You could have spent more time finishing it, but one must respect the reasons the work has been interrupted for. A painting can end for many reasons: or because you really reach exhaustion in relation to the theme, because the motive disappears from your sight you can no longer follow it.”<sup>25</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> mfaboston. “Conozca El Artista: Antonio López García.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 28 May 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKo-WjDAQvQ>

The predominant message evident in his Zen ethos is the idea that as an artist your job is not only to be an artisan or a master of your craft but to also have the humility to follow and trace a subject in time until it is no longer possible. An artist must respect the external reasons for a work to conclude in failure as these consequences are often beyond the artist's will and going against them constitutes an existential disregard of nature and time. Failing to complete a work is not a death sentence to the work since he believes on the value of archiving an incomplete work or selling an unfinished piece, thus giving an other the opportunity to appreciate the moment, tracing, and evidence of a temporal event that can no longer be followed through by its creator. Once the work of art is in the hands of its new owner it takes a life of its own, independent of the intentions and personal investments of its creator. Being at peace with this notion is one of utmost freedom for any artist and it liberates both the creator and the work itself from the dialectic of failure and success that infects the world of art.

His method is not one that sets its sight on accomplishing a predetermined goal or outcome but rather it constitutes an existential relationship to the pictorial process and *being there* next to the subject represented, following its temporal materiality with his eyes and brush. By limiting the pictorial scope and vision to an obsessively demarcated plane that encapsulates the subject, Antonio sets out to represent in the most honest manner the solemn presence of the tree. By aligning his body, the symmetry of perspective, and his eagerness to be present, he is able to produce a presence proper to the work of art as such. This is a presence proper to painting – contrasted via Walter Benjamin to cinema and photography—that is constituted through the creative oscillation between mind and object, subject and object, the observer and the thing.

Painting is one of civilization's oldest cultural activities, it is a human, all too human practice that will always have an aura shaped by the psychic investments of a sentient, thinking individual. Some painters express this humanity abstractly (through an inner life) and others express it through their virtue to comply with age-old conventions (mimesis). Antonio, and to an extent, Víctor Erice fall in neither of these categories and are, in fact, able to traverse both fields of art simultaneously. López García's realism is at all times preceded by his desire to be there and follow a subject in time; he wants to be with the quince tree in his backyard and trace its temporal growth and development. An interview included in the film with a journalist visiting him in his studio addresses this specific aspect of his work. The journalist questions his technique in relation to other painters practicing in the field of realism and his answer masterfully sums up the conceptual thread of his work and of Erice's film as a whole:

*Interviewer: "I have noticed you use a technique, a method that is different from all the other painters. A lot of painters I know copy a photograph to feel comfortable.*

*Antonio: "The best part is being close to the tree. That is more important than the end result for me. Photography doesn't give you that" (01:22:54).*

Failure to complete a work must be primarily understood as a solemnly human quality. To fail because the work has come to an end—either to the hand of fate or to the exhaustion of an idea— is a noble and humble approach. Such an approach is specifically contrasted to the modes of representation in our age of technological reproducibility: automatic forms of pictorial reproduction are able to minimize human error, increase artistic productivity, and leave a small room for aura, humanity, and agency. Thus, failure to complete a work of art is more than an incidental consequence of unforeseen events and becomes an oppositional stance to modern forms

of reproduction and mastery over nature. By opening his being to the work, to time, weather, and the invisible forces that constitute the event of failure, Antonio López García embodies the critical threshold between human intention in the context of art and nature as the ungraspable event.

*“An animated being in nature is within and without an organization appropriately elaborated down to all its minutest parts, while the work of art attains the semblance of animation on its surface only, but within is common stone, or wood and canvas, or, as in the case of poetry, is idea, uttering itself in speech and letters. But this aspect, viz. its external existence, is not what makes a work into a production of fine art; it is a work of art only in as far as, being the offspring of mind, it continues to belong to the realm of mind, has received the baptism of the spiritual, and only represents that which has been molded in harmony with mind. A human interest, the spiritual value which attaches to an incident, to an individual character, to an action in its plot and in its denouement, is apprehended in the work of art, and exhibited more purely and transparently than is possible on the soil of common unartistic reality.”<sup>26</sup>*

8. Friday, October 26th to Monday, December 10th: The record of a new work (01:13:21-01:51:05)

On this day, after renouncing the oil painting of the quince tree, Antonio commences a new work. On the white canvas, María has helped him prepare, he is drawing the tree with a fine pencil. A brief time-lapse reveals the prodigiousness of his drawing skills and the tree’s form is beginning to emerge quickly in the canvas and the weather is better but light rain persists. The quinces are still yellow, but parts of their skin are beginning to rot. The technique and position are almost

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<sup>26</sup>Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, “The Conception of Artistic Beauty,” Essay in *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 34.

identical to that of the painting and the painter looks happy again; his joyful singing and demeanor confirm it. The rain increases in intensity and the painter takes a contemplative break and lights up a cigarette.

The next day takes place at the garden where Antonio will continue to work in the newly commenced sketch. The camera pans slowly from the top of the tent to the canvas containing the new drawing and we can listen to the radio broadcast announcing the news of the day and on this date the weather seems to have gotten better with more sun and very little rain. The camera continues panning until it reaches the ground. Antonio enters the shot; he is shoveling aside the water that has collected on the ground and we listen to the radio dailies as Antonio proceeds shoveling intensely. “The gulf war has produced an increase in petroleum which is at the moment at 33.7 dollars. The stocks in Madrid have gone down four points, in Tokyo three hundred forty-six and in New York there has been a decrease of forty-eight points. More troops are being deployed to aid in the Persian Gulf conflict. Atletico de Madrid is playing against Barcelona in their home stadium, the Vicente Calderon.” The camera zooms into the radio player placed on a chair next to the worksite and the announcer makes a prediction of the weather: “Cielos muy nubosos en la mayor parte de la peninsula. Los chubascos seran frecuentes y de origen tormentoso en la mitad norte.”<sup>27</sup>

On October 28<sup>th</sup> we are once again present to Antonio’s labor at the site and on this day his family has stopped by for a visit. He is gathered with his daughters, their partners, and María who is giving him a haircut. The family sits around a table drinking tea and the day seems cold but despite this the family is enjoying being outside in the garden. Antonio asks for a chocolate and

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<sup>27</sup> “Today, cloudy skies in a major part of the peninsula. Rain showers will be frequent and stormy in the northern half of the region.”

one of his daughters mentions she noticed that he was no longer working on the painting. At this moment Antonio explains the reasoning for his decision to stop working on the oil painting.

Daughter: “I have seen this morning that you have chosen to abandon the oil painting.”

Antonio: “That’s right I have started on the drawing.”

Daughter: “When did you start working on it”?

Antonio: “Two or three days ago.”

Daughter: And what happened? You didn’t like the other one? It didn’t convince you?

Antonio: “The weather (time) was so rotten, so unsettled, so horrible. I couldn’t go on painting. I wanted to represent the sun on the tree. But the light changed so often, I couldn’t go on.”

Boyfriend: “Will you be able to pick it up next year?”

Antonio: “Absolutely not.”

Antonio: “You see, next year the quinces, the leaves will have changed. All I did was complain about the weather, I haven’t been very lucky. This year has been worse than usual.”

Daughter: It’s been some time since you painted an oil of a quince tree.

Antonio: “I know, this is why I wanted to paint it. Your mom has told me it looked beautiful and that I should try to paint it.”

Boyfriend: [laughing] “Careful (María) he is going to try and blame you.”

Antonio: “No, no it is good like this. The only thing is that time (weather) has not been on my side. The truth is I have been unlucky. This year has been especially horrible.”

(01:17:20-01:18:40)

The conversation between Antonio and his family further elucidates his philosophical approach towards the sanctity of realism and his profound commitment to naturally following an object/subject in time. When asked if he will retake the painting, he has abandoned just a few days prior, his response is an emphatic no, and his reason has nothing to do with the painting itself which he could always complete from memory or from the cinematic images Erice has recorded during their time together. He is completely at peace with the outcome of failure and at no time during this film or this dialogue with his family does he express a sense of misery or loss. This response testifies to the philosophical attitude he maintains towards this yearly ritual of painting the quince tree, in which the goal is to accompany its growth rather than capture it in paint. When asked if he could simply retake it next year and finish what he started he appears almost offended by the question. “Absolutely not” he says and goes on to explain: “You see, next year the quinces, the leaves will have changed. All I did was complain about the weather, I haven’t been very lucky. This year has been worse than usual.”

Antonio has set out to capture a fleeting moment of beauty in which the sun is refracting light upon the leaves and the fruits of this tree in a specific and unique manner. That special light changes within a few weeks and for him that light represents a unique appearance, one that will most likely never repeat itself. This is not only a lesson on failure and patience having to do with art making, but it also points toward a grander understanding of time and nature as a whole. Here Antonio echoes the Greek philosopher Heraclitus when he wrote that a person can never set foot in the same river twice. That sight with its diffused illumination will never be again, never will it appear in the same way it was when he decided to attempt painting it into the composition on that lovely fall day. And for Antonio that is okay, it is the essence of his ritual and an unavoidable fact of life, art, and time.

“The river  
 where you set  
 your foot just now  
 is gone—  
 those waters  
 giving way to this,  
 now this.”<sup>28</sup>

9. Monday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>: (01:43:54-01:44:51)

The scene opens up with a still image of the garden and the camera is looking from the same vantage point as it did in the previous shots. Antonio, wearing a warm coat and carrying his tools, enters the picture. He contemplates the tree; it has lost most of its leaves and fruit which we can say are now on the ground. He picks up a quince that has fallen to the ground and we can see how the earth, once green and luscious, is now almost fully depleted of grass and covered in cigarette butts. The fruit’s skin is still bright yellow, but it has numerous bruises on its exterior. He raises it to his nose and absorbs its powerful aroma.



<sup>28</sup> Heraclitus, *Fragments*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 27



10. Monday, December 10<sup>th</sup>: End of the work and the final meditation with the quince tree (01:47:08-01:51:05).

Erice presents to us another still-life shot of the site where Antonio, who is sitting down in stoic silence, contemplates the drawing he has undertaken after failing to complete the oil painting. The camera pans around the site, stopping to gaze at the drawing and Antonio's facial expressions. Next, the camera pans to the tree and the few remaining quinces that still hang from its branches with the white marks Antonio has applied to them, testifying to the passage of time and the way gravity has affected their position in relation to the horizontal thread he used to maintain perspectival order. Erice zooms into four individual quinces that have fallen to the garden floor; their skin is flayed and full of white paint marks and their flesh shows advanced signs of rot and decomposition.

After protecting the quinces for all these months of artistic work, Antonio starts to cut down all of the remaining healthy quinces (presumably to make jam or marmalade) and this scene signifies the end of the work. He takes the canvas and materials inside the home and the workers help him move the tarp out of the site. Next, he removes the perspectival threads, the metal poles that hold them together, and the easel. "It's over", Antonio is heard saying, and in the next frame a worker enters the garden, removes a quince from the tree, and smells it intensely. The frame fades to black.



11. Tuesday, December 11<sup>th</sup>: María Moreno's artistic ritual (01:51:05-02:09:02).

The diary entry for December 11<sup>th</sup> begins with a montage scene of the barren tree and garden followed by a wide shot of Madrid at nighttime. The city is illuminated entirely by artificial light sources and Erice emphasizes the windows of residential building illuminated by the light of television screens. The next cut reveals the artist's home at night followed by the activation of a single light emanating from a bedroom on the second floor. Next, we are inside this bedroom where Antonio is lying down in the bed while María, his wife and multi-talented artist, shuts the blinds and begins setting up her workspace<sup>29</sup>. Antonio is directed by María to position himself in the exact position he needs to be for her to continue the portrait of her husband. He is fully dressed, holding a photograph on one hand, and a crystal ball on the other. María illuminates the room further and turns on a spotlight on the canvas we now see she is working on. She resumes painting on a work that is nearly complete and which we can infer has been a part of her ritualistic art practice in a similar way to Antonio's work with the quince tree. As soon as María resumes painting, Antonio voices his critique of her work.

Antonio: "To work on a painting after so long. I think.... I could prepare a canvas of that same size. You'd start again completely free from the beginning without worrying. I think that would be the best."

María: "Maybe I will, I don't know. Give me a few days. What you're suggesting may be the best solution. But I want to try something. Let's try it."

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<sup>29</sup> It must be stated that María Moreno is an incredibly talented artist and an important figure in Spanish culture. The film unfortunately portrays her in a secondary role which could allow for a feminist critique of patriarchal culture in Spain. I have focused primarily on Antonio's work since it ultimately the main plot of the film and the one with which Erice makes the majority of his philosophical expositions. The final scene of Moreno's painting of her husband is perhaps the most profound testament of art's role in capturing the passage of time.

Antonio contemplates the picture of him and his friend Paco in Greece. After looking at it for a brief moment he suggests taking a trip to Greece soon. He falls asleep, dropping the crystal ball whose sound alerts María that he is no longer awake. When this happens, she stops painting, turns the lights off, puts the crystal ball in his jacket pocket and leaves the room. María's practice and philosophy become evident at this moment, and Antonio's judgement of her work is both ironic and comical considering the philosophical similarities of their work. Antonio has to lay down in the exact position every time she paints, and the work will only go on during the duration Antonio remains awake, never longer than that. This philosophical attitude toward the integrity and realism of a scene is almost identical to her husband's work with the tree we have just witnessed during the entirety of *El Sol del Membrillo*. Antonio abandons the painting once the environmental conditions he sought to capture disappear, once these are gone the painting is finished—despite it being complete or not—and he will never again retake or attempt to complete it. Once it is gone, it's gone.

María will follow a similar philosophy, regarding the realism of a scene, and will make sure Antonio is wearing the same clothes, maintaining the same pose, and that the light is exactly the same. But unlike her husband, María's painting is not about the ambition to finish the work within a given ephemeral duration. It is rather about spending that allotted time with Antonio as if part of a ritual of community that will result in a visual memory that will be with them seemingly forever. The time of this ritual is finite and determined by the energy Antonio has left to stay awake, the photograph he is holding up is meant to stir up memories of the past, and the crystal ball—refracting the light in the room— contains within it the prisms of vision and an allegorical meaning about the visual arts. This object also functions as an alarm, a marker that the ritual of painting has come to an end. When he falls asleep, he drops this ball and María is alerted that the

painting must finish. Like her husband—despite his judgments of her work—she will not continue painting past this point and once it occurs, she puts down the brush, turns off the lights, and leaves the room.



## 2. Painting, cinema and memory: *El Sol del Membrillo* as metaphor and narrative

There is a pronounced shift in the film approaching its conclusion that takes the viewer more directly into the world of metaphor, fiction, and memory. Even though various sequences are clearly planned or scripted, there is a veracity and realness that characterizes the intention and the action we witness throughout the majority of the movie. Halfway through the film we learn that this tree we have followed along with Antonio, has a special psychological and personal meaning to the artist; it is not just a pretty tree outside his backyard. We learn through an interview that takes place at his home that Antonio has actually painted quince trees numerous times before.

*Antonio: Yes, I do. I like quince trees. The tree and its fruit. I've drawn other trees, but I have a kind of tendency to work on quince trees. I don't know why.*" (Appendix 1, 01:21:28-01:22:54)

To this statement he adds that he planted this specific tree four years ago and has been painting it every year as a personal ritual separate to the rest of his practice. During the last sequences of

the movie— and following the beautiful exposition of María Moreno’s art practice— Erice breaks away with the realism and documentary veracity he has relied on so far in order to elucidate on the memory and inspiration that drives the painter to undertake this ritual every year. In these poetic and metaphorical sequences, the filmmaker provides a cinematic montage of a dream that takes us inside López García’s psyche. The dream sequence is composed of nighttime images of the site in the backyard long after the work has ended, the decayed fruits and leaves that have collected around it, and shots of the camera on a tripod next to it. In addition to these shots the filmmaker includes a voiceover by the artist where he recalls vivid memories about his hometown of Tomelloso that shed some light on his affinity with the quince tree.

Antonio: *“I am in Tomelloso in front of the house where I was born. On the other side of the plaza there are some trees that have never grown there before; from a distance I recognize the dark leaves and the golden fruits of the quince trees. I see myself in between these trees, next to my parents, in the company of other people whose features I can’t quite identify. The rumor of our voices reaches me, we converse peacefully. Our feet are sunken in the muddy land. Around us and attached to their branches the wrinkled fruits hang ever more ripe. Giant stains invade their skin and in the immobile wind I perceive the fermentation of their meat. From the place where I observe the scene I can’t tell if the rest can see what I am seeing. No one seems to notice that all the quinces are rotting under a light that I find hard to describe. Clear yet at the same time somber and turning everything, it touches into metal and ash. It is not the moonlight nor the twilight or the light of dawn.”* (Appendix 1, 02:06:30-02:09:02)

The dream sequence delves into the mind of the artist and presents to the viewer a poetic and psychological portrait of the artist’s soul and what inspires him to create. The tree, which at first glance is only a tree, gains a deeper significance related to a memory of childhood. This

mundane quince tree is a 'substitute' for the artist's parents and hometown in lieu of their physical absence in his life and a symbol of childhood nostalgia. The tree itself is a memorial symbol of a time that is no more, but even more significantly, it testifies to the primary narrative of the film itself, the inevitability of death and the unrelenting passage of time. During the movie we see Antonio racing against time to capture a fleeting moment in oil paint, but this struggle is metaphorical personification of his own relationship to death and mortality as he approaches the twilight of his own life. The dream begins with a jovial memory of time spent with his parents, but the concept of death introduces itself in the form of quince trees with their decaying and dying fruits. In the dream, young Antonio becomes detached from the euphoria of childhood and fixes his gaze on the surrounding quince trees and immediately notices the corrosive effects of time embodied in the quince's decomposing skin.

The child we see in the dream marvels at the passage of time as a way to come to grips with his own mortality. In this sense, the quince tree with its decaying fruits and the attempts to paint it during a fleeting moment of light are metaphors about the inevitability of death in general and an attempt to slow down the personal sojourn toward death. This notion, in fact, goes beyond the level of a personal existential realization and it colors both his work and the thematic motif of the film as a whole. It is not only about realizing that he is old, and he will die someday, but about painting with a sense of urgency and respect towards the passage of time that informs the formal and aesthetic operations behind his entire practice. In Antonio's hyperrealism we encounter a gesture towards time and space as it relates to the sublime; he demonstrates a deep understanding of the sublime's relationship to death, horror and the unforgiving passage of time. Put differently, death is sublime, and the film chronicles these moments pregnant with sublime beauty when we

are faced with the decaying skin of the quince tree and its fruits or when we are presented with the camera casting a shadow on the tree after Antonio's failure to complete it.

The dream is Erice's final stroke and final word on the relationship of the painter with time. Through word and image, he expresses the theme that has been running throughout the entirety of the motion picture and we come to understand the existentialism that both takes hold and inspires a master artist to keep working ceaselessly. Returning to the sequence where Antonio constructs his symmetrical grid (Appendix 1, 00:05:58-00:07:51) one can interpret his obsession with the conservation of the symmetry of space as a result of his own existentialism. The problem of symmetry can be defined in the following way: can the "other" who experiences my artwork witness that which "I" am seeing here and now? In this sense the preservation of symmetry is not only a formal operation particular to the art academy and the science of perspective but is in its very essence a philosophical methodology. Jacques Lacan helps us elucidate the tension between gaze and painting: *"The painter gives something to the person who must stand in front of his painting which, in part, at least, of the painting, might be summed up thus-You want to see? Well take a look at this!"*<sup>30</sup>.

Lacan is implying that the painter must always include in his representation the eye that sees and its position relative to the geometric plane that constitutes the sight and site. In other words, the painter must take into account the veil of perspective; the artifice that is constructed through the optical organ and which in many ways precedes the object or thing being represented. The painter's intentions are hence not about being seen or presenting an object but rather about presenting to the witness of her work the very gaze that created and extracted this object out of the ephemeral continuum of spacetime. This results in granting the spectator a moral responsibility

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<sup>30</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Line and Light," Essay in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, (New York: Norton, 1978), 101.

toward the painting that forces them to renounce their own gaze and inhabit the gaze being contained within the work being witnessed; to truly become a witness one has to inhabit this embodied gaze. For Lacan, it is in this psychic and philosophical activity where the essence of contemplation lies. When the receptor of the work renounces their subjective gaze and experiences the work in a state of *abandonment*. It is in this altered state that the spectator can look without gaze, absorb without judgments, and ultimately engage the work without entangling its content with their own gaze and subjective expectations.<sup>31</sup> It is thus the existential question behind all art—painting and visual art specifically—in which the artist has to approach the uncertainty of the modes of seeing that spectators bring with them to the arena of aesthetic reception and appreciation. The reality is that the painter/artist never knows if the Other sees that which they see but they can take the necessary measures in order to ensure that the experience is as solemn as possible.

One final point pertaining to the dream sequence has to do with the role that visual technology (cinema in particular) has in relation to the discipline of painting. This tension is visible during the entire film by the presence of a film crew in a painter's studio, but it becomes more apparent toward the movie's conclusion. We have already discussed the ways in which Erice implicitly provides commentary about the relationship between the two mediums by showing the durational struggle to capture a sight, but it is in the final dream sequence where he presents his thesis. Parallel to Antonio's proclamation about death, aging, and memory the dream sequence montage presents a visual metaphor about the role of cinema in the event of the quince tree during the months the painter has been struggling to paint it. In this sequence Walter Benjamin makes an

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<sup>31</sup> This way of seeing and experiencing artworks is paramount to all aesthetic reception but it is especially important for the reception of postmodern works of art which are often embedded with ambiguity and paradox. That is why many works of this kind are often received with animosity and psychic projections.



appearance and his premise about technological reproducibility and aura is visually articulated by Víctor Erice.



The Benjaminian dream montage develops in the following manner: *[Sounds of a power generator running]* On a wall in the garden, we see the shadow of a film camera standing next to the tree. The next shot is of the camera and a cinema light standing in front of the tree at night, approximately where Antonio used to stand. The light turns on automatically, illuminating the quinces lying on the ground. A close-up of a timer reveals the automated process of lighting and the following shot shows the tripod's feet, placed next to the nails Antonio has used as place markers for his feet. The moon is revealed as dark clouds move past it. We are now inside the artist's house; it is dark, and the moonlight is illuminating its interior. With limited light, we see a number of the artworks he has kept over time. The camera pans to paintings, sculptures of people's torsos, and a mold of the painter's face. Erice cuts to the moon once again and quickly transitions to the painter sleeping deeply. The camera zooms into his face and we begin to listen to Antonio's muffled voice. As he speaks the camera surveys the work site at nighttime surrounded by rotting fruit and illuminated by the cinema light. We see the shadow of the tree and the camera; the sequence ends with a close-up of Antonio's face (Appendix 1, 02:03:31-02:06:30).

The sequence signifies the film's transition into the realm of theory and philosophy, arguably a motif few films in the history of the medium have managed to express in such a nuanced and articulate way. In this montage Erice concludes the movie with a visual essay about Benjamin's theory of aura and technology, specifically the way these topics relate to the medium of cinema and painting. The dream sequence could be interpreted through the lens of Benjamin's theory of aura as a cinematic metaphor of the place of painting in relation to cultural memory in the age of technological modes of memory-creation. In the dream Antonio describes a light that is "clear yet at the same time somber and turning everything, it touches into metal and ash (Appendix 1, 02:06:30-02:09:02)." The statement has a twofold meaning: on the one hand, it is about the light of modernity and technology and the way it is slowly replacing humanistic values and practices. And on the other hand, the more literal meaning of the statement has to do with Antonio's own relationship to the relentlessness of time and aging. The second meaning of the dream is quite evident throughout the entire film so let us delve briefly into the critique of modernity we have extrapolated from this metaphoric proclamation.

The artificial light the painter describes in the dream – which is juxtaposed with the shots of the cinema lights at night next to the tree—is an artificial light different from the sunlight the painter relies on to paint. The shots of the cinema camera and the light rig visually illustrate that with cinema one is able to continue the work of representation beyond the natural lighting the painter relies so much upon. In this situation cinema arguably overtakes the painter's role in the work of representation and mimesis. Paradoxically, the humanity of painting is what simultaneously makes it culturally significant and a permanent staple in the social cosmology of the artwork.

“Most paintings, like writing, are mobile. They are unattached. They can be moved about, carried from location to location, removed from somewhere without damage to the ecology of the locality. Benjamin’s analysis of modern technological forms of reproduction is marked by an alienation from the here and now of place, an uprooting, a removal of the bird from the nest, the separation of the kernel from the shell. Benjamin’s notion of the aura arises from the extraction of a thing from the niche, its original residence.”<sup>32</sup>

This montage illustrates both Benjamin’s and Bordo’s thoughts brilliantly by showing the site of work at night alienated from the sun which informs the theme and intention of the painting and illuminated artificially by the cinema lights. The place, in the form of the tree and the site constructed around it, is brought to life by the camera and the artificial lights devoid of its aura and completely detached “from the here and now, uprooted from place yet it is as if the picture had become the place.”<sup>33</sup> The message of both this sequence and Walter Benjamin’s theory is that a machine (camera) grants us opportunities we could not have fathomed before its inception, but it will never be able to  *dwell, inhabit duration, and experience corporeal presence* in the way a painter does when she spends countless hours working to represent a moment.

The end goal of working tirelessly with a moment—in this case the quince tree in his backyard and in his memory—is not to complete and successfully capture the sight but rather about the experience of duration and lived temporality between the work’s conception and its conclusion. It is never the final result that matters but rather the *time* in between a work’s genesis and its final state. The accelerated mechanisms of technological devices minimize and arguably remove this

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<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Bordo, “History Lessons: Imitation, Work and the Temporality of Contemporary Art,” in *Theorizing Imitation in the Visual Arts: Global Contexts* by Paul Duro, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2015, 220.

<sup>33</sup> Bordo, “Imitation, Work and the Temporality of Contemporary Art,” 220.

human element from the process and the parallels Erice draws by juxtaposing the camera and the painter testify to this notion.



### 3. Víctor Erice's Cinema as Document

I now want to present an argument in favor of the medium of cinema and put forward the idea that, despite its teleological shortcomings, cinema does in fact give new meaning to the concept of aura and allows artists to achieve something that is impossible in a discipline like painting or sculpture. We have gone through the elements that constitute the art of Antonio López García and defined them as: *temporality*, *formal operations*, *materiality*, *memory*, and ultimately *failure*. We will focus on this last signifier for our discussion on cinema since it is here where cinema goes beyond the work of Antonio<sup>34</sup> acting as a medium of documentation and memorial preservation in the context of failure.

Erice's camera is present to record the evidence of Antonio's labor and it makes possible the witnessing and visibility of something which would otherwise remain unseen for spectators. The most important of these evidential captures is the sojourn of painting the quince tree and its

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<sup>34</sup> We are not arguing that López García's failures should be interpreted negatively; in fact, the film argues that it is his acceptance of failure which makes him one of a kind. The film also looks at his failure to complete the painting as a poetic moment in the sojourn to capture a fleeting moment. That being said it is cinema which goes beyond failure and allows us to even experience this poetic journey.

conclusion in failure. The world is able to view the works López García finishes and either sells to private buyers or are acquired by galleries or museums. But the many works he fails to complete never see the light of day and they are stored in his own depository archive at his studio and never become available to the public. It is within this collection of unfinished works that the painting of the quince tree resides and because of Erice's film we are able to bear witness to its inception, conclusion, and archiving. Erice poetically captures the journey of the painting through a durational cinematic approach that prioritizes slowness and meditative sequencing. Because of his slow poetic style of filmmaking the viewer is able to feel more present during the process Antonio undertakes. In fact, this style raises an important point about the aura of cinema. According to Benjamin cinema differs from the rest of the plastic arts in that it "is linked to a radical renunciation of eternal value"<sup>35</sup> and thus takes part in a process of reproduction that is not "artistic" per se.

What differentiates these media and their relationship to the artistic, in terms of a Benjaminian definition of aura, comes down to labor, temporality, and movement. The painting differs from its reproduction on the screen by virtue of containing within itself a historical testimony (aura) and a connection to an embodied temporal being. But in the case of this particular painting, it is missing the second half of what constitutes a work of art; it lacks a material collective reception. It is here that cinema goes beyond the aura for the sake of a (mass) collective reception and breeds new life to a work that would otherwise remain unseen. With cinema we are in the presence of something different (almost opposite) to the aura in the way Benjamin theorized it. If a traditional artwork creates an aura by way of a historical testimony emerging from the here and now; cinema is rather involved in the creation of an assemblage of "a very large number of images

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<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," *Essay in The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2008), 28.

and image sequences that offer an array of choices to the editor [...].”<sup>36</sup> But despite its divergent relationship to the artwork’s aura, cinema – through its assembled fragmented condition—is one of the art forms with the most potential of distribution for both the creator and the spectator.

The reception of a painting is mediated by a physical public space in a gallery or museum, its placement in a room in relation to the singularities of that specific room, the works that surround it, and ultimately the critiques and discourse that precede and follow the work. All these preconditions (except for the discursive criticisms that precede collective reception) don’t really apply to cinema and in this medium the two poles of reception that constituted painting (criticism and individual reception) coincide in a way that was never possible before. What Benjamin hints to in this essay is the idea that the activity of painting spectatorship had begun to enter a crisis of collective reception that was linked to the advent of mass audiences and the rise in popularity of photography. But photography still preserved a similar mechanism of capture and reception to painting that involved a static sight, there was no movement and dynamism yet. It is with cinema that we finally get the dynamic movement that imitates duration and what Benjamin calls the *optical unconscious*. Cinema, in a way, fulfilled the audience’s desire to be distracted by a moving and ever-changing spectacle that Benjamin called an optical unconscious because it mimicked the way our memories and even dreams look to us in our mind’s eye.

In a movie, an actor or represented subject has to necessarily forego their aura in the name of a script, a character, or a narrative. This radical renunciation that subsequently destroys the aura as we know it is determined by the fact that a scene can be shot numerous times and from different vantage points until the perfect shot is achieved (thus undermining the spontaneity of a moment). This is exactly where Víctor Erice’s poetic cinema enters the discussion and problematizes these

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<sup>36</sup> Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, 28

stylistic notions particular to the medium. *El Sol del Membrillo* is at once a documentary and a metaphorical story, thus challenging and playing with the conventions of genre and style that were pervasive at the time of its production. Antonio is documented during a season of work and most of the sequences we are presented with are spontaneous and likely unscripted, but others are clearly being directed and curated by Erice behind the scenes. Overall, the film feels unscripted and natural until we reach the final dream sequence in which we get a voice over monologue by the painter who hasn't, until this point, addressed the audience directly. Up until the moment of the dream monologue the "acting" of López García has been constituted by the mundane realism of artistic work and other domestic activities.

There are, of course, other nods to the presence of the camera throughout the film<sup>37</sup> but overall, the format of his acting in front of the screen is a non-acting composed mainly of long durational shots of the artist in his natural habitat. It is because the actors on the screen are not upstaged, constricted by the rigors of a script, and since the director favors duration over montage that the film preserves the spontaneity and realism of the moments it captures. Thus, one could argue that this formula approximates the preservation of an aura in the way we have discussed despite being radically absent of a physical here and now in the way Benjamin discusses. Since cinema's aesthetic precondition is one of discontinuous continuity it is hard to argue that any film has more aura than others since any sequence (durational or not) is always going to be composed of hundreds of individual frames played consecutively next to each other. Furthermore, Benjamin argues that cinema operates precisely by foregoing the aura of the actor that "acts" with her whole person. With that idea in mind, something radical happens within the language of cinema when an actor stops acting or reading from a script and instead presents her being as it is naturally. This is

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<sup>37</sup> Another scene that is clearly a montage directed by Erice is when Antonio and his friend Enrique coordinate to sing a song for the camera. Nonetheless the action feels natural and at no point does it feel forced or contrived.

what Andre Bazin called the dramaturgy of nature when he argued in favor of the ontological realism of cinema. The argument is that when one captures an event or person without the veil of a narrative structure or a script these realities present themselves in a solemn presence to the camera.

Erice has publicly discussed being a reader of Bazin and an avid fan of the Italian Neorealist movement, so it is no surprise that his movie acknowledges these philosophical concepts in both form (durational and slow sequences) and in content (the numerous metanarrative shots of the camera next to the work site). These gestures pay homage to Andre Bazin's idea that cinema is indeed capable of presenting an objective reality despite being ontologically artificial and automated in its mechanism of capture. Erice is conscious of these limitations and draws attention to them while making an argument for the possibility of an *auratic* cinema which is at once a document and a work of art. Cinema in general and slow cinema in particular forces us to rethink our relationship to the aura and to time as a whole. Mary Ann Doane echoes Benjamin when she claims that cinema creates something which is unique to the apparatus and to the historical moment (*weltanschauung*) it emerges from. In some ways it fulfilled a long-standing and paradoxical human desire of preserving time and in doing so it created an art form with its own rules of reception. Doane writes:

*“The achievement of modernity’s temporality, as exemplified by the development of the cinema, has been to fuse rationality and contingency, determination and chance. In line with the logic of statistics, the cinema has worked to confirm the legibility of the contingent. Cinema’s decisive difference from photography was its ability to inscribe duration, temporal process. Yet it was duration based upon division, upon the sequential serialization of still photographs which,*



*projected, produced the illusion of motion and the capturing of time.*"<sup>38</sup>

Stemming from our discussion of Erice and Doane's idea that cinema presents an illusion of duration via the projected sequential serialization of still images, it is clear that what we have in front of us is not a real tissue of time but rather its artificial semblance. Doane's comparison of cinema to the logic of statistics is a prescient one because it places this mechanism in a historical context which is characterized by the rise of Big Data, social media platforms, and an infinitude of statistical forms of knowledge. This is, in essence, the problem Benjamin and the Frankfurt school had with technological forms of aesthetic communication like cinema and photography, which were always coded and, in some ways, determined by the logic of capitalist technocracy. Erice places himself in the middle of this tension between the medium and the oppressive forces that brought it into existence by favoring duration over montage, improvisation over script, and historical subject matter over exhausted narrative tropes. Overall, he is challenging the norms of cinematic language by prioritizing a subject matter that has to do with material temporality, the passage of time, and the unforgiving embrace of death. In *El Sol del Membrillo* Erice rejects cinema's alignment to the logic of statistics by *preserving and making visible poetic events as documents of knowledge and vice versa*.

Herein lies the value in this film: it is a work which does not claim to be a document—in the way many popular objective documentaries do—but rather it presents poetry as truth, truth as poetry, while being aware of the paradoxes and contradictions of the medium. The film addresses these head on by the selection of its content (the monotonous and ordinary portrayal of one of the world's most famous artists) and the poetic form of the film in general. In this jewel of Spanish cinema, we have a movie dedicated entirely to the ordinary life and extraordinary practice of an

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<sup>38</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "The Instant and the Archive," in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 208.

incredibly important painter and teacher. As an audience we get to go behind the scenes of his artistic process, but we are also capable of witnessing the trials, tribulations, and chance encounters of his everyday life and work. Ontologically speaking, cinema arguably lacks a material connection to time and the here and now (it creates it by simulating the illusion of continuity) that we encounter in painting, land art, and sculpture.<sup>39</sup> Having said that, Erice approximates real duration and aura by focusing on the life and work of an artist who has a deep connection to place and prioritizes being witness to the passage of time over its mastery. But it is only through the technology of cinema and the event of *El Sol del Membrillo* that, as an audience, we are able to conceptualize and bear witness to the private *métier* of Antonio López García.

#### **4. The poetic cinema of Víctor Erice: aura, time, and light.**

As we have discussed at length in the previous sections, some of the defining features of Víctor Erice's *El Sol del Membrillo* are the slow-paced durational sequences that make up the film. The general theme as a whole pertains to the temporality of a painting, the passage of time through the seasons, and the finitude and mortality of human life. In fact, Erice takes his durational realism as far as showing the struggles and roadblocks that Antonio López García faces during the process of painting a quince tree in his garden. In the film we are presented with the painter's process from beginning a new work to ultimately failing to complete it – mainly due to the contingencies of the weather and the inconsistencies of natural lighting. Erice takes us through the journey and allows us as spectators to witness the process and the conclusion in its failure without coding or

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<sup>39</sup> And, to state it again, it is not my claim that these art forms ask to be represented in this way, but it happens to be that cinema is the latest art form to re-define and complicate our current notions of time and experience.

interpreting failure as a negative aspect of artistic creation.<sup>40</sup> There is no upstaging of the events in the movie and the painter is presented taking on a new project in the manner he is accustomed to without a narrative or a directorial expectation to complete the work. A curious fact pertaining to this, is the notion that despite being one of Spain's most respected artists, Antonio does not have a high rate of completion<sup>41</sup> compared to other contemporary painters. After further research and stemming from the inside look Erice gives us from his archive of incompletions, it is clear that this is a painter who does not seek to create volume but that prioritizes the *labor* of painting in itself.

Because of this attitude towards failure and completion he is able to be at peace when a work comes to an end. As he tells the camera and audience during the movie, he is respectful of the moment when a work has come to an end—either by his own volition or by environmental contingencies. These unfinished works are stored in a dark basement in his studio and are never made available to the public (which is a shame since we get to see in the film a multiplicity of incredible works that will likely never see the light of day). In the basement we see a myriad of paintings and sculptures, some finished, and others halted in their progress. This makes sense because during many instances in the film he states that to him painting is more about the duration and time spent with a work and the scenes where the work takes place. Regarding the quince tree portrayed in the movie, it is the time spent next to it while painting it and accompanying its growth that grant Antonio professional satisfaction. Despite being mildly disappointed about not being able to complete the oil painting he solemnly accepts the end result and moves forward without internalizing this failure as a detrimental event.

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<sup>40</sup> This is a very important point and I want the reader to be aware that when I use the word failure in relation to the completion of work of art, I do not use it with a negative connotation. In fact, it can be argued that failure is an essential part of all artistic work and all artists in some ways need failures in order to eventually create their best work.

<sup>41</sup> The painter's relationship to failure is both poetic and pragmatic in that it allows him to keep his expectations realistic and stay true to the representation of an ephemeral event or sight.

The camera of Víctor Erice imitates this poetic attitude towards time and duration as is testified by the overall slow tempo of the film and the numerous sequences of Madrid's people, cityscapes, trains, sun, clouds, and apartment buildings. The camera's focal point is never just the artist at work but also the daily life that surrounds him. These lived experiences include a group of plasterers working on renovations in his home, numerous visits from his daughters and his best friend, and most importantly his relationship to his artist wife María Moreno. In many ways *El Sol del Membrillo* goes outside the traditional scope of an artist documentary by making the house and its inhabitants during this time period protagonists of the film itself. The garden, the quince tree he is painting, the workers, his daughters, the changing weather, the city around his home, his best friend Enrique, and his artistic and romantic relationship with his wife all constitute the space which shapes the artist's life. Erice makes the conscious decisions to include all of these "characters" as part of the plot of the film in the form of a human and social matrix that constitute the artistic practice of Antonio López García. It is this decision to include the ordinary realism of everyday life that makes this film one of the most important cinematic exponents of *aesthetic documentary*.

On the one hand, the film presents us with some objective truths pertaining to the monotony of everyday life in Madrid (both inside and outside the film set) by showing events that unfold inside of Antonio's house and the surrounding metropolitan areas of Madrid.<sup>42</sup> The focal point of this movie is the artist and the painting he undertakes during the time of shooting, but the camera takes us places that wouldn't otherwise be revealed to an audience interacting with an artist's work in a gallery. This is one of the possibilities that the technology of cinema endows a director with, allowing to make visible the quotidian, personal, and somewhat private activities that surround a

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<sup>42</sup> Erice includes numerous shots of trans, children playing soccer in the street, apartment buildings, and other cityscapes to provide the social context of Madrid where López García's house and studio are located.

subject. The inclusion of these events humanizes a painter that otherwise remains relatively private within the public sphere. Furthermore, the absence of acting and a rigid script present his actions in a less mediated fashion and arguably preserve his aura instead of renouncing it to the structure and direction of a script. My belief is that these steps endow the audience with a far more honest and realistic representation of the work and life of one of Spain's most iconic cultural figures.

There are two scenes in particular that illuminate the notion of a non-acting acting and the breaking of the fourth wall.<sup>43</sup> The first one takes place when Antonio receives a visit from his close friend Enrique that attended the art academy with him (Appendix 1, 00:37:47-01:03:30). The two of them discuss their time at the academy, the changing currents of the art world, and they discuss some of the formal specificities of quince tree painting. Antonio is attempting to paint the tree in line with the grid he has set up around it and asks Enrique to help him by holding a leaf that is obstructing one of the quinces he has chosen to include in the composition. While Enrique holds the leaf and Antonio diligently applies his brush strokes on the canvas, the two of them break into song. The song is a traditional Spanish song that presumably many people know by memory. What is stylistically interesting about this scene is the fact that the artist breaks the fourth wall for the first time and addresses the camera operator. The two friends are attempting to harmonize together but when they fail to do so they ask Erice to give them another opportunity to succeed in harmonizing. They laugh and tell the camera operator—whose presence has been invisible so far—that they must repeat the song until they achieve a better result for film. They succeed after the third attempt and as a spectator you can feel the spontaneity of the moment and the way it is

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<sup>43</sup> It has to be stated that the way the fourth wall is broken during this sequence is not a meta gesture towards the medium of cinema but rather a nod to the casual and truthful atmosphere of the film as whole. In a way the inclusion of this scene further humanizes Antonio and plays with the tension between document and artifice.

comical for everyone involved; the enjoyment from both artists and the invisible camera crew is palpable for the viewer.



The power and value of this scene lies in the director's choice to keep the numerous attempts at harmonizing providing the sense that we are there among the artists and the crew sharing in a joyous moment. Up until this moment the director has kept things objective by not making his presence felt. Erice and his crew have remained invisible by relying on long shots, wide angles of the work site, the use of tripods to record the action, and more importantly by avoiding interviewing any of the subjects of the film and opting to allow the action to occur *naturally*.<sup>44</sup> The decision to include the numerous attempts at singing in harmony is an aesthetic choice from Erice (he could've only included the scene where they succeed in harmonizing) and demonstrate the influence Bazin and Benjamin have had on his work. In relation to the latter, we can interpret this scene as an attempt to preserve the aura of a moment which the medium of cinema foregoes when real action and spontaneity are replaced by a script, acting, and editing. The inclusion of the numerous takes and the laughter shared between the characters and crew give the spectator a somewhat unmediated moment in its unrestricted duration. Generally speaking, movies

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<sup>44</sup> This approach is inspired by André Bazin's dramaturgy of nature which Erice has publicly claimed to be inspired by.

exclude deeply human scenes of this kind by carefully determining in advance the action via a script, the use of editing to select only the best scenes for final cut, and a director's general management of the production. Erice continuously pays homage to the neo-realist tradition and their use of long takes to provide a feeling of uninterrupted duration, prolonged establishing shots for spatial context, and depth of field to give a more comprehensive experience of space to the viewer.

The second relevant scene to this discussion is perhaps the most *philosophically pregnant* moment in the entire film and one that I have interpreted as a cinematic quotation of Walter Benjamin's theory of art in the age of technological reproducibility (Appendix 1, 02:03:31-02:06:30). Up until this moment Erice has favored cinematic realism with a few exceptions along the way but in this sequence, he moves to the deeply allegorical world of dreams. The scene breaks with the realism of the film by presenting a montage sequence of Antonio's dream. It begins with a voiceover by the painter describing a memory of his childhood in Tomelloso where he is on a stroll around the city with his parents. The dream starts with a joyful scene of childhood along with his parents who don't longer live but it unexpectedly takes a turn to the macabre. In the dream young Antonio notices a quince tree in the distance with bright yet decaying fruit. The tree is illuminated by what he describes as a strange light that is clear yet somber and which transforms everything it comes into contact with into ash and metal.

The vocal testimony is juxtaposed with a montage sequence of the work site at night illuminated primarily by cinema lights that are activated by a remote-controlled timer. The juxtaposition of the testimony and the montage sequence work perfectly together by presenting the viewer with a decaying quince tree which is being illuminated and made visible solely by the aid of artificial lighting. The light described by the painter's voice could thus be interpreted as a stand

in for modernity in general and the dangers of technological modes of reproduction in particular as it is being illustrated by the literal light at the garden.<sup>45</sup> In addition to the lights, Erice includes shots of the place markers Antonio has used to maintain the same position in relation to the painting juxtaposed with the camera's tripod legs standing in the same position. This is a perfect cinematic quote of Walter Benjamin's writing on the aura since it alternates between the positional gaze of the painter and that of the camera. Because painting involves and requires the whole being and time of a painter, it is argued by Benjamin that all works in paint *carry* with them an aura and historic testimony that is rooted to the presence of a human subject and the idiosyncrasies of place that constitute and mediate the experience of creating the work. Conversely, the camera's capture is by definition not reliant to the contingencies of lighting and physical presence as is exemplified by the nocturnal scene of automation presented by Erice (the lights turn on remotely and the camera can be pre-programmed to record on its own).

As incredible as the medium of cinema is, it has to be noted that its technological mechanism by definition foregoes the aura of a moment by relying on mechanical/artificial forms of capture (the click of a shutter vs. the time-consuming strokes of a human being applies on a canvas). On the other hand, a painter preserves the aura by being true to the historical contingencies that inform the form and content of the work. Benjamin exemplifies this problem beautifully when he compares the cinematographer to a surgeon and the painter to a magician. He writes: "The surgeon penetrates the body of the patient while the magician respects it just by placing his hand. The painter is like a magician because he maintains in his work a natural distance from reality,

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<sup>45</sup> My interpretation of the light that is sombre yet bright is twofold: first it stands in for the effects of modern technologies of capture in relation to more humanistic practices like painting. Secondly, and in a more poetic sense, the light symbolizes the passage of time, death, mortality, and aging which are notions that the painter is faced with during the entirety of the film.



whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue<sup>46</sup>.” *El Sol del Membrillo* as a whole, and in particular this montage sequence, are visual illustrations of this paradigm. Throughout the entire film Erice has presented the process of a painter who struggles with the ideal lighting conditions to complete a painting of a tree illuminated by the sun at a specific time of the day. Because López García prioritizes the preservation of a *natural distance from reality* he ultimately fails in completing this work because of bad weather, cloudy days, and the arrival of winter. The camera accompanies him through this journey while capturing the scene he has envisioned with the click of a button and thus penetrating the tissue of this reality.<sup>47</sup>

It is that which cinema lacks, a distance from reality’s naturalism, which becomes its foundational aesthetic and formal principles. Critical filmmakers with a background in theory and philosophy know this and take a self-reflexive position regarding the artificiality of the medium. The nocturnal dream montage I have just described is an example of this reflexive modality in filmmaking. With the camera Erice replaces the eyes, body, and presence of the painter who would not be able to paint at night but who through his embodied presence is able to come closer to the divine emanation and unique appearance of the quince tree event in his backyard. From September 30<sup>th</sup> to October 25<sup>th</sup> the artist has invested the whole of his being and temporal investment in capturing this sight and the camera – with its technical apparatus of capture—is able to capture unlimited lighting conditions. To echo Benjamin, there is something unnatural and invasive about the way the camera reproduces the sublime sight of the tree that Antonio is working so hard to convey. The way the camera simulates its colors and composition with such technical efficiency—

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<sup>46</sup> Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” *Essay in The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2008), 28.

<sup>47</sup> It is paradoxically through this very transgression into the tissue of reality that cinema acquires its aesthetic and cultural significance. This does not discredit its value at all but rather it radically reshapes the conversation about aura and testimony.

akin to the work of a surgeon—feels like cheating when contrasted to the art of painting. The painter, like a magician, creates a mystical appearance, an illusion by way of a magical process, a set of tricks that are truly human and do not penetrate into the fabric of reality. The realist painter by definition honors and pays respect to the unique appearance of the here and now and the philosophical impossibility of representing a moment how it truly once was.

All of this being said, Benjamin's theory falls short of a complete understanding of the radical new possibilities the medium enabled. We could interpret his analogy of the surgeon and the magician as a historical perspective on modern achievements. Simply put, one wouldn't generally trust a healer magician more than a surgeon in the event of emergency brain surgery. With that same logic cinema and painting are simply two distinct mediums with shared principles like lighting, composition, framing, color, perspective, and so on. It is my opinion that one isn't necessarily better than the other despite the conversation we've had about the *aura*. One could argue that cinema's radical renunciation of the aura, by way of its mechanical operations, is precisely what endows it with a radical potential that realist painting could never dream of. Cinema is able to present images of numerous sights and places without being limited to the corporeal constraints attached to painting and even photographers who are confined to static sights.

Erice utilizes this potential to not only show us the larger context of an artist's work but to also point out—in a reflexive manner—the limitations of the medium when it comes to telling a story via the sequential frames of numerous locations. What I mean by this is that one can't forget that the moving image is and always will be the sequential playback of individual frames creating the illusion of movement and duration; no matter how realistic the subject matter; film, video, and the media of the moving image will always be rooted in illusion. In Bordo's reading of Benjamin's theory he reminds us that “the digital image is sufficiently attenuated and recomposed by the

apparatus to yield a simulacrum as a dematerialized site that undermines the assumption of the here and now. A virtual site is a location putting question marks against who, what, where, and why. In the era of the digital screen, it is almost as if Benjamin's allegation has yet to arrive."<sup>48</sup> In other words, the product of the digital image –insofar as I am referring to the DVD of the film which was shot on film—is inherently steeped in an ambiguity regarding the materiality and the here and now of the object being presented. Is the object produced by the digital image a simulacrum devoid of a material site, merely a copy? Or is the digital work referring –as is the case of this film—to a real event, a happening pertaining to an artist's labor that is in itself its own archive. Bordo unpacks Benjamin's theory by reminding us that for the German thinker works of art are special kinds of artefacts that, through their aura, carry within themselves their own history and archival record.

“Thus, Benjamin relies on the ontological necessity for an original artefact – a thing – transmitted through time, not the copy of the thing but the singular original itself. This requirement of ontological singularity underlies Benjamin's claim of the diminishment of the work of art in the era of (its) technological reproduction. For Benjamin the original work of art carries the record fully. It is an archive. So, while all fabricated things are such records, art carries these records to the fullest and hence highest degree. From a Benjaminian point of view, there is a continuum of humanly fabricated things from the lowliest artefacts to the maximum, the ‘work of art’. There is gradation from a minimum to a maximum. Artefacts are not all the same. Art is a special kind of artefact, the *work* of art is a special kind of art.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Bordo, “History Lessons: Imitation, Work and the Temporality of Contemporary Art” Op.cit, 216.

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” 218.

The dream sequence is Erice's poetic critique of cinema. It proves to the viewer the unfair manner in which a director can sidestep and eclipse the profound labor that someone like Antonio has invested in order to create a testimony of place. Erice visualizes the dream that inspires him to paint quince trees to life with an ease that will never be possible for a painter; he simulates the scene altogether and visually illustrates one of the most profound moments in his dream. For López García the most important aspect of this oil work is the manner in which the sun illuminates the tree and its fruits, creating a sublime golden glow that only occurs at a specific time of day. The camera captures this scene flawlessly many times during the film and in the final dream montage it even goes as far as illustrating the dream about death and the passage of time that inspires the artist to paint it. But both of these scenes are inextricably connected to a material presence that is almost impossible to capture, precisely because it is unique to an ephemeral moment in time and space. Ultimately it is this material relation to place that characterizes the differences between the art of painting and the art of cinema.



For Walter Benjamin a landscape moving past an audience in a movie theater or a television screen is devoid of its aura; one is not in the presence of the landscape itself but rather to a multitude of images that simulate its likeness. And this serialized image lacks the authenticity and

historical testimony of the original landscape. The paradox lies in the fact that if it wasn't for the presence of the filmmaker and a camera the audience would not gain access to certain landscapes and be able to ponder these questions about technology and the cultural heritage of aesthetics. This is why we can consider Erice's film, of a painter attempting to finish a work in a finite duration of time, a work of ritual mimesis in which the filmmaker simultaneously attempts to present the solemn truth behind this sojourn while imitating the style of realism of the film's subject. This is the reason why *El Sol del Membrillo* is itself a meditation on imitation with a Benjaminian sensibility "precisely because it begins and ends as locality and place in relation to which mimesis as representation in the widest sense is to be understood. Benjamin posits the authenticity of the work of art as a singular attachment to a locality, a place as a methodological presupposition."<sup>50</sup>

The film takes place in its entirety in the same location—Antonio's house and primarily his garden—and thus its topos, as a work of art, is rooted equally in the space in which the action unfolds as it is in the portrayal of an artist at work. Its choreography takes shape through the different dates that are marked in each scene which demarcate a moment in time and a rootedness to place as an actor of the film that shapes and conditions both the attempts to complete a painting for the artist and the shooting schedule for the film crew. The bad weather that is recorded on the film, and which persists throughout its entirety, prevents the painter from completing the painting of the quince tree which in turn prevents Erice from filming with the artist. Evidence of this is that the record pertaining to the days of bad weather include only still images of the work in progress.

This attempt to shoot only when Antonio paints further advances the choreographic aspiration of the film and its commitment to the authenticity of the work as a document. The garden in his backyard is the x that marks the spot for both filmmaker and painter and both of them share

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<sup>50</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 219.

the commitment to place as the site for an artwork to unfold. Despite the illusory mechanism of film as such and the art of montage Erice chooses to stay true to the here and now, a passion that he shares with the painter. This attitude on the part of both artists show that they are aware that “authenticity and aura derives its significance as the *topos* where art resides as a cultural operator. Benjamin never leaves the ritual site, at least as his model in his aestheticizing of the lost place. Tacit within the destruction of the aura is alienation as the loss of, and finally the destruction of, place. The virtual is a site devoid of place. It is nowhere.”<sup>51</sup>

In one of the final scenes, after failing to complete the work in oil, Antonio stores the painting away in his basement as if suppressing it to the depths of his unconscious and away from a collector’s hands or the halls of a gallery. This action keeps the work away from the public’s gaze and from the critics and enthusiasts that chronicle and admire his work, but this is a distance unique to all art forms (including cinema) in which the artist carefully selects that which she shares with the world. The technology of cinema allows spectators a special insight into this otherwise private world and it is one of the things that makes this film so special and gives it a valuable historical and cultural significance. The moral of the story is not that cinema is better than painting or that technological reproducibility is the way of the future. Rather it can be read as a text that mourns the loss of labor as such. It laments, in line with Walter Benjamin, the loss of material labor and privacy that we are subjected to in our technological societies. With the advent of video technology, automated labor, ubiquitous smart phones, and other surveillance devices it is clear that we are moving toward a world where humans and their labor will no longer be needed. Despite the numerous benefits technologies grant us, we are slowly losing human activities that are paramount to our cultural heritage. Benjamin’s argument is not solely about painting and

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<sup>51</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” 219.

photography, but it extends to the contemporary tension between automation and human intention. The problem is not that photography is better than painting, but rather the problem is the possibility of a world where photography replaces painting at a specific task and removes the human agent from the picture altogether. One cannot ignore the fact that cameras are so ubiquitous today that we all carry one in our pockets, and this propagation is directly tied to capitalist production and the uneven distribution of wealth. Paramount to this distinction is the fact that most of the mobile cameras we carry today are produced by one manufacturer that has taken a stronghold of the market and is able to create the conditions under which their devices are used.

With his final montage sequence, Víctor Erice reminds the viewer of the inherent value in material labor and the process-oriented practice in which painters invest their whole being in order to play a part in the presentation of moment in the here and now. Technological forms of capture simplify this process to the point where a smartphone operator does not even need to understand the basic technical knowledge necessary to properly expose an image; smartphones automate and standardize art of photography and videography. Regarding the advent of smartphones, one could argue that Benjamin's theory could still hold value if we replaced painting and cinema with cinema and smartphones. The progression Benjamin observed is basically the same insofar as a new invention arrives in order to simplify a previously existing operation with the ultimate goal of replacing the operator by automating labor. If photography replaces the labor of a painter then smartphones and mass-produced technologies will eventually make film crews and large budget productions<sup>52</sup> obsolete.

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<sup>52</sup> Vlogging and the rise of YouTube are examples of large-scale productions essentially being replaced by a one-man operation. You can reach more people and monetize your content far more effectively with a single mirrorless camera than through the bureaucracies of a studio production. This is both a good and bad thing but ultimately what is lost is once again the human element of filmmaking (lighting, sound engineering, manual focusing, manual exposure, and so on).

In *El Sol del Membrillo*, Erice never argues that cinema is a superior medium but rather presents images of the two mediums – with their respective idiosyncratic formal operations—in a dialectical conversation. This he does in a very similar way to how Benjamin theorized about these practices; the film feels at many times something that Benjamin himself could have written. Benjamin writes: “[...] the presentation of reality in film is incomparably the more significant for people of today, since it provides the equipment-free aspect of reality they are entitled to demand from a work of art and does so precisely on the basis of the most intensive interpretation of reality with equipment.”<sup>53</sup>

The film concludes with a scene of the garden in the spring of next year. The garden is blossoming anew and the quince tree – surrounded by a few rotted quinces that remained from the winter—is starting to grow new fruits. We listen to the sounds of birds singing juxtaposed with Antonio singing like he always does and the usual sounds of a bustling city like Madrid. Life begins to emerge again in what once was a garden devastated by the sterility of winter; this is the eternal cycle of time. The film ends with a eulogy: “Paco Solorzano in memoriam.” (02:06:30-02:10:44)

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<sup>53</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” 28.



## Chapter 3 – Conceptual framework: Commons and Landscape

### 1. Art and Landmarks: Introduction to The Mill Road Cemetery Case Study

News release from February 19, 2014:

*“Cambridge City Council is delighted to announce that ‘Bird Stones’ designed by the artist Gordon Young will be launched by the Mayor, Councilor Paul Saunders and the Venerable John Beer, Archdeacon of Cambridge at Mill Road Cemetery on Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> February at 11 am.”<sup>54</sup>*



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<sup>54</sup> “Cambridge Network: Cambridge Ideas Change the World,” *Cambridge Network*, December 26, 2021. <https://www.cambridgenetwork.co.uk/>.

The official statement from the city of Cambridge, England informs its constituents and those who visit from afar about a new project of public art to be available for public consumption as soon as 11 am on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 2014. In front of me I have this news release and a photograph, taken by Professor Jonathan Bordo, of one of the aforementioned “stones” with a poem by Robert Frost inscribed inside of it. We will begin to unpack the connective threads between these two objects but before let’s give a little more context to this public art project announced in the statement. The commission given to renowned artist Gordon Young by the Cambridge City Council Public Artwork scheme involves five stones and one wooden structure. Each stone is meant to celebrate a specific bird species with a text, poem, or biblical verse that relates to the chosen bird. In the case of the provided photograph, its title is “Robin”, and the stone is inscribed with Robert Frost’s poem *Robin Singing in its Sleep*. The other five art works are titled: *Song Thrush, Crow, Sparrow, Dove, Blackbird, and Finch*. But why birds? Why stones? And why a graveyard as the venue for an artistic installation? I will begin to address these questions in the following text and begin to create a connective thread with my own work by utilizing Gordon Young’s work as both a starting point and a preface to my work on Tommy Thompson Park.

From numerous reports and news articles I had read, I discovered that in England – a place I have yet to visit—open street cemeteries are common and differ from our treatment of these sites here in North America, many of them being considered landmarks. We will address the notion of a landmark briefly as it will be pivotal in our analysis of this site and by extension my own study. One new article in particular caught my attention, it stated that there had been a rise in people desecrating graves by using them as shelters to sleep in. The locations attracted what the city named “rough sleepers” and a myriad of drug users who left behind a considerable number of

needles.<sup>55</sup> The sites were simply becoming a hangout for sketchy characters, drug dealers and users, teenagers consuming drugs and alcohol, and so on. The city of Cambridge had to take measures and named this and other cemeteries as “protected natural areas” which would arguably put the law to work in protecting the integrity of the graves and the landmark as a whole.

Cemeteries, in fact, have a commonality with art and museums in particular in so far as they are all concerned with the preservation of the past, the remembrance of those who have passed away, and in general engaging with the process of memory. In this sense working in a cemetery as an artistic venue of exhibition is not as different or strange as it seems. Young plays into the particularities of the place by engaging in a process of imitation of nature; the cemetery attracts a diverse group of bird species and the artworks he constructs are plotted in relation to the local ecology of the Cambridge Mill cemetery. What is produced by the works is a link to nature and locality, a mirroring of the social investments of a graveyard, by way of representing poets and their surviving ideas and affects and paying respects to the history and ecology of the space. This is a kind of memory-work related to what a cemetery does insofar as it enables the presence of absence by memorializing through a physical trace a life that no longer lives. Cemeteries can be lively communal spaces as they allow those who remain in this world to travel into their own past and memories to re-visit loved ones that are gone. Conversely an art gallery and museum endow the spectator with the ability to travel back into a moment of the past that the artist worked to preserve in her particular medium of choice.

Young is involved in a work of imitation, both in form and content— by erecting the aforementioned *Bird Stones* that simultaneously capture the local ecology of the site— through the

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<sup>55</sup> Raymond Brown, “Cemetery Where Homeless Sleep inside Graves Targeted in Council Clean Up.” *CambridgeshireLive*, Cambridge News, 29 Mar. 2018, [www.cambridge-news.co.uk/news/cambridge-news/drugs-tombstones-sleeping-cemetery-mill-14466034](http://www.cambridge-news.co.uk/news/cambridge-news/drugs-tombstones-sleeping-cemetery-mill-14466034).

reverence to specific local birds and *importing* the voice and ideas of poets who are not a part of the landscape but resonate with its energy. In other words, Young's work plays with the tension between presence and absence in a similar fashion to the way a gravestone visualizes a presence of those who are no longer present in the here and now. Furthermore, in a more material sense by choosing to work with stone in reference to the old cemetery of Mill Road he pays his respects to the history of this emerging commons that is now re-mediated as a communal green space for the citizens of Cambridge.

The cemetery was consecrated in 1848 and was utilized exclusively as a burial site of the city's main parishes. The Church Building Commissioners authorized its use for 13 parishes specifically and each individual parish had an allocated space for its burial needs.<sup>56</sup> The land in question was transformed, from what the Mill Road Cemetery's website describes as green fields, into built up cityscapes during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As in many regions including Canada, the area was composed of greenery and farmland as far as the eye could see. By 1888 the area was already inhabited by intricate networks of streets, introduced fauna (specifically trees common to other urban areas), and houses while the cemetery remained in the middle of these urban developments.

Being built during this time the cemetery was designed with typical mid-Victorian design elements and specific design theories about how urban space is meant to be integrated with the pre-existent landscape. The premise of urban development of the time was to create the most pleasurable living experience without disturbing the landscape. This approach was inspired mainly by the work of John Claudius Loudon, a renowned Victorian architect and horticulturist of the region. In line with the aesthetic of the time, Loudon prioritized the usage of exotic and large plants

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<sup>56</sup> "In August 1847 the land was conveyed to the Church Building Commissioners for the use of the 13 parishes of All Saints, St Andrew the Great, St Andrew the Less, St Benedict, St Botolph, St Clement, St Edward, St Mary the Great, St Mary the Less, St Michael, St Paul, Holy Sepulchre and Holy Trinity, as an extension to their burial grounds." "How It Began," *Mill Road Cemetery*, 26 Oct. 2015, millroadcemetery.org.uk/how-it-began/.

such as ferns, gladiolus, lilies, ornamental grasses, cannas, among others. The use of these ornamental trees, shrubs, and flowers was contrasted with pristinely manicured green lawns. Loudon was prolific in the area and even published an array of landscape design and gardening books. The main design philosophy behind the creation of these spaces was to allow people to feel comfortable and at peace in these outdoor urban commons. His ideas were extended into the design of cemeteries and the architect of Mill Road cemetery was certainly influenced by Loudon.<sup>57</sup>

Andre Murray was in charge of the Mill Road Cemetery project but before taking on this endeavour he worked as the main designer and curator of the Botanic Garden in Cambridge. That garden borrowed Victorian design elements similar to those used by Loudon; composing a whole through the multiplicity of smaller nodes of flowers, bushes or exotic plants with the underlying base of an all-encompassing finely cut grass floor. Basically, picture a pool of water or a pond composed of different water lilies giving the impression of a concentric whole composed of its numerous and separate parts. In the case of the lilies one can see the nodes making up the whole while experiencing the sight as a somewhat cohesive unity. This is what Cambridge Botanic Gardens and other Victorian parks looked like at the time and Murray implemented many of these ideas into the design of the cemetery. The idea of the gardens' design and by extension that of the cemetery was to have a centralized area around which other paths extend into a kind of a serpentine perimeter path that takes visitors around the outer graves.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> “How It Began,” [millroadcemetery.org.uk/how-it-began/](http://millroadcemetery.org.uk/how-it-began/).

<sup>58</sup> In his 1843 book, ‘On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries’, he set out practical design ideas for urban cemeteries and churchyards. He suggested that, from a central church or chapel, small paths should radiate out to a serpentine perimeter path that takes visitors around the outer graves. “How It Began,” [millroadcemetery.org.uk/how-it-began/](http://millroadcemetery.org.uk/how-it-began/).



The circular meandering layout of Cambridge's botanic garden reverberates into Murray's design plans for the cemetery in the layout of the cemetery in its current iteration as a 'green space'. From 1847 to 1848 the site was cleared and walled off with approval of the Church and markings on stones demarcated the space reserved for each of the 13 parishes. Through its circular and somewhat modular design accompanied with the signifiers of the stone markings visitors could easily identify where they were in relation to the 13 parishes represented in the space. The surrounding walls enclosed this burial site and gave it its sacred character by being visually bordered off from the rest of the landscape and the adjacent town. The yellow brick wall was not impenetrable and at 6 feet high in its highest part it mainly served the purpose of symbolic enclosure and with its mosses and expressive details it was also aesthetically pleasing to the eye. Since the cemetery was designated for exclusive use of clergy and members of the parishes it filled up rather quickly and no new burials were allowed.



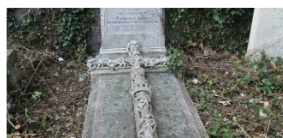
The exclusivity of this burial ground led to many of the gravestones to be declared monuments. Important people such as Hermann Bernard and Charlotte Berridge are buried here and their stones along with their inscriptions are considered monuments for citizens to appreciate. It was this added layer of monuments that eventually led to the City of Cambridge naming the site a Grade 2 national heritage “building”. This is a labelling that occurs with buildings or sites that include or find themselves in a historically and culturally important location. This elevated status allows the city to take special measures in protecting and preserving its structural integrity. The site was also named a protected wildlife destination since many species of birds and other animals make this place their home. What we are really talking about are landmarks; for this I would like to take a conceptual detour in our story and problematize the notion of landmark as it relates to Mill Road Cemetery and to the other side of the ocean to Tommy Thompson Park in Toronto, Ontario.



#### Art in the cemetery

In February 2014 Gordon Young, internationally acclaimed artist, installed his seven Bird Sculptures in Mill Road Cemetery.

[Read more](#)



#### Listed monuments

Discover the many beautiful and interesting monuments and gravestones in the Cemetery

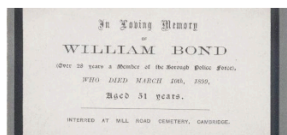
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#### News

We now have a PayPal account for online donations. Use the Donate button at the top of the page

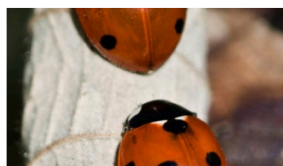
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#### Life stories

Read about the lives of some of the people buried here, organised by occupation or profession.

[Read more](#)



#### Wildlife

The Cemetery is a designated City Wildlife Site

[Read more](#)



#### Managing the Cemetery

Parishes, Cambridge City Council and Friends information

[Read more](#)

<sup>59</sup> The website of Mill Road Cemetery is a clear demonstration of the postmodern reclamation of wildlife and heritage sites. While being real physical locations their web presence includes an index of its contents and more importantly a Pay Pal account for people to donate directly.

## 2. Landmarks: Conceptualization and Critique

Landmark is a keyword that we must contextualize before we go any further and it will provide some background to an age-old human tradition pertinent to the study of contemporary art practices and more specifically of nature areas and wildlife spaces. Some questions to address here, and in a more specific way throughout my dissertation, are as follows. What is a landmark? What is the history and common usage of landmarks? And how do these “markings” at Cambridge Mill Road Cemetery differ from and compare to other landmarks that incorporate socio-political and aesthetic inscriptions such as sculpture, land art, installation art, and others in this kind. To begin answering this question let me turn to Robert Macfarlane’s seminal book, *Landmarks*. In this text Macfarlane assembles a glossary of ancient and lost words that were used to describe the ritualistic, socio-economic, and cultural features of the land. He views the words themselves as landmarks of a lost linguistic *weltanschauung* dating back to ancient societies that preceded and shaped our own. These societies, some of which still exist, practiced forms of labor that were inextricably linked to the land— fishing, hunting, navigating. These ‘land’ based practices were in turn productive of local economies instead of the kind of centralized global systems we currently inhabit. It is easy to see why this model of production, deemed inferior by today’s standards, was a more holistic and sustainable approach to the concept of habitation of nature as a whole.

The societies that established these local economies treated the land as both a resource to take advantage of and a sacred space that demanded respect, material reciprocity, and balance. One example of this attitude can be found in the opposite hemisphere by looking at Aztec practices of sacrifice. The Aztecs are compared to our societies of consumption by Georges Bataille when he compares their lives to our relationship to production and capitalism. He argues that our current models of commerce and societal hierarchy tend to work under the premise of labeling as profane



that which used to be deemed sacred by “primitive” societies. The Aztecs, for example, believed the sun to be an important deity since it was responsible for providing ‘energy’ to their lives and most importantly daily sustenance to their crops. The idea was that the sun directly aided them in their daily life by providing the needed fuel for crops to grow and yield the harvest of each season. So, in holy gratitude to the sun, they would offer human sacrifices as well as ritualistic burning of crops in order to give back to the deity that had sustained their lives for another season. The premise was that human lives inherently consumed this solar energy and as populations grew so did the solar intake, they “took” from the sun. Therefore, it was important to consider and act upon some kind of cosmic retribution that would, in theory, return that energy back to the sacred cosmos.<sup>60</sup>

“Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use degraded, rendered profane. Servile use has made a *thing* (an object) of that which, in a deep sense, is of the same nature as the *subject*, is in a relation of intimate participation with the subject.”<sup>61</sup> What Bataille is really suggesting, by providing the example of the Aztecs, is that contemporary societies operate under the guidelines of the *thing* as an object to be made servile to human intentions. In other words, the world of work introduces a duality between the world and the subject. In this worldview tools, factories, products, and workers themselves have to be reduced to the state of *the thing*; abandoning all cosmic notions of the interconnectedness of matter in the universe in order to operate fluidly within the cycle of production. In extension, the world as a whole is perceived as a *thing* that serves

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<sup>60</sup> Despite the clear power dynamics present in Aztec society – those sacrificed were usually prisoners—the relationship to their ecology as the “house” they inhabited was something of utmost importance.

<sup>61</sup> Georges Bataille, “Sacrifices and Wars of The Aztecs,” in *Accursed Share*, (Zone Books, Princeton University Press, 1991), 55.

a utility (mainly housing the human race and providing resources) and with this logic resources have been extracted and consumed to a point of no return.<sup>62</sup>

Macfarlane discovers, in the words he presents as a comprehensive glossary, a more nuanced vocabulary to describe and relate to place than what we have available in the present. The author argues that our current lexicon has adapted to the changing techno-industrial landscape and editors of dictionaries have been forced to dispose of “land” words in favor of words relating to technological activities and practices. He notes that the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* recently removed words such as Fern, Heron, Ivy, Kingfisher, and others in place of words such as Blog, Bullet-point, Celebrity, and so on. Those in charge of these changes argue that today’s youth do not need “land” words for their daily lives and social integration but will be more equipped for modern life by knowing words and terms pertaining to digital and social media technologies.

The Oxford dictionary argues that kids know and care more about blogging, YouTube, Instagram, computers, smartphones, and Kim Kardashian than they would about place names and terms used to describe the features of the natural world (and they are not wrong). This is to some degree a fact and an indication of the sad state of affairs of contemporary life. But Macfarlane seeks to invigorate this endangered discourse by re-introducing words that are out of circulation and that belonged to a rich tradition of farmers, fishermen, hunters, and generally speaking those who were close to the land and spoke its “language”. *Landmarks* according to the author are the *investments* human beings have with the *land*. And it must be stated that a lexicon of words pertaining to landmarks is absolutely vital in an age of ecological degradation and the accelerating rise of techno-industrial landscapes and worldviews.

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<sup>62</sup> This point of no return included the inevitability of climate change and the inescapable realities of capitalism which would require a complete overhaul of our current socio-economic systems.

One of the terms, relevant to this study, that the author re-introduces is the word *cairn*, which is indeed useful for the analysis of contemporary site-specific artworks such as Young's *Bird Stones*, the practice of gravestones in general and the graves in Road Mill cemetery in particular<sup>63</sup>. Macfarlane brings back the term from Scottish Gaelic and it roughly stands for *a pile or heap of stones functioning as a landmark, a monument, or a tombstone*. A brief examination of the word's history shows that cairns have been used throughout history in diverse ways, varying from location to location and truly specific to a place, a land, and a geography. The first accounts of stone mounds dates back to 3.3 million years ago and during this epoch stones were beginning to be utilized as weapons, utensils, writing artefacts, and as tools in general. But in their most essential definition cairns were seen simply as hills and natural rock mounds. In distinct locations of Europe, the usage of cairns varied from burial monuments, demarcations of war zones<sup>64</sup>, rituals and religious ceremonies, hunting zone markers, trail markers, and even zones of astrology.

An example that is more pertinent for my study dates back 12,000 years ago to the aboriginals of Canada, specifically the Inuit people. They named this kind of place marker *Inuksuit* and it served as a marker for navigation routes, points of reference for travelling the land, trail markers, markers for hunting, fishing, and herding, markers of veneration sites, among other uses. Essentially, the concept of cairn as a place marker varies from location to location but undeniably shares a commonality surpassing geographical borders. The issue that emerges in today's usage of these landmarks, in particular pertaining to the example in Canada, is that aboriginal culture has been eclipsed and appropriated by Colonial and Imperial practices and culture. The Inuksuit in

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<sup>63</sup> An important exemplar of cairn-making in the context of site-specific art is, without a doubt, Andy Goldsworthy who we will discuss further in this dissertation.

<sup>64</sup> Before battle in some locations around Europe men were known to create mounds using rocks from the opposing battalions. This signaled a code of honor permitting the opposing parties to come together before battle.

Canada is still considered an integral element of Canada's aboriginal past but in contemporary discourse it is appropriated as a symbol for "Canadian" identity and the armed forces. Its "circulated" semiotic content is no longer just about a landmark that is about and of a place but rather operates discursively as a tool of ideology. Detached from its original usage, the Inuksuit is no different from Uncle Sam or the Maple Leaf, feeding into narratives about colonial identity, white identity, and nationalism rather than actually functioning as a symbol of the landscape. It also exemplifies the act of substitution and simulacra that takes place in modern times where words such as step take on an entirely new meaning.

### 3. The commons and landscape

My hypotheses about the city of Cambridge and Toronto's real intentions behind a place like Tommy Thompson Park is benefitted by looking back to the genealogy of the concept of *commons*. Raymond Williams tells us that the earliest use of the term in the English language dates back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century and its root word derives from the Latin *communis*.<sup>65</sup> The word *communis* is derived from the Latin *com* and *munis* which roughly mean *together* (*com*) and *under obligation* (*munis*). The word common, since its early usage, is deployed as *community*, understood as an organized body of people ranging from a specific group to the entirety of the world. But what Williams points out is that in its earliest use it defined social strata, i.e., it functioned as an adjective and noun of social division: "common, the common, and commons, as contrasted with lords and nobility."<sup>66</sup> And so we get the term *commoners* which was used to describe those at a lower social standing in relation to nobility. What is remarkable is that this linguistic demarcation of power

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<sup>65</sup> Raymond Williams, "Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society" in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 70.

<sup>66</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, 71.

relations is very much active in the contemporary understanding of the commons. One can even think of its other neutral use as an adjective, meaning that something is done often or is a basic occurrence. For example: “it is common to encounter homeless people in certain areas of the city of Toronto”. The word even functions as a derogatory adjective that stands for something vulgar or mundane, lesser than other things or people.

According to Williams, the derogatory definition of the word *common* tends to be indistinguishable from its neutral definition as a shared community or space. In fact, it is in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the term takes on a more direct negativity when it aids to distinguish between class divisions. So, in our present understanding of the *common* as the whole of mankind we have conflated with it the idea of the private in relation to the human groups that constitute space. We are all part of the commonwealth but at the same time we are told that we are private individuals meant to pursue individualistic goals instead of community-oriented objectives. Capitalist societies tend to alienate individuals from others and more importantly from their inner selves in order to function more effectively in relation to the economy.<sup>67</sup> In this sense, every *commons* in the form of parks, the streets, beaches, wilderness reserves, etc. found in the city have to be viewed under the lens of urban planning and its ideology. As with the example of Cambridge Mill cemetery, one realizes the limitations of the *publicness* of these sites when the state has to intervene and create a framework of inclusion and exclusion that limits the presence of undesired *commoners* to the grounds.

Unlike the time when the word common was first coined, countries don't openly label and perceive groups of people as inferior to other more noble groups. But in the absence of nobility and kingdoms, cities do divide their dwellers into participants of the economy at large and those

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<sup>67</sup> This is essentially the premise cities where we tend to find ourselves alone together.

that do not participate are automatically excluded from access to most of a city's public spaces. No shirt no service, dress codes in night clubs, no loitering, parking meters, entrance fees for public parks and museums, highway tolls, and so on are all strategies used to privatize and monetize from what are supposed to be spaces for *communion*. If you don't have an identification card or money you cannot participate in most public activities and those who do not play *the game* are marginalized into housing residences on the periphery of a city or prosecuted by the law in some other facet.

In other words, "common" space as such is hard to define and beyond the veils of the public and the private sphere, we encounter that all space—to the extent by which all states or municipalities claim the land as theirs—is owned and operated by corporate institutions and governments. One cannot ignore the fact that today more than ever countries themselves are *owned* and *operated* as businesses whose main priority is to capitalize on their users and participate in the global economy. In fact, what is deemed public is mostly privately owned and the law itself treats these spaces as sites for cultural and capital gain. For instance, think of the Cambridge Mill public cemetery again; here we have a great example of the limitations of the commons. People are invited to visit but deemed unwelcome as soon as the space is (arbitrarily) disrespected or misused. The discourse of the sacred and the profane as well as drug legislation enter into effect when the space is not used purely for *leisure and aesthetic judgment*. Without going as far, even "loitering" or "killing time" are considered suspicious and problematic as is evidenced by the thousands of signs labeled "no loitering" throughout most public spaces in England, Canada, and the world. Our relationship to space is modulated in accordance with the use value of places and in essence the imperial heritage of the definition of landscape and commons carry forward into how modern spaces are designed, curated, and meant to be occupied.

*The word landscape is a portmanteau, a floating signifier, for almost everything human beings consider intimately and with desire about their material surroundings.* Historically speaking, the landscape is a construct for all kinds of human inscriptions and representations but in a time when the concept of landscape is symbolically and physically threatened it is important to shift the discourse that currently informs it. I will argue for the necessity of landscape as a keyword and concept through a few of the most important theorists in the field and through the study of Tommy Thompson Park as a symbol of the state of contemporary Canadian landscapes.

In the Oxford dictionary: a) the word landscape is a noun that stands for “all the visible features of an area of land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal and b) a picture representing an area of countryside.” The origin of the word dates back to the late sixteenth century often denoting a picture or scenery and the root words ‘lant + scap’ comes to us from Middle Dutch, *lant* designating ‘land’ and *scap* broadly meaning ‘ship’. From this dictionary definition we can already intuit two contesting meanings: one pertaining to nature as that which is simply “there” and “around us” and the latter pertaining to landscape as a genre of painting. It is precisely this tension which interests W.J.T. Mitchell when he proposes a shift in definition in his seminal work *Landscape and Power*. In this text—which will be of profound influence on my own work—Mitchell provides a deep history of the concept and argues the need for a shift in definition. The author argues that in order to fully understand what landscape is, one must not define it as a noun like most dictionaries and scholars do, but rather see it as an active verb. In other words, landscape should not be defined and explained in terms of what it means but rather what it does. The investments around the word have historically made it a site for cultural practices and discourses of power but the radical re-conceptualization Mitchell presents would not just replace that discursive investment but add to it by interpreting landscape itself as a cultural medium; the Earth

itself is the medium in which all human and natural activity plays out. The author suggests that all landscapes whether they are rural, urban, or artificial have the capacity to affect and be affected. All landscapes greet us as space and as such we must address what they do to us (how they affect our bodies), what we do to them (how we affect them), and how both of these “doings” become naturalized through our representational media. Mitchell writes: “What we have done and are doing to the environment, what the environment in turn does to us, how we naturalize what we do to each other, and how these ‘doings’ are enacted in the media of representation we call *landscape*.”<sup>68</sup>

In other words, landscape is not only an aesthetic category or a static sight and site to be perceived but it is rather dynamic and always moving in time and space. The static definition comes to us from the West, its modernity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and its pictorial definition as a genre testified by the history of painting but landscape as a pictorial category does not only come from the West and specifically its British heritage as many would assume by the popularity of ‘English Gardens’ in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, as a simple dictionary definition suggests the twofold term originates with the Dutch. But Mitchell reminds us that the concept—which the West appropriated—and the *beautiful* gardens that rose to prominence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in England, were influenced by a long history of Chinese landscape painting. What the West appropriated is the spiritual effect of landscape—already being practiced by the Chinese—as a “picture” to be perceived rather than an ecological sight to be experienced. The Landscape Gardens arise not from the need to exalt nature as such but rather as an imitation of nature related to the effects felt through the examples of Imperial Chinese landscape painting. What this means is that the simulacrum of

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<sup>68</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape” in *Landscape and Power*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1.



nature lies at the origin of the word's definition and helps in conflating the activities of perception and experiencing unmediated *nowness and being*.

This leads to a number of problems surrounding the term and our general interactions with nature. Regarding ideology, landscape has a double role in the way it naturalizes its interaction with us and our interaction with it. What is naturalized according to Mitchell, is a cultural construction (an artifice) that interpellates the beholder as sight and site. It functions like Althusser's repressive state apparatus in the sense that it greets us a part of the discourse of power and perpetuates the agenda of the state through the semblance of familiarity. From its Chinese and British origins, the concept was always an imperial one, and thus inextricably connected to power and its effects. But despite being a colonial tool and invention, landscapes are found everywhere in the world as concepts and their meaning slightly varies from place to place. Milton already warned us of the ambivalence of landscapes when—through the voice of Satan—he describes paradise as: “the voyeuristic object for a gaze that wavers between aesthetic delight and malicious intent, melting pity and honor.”<sup>69</sup> However, Mitchell's new dynamic landscape is not limited to the discourse of power, it is deemed to function as both a cultural medium and stage in which painting, poetry, music, cinema, writing, and the arts can represent or tell a story. And more importantly it functions as a multi-sensory medium composed of earth, stone, water, sky, plants, animals, sound, silence, light, and darkness that inevitably precedes our cultural and intellectual investments.

Before the landscape is represented by any type of media, it is itself an *artifice* in so far as it precedes human activity and can only be perceived through our own mechanisms of vision and perception. Because of this it tends to behave like other semiotic objects, particularly money.

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<sup>69</sup> Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 1.

“Functioning as a special sort of commodity that plays a unique symbolic role in the system of exchange-value. Like money landscape is good for as a use-value, while serving as a limitless symbol of value at some other level.”<sup>70</sup> Some examples of this kind of commodification of landscape include national parks, real-estate spaces, vacation destinations, city and country tours, Hawaii, the Swiss Alps, The Machu-Picchu, and endless others. All of the aforementioned commodities are generally available to those with the power and the cultural capital needed for access. Furthermore, in the times of environmental hysteria, landscape is no longer an imperial tool per se but rather has itself been labelled as an endangered and protected species that is shielded and isolated by humans and from humans. Tommy Thompson Park with its numerous projects of habitat creation and preservation will be addressed later in this text as an example of landscape in relation to Mitchell’s definition.

#### **4. The Eco in Ecology and Economy**

*“An account of landscape understood in this way therefore cannot be content simply to displace the allegory; it has to trace the process by which landscape effaces its own readability and naturalizes itself and must understand that process in relation to what might be called “the natural histories” of its own beholders”[...]What we have done and are doing to the environment, what the environment in turn does to us, how we naturalize what we do to each other, and how these “doings” are enacted in the media of representation we call “landscape.”*<sup>71</sup>

The conflation of money and space is clear through the etymologies of the words *common* and *landscape* I have outlined. But the problem has never been as clear as it appears in the present;

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<sup>70</sup> Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 14.

<sup>71</sup> Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 2.

an epoch that has been labelled as the age of the *Anthropocene*. What this definition implies is that the profound and all-encompassing domination of the earth and the space around us has finally reached a boiling point. Our activities on the surface of the earth we inhabit have begun to affect the geological development of the earth as whole which has driven a myriad of state policies and ecological initiatives. Whereas before the entire existence of humanity was regarded as a blip in the general scale of geological time, it is now regarded as deeply influential to its present and future condition. Human activity from its origin until the present has had a deep impact on the earth's ecosystems, its geology, its waters, mountains, valleys, and even its weather. Climate change is an example of the human effect on the earth and when we truly internalize this conclusion our future does not look promising at all (according to the numerous theorists of the Anthropocene). This is the reason why contemporary artists can no longer focus their attentions on the landscape as such but must rather –as an ethical responsibility—attend to the monstrous effects our activities have had, are having, and will continue to have on the earth as whole. Before I present some of the most remarkable exemplars of this newfound aesthetic direction let us try and understand where it all went wrong. How did we get here? Where are we headed? And what role do greed and power have in what is now considered a situation without any clear antidotes?

In several editions of the *Oxford Dictionary* the word ecology is immediately followed by the word economy. When proposing the conflation of these terms in today's global landscape I did not know this fact, but it is not as coincidental as it may seem. The word *ecology* is preceded by its scientific use as *oecology*. The word was transformed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by the German zoologist Haeckel<sup>72</sup>. Its root words derived from the Greek *(oi)kos* which means 'house' or 'dwelling' and *logos* roughly standing for 'speech' or 'discourse'. So, ecology in its original

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<sup>72</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Revised ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 110.

conception stood for the study or discourse pertaining to the space we dwell in, the environment as a whole. Its modern usage as a noun pertains to “the branch of biology concerned with the relations of organisms to one another and their surroundings.”<sup>73</sup> In close contrast the word economy is defined by the same dictionary as: “**n.** **1** the state of a country or region in terms of the production and consumption of goods and services and the supply of money. **2** careful management of resources. **3** a financial saving. **4** the prosperity or earnings of a place. The word comes to us from the Greek *oikonomia* which translates to ‘household (dwelling) management with the combination of *Oikos* (dwelling, house) and *Nomia* (arrangement, distribution). An initial linguistic analysis already tells us that from the start both concepts share an affinity to place, location, and the material surroundings of our daily lives. The earth as a material organism houses all of humanity, nature, trees, water, animals, and a myriad of living organisms who all operate under their own set of rules, instincts, and biological functions.

In this sense, the purpose of economy, politics, and ecology is interrelated insofar as the effective sustainability of society depends first and foremost on a habitable environment. Before wars, violence, and other human problems our role is to act as custodians of the earth and in a matter of speech clean the table after we eat. Without the earth there is no humanity, yet our entire human history has proved to be more about exploitation of our ‘dwelling’ than ‘careful management’ of our material surroundings. The house we live in has been stripped bare of all of its resources and continuously polluted, extracted, and diminished by our contemporary modes of industrial production. The age of the *Anthropocene* is marked by the excess of economical inscription on the earth; we have exploited and abused all of the natural resources available to us and continue to populate the earth at an alarming rate. More people equate the need for more

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<sup>73</sup> Waite, Maurice, ed. Oxford English Dictionary Seventh Edition ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 52.

production and industry, so instead of properly managing and caring for our ‘dwelling’ we have encumbered it as a parasite stripping the host of all its vital organs.

*To begin addressing some of these global issues it is important to shift our attention to the current framework of neoliberal economics* because in order for humanity to avert an ecological catastrophe it is paramount to re-shape our current model of neoliberal economics and production. It is neoliberalism that got us here with its emphasis on privatization, economic liberalization, free trade agreements, reduced government spending in favor of the private sector, and so on. But without focusing too much on its present multiplicity of contested meanings one can look back to the original use of *liberal*. Parallel to the etymology of *common*, one encounters again in the origin of *liberal* a term that designates a “specific social distinction, to refer to a class of free men as distinct from others who were not free.”<sup>74</sup> And even though the term liberal in its 15<sup>th</sup> century usage entails freedom it was also used to refer to a “formal permission or privilege.”<sup>75</sup> Further along in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century the term began to be used in a political sense to designate a particular kind of “free” men. In 1822 the word became a political noun in opposition to centralized and bureaucratic forms of control, however, the word is impossible to conceive as a kind of pure collective freedom but rather since its political usage began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it always relied on individualistic theories of men and society. In other words, liberalism is no more than the product of capitalist thought, which seeks to affirm individualism against all other forms of society in order to maintain the alienation and isolation required by the capitalist machine. “Liberalism is then a

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<sup>74</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, 178.

<sup>75</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, 179.

doctrine of certain necessary kinds of freedom but also, and essentially, a doctrine of possessive individualism.”<sup>76</sup>

The problem is and has always been our relation to production and the fact we base our economies on the creation of surplus instead of a model of basic sustainability. The logic of capitalism is centered around the creation of needs and marketplaces rather than bare necessity; what Bataille labels as the features of an accursed share, a damned society. The point is not only that we take from the earth more than what we consume but rather that we take all of it in order to commodify it in a myriad of unlimited ways in order to sell to the highest bidder. Production equals waste value. We believe that if we can make enough to have leftovers we are probably prospering as a society and if the supply exceeds the demand – which the decimation of our oceans and our carbon footprint testify to—then we can simply allow markets to create new needs for these unused, untapped resources. Neoliberal markets do not discriminate what the product being pushed is, this is why guns, drugs, and sex are three of the biggest commodities of our time and why global warfare in general has become the currency of postmodern capitalism.

## **5. Art and Ecology**

Gordon Young is a maker of site-specific art and many of his pieces transcend the fixed status of artwork by being interpreted and related to as landmarks. Think of both “Bird Stones” and “Comedy Carpet” which are pieces that have remained semi-permanently in the respective sites of their construction. By enduring in the landscape where they were built both pieces achieve the level of landmark, differing from artwork in the sense that they are permanently associated with a site and inform its social, cultural, and natural geography. When one visits Blackpool and

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<sup>76</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, 181.

Cambridge respectively these works help to orient visitors and become landmarks to be visited and collectively appreciated.

Returning to Gordon Young, we are in the (mediated) presence of a work that, no doubt, pays homage and borrows inspiration from a long tradition of landmarks. The artist, who is well known for his works of public art, has been prolific since the late 1980's with famous works such as *Fish Pavement* (1992, Hull), *A Flock of Words* (2002, Morecambe), and *Comedy Carpet* (Blackpool, 2011). The latter is regarded as England's largest public art exhibit covering a surface area of 2,200 m. squared and as the name suggests it is composed of different comedy punchlines numerous comedians have uttered or performed in Blackpool. Totalling 160,000 carefully curated words, the piece made of granite and concrete, carpets a popular promenade in the Northwestern English town. Young is well known for incorporating typographical and sculptural elements in works like *A Flock of Words* (2002) and *Bird Stones* is not the exception. However, it is difficult for analysis to ignore the fact that the city of Cambridge appointed him to this commission as a reaction to the perpetual transgressions previously occurring at the cemetery and as a way to revitalize the space.

It was not enough for the city to appoint the location as a wilderness site and national landmark in order to fight back loitering but something rather more material needed to occur in order to reinvigorate the space. So, what is the difference between public and private art? Why not close the park and profit from it directly by charging entry to the exhibition? The whole point of public art is to imitate the structure of a landmark; in other words, public art is meant to be based in a public location and make itself available to everyone and anyone. It is in some ways an exercise in cultural democracy, but does art lose something when it is available for everybody to consume? Is public art actually available to everybody? These perhaps are not the right questions to ask but

they are worth bringing up. The reality of this public exhibition is that like the repurposed Canadian Inuksuit, these structures provide the city with a more important kind of use value: cultural capital.

Urban planning and design are clearly never devoid of ideology and discourse, and in the case of this exhibition the ideology behind it has to do with cleansing and profiting off the cemetery which was already a point of attraction for the public. This particular common space is transformed when a) it becomes a wilderness site and b) it becomes a public art gallery. My hypothesis is that in this specific case the city of Cambridge knew that by putting into effect both of these strategies they could effectively exclude and banish unwanted visitors to these commons. By introducing art, which is popularly a fixing of the bourgeoisie's table one can expect cultured and interesting citizens to populate the grounds. This in turn cleans up the park from the undesired mix of junkies and rascals and adds to the cultural capital (tourism, tours, etc.) of the city's economy. *The site has an extremely important relation to my study of Tommy Thompson Park in Toronto, Ontario and proves that the exercise in urban "creativity" is not without precedent. However, the Leslie Spit is not a city's commission to an artist but has become rather an exercise in public "art" by the people and for the people.*

In my opinion, artists have both the capacity and the responsibility of affecting change in the world through their art in ways that are not possible in other fields. This makes it of insurmountable importance that their work reflects, questions, and amplifies the current ecological crisis. Art is at once a meditative self-reflexive practice in psychological sublimation for the artist, but it also makes possible the presentation of divergent and antidotal modes of 'seeing the world'. The point is that art is always artifice and storytelling but in order to affect change and become part of the fabric of human history it must also create a site/sight for free thought and spiritual emancipation to exist. However, it must be stated that this claim at times becomes irrelevant, when



under a neoliberal framework, artists are confined to express themselves and communicate within predetermined restricting art markets. The neoliberal commodification of art means that markets can be created and fulfilled out of seemingly nowhere and their reason to exist can follow after the fact. There exist markets for all kinds of tastes, but they are all centralized around hegemonic forms of art that are meant to regulate and modify our behavior (ideology and propaganda are examples of this). So, behind all the obstacles artists have to surpass today is the mission to transcend the monetization of art and art markets while maintaining a sustainable practice, selling and communicating without ‘selling out’.

In his 2001 film *Rivers and Tides*, Thomas Riedelsheimer presents to the world the work and life of land artist, sculptor, and photographer Andy Goldsworthy. The artist is presented in his homeland of Scotland and other locations as he sets out to complete a multiplicity of site-specific artworks. The radicalism of his oeuvre has to do with the way his work incorporates the earth itself as a material element for the compositions; Goldsworthy works with the earth itself as a medium. On many occasions his works are built with their destruction in mind, allowing temporality and impermanence to become a central component of the work’s life and subsequent death. The work is reflective of a new artistic paradigm that seeks to re-introduce flux and transience as the defining characteristic of contemporary art and artmaking. This is novel especially in the context of sculpture and land art since these disciplines have been historically known for attempting to create objects that withstand the passage of time and ascend to the level of monuments. It is on this point that someone like Baudelaire becomes vital to understanding the social relevance of an artist like Goldsworthy. The poet as critic has already provided us with the ground from which to re-think the beauty of destruction, death, and transience in a world that more and more is becoming obsessed with permanence and images that are meant to memorialize that which is no longer

present. Baudelaire saw the immanent beauty in the negative essence of modernity; the flow of people and cars, the ceaseless construction of cities, and the hedonistic effects of these geo-spatial changes all served as inspiration for his work. Similarly, Goldsworthy constructs works and sets up their inevitable wreckage allowing him to make visible the (negative) essence of time by considering what is not and what seizes to be.

Furthermore, Goldsworthy seeks to initiate an ecologically minded relationship to place. Materials are collected from whatever natural debris is available in a given location and they are put together as ephemeral sculptures that will not infringe on the natural ecology of a given place but rather return to the place in its disassembled parts. Contingency plays a role in what the materials of a piece will be, and it is these materials along with the place itself, that dictate the course and duration of the structures. Take as an example the numerous cairns he builds and photographs in different parts of the world (with the exception of the cairn at the gallery). The cairns, in the same fashion of the iconic icicle at the beginning of the film, are manufactured from found material. The artist's mission is to minimize his ecological footprint by only utilizing materials found at the work site and the labor entails a scavenge in and around a place for the materials that will make up the work of art; the materials are not imported to a place but are rather already a part of it. The structures are not built with endurance as their purpose, as with any other kind of monument, but rather they are built with their destruction in mind. Destruction is not deemed as a negative outcome of a day of labor and rather becomes the poetic return of the materials into their environment, ashes to ashes and dust to dust. These two elements of the Scottish artist's work testify and enact what we will consider as an environmental art practice. The locality and ephemeral endurance of the work operate in stark contrast to hegemonic art practices, architecture, and monument making which work with maximum extraction of resources and

maximum temporal endurance in mind. Statues, cemeteries, civic monuments, and so on operate against the ecologically minded ethics of Goldsworthy's work but even someone like Goldsworthy is not immune to practices of memorialization since he is forced to document the work through digital photographs and at times has to export a piece into a space of spectatorship; from nature to cultural venues of mass recognition (art galleries).



The stone cairn, a repeating form and motif in Goldsworthy's oeuvre, is exhibited during different segments of Thomas Riedelsheimer's documentary about the artist *Rivers and Tides*. Two specific images of the stone cairn interest me in relation to this dissertation. One is the sculpture at the beach, progressively becoming subsumed by the ocean which will eventually absorb it in its entirety and the second is an image of an (almost) exact piece but this time at an art gallery. The two images represent two different approaches to the artwork and its reception. In the first, the sculpture is built in the environment which produced and provided its materials. This iteration of the cairn is special because it achieves a full life cycle by being destroyed by the ocean in the same beach which gave origin to its form. This first sculpture is made in accordance with *big time*; its construction and destruction all depend and are conditioned by the natural time of the tide. In the second iteration, at a gallery becoming part of a public space, the sculpture appears lonely and the knowledge of its origin is not evident at first glance. Some gallery dwellers walk past the piece

paying little attention to it and others stop to contemplate. Its reception is mixed and instead of a poetic story of origin and decay the piece must compete with other artworks for the wandering gaze of the gallery audience.

The latter mode of reception is precisely where the crisis of modernity can be located, which Benjamin and Baudelaire describe so well when they lament the artwork's loss of aura and the *here and now*. The crisis concerns the excessive proliferation of images, objects, perceptions, and commodities which only succeed in creating a frantic state of (dis)attention instead of a dedicated attention to singular details and singular works. However, in both cases the cairn sculptures achieve what I think is the artist's aim for all his works. Both sculptures become one with their environment, they seamlessly merge with the natural progression of history (natural history and human history). His pieces come from the environment and return to it in their natural states. There is no manipulation or domination of nature involved, rather his work is profoundly ecological in that it consists of *working with* rather than *working for*. The defining character of most human endeavors, specifically in industrial societies, is the exploitation of nature for the sake of "human" necessity. Urban design, infrastructural innovations, and technological progress are all predicated on the hierarchy of the human race against nature; anti-ecology is the way of our time.

It is this the fine line contemporary artists tread when seeking to preserve a meaningful praxis that permeates the social sphere in a fashion that is simultaneously consumable and critically reflexive. One cannot forget the important role cinema plays as the preferred vehicle of communication even when it comes to communicating a message about the negative impact of technology in society. In an age characterized by the omnipresence of digital images and archives one cannot simply return to the written word or speech; even the most resilient critics have to use

these very images to combat their pervasiveness. It is clear to me that if Benjamin and Baudelaire were alive today, they would not limit their critical theories to the written word and would inevitably use the tools – cameras, video logs, blogs, Instagram pages, etc.— to communicate their radical messages. The point that has been reiterated throughout is that in order to adequately combat and critique technology one has to be *in* it; in other words, relinquishing the vantage point that posits liberation as a necessary transcendence from technology. Being a luddite in our postmodern technological societies would be as absurd as allowing oneself to be completely subjugated by it. Andy Goldsworthy closes the gap between naturalism and artificiality by taking sublime photographs of his works at the climax and ruination of their fleeting existence. His digital records – that simultaneously function as an archive— are disseminated to and cultivated by the mass art markets and the sets of invested audiences.

In the film *Waste Land*, by Lucy Walker, about ecological land artist Victor Muniz, I encounter a similar cinematic trope to *Rivers and Tides*. The film— by looking at the ways in which garbage is utilized to create artworks—is also an exploration of the negative essence of modernity. By creating positive value out of garbage, the artists depicted in this film reveal the negative, and truly catastrophic, side of our current modes of production. Some of the questions the film evokes are the following: How does the work of art depicted invert capitalism's relationship to surplus value? How is waste a symbol of contemporary (excessive) modes of capitalist production? How is waste considered in the film as more than just surplus i.e., how is waste an expression of the accumulation of history and time? Some answers to these questions are already apparent in relation to the three thinkers I have discussed. With Baudelaire and Benjamin, we can think of such an art form as the ideal dialectical image. Both thinkers, and Baudelaire in particular, help me think of the positive value of the negative, of garbage or dead time as both a

commodity and a work of art. We may even propose that this kind of work operates as historical materialism since it is an artistic incarnation of garbage as history—of what a society leaves behind—and time in its visual embodiment.

Muniz is a sculptor at heart and his process begins with a pastiche of materials of unusual, mundane, and often jarring origin. He has worked with chocolate syrup, dust, sugar, and a variety of atypical elements but the whole point of including these unorthodox materials is to poke holes into the fabric of the artistic *métier*. The artist has always been fascinated with memory as a process of creation and his 1988 book *The Best of Life* focuses on drawings inspired by some of his most precious childhood memories. Naturally he moves from sculpture to photography in an attempt to expand his practice into the realm of documentary images. Being fascinated by the act of recalling childhood memories, his photographs integrate a photojournalism aesthetic with a playfulness that seeks to disrupt the genre's often objective and serious style.

Born in Sao Paulo but residing in Brooklyn from an early age, the photographer travels to his native Brazil to produce some of the most ambitious photographs of his career. The project takes place in Jardim Gramacho, one of the biggest landfills in the world and home to a vibrant economy of what is known in Portuguese as *catadores*. The *catadores* are essentially a group of people that collect, organize, and attempt to profit from the garbage found in these wastelands. Initially, the work was meant to capture the ordinary lives of these garbage hunters and photograph them with the garbage that brings usefulness and value to their lives in order to both exalt their lives and bring attention to our relationship to waste. The artist sought to illuminate and document the emergent positive economies that arise from the abject waste that is, an often repressed, byproduct of our rituals of production. Garbage, perceived as abject and undesired by city-dwellers, is truthfully a vital currency for those who have no choice but to sort through it in order

to bring food to their tables. In a more general sense, a landfill like Jardim Gramacho testifies to the current state of ecological degradation to our environment to the hands of our accelerated and accelerating modes of consumption and production. But after engaging with the *pickers* at the site the project took a different and more interactive direction. With their help Muniz constructs large-scale sculptures, made from the waste material, that recreate the photographs he has taken of them as well as a number of iconic paintings such as *The Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David.

What these harmoniously incongruous photographs succeed in reproducing is the profound effect garbage has on both the environment and the people that inhabit it. Muniz's photographs and the movie about their process capture the attempts of an artist in raising awareness about an essential problem of modern life; we produce more than we can consume. Cities such as Sao Paulo, which are not as technologically developed as those in the first world, have an unsustainable practice of waste management that is testified by the state of this massive landfill. But what makes these images ethically charged is the fact that Muniz, who goes to the dump site to document the suffering of these people, discovers through the process that they are full of joy and in a vibrant relationship to the waste land they regard as landscape and workplace. A further layer of the dialectical relation of art and technology, in relation to both Goldsworthy and Muniz, is the mere fact that it is a cinematic aesthetic document that allows us to experience the place-value of the artist's practice by transcending the spatiotemporal limitations of experiencing art in real time. We cannot be in Scotland or Nova Scotia when Andy measuredly and artfully collects, manufactures, and re-presents the earth as (art) work through his process, or when Victor laboriously designs, curates, and manufactures spectacular sculptures out of garbage in the biggest landfill in the world. A photograph brings us close to a place, but it only presents to us a snapshot of its temporality and in most instances the photograph presents itself as a finished work.

The importance of cinema and the moving image in general, despite its numerous misuses and abuses, is that it is capable of producing a dynamic ecology of images and through them allow the audience to have an immersive experience, in their sofas or laptops, events that are only accessible to those with the privileged access to witness them in person. From Andy's process, to images of the Berlin Wall in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*, cinema democratizes the world at large by closing the gap between site and place and transcending the dependency landscape has had as a static art-historical concept. This is exactly what Mitchell talks to us about when he calls for change in the landscape paradigm into a more dynamic and *mobile* concept in contrast to the idea of landscape as a genre of painting. For Mitchell, cinematic technologies contribute to this new-found dynamism and, to an extent, the technology does not rob landscape of its aura and here and now but rather amplifies and mobilizes its reception in a changed state. Benjamin already warned us of the dangers cinematic technologies but even he argued that cinema forces us to reconceptualize the concept of aura as a whole and think of cinema in terms of a new paradigm of reception.<sup>77</sup>

Additionally, most of the films I have produced operate under two simultaneous lines of reflection: the self-critical reflection on the medium (the downfalls of its technological automatism which are also social symptoms) and the creative materiality of its innovative time-based forms. In a way, many of my video works carry with them an aspect of the negative and the vital; by being both a criticism of the metaphysical distance put up by the camera's automatic gaze and its framing, as well as a positive nihilistic celebration of novel forms of disembodied spectatorship. When making a film I tend to exploit these two poles to their (often absurd) limits by tampering with traditional uses of form and content. The spleen and the ideal are always in conversation with

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<sup>77</sup> Please see chapter one of this dissertation for a lengthy discussion about the aura in the age of technological reproducibility via the film *El Sol del Membrillo* and Walter Benjamin's essay.



each other. For example, in the film *Las Vegas* I explore the nature of post-modern modes of leisure (gambling, recreational drug use, and travelling) by recording two actors, in a kind of home video/documentary style, as they partake in fictional drug use and real gambling. The point was to take documentary form to its limit by objectively exploring a controversial subject matter and recording actors performing these activities “out of character”. In other words, actors that are not acting. To enhance the tension, I incorporate the shaky filmmaking aesthetic of home videos with the use of professional editing software. The theme of the film revolves around the meaningless excess of ‘recreation’; casinos, drugs (spleen), and a poetic meditation on place, identity, and the life of the times (the ideal).

The grotesque, the shocking, and the disgusting serve as an important affect that contemporary artists must seek to evoke and address in favor of ideals of classical beauty which have been explored for centuries. The beauty of art and its connection to entertainment and leisure function to somnolently control audiences and suggest specific ways of seeing and relating to the world. The shift in sensibility becomes a necessary one in an age defined by the society of the spectacle with its increasing and accelerated relationship to technologies of distraction. Most art today works to distract us from our busy schedules and provide us time to ‘decompress’ and ‘disconnect’ from the capitalist networks we are inextricably connected to. Disgust becomes emancipatory in this context, and photographs of waste – as in the case of Muniz—remind us and forcefully wake us from the slumber produced by our post-capitalist existence. Garbage, waste, destruction, and the overall horror of capitalist excess are notions that become consciously and effectively suppressed by our media-centric climate, and more often than not, this worldview is imparted through the didactic and often mind-lulling spell of the entertainment industrial complex.

## 6. Mediation and The Civic Witness

My aesthetics as a camera operator and writer are, in collaboration with the camera's mechanism of capture, to be a civic witness of the real. Stemming from my training in Cultural Studies I have learned to identify my vocation as a form of Cultural Diplomacy. In the same way one writes a paper about complex post-structuralist topics the camera can function as the equivalent of a keyboard to the trained cultural critic in terms of its ability to function as an equally intelligible mode of critique and knowledge creation. The camera is no different to my writing pad in so far as I am writing, framing, and presenting my ideas and views of the world through the camera's lens. Reality, I have come to learn, is more powerful than fiction and my approach is one that aspires to lift the veil behind the simulacrum of daily life through the solemn presentation of that very reality.

Supplementary to a critical approach there is also a more aesthetic and ontological rationale to my digital camera practice. I am interested in telling stories that subvert traditional modes of storytelling, but I am also— like my mother was with her recording of our childhood— obsessed with the disappearance of *the present*.<sup>78</sup> The camera in its most ideal conceptualization is simply a mirror or sensor that is susceptible to external stimuli, particularly light. Arguably, what the device *senses* is the external phenomena which lie outside its *photoscopic* boundaries, but by virtue of operating a camera or a writing pad one is inevitably placed in the middle of the device and that which it captures/articulates. I am interested in the third person, to question what it means to truly be in the middle as a photographer and filmmaker, to be omniscient. This means to avoid being oppressive, by forcing ideals, narratives, opinions, etc. and to avoid being oppressed by the

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<sup>78</sup> As will be expanded throughout the dissertation, the photographic and multimedia work I am presenting often revolves around the disappearance of the present. The camera is arguably there to capture what will no longer be. But in a broader sense, through the site of Tommy Thompson Park, I am utilizing this technology to present and problematize the destruction of nature.

mechanism of the camera – narrative structure, technical protocols, montage, and so on. The middle in photography and filmmaking is the third person; a relation to the event as an outsider and a story that is told through the interplay of subject and object (medium).

Since I began taking photographs and recording videos, my thematic concerns usually emerged from the forces that assembled around my lens. Being in the middle means one arrives at a place with no prejudices or predispositions; to arrive without a subjective and thematic disposition and allow the site to speak for itself. Unlike photojournalism, ethnography, and writing the methodology is not concerned so much with technique and authorship but rather about aspiring to place oneself in the middle of an event and the instrument of its capture. A decentralized author relation to the event unlocks the potential for communication to become wisdom. Amidst the epidemic of fake news and a paranoid search for the ultimate truth, art is forced to communicate neither truth nor falsehood but rather make interventions to the prevailing regimes of truth. Hence artists, as the ideal bearers of *knowledge* and *truth*, must communicate with the unbearable, the disgusting, and the transgressive. Too many documentaries and television programs today focus on social negativity which is why when I document images that testify to the catastrophic effect of humanity on the environment I do not seek to condone or praise it but rather present objectively so that the spectator is allowed to make those judgments on their own accord.

Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky is a pioneer of this novel approach and his images of ecological devastation around Canada and the world are exhibited as both evidence of our downfall as a civilization and as aesthetic objects that penetrate our deepest sensibilities and evoke feelings of pleasure and aesthetic enjoyment. Through this approach to photography, he allows the spectator to simultaneously bear witness to the disaster and to create for themselves, through his masterly usage of light and composition, a heterotopia— an (other) world that lies

completely outside of the world of language. Likewise, Burtynsky as a photographer is plunged in the middle of the world of fine art and real contemporary issues of geopolitical implications.

The ethical duty of the artist is to (re) present reality. This only means that art, in so far as it is always involved in creating artifice, is simultaneously a subjective transformation, framing, and selecting of the world that exists outside of the artist. In this sense, the camera and the writing pad do not afford me the right to speak the truth about an event but are for me a tool for “being” in a situation as an ambassador of communication. What takes place is a negotiation in which my own experience becomes the datum through which I invent a method, a role, and a witnessing. My phenomenological experience, the camera’s digitally sensorial information, and the world outside are the datum, the evidence, and the material of my work. Topics emerge as the byproduct of this reciprocity between medium and my subjecthood. But a certain contradiction emerges as I am trying to communicate that which is incommunicable and abominable, while retaining the autochthony and authenticity of communication.

It is with these ideas in mind that I arrived at the Leslie Spit as one of these impactful topic-events. Upon my first visit to the park, I knew nothing about its problematic history or its popularity within the collective urban consciousness. In a very primal sense all public parks are integral components of a country’s imaginary; psychic investments involving physical well-being, leisure, ideas about God and Nature, all become displaced into parks and wilderness spaces. Bluntly speaking, society needs parks and nature reserves to remind itself of what used to be, a world with a healthy balance of soil, trees, and greenery, that was replaced for one made up of concrete and cement jungles in which (techno-capitalist) life prospers. The truth is that a technological life is not sustainable without recreation and fresh air; a place to escape and decompress from the oppression of our social roles and devices. In this sense, parks and green

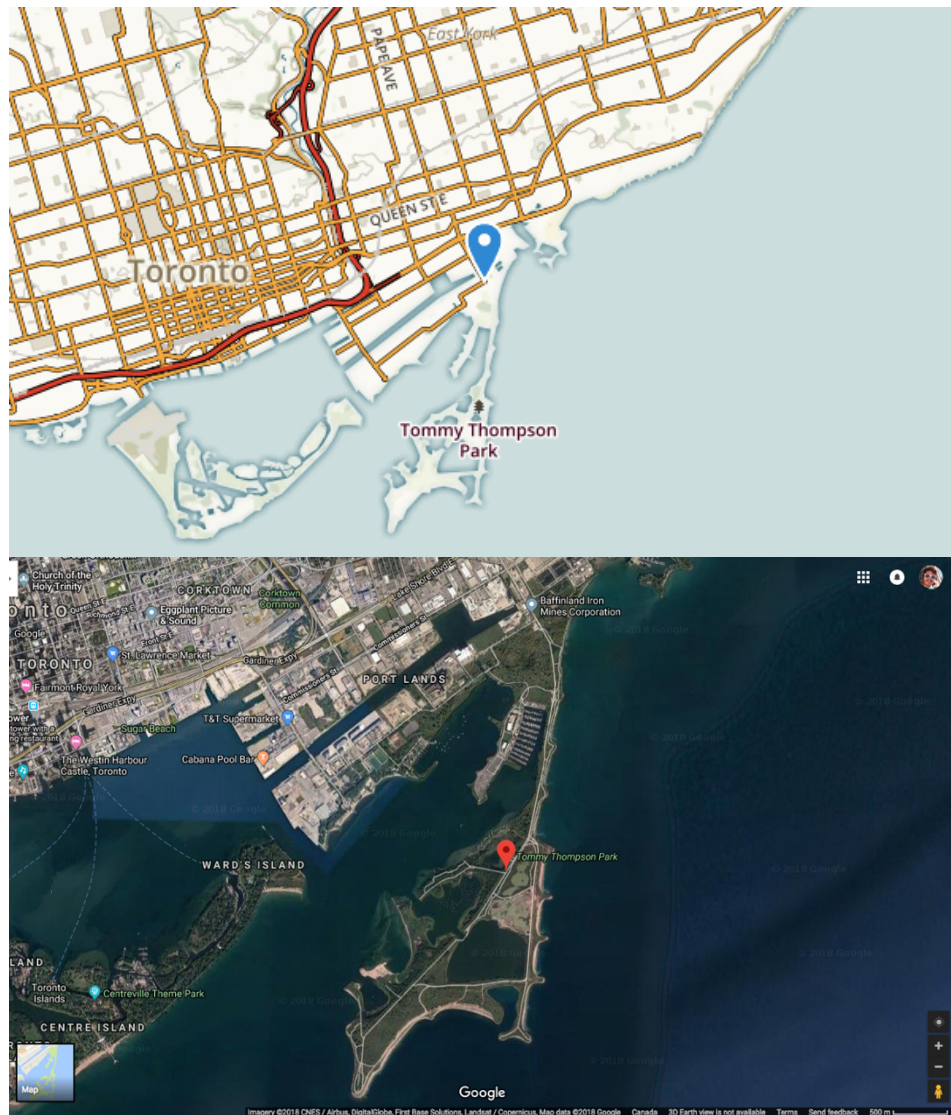
spaces play a crucial role in the cycle of effective and sustainable production; like hospitals, clinics, and parks are there to preserve the state's relative bio-political homeostasis.

But what is especially significant about The Leslie Spit, in this context, is the fact that what is being presented as an urban wilderness, nature reserve, and social playground is at its core a man-made wasteland. Literally, manufactured from rubble, this waste-peninsula parasitically encumbers upon Lake Ontario, polluting its waters and those that once benefited from it. It is evidence of humanity's role in the *Anthropocene*; our role in the destruction of the earth and its resources has become more apparent and parasitic than it has ever been. The park, however, also proves that even ecological destruction can enter the cycle of production as yet another commodity for its users to enjoy and consume. City-goers travel this peninsula all year round, and judging from people I have talked to, no one seems to know the dark repressed history of the site. Furthermore, any excess infrastructural material from the city ends up dumped here as well and, in this process, reports and witnesses tell us that things such as graveyards, human possessions, repossessed items, and the overall effects of urban displacement constitute a great part of the surface area of this parkland.

With all this being said, my images are not aspiring to tell this story in a pedantic way but to make visible the contradictory relationship we have to nature and theorize what a relationship of this kind means in the larger context of a technological age and the progressive erasure of our natural environment in favor of manmade spaces. In this dissertation and through this film I am attempting to address these questions by analyzing the myth of the wilderness and consider the philosophical and social consequences of a society that abuses and is abused by its own technologies. In turn, I will also problematize my role in this circuit of communication and consider that I am too involved in a contradiction by communicating with a digital and linguistic

medium (my camera and my keyboard) that in many ways create distance and alienate me from the objects I am studying. Thoreau wrote with nature, the group of seven painted with nature, and I am attempting to photograph with nature. To do so I must acknowledge and make visible the artificiality of both my digital images and Tommy Thompson Park as a man-made attraction.

## Chapter 4 – Visual, poetic, and theoretical encounters with Tommy Thompson Park



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<sup>79</sup> A digital image retrieved from Google Maps shows Tommy Thompson Park's geographical location. The park's entrance is located in the intersection of Leslie Street and Unwin Avenue, in close proximity to Toronto Island and Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport. This man-made peninsula turned into a park extends for roughly 5km from its entrance to the iconic lighthouse at the end of Leslie Street.

### 1. First Visit to Tommy Thompson Park: October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017.

I am driving on Lakeshore Blvd East and past a *Canadian Tire*, in what is known as the Port Area of Eastern Toronto; I notice a shift in the cityscape. Make a right on the lights, on Leslie Street, they said. The atmosphere is already dustier here and the path leading to the park is mostly travelled by heavy duty trucks all carrying industrial loads and materials. The establishments I gaze upon metamorphose from *Starbucks* to *CBM Aggregates*; a linguistic shift of seismic proportions I would say. Even though The Beaches community is a few kilometers away, the vibe here is more about industrial infrastructure and the gritty underpinnings of the city of Toronto: the theme here is cement, soil, gravel, salt, limestone, brick, satellites, and as we will see at the spit, waste disposal. This is why I've come to this place. Even the air smells differently in this small stretch of road that leads to the 'Leslie Spit', as it is colloquially known by Torontonians. A subtly acrid hint of ash and burnt rubber blends in with the common smells of any other *lacustrine*<sup>80</sup> community. Tommy Thompson Park is the place I am here to explore, to meet.

A street on the entrance to Tommy Thompson Park alerts citizens that the vehicular transit of Leslie Street ends at this point. A sign on the fence next to the satellites alerts me that extremely dangerous radio waves are being emitted here so I shall keep a safe distance from them. Cars are not permitted inside the main road unless you are headed to dispose of some industrial waste or going to *The Aquatic Park Sailing Club*. If you are a member of this club their website suggests that you can access by both water and through the main entrance at Leslie Street. By water, members can access via sail or motorboats or simply by swimming or paddling to the club's dock. Official coordinates of the park are 43°39'7.68" N 79°19'22.60" W.

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<sup>80</sup> Lacustrine: of or pertaining to a lake or lakes; lake-like geographical.  
Robert Macfarlane, "The Woods and The Water," *Landmarks*, (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 124.





2017-10-03 | Signs next to the Leslie Street entrance of the park.

The entrance to Tommy Thompson Park is adorned by six signs pertaining to basic regulations and park hours. We are informed that park hours vary from day to evening being closed from 5:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Monday to Friday. The park is open during these day times on weekends and statutory holidays only, but open Monday through Sunday from 4:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Right away I can observe that the park attracts numerous cyclists, and a sign designates 20km/hr. as the maximum speed. Furthermore, a graphic illustration of a bird suggests that the park attracts many species of birds and with them a great number of professional bird watchers and aficionados. According to the park's official website the community owes its biodiversity to its location within Lake Ontario, functioning as a pit-stop in many species' migration route but to any informed citizen the idea that a park bursting with wildlife being built on top of industrial

waste and substratum seems counter intuitive. The park’s website addresses this unique situation in the following manner:

“From its origin as rubble and sand, Tommy Thompson Park has developed into a complex mosaic of habitats, which support a diverse community of flora and fauna species. [...] Due to the nature of construction and substrates, TTP is quite impervious to water infiltration. The consequence is standing surface water that creates seasonally wet areas that are highly attractive to a variety of wildlife. These seasonally wet areas are heavily used by migratory shorebirds and as nesting sites for regional and locally rare bird species such as Virginia Rail, Sora, and American Woodcock. Seasonal pools are also important breeding areas for amphibians.”<sup>81</sup>



2017-10-03 | Satellite dishes parallel to the park’s entrance.

The entrance to the park neighbors the *Leslie Street Allotment Gardens* on the left-hand side and *Baffinland Iron Mines Corporation* across Leslie Street. On Unwin Avenue, parallel to Leslie, one can see the *Toronto Yard*, a sizable operation whose space is mantled by

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<sup>81</sup> “Birds of Tommy Thompson Park,” *Tommy Thompson Park Guide*, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), All Rights Reserved., [www.tommythompsonpark.ca/park-species/birds/](http://www.tommythompsonpark.ca/park-species/birds/).



monochromatic clusters of indiscernible aggregates. A number of satellites are housed near the parking lot of this establishment.<sup>82</sup> An eighteen-wheeler zips by, creating a cloud of dirt that fogs my view, and on this hot summer day the site has attracted hundreds of cyclists, joggers, and all kinds of nature enthusiasts. As I begin to make my way into the park, through the heavily congested trail, one or two cyclists aggressively ring their bell to notify me I must permit their smooth passage<sup>83</sup>.



2017-10-03 | Bricks on one of the main trails.

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<sup>82</sup> What was notable about this establishment was their collection of satellites one could observe from the street. Per their website: “Baffinland Iron Mines Corporation (Baffinland) is a Canadian mining company, mining iron ore at the Mary River operation in the Qikiqtani region of North Baffin, Nunavut, Canada.” Specifically, the corporation is in charge of mining, crushing, and shipping high grade iron. “Mary River Mine,” *Baffinland*, Dec. 25, 2021, <http://www.baffinland.com/mary-river-mine/our-operation/?lang=en>.

<sup>83</sup> This is one main critiques of the layout and design of the park. Having been both a pedestrian and a cyclist here I found that the main trail does not favor the spatial requirements of people walking or running and is often taken abused of by cyclists.





2017-10-03 | Bricks on one of the main trails.



2017-10-03 | On the numerous trails that deviate from the main road one finds an array of construction materials including bricks, tiles, stone, metal, and so on. One also encounters abandoned personal possessions, old and new, of all kinds.

This photograph is one of the only in the entire document that was not taken by me. The name of the photographer was not made known to me, but he is the brother of Cultural Studies doctoratal program colleague Amalia Moir. When she heard me sharing the initial sketch of this study, she informed me she had a couple of uncanny photographs that her brother had captured a few years back at the site. I was, of course, excited about that and she kindly allowed me to use them in this dissertation. The picture below shows a doll's head propped up on what looks to be a pinecone. Immediately I am made aware of a kind of artifice (perhaps the photographer or someone before arranged the head this way) that indicates this photograph was most likely curated.



I was told that the doll's head was found abandoned at the site the day the photograph was taken so at least I know it was not introduced as an artifact for this specific photograph. In fact, many visitors have reported eerie sightings of this sort after visiting and the park is full of sculptures created using the thousands of industrial metals, brick, and stones found at the site. This



particular sighting is relevant to the study by Foster who uncovers the buried ruins of displaced affordable housing dating back to the 1980's.<sup>84</sup> During this time, it was more than common to find all kinds of household items, cutlery, appliances, etc. as those who were forced to leave their homes to accommodate the construction of luxury condos were sometimes unable to take all their belongings with them. Even in the present day one is able to find all kinds of objects and artifacts; either displaced from elsewhere or introduced intentionally. We will return to this conversation in the following section.



2017-10-03 | Bricks, metal, and stone on one of the main trails.

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<sup>84</sup> The section that follows provides critical perspectives about the park and its problematic presentation as an urban wilderness.

Approximately 2 kilometers into the park's main trail, visitors encounter the first few clearings looking out into Lake Ontario. In order to get to the "beach" one has to traverse what is no longer a trail made of soil but rather a trail layered almost entirely out of what looks like residential debris. In these "boardwalks" leading toward the different beaches in the park one encounters an exorbitant number of industrial rubble and materials. From house towels, to bricks and floor tiles, the path is not an easy one to traverse and even though we were travelling slowly a degree of stealth was required. But what poses a real danger to visitors of this Canadian park is the sheer number of heavy metals, omnipresent in every trail, grassland, and even shorelines. The pathway is staggered with sharp metals and along the passage I spot an abandoned towel on top of a bed of bricks. Maybe because of all the linguistic and psychological investments it produces in me, the disembodied towel reminds me of human remains and sets an eerie tone to the rest of my expedition.



2017-10-03 | Bricks, metal, and stone on one of the main trails.

I am now at one of the first accessible beaches at the Leslie Spit. The water of Lake Ontario is roaring and blue as always, but the sand has been replaced by metal, debris, and other types of

discarded matter. Even reaching the water poses a difficult challenge but I take a couple of photographs trying not to scrape my leg on a piece of corrugated metal rebar. I simultaneously feel horror and a sublime magnetism that hypnotically attracts me to this post-apocalyptic scene. Maybe it is the mortuary stasis of the metal and concrete in relief to the recurrent infinite motion of the water that reproduces a spectacle unlike anything I have ever witnessed? Nature, with its boundless motion, juxtaposed with the ruins of the city, the remnants and sublime excess of capitalist industrial progress. What I witness is the excess of production and ruins of urban expansion discarded by the wayside on the shores of the uninhabitable waters of an imposing Lake Ontario.

The lacustrine breeze in synchrony with the rays of an autumnal afternoon sun clash with the meandering and surrealist forms of metal figures that have completed their sojourn to the park's shore. Perhaps at some point these metallic formations served as an important component of a building's foundation, but to me, in their current iteration, they resemble modernist motifs akin to Picasso and Dali. There is indeed a brutalist element to the aesthetic experience of this park; from the hardness of the ground to the harshness of the metallic remnants that adorn the shorelines of this artificial peninsula. One is quickly reminded that this is not a natural peninsula, but a man-made artifice constructed entirely out of industrial waste that has been abandoned, reclaimed by human beings and nature itself. This is the most breathtaking aspect of The Spit; the ways in which nature reclaims that which was taken from it and the manner in which nature finds haven and expression in the harshest and most unlikely conditions.





2017-10-03 | Bricks, metal, and stone on one of the main trails.



2017-10-03 | A mound of debris on one of the main trails.

How many stories do these waste assemblages tell? Where does it all come from? What was its original purpose? And now that it is here, what purpose does it serve? Does it imitate the forms of nature on its own accord or was this entire spectacle curated by an artist with postmodern sensibilities? Would the illusion that the aggregates have been placed here consciously by an artist make it any better? Even if this is not the case, it is clear that some of the metal-heavy sections of this park have gone through a profound transformation by virtue of their historical usage. My guess is that visitors to the park contribute certain curations when they visit and throughout the years it has become a kind of collaborative public art exhibit and perhaps a ritual to some. And when we visit and set our gazes on these monstrous constructs, we are complicit in deriving aesthetic pleasure from the profound devastation of nature. This activity along with emergent practices like dark tourism are just another node in the cultural machine of late capitalism and specifically of contemporary emergent forms of spectacles and spectatorship. Are we not playing along with the state's game when it comes to Tommy Thompson Park as soon as we participate and perpetuate the idea of an *Urban Wilderness*?

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Approximately four years ago I saw an original Louise Bourgeois sculpture in an outdoor public space in Canada's capital on a steamy summer afternoon. *Maman*<sup>85</sup> depicts a spider in its surreal modernist glory and it can be found in only a select number of sites around the world as a permanent sculpture. Luckily for Canadians, one of those permanent locations happens to be adjacent to the main entrance to *The National Gallery of Canada* in Ottawa. The gallery spent a third of its budget in acquiring the bronze figure back in 2005, reportedly spending a staggering

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<sup>85</sup> "Huge Spider Erected Outside National Gallery," *CBCnews*, CBC/Radio Canada, 11 May 2005, [www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/huge-spider-erected-outside-national-gallery-1.522885](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/huge-spider-erected-outside-national-gallery-1.522885).

3.2 million dollars. Whether or not the investment paid off, it is truly breathtaking to witness a part of surrealism's history and to have, here in Canada, a work of one the most renowned surrealist artists in history. The metallic assemblage pictured below reminded me of Bourgeois' work and in many ways, mostly due to its context and location, the rusty rubble structure at the Spit affected me in a far more visceral way. I immediately began thinking about the history of this metal, its trajectory to this specific place, and its journey into achieving its current undulating psychedelic form.



Photograph taken with an iPhone during my last visit to the National Gallery in Ottawa. 2019-10-01





2017-10-03 | A rebar assemblage that resembles Bourgeois's *Maman*.

About 4 kilometers into the journey and stopping at most of the beaches on the periphery of the main trails, I arrive at the largest “beach” in the park. Here the shore is completely engulfed by industrial material and unlike the other spots this “beach” floor is entirely infested by matter and amongst the attractions I notice a bench made entirely out of corroded metals. Visitors to the park sit on this hazardous park bench and proceed to take selfies on their phones. This scenario makes me question the motive for my visit. Am I just another consumer of the many recreational commodities the city has to offer? Did I fall for the trap and is this place just another vacuous attraction? I’d like to believe that I am here today to witness and present the ambivalence of a site that promotes itself as an urban wilderness and dumpster.

We live in a time defined by the most freedom and oppression we have ever seen, artists (and citizens) must perpetually negotiate the commodification of their art (and lives) and find middle grounds where their self-expression can still create distant resistance without being completely cannibalized by the rampant cycle of capitalist production. Inspired by this aesthetic I

aspire to present the monstrous and the historically grotesque through my lens in order to provoke in the viewer a piercingly sublime aesthetic experience. As an audience we can no longer expect to be simply entertained by art, but we have to be at once captivated and disgusted. The polarity of sensation is the taste of our time. Simon Critchley articulates it quite well: “The disgust that we feel might not simply repulse or repel us. It might also wake us up.”<sup>86</sup>

## **2. Second Visit to Tommy Thompson Park October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017: Historical context and Impressions about the Leslie Street Spit as Ecological Paradox.**

The Toronto Harbour Commission (now the TPA) was created in 1911 to oversee the “reclamation” of the marsh. Filling of Ashbridge’s Bay commenced in 1912, and by 1960 the marsh was completely gone. According to their website: “The Tommy Thompson Park Bird Research Station (TTPBRS) was established in 2003 to aid in the understanding and protection of birds and their habitats through monitoring, education and research. Tommy Thompson Park (TTP) is recognized as a globally significant Important Bird Area (IBA) by Birdlife International and its Canadian partners for its significance to populations of nesting waterbirds and migratory species. The combination of an "urban wilderness" with internationally significant bird life and close proximity to a large city makes TTP an ideal venue for a permanent center for bird studies and education.”<sup>87</sup>

At the same time as the city acknowledges its value as a reclaimed ecological site for a diversity of migratory birds and other species, it also actively operates as a site for the disposal of

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<sup>86</sup> Simon Critchley, “Absolutely-Too-Much,” in *The Brooklyn Rail. Critical Perspectives on Arts, Politics, and Culture*, The Brooklyn Rail, 1 Aug. 2012, [brooklynrail.org/2012/08/art/absolutely-too-much](http://brooklynrail.org/2012/08/art/absolutely-too-much).

<sup>87</sup> “Tommy Thompson Park Bird Research Station,” *Tommy Thompson Park | Leslie Street Spit*, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 18 Feb. 2021, [tommythompsonpark.ca/tommy-thompson-park-bird-research-station/](http://tommythompsonpark.ca/tommy-thompson-park-bird-research-station/).

industrial matter. The guidelines can be found on the internet, but I am including them in this document as yet another visual element of what makes up the discourse behind the Leslie Street Spit.

**TORONTO PORT AUTHORITY Notice to Contractors and Truckers Leslie Street Lakefill Site Effective September 2, 2011, Type “C” materials, consisting of reinforced concrete with re-bar, such as concrete pipes, pillars, beams, light poles, and so on, are NO LONGER ACCEPTED.**

Effective May 20, 2003, Type “A” materials, consisted of clean, dry earth, clay silt, shale, sand and backfill sand, are NO LONGER ACCEPTED. ASPHALT MATERIAL AND SHEET ASPHALT ARE NOT ACCEPTED. NO GARBAGE, RUBBISH, WOOD or any other material will be accepted that might contravene the following anti-pollution regulations:

1. Toronto Port Authority Practices and Procedures Article 26.
2. The Ontario Environmental Protection Act 1990, amended June 1992.
3. Ontario Regulation 735/73 Schedule 9.
4. Improved Lakefill Quality Control Program amended January 1993.

Truckers found concealing unacceptable materials will be liable for the cost of removing the same and will be prohibited from using the area.



**ACCEPTED MATERIALS** Type “B” Unreinforced concrete, broken concrete, brick, ceramic tiles and Clean porcelain materials. There is a size limitation of 8” x 8” x 16” on all accepted material (size of cinder block). Toronto Port Authority approved rubble Type “B” to contain less than 5% by weight of Type “A” material. **CHARGES:** \$33 per truckload, tax exempt (Payment by Cash, Bank Draft, Money Order, Certified Cheque, Debit card, VISA Card or Master Card) **SPEED LIMIT** Maximum speed as posted applies within the site area. Drivers exceeding those limits, or driving without proper care, may be prohibited from use of the area. **NO LIABILITY:** Toronto Port Authority assume no liability for the safety of persons or vehicles using the site. Drivers and vehicles enter the area entirely at their own risk of injury and damage, howsoever caused. Drivers retain sole responsibility for safety, irrespective of any dumping directions they may receive from Toronto Port Authority personnel. Visiting vehicles must keep clear of the Toronto Port Authority equipment engaged at the site. **CONDITION** Entry to the area constitutes acceptance of the foregoing conditions. **Opening Hours at Leslie Site ( #1 Leslie Street ,Toronto ), :** Monday to Friday, 7:30am.- 4:15 pm **ACCESS CARD** Available at Toronto Port Authority, Works Department at 62 Villiers Street, Tel: (416) 462-1261, (open Mondays – Fridays, 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m) **REFUNDS** All refund requests are to be made at the Works Department Office. Proof of Purchase (i.e. Original Receipt from Toronto Port Authority) must be presented to obtain a refund. Only one (1) refund per Proof of Purchase (i.e. Official Receipt) will be made. Updated June 6, 2012




A promotional banner for Tommy Thompson Park. The top half features a photograph of the Toronto skyline across a body of water, with the CN Tower on the left. The text "WILDERNESS ON THE WATERFRONT" is overlaid in white. Below the photo, the text "TOMMY THOMPSON PARK" is displayed in large, bold, black letters. Underneath, there are social media share icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Google+. On the right side, there is a dark grey box containing a "90%" rating with a thumbs-up icon, the text "Tommy Thompson Park" and "tripadvisor" logo, and weather information: "22° CLEAR SKY", "21° LOW", and "23° HIGH".

WILDERNESS ON THE WATERFRONT

**TOMMY THOMPSON PARK**

SHARE:   

90%   
Tommy Thompson Park  


22° CLEAR SKY  
21° LOW 23° HIGH

Image courtesy of Tommy Thompson Park's website.



Image courtesy of the Toronto Star. Taken by Alan Page



# WELCOME TO TOMMY THOMPSON PARK

## Toronto's Urban Wilderness



**LEGEND**

- Multi-use Trail
- Pedestrian Trail
- Nature Trail
- P** Parking
- Washrooms
- Lookout

**HOURS**

Open weekends and holidays  
 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.  
 April to October  
 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.  
 November to March

### TRAILS

Tommy Thompson Park features a trail system that spans 18 kilometres. The system features three types of trails that were designed for various user groups.

The **Multi-use Trail** is the asphalt trail that runs through the centre of the park. This trail accommodates leisure cyclists, rollerbladers and joggers and spans 7.4 kilometres. Cyclists must yield to pedestrians.

The **Pedestrian Trails** are graded gravel trails for use by walkers, strollers and wheelchairs and span 7.3 kilometres.

The **Nature Trails** are narrow trails, only half a metre wide, are not graded and may be uneven. They are intended for walking or hiking and target user groups such as nature watchers and photographers. The nature trails span 3.3 kilometres.

**Trails are not maintained during the winter.**

### PARK RULES

Permitted Activities	Non Permitted Activities	
Hiking / Jogging	- No Unauthorized Motor Vehicles	- No Swimming
Leisure Cycling	- No Pets	- No Skating
Wildlife Viewing	- No Dumping	- No Speed Cycling
Fishing	- No Camping	- Permits required for commercial filming and photography
Rollerblading	- No Fires	- No Removing Plants or Shoreline Materials
Snowshoeing		

Staff is available during regular operating hours at the Staff Booth and can be reached at 416-990-8058. If you have questions about park programs or management please call 311. In case of emergency call 911.

Visit us at [www.tommythompsonpark.ca](http://www.tommythompsonpark.ca)

Call **311**



**Tommy Thompson Park**  
Toronto's Urban Wilderness







2017-10-09 | Surveillance cameras at one of the checkpoints of the park.



2017-10-09 | Warning sign on one of the unpaved trails.

“I discover vision, not as a "thinking about seeing," to use Descartes expression, but as a gaze at grips with a visible world, and that is why for me there can be an other's gaze.”<sup>88</sup> By having a writing pad and operating a camera I attempt to position myself in the middle. Forces assemble around me by virtue of pointing the camera to the world. Circuit of communication. What does it mean to be in the middle of an event? The training and disposition you need to use this device critically and democratically all lies on being in the middle, not outside or inside. How does this practice differ from photojournalism and writing? Is this praxis? I use the camera as a tool for “being” in a situation and my own experience is the datum, inventing through it a method, a role, a witnessing. The world comes crashing into me like waves of sensory data, slowly approaching and retreating ad infinitum.



2017-10-09 | Rebar in the water at one of the shorelines.

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<sup>88</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2010), 409.





2017-10-09 | Photograph of myself while taking photographs and videos at the Spit.



2018-08-15 | One of the biggest peninsulas made almost entirely out of rubble.

People love it here, even though it's full of sharp metals and the ground is uneven and unforgiving. As I learned from the plurality of signs that populate the path, the government of Canada also likes the idea of this place. Exercise is good. We continue to enhance our cardiovascular health so we can survive the stasis of work. This place is a habitat creation project. Introducing and promoting the habitation of a select number of species and creating a safe haven for wildlife. The Leslie Street Spit, Tommy Thompson Park, bird sanctuary, or dump site? Going for a jog, disposing of industrial by-product, or birding. Tommy Thompson Park is also an art gallery<sup>89</sup>, a recreational space, a habitat for animal species, and the home of the forgotten materiality of the city of Toronto.



2018-08-15 | Picturesque assemblage of rubble and rebar at the limits of park.

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<sup>89</sup> Julien Gignac, "Who Is the Mystery Artist Building Makeshift Shrines at the Leslie St. Spit?" Thestar.com, 31, July 2017, [www.thestar.com/news/gta/2017/07/31/who-is-the-mystery-artist-building-makeshift-shrines-at-leslie-spit.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2017/07/31/who-is-the-mystery-artist-building-makeshift-shrines-at-leslie-spit.html).



### 3. Critiques of The Leslie Spit: Xenotopia and the disenchantment of landscape.

*Xenos*: stranger, foreigner, strange, from outside, alien.

*Topos*: place, location.

“In cosmological theory, there were the supercelestial places as opposed to the celestial, and the celestial place was in its turn opposed to the terrestrial place. There were places where things had been put because they had been violently displaced, and then on the contrary places where things found their natural ground and stability. It was this complete hierarchy, this opposition, this intersection of places that constituted what could very roughly be called medieval space: the space of emplacement.”<sup>90</sup>



91 Image courtesy of Ports Toronto website.

The Leslie Street Spit is a *xenotopia*. Man made from rubble now welcomes a blossoming diversity of elements, human beings, animals, metals, concrete, brick, and so much more. Foucault

<sup>90</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias.” *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* no. 5, 1984, 46.

<sup>91</sup> Leslie Street Spit,” *PortsToronto*, Accessed December 31, 2021. <https://www.portstoronto.com/port-of-toronto/harbour-maintenance/leslie-street-spit.aspx>.

paves the way for us to think of other spaces, of spaces imbued in and made of otherness in which the boundary between the sacred and the profane is collapsed. At the Park, the profane— in the form of industrial and human waste, urban displacement, and cemeteries— coalesces with the sacred— in the form of trees, shrubs, grass, wildlife, and so on. All of these contradictory elements come together in what is promoted as wilderness but hides a complicated past of destruction, industry, and gentrification. This place is in actuality a mass burial ground for the profane leftovers of a city that is becoming inaccessible to most. The spit was man-made by destroying nature and erecting an alien wilderness; a “natural” space created with the debris of urban growth and the reclamation of a marshland deemed useless in favor of industrial projects. Because of this very reason it approaches us in an ambivalent confused way. The spit as a space and commons is not entirely sacred or profane but straddles the thin line in the middle of this duality.

According to the Toronto Parks website: “In 1959, filling to construct the Leslie Street Spit or Outer Harbour East Headland (Tommy Thompson Park) was initiated by the THC (now the Toronto Port Authority) in the area of Leslie Street and Unwin Avenue for "port related facilities". In 1973 the land base of TTP was dramatically increased with dredging from the shipping channel in the Outer Harbour. From 1974 to 1983 approximately 6,500,000 cubic meters of sand/silt were dredged from the Outer Harbour and placed at the spit. This resulted in the formation of the lagoons and sand peninsulas which account for a significant proportion of the land base of TTP. In 1979, a major expansion of land area occurred with the construction of an endikement on the lakeward side of the Headland. The endikement provided protected cells for dredged material from the Inner Harbour and the Keating Channel.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> “Tommy Thompson Park,” Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), Accessed December 31, 2021 [trca.ca/parks/tommy-thompson-park/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIIsbPer9jS3AIVg47ICh0IFQI-EAAYASAAEgKRh\\_D\\_BwE](https://trca.ca/parks/tommy-thompson-park/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIIsbPer9jS3AIVg47ICh0IFQI-EAAYASAAEgKRh_D_BwE).



Toronto Ashbridge's Bay 1920, looking west. Source Unknown. Picture, 1920, English

What is interesting about The *Leslie Spit*, in the context of its official documents, is the fact that what is being presented as an “urban wilderness” is a man-made landscape that replaced a once blossoming ecosystem. Literally manufactured from rubble and waste, this peninsula extension now encumbers upon Lake Ontario, replacing the once vital ecosystem of the Ashbridge’s Bay Marsh. The *Spit* is evidence of humanity’s role in the Anthropocene and our participation in the dramatic change and decimation of the earth and its resources, a process which is at an all-time high. Simply stated, the current rate of population growth and urban development cannot and will not be sustained by the earth in the foreseeable future. Yet, the Toronto, Ontario park proves that even large-scale ecological catastrophes can acquire a positive value out of the tumultuous tension between cities and nature. City-dwellers travel this peninsula all year round,

and judging from the people I have talked to, no one seems to know the buried histories of the territory<sup>93</sup> in which the park is situated on or its usage as a full-time landfill. The location presents itself as a park but simultaneously serves as an active landfill for specific kinds of industrial waste during the week. Excess of infrastructural material from the city is dumped here and, in the process, as reports and witnesses testify, all kinds of unusual matter makes its way to this place.

People have uncovered materials ranging from displaced graveyards, human and household possessions, all the way to the domestic and infrastructural remnants of urban displacement and gentrification. A witness provided me recently with a photograph of a doll's head taken many years ago. One can speculate that this object, which now encounters itself desolate in this strange wasteland, once found its place within a familial environment in the hands of a child who treasured it inside their home. Jennifer Foster and Heidy Schopf's seminal 2013 paper *Buried Localities: archeological exploration of Toronto dump and wilderness refuge* provides me with a critical and archaeological framework necessary for engaging with and interpreting the semiotic content of a place that reads like a park and acts as a dump. Foster and Schopf illuminate the complicated history of the park and uncover the buried truths about the materials that make their sojourn to the territory.

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<sup>93</sup> I speak here of the recent history of this park, but it is important to acknowledge that this place we call a park today is first and foremost situated on the land of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation.





Photograph courtesy of Trent University scholar Amalia Moir

For ordinary visitors, the park greets you warmly with its extensive trails and biking paths, surreal landscapes made of rubble, and its blossoming new ecologies. In the authors' words: "Much of the appeal of the Spit lies in popular appreciation for what is perceived as an untamed, sublime, and feral aesthetic, where nature is able to heal the scars of industrialization. As Foster (2007) explains, "It juxtaposes a degraded and discarded city with fertile and vigorous ecology, a place where nature has colonized the post-industrial urban spoils."<sup>94</sup> The aesthetic attraction of the site lies in the dualistic redemption of nature over (industrial) man-made decay and it demonstrates to the public the potential of hope in the context of the real collective fear of losing nature altogether. With the conclusions made by Foster and Schopf in mind, I believe that this side of the Spit is at once an undeniable truth and the veil of a problematic social history buried underneath the surface. The city presents this space as the harmony of nature and "clean fill" techniques of

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<sup>94</sup> Heidy Schopf and Jennifer Foster, "Buried Localities: Archaeological Exploration of a Toronto Dump and Wilderness Refuge," in *Local Environment*, vol. 19, no. 10, 2013, 2.

disposal while being heralded as a triumph of nature over the destructive effects of capitalism and a testament to the idea of nurture over nature. Its official website advertises the park as a place where you can enjoy nature and simultaneously feel good about the efforts of the city to re-wild what once was only a product of dredging, a no man's land.

#### **4. Reclamation of the marsh and other initiatives of rewilding an urban landscape**

To protect Tommy Thompson Park's ecological integrity, the city of Toronto provides rigid laws and regulations about what kind of materials are allowed to be deposited here. Permitted materials include concrete, broken concrete, brick, ceramic tiles and clean porcelain.<sup>95</sup> The form also indicates a cost of thirty-three dollars and a size limitation for each disposal, roughly described as one truckload. Recent changes to the regulatory form ban previously accepted materials such as clay silt, backfill sand, sand, dry earth, and shale. In other words, the present arrangement to the contract enables an arguably more sustainable transaction of dumping and these regulations take into consideration the Habitat Creation Projects currently underway at the Spit.<sup>96</sup> A project that, albeit its apparent success, poses numerous philosophical quandaries about the essence of nature and its anthropogenic double. Specifically, when the region in question that is now a functioning dump site and recreational park used to exist as a wetland harboring numerous species of flora and fauna.

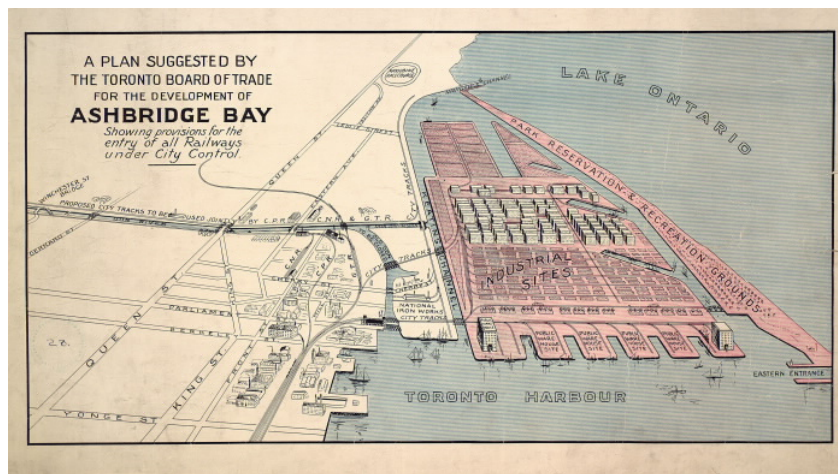
The idea of the Leslie Street Spit officially emerged in 1911 from the minds of city planners of Toronto seeking to make better use of a 'useless' marsh on the edge of the burgeoning

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<sup>95</sup> For reference look at web resources provided in the previous section of this dissertation. I have included an image of the regulatory form provided by Tommy Thompson Park's official website.

<sup>96</sup> "Wetland Creation Project - Tommy Thompson Park," *Tommy Thompson Park | Leslie Street Spit*, Aug. 30, 2019, <https://tommythompsonpark.ca/wetland-creation-project/>.

metropolis. Because of its relatively uninterrupted natural development, the Ashbridge's Bay marsh housed a myriad of bird species and was a popular destination for bird watchers, hunters, and so on. However, human waste and cattle manure from the city next door found their way to the shores of the marsh. City officials expressed their concern for contagion and “wasted space” and assembled a plan to ‘reclaim’ the marsh. In 1911 the Toronto Harbour Commission was created to oversee the reclamation that would continue, with ebbs and flows, all the way up to the 1960’s. The years 1964, 1968, 1980, and 1981 are reported by the Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority to be the most active in terms of dumping construction material extending it further into the lake. 1964 and 1980 specifically were the periods of highest transference to the site, marking what its contemporary geographical features.<sup>97</sup>



The process of dredging material from the harbor and the exportation of construction material since the 1950’s has exceeded its primary objective of preventing flooding, waste accumulation from the city, and maximizing space for recreational purposes. The reclaimed marsh now boasts approximately 500 hectares of land that operate as a park and more relevantly house a unique ecosystem of wildlife and plants. In particular, the park has become a favorite destination

<sup>97</sup> Toronto Board of Trade. Map, 1910, English. Photostat copies available. [1910 Date Created year accurate; month and day unknown for 1910. Public Domain. Lithograph, color; backed with linen.

for a diverse species of birds resulting in it being designated as an Important Bird Area by the Birdlife International.<sup>98</sup> At least 15 different species of birds have been observed at the site, but the Ring-billed Gull and the Black-Crowned Night Heron are regular tenants. Ring-billed Gull population is significant in the area and with an average of 55,000 pairs observed it accounts for 8.4% of the global population.

Other notable inhabitants of the site include the Common Tern and the Double-crested Cormorant, who were both migratory species in the park's recent past. People have also observed and recorded the presence of: The Long-eared Owl, Whimbrel, King Rail, Kirtland's Warbler, Red-breasted Merganser, Rusty Blackbird, Red-necked Grebe, among others. In lieu of the immense aviary diversity in this anthropogenic landscape, a Bird Research station opened in 2003. The station boasted a motto of improving "the understanding and protection of birds and their habitats through monitoring, research and education."<sup>99</sup> The initiative follows traditional environmental worldviews that consider all-natural species as integral to the development and preservation of the environment as a whole. Proof of this is the fact that all of the aforementioned birds help with the pollination of plants, the elimination of invasive insects, rodents, and other unwanted visitors, and the scattering of seeds within disparate ecosystems. Ironically, one of their most important effects on this specific environment is serving as food to local reptile and mammal predators such as predatory birds, coyotes, and foxes.

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<sup>98</sup> "IBA Site Listing," *IBA Canada Important Bird Areas*, Birds Canada, [www.ibacanada.ca/site.jsp?siteID=ON038](http://www.ibacanada.ca/site.jsp?siteID=ON038).

<sup>99</sup> "Tommy Thompson Park Bird Research Station," *Tommy Thompson Park | Leslie Street Spit*, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 18 Feb. 2021, [tommythompsonpark.ca/tommy-thompson-park-bird-research-station/](http://tommythompsonpark.ca/tommy-thompson-park-bird-research-station/).

## 5. Wetland Creation Project

In addition to the myriad avian initiatives, Toronto city planners have an ongoing Wetland Creation project that seeks to expand and protect the site's ecological welfare. As stated in the introductory remarks, The Spit was once a marsh; a natural wetland made up of diverse site-specific ecologies. The city's version of the concept of "wetland" consists of reclaiming sections of the site that were once exclusively used as waste disposal zones in order to repurpose these spaces into "swamps". The idea seems like an interesting development from an environmental perspective by seeking to regain a marshland that was once lost to the hands of industrial developments. It is worth mentioning that dogs, cars, drones, e-bikes, skating, camping, and campfires are also restricted from the park due in large part to the aforementioned habitat creation initiatives. As a further protective initiative, visitors cannot extract anything from the park including sediments, bricks, plants, any kind of wildlife, as well as importing any foreign species.<sup>100</sup> Pets are strongly unwanted at the park because of the likelihood of them disturbing current wildlife ecosystems and pets such as dogs could destroy low-hanging nests, kill birds, or encounter one of the many coyotes that migrate through the park's trails. The city established this law in 1985 and goes on to argue that pet-owners have enough pet-friendly parks dispersed around the city (which I thought was a valid proposal).

At Tommy Thompson Park there are three sections known as Cell 1, 2, and 3. These are described as "confined disposal facilities" where the boats of the neighboring boat club are not allowed access. These cells are being refashioned to create 30 hectares of coastal marsh habitat<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> This is a necessary yet paradoxical precaution since the whole existence of The Leslie Spit is predicated upon the importing of foreign materials and ideologies.

<sup>101</sup> Indeed, similar to the habitat that existed before Toronto dumped all of its waste here.

and decrease the rate of waste disposal at the site. The Wetland Creation Project, as is officially stated by their website, seeks to:

- “Establish functional coastal marsh communities;
- Increase emergent and submergent vegetation zones;
- Increase the diversity and extent of riparian and upland vegetation;
- Increase structural habitats and the diversity of substrates;
- Increase the diversity of shoreline habitats;
- Provide critical habitat components for the resident fish and wildlife communities within the Lake Ontario Waterfront;
- Provide educational opportunities for school groups and the public.”

The project seems, at first glance, a positive one for the emerging ecosystem of The Leslie Street Spit and it is in line with Toronto’s motto of “Diversity our Strength.”<sup>102</sup> It makes sense for a city that boasts one the world’s most diverse assemblage of people and cultures<sup>103</sup> to also look into nature and aspire to strengthen and enhance its own diversity. But looking close to the language and tone of the discourse reveals some problems in the approach. In fact, scholar Donya Ahmadi has already poked holes in this idealized notion of diversity by proving that what is accepted as diversity is often only accepted as such if “its benefits are economically valuable.”<sup>104</sup> In the context of socio-spatial configurations, the city puts most of its energy into those

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<sup>102</sup> “Toronto: Diversity Our Strength.” *Toronto.com*, Aug. 30, 2019, [www.toronto.com/toronto-topics/5333796-toronto-diversity-our-strength/](http://www.toronto.com/toronto-topics/5333796-toronto-diversity-our-strength/).

<sup>103</sup> At least 50 percent of Toronto’s residents speak a language other than English.

<sup>104</sup> Donya, Ahmadi, “Is Diversity Our Strength? An Analysis of the Facts and Fancies of Diversity in Toronto.” *City, Culture and Society*, Elsevier, 18 Dec. 2017, [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877916617300589](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877916617300589).

neighborhoods and milieus that are often the least diverse. Ahmadi demonstrates the way in which the neighborhoods with the most diversity are often located on the periphery of the urban city center and the inner suburbs whereas economically prioritized areas are often those housing white rich Canadians in the inner city.

Even relating this myth to my own experience as an immigrant I can assure you that Canada's borders are not wide open for all visitors to migrate here. In fact, getting a visa for the first time was one of the most expensive and complicated travel related processes I have ever experienced. To come here as a tourist, I was expected to purchase my plane and hotel ticket in conjunction with the application without any assurances that I would be approved for a travel visa. In addition, I was expected to provide receipts of every single bill in my name and pay one hundred and fifty dollars for the visa itself. I am aware I come from a third world country, but it was absurd to me at the time that I could receive a U.S. visa in a day at the embassy while the Canadian process was one of the most restrictive transactions I had ever experienced.



**DIVERSITY  
OUR  
STRENGTH**

Toronto's motto which is featured in the city's crest of arms.

I want to redirect our attention to the overdetermination present in the set of axioms that define the Wetland Creation Project. The word "increase" is used in four of the seven axioms, "provide" in two, and "establish" in one. Notice that what is presented as a noble attempt to re-wild a long-lost landscape, articulated through the use of official language, could in fact be a demonstration of the power of human will rather than a form of pure environmental altruism. The repetition of keywords such as 'Increase' and 'Provide' places emphasis on the role of the human

subject over the externalized projection of a ‘nature’ to be conquered, modified, and spatialized according to specific capitalist ideologies. These ideologies are enmeshed within hegemonic power dynamics that dictate the grammar of space to the user and set the legislation in motion for the space in the broader context of Toronto. One cannot visit the place without vehemently respecting, and therefore abiding, to the rules and etiquette of the park. Breaching this implicit but unspoken contract would ensue material consequences or the full force of the law upon the visitor depending on the severity of the infraction.



Notice how the sign photographed above clearly delineates the spatial boundary of exclusion and inclusion in the space. As a user of this urban interface, one has to acknowledge the presence of state law in order to integrate and flow smoothly within the space as a whole. The logic behind these laws is complex insofar as it involves a paradox of environmental destruction and conservation. In most national parks the ethics of conservation follow a much clearer path since what is being conserved are natural spaces, zones, or areas that were, in most cases, there before urban infrastructures. At Tommy Thompson Park, the conservation initiative remains



paradoxical insofar as what is taking place is not a conservation of a wilderness that existed prior to human activity but a wilderness that was created by industrialization and stripped of its original materiality altogether and which is now accidentally re-emerging in an artificial context. What used to be a wetland was raised, dredged, and altered by industrial fill including concrete, sand, bricks, and a plethora of other elements and it was only by chance that it grew into a meaningful space for emerging wildlife.

In short, the rules applied to the park are not devoid of hypocrisy from the city that enforces them. The park symbolizes an idealized version of nature and wilderness in which nature is forcefully “preserved” and “maintained” on an arid wasteland where human beings have deposited their waste and consciously neglected the ecological integrity and sanctity of the space for the last one-hundred years. This dynamic evokes a conversation about the Anthropocene and humanity’s profound effect on the earth and its ecosystems. The site is visible evidence of the devastation and change human beings perpetuate on nature, but it proves a far more perverse dynamic having to do with the prioritization of human agency as a force that can ‘rescue’ and ‘restore’ that which was once forsaken. What is philosophically complicated about a critique of the park is that it simultaneously exemplifies humanity’s virtue and capacity to act as custodians of the earth despite their role in its destruction. Humans are the only ones able to save that which they destroyed<sup>105</sup>.

I am not a staunch critic of these re-wilding initiatives nor am I pessimist when it comes to the reclamation of wastelands, but I can’t help being skeptical of human beings taking the role of custodians of nature in the context of all the destruction we have caused. I undoubtedly see the

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<sup>105</sup> An analog to Tommy Thompson can be found in California’s Salton Sea, a massive landlocked lake that was artificially created in the early 1900’s and which now poses significant ecological danger to the local ecology as a whole and the quality of air in Southern California. “Editorial: The Salton Sea Is a Disaster in the MAKING. California Isn’t Doing Anything to Stop It,” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 29 Mar. 2019, [www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-salton-sea-failure-20190329-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-salton-sea-failure-20190329-story.html).

immense value of these restoration projects, but my critical lens does not allow me to oversee the fact that above those on the ground doing the labor is a deep network of bureaucrats who are counting the money. I am thinking here of Frederic Jameson's theories regarding postmodern science and in particular his notion that scientific knowledge seeks to create a framework for crisis resolution that is rooted on an entirely created system of postmodern production. Jameson describes Science's search for proof (which would apply to the quest for ecological preservation at the Spit) in the following manner: "working on a proof means searching for and "inventing" counterexamples, in other words, the unintelligible; supporting an argument means looking for a "paradox" and legitimating it with new rules in the game of reasoning."<sup>106</sup> In other words, the game being played by those looking to create new scientific knowledge (in the vein of bird research at the Spit) is one in which the proper discourse and logic is articulated in order to receive the funding necessary to do such work. "In neither case is efficiency sought for its own sake; it comes sometimes tardily, as an extra, when the gran givers finally decide to take an interest in the case."<sup>107</sup>

Another relevant and emerging infrastructure at The Spit is the ongoing Baselands Trails Project. As was previously stated, the park includes an extensive matrix of trails that enable *users* to navigate the space through creatively paved walkways. The website's official statement about the project claims to "develop a pedestrian trail system that improves user experiences and accessibility while minimizing the impact to and respecting the ecological significance of the area."<sup>108</sup> The paradox of this mission is the overt inclusion of human recreation as a part of the

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<sup>106</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, "Postmodern Science as the Search for Instabilities," *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Minnesota: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010), 54.

<sup>107</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 54.

<sup>108</sup>"Tommy Thompson Park," *City of Toronto*, Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, [www.toronto.ca/data/parks/prd/facilities/complex/2441/index.html](http://www.toronto.ca/data/parks/prd/facilities/complex/2441/index.html).

ecology of the space while prioritizing emergent wildlife and flora. These two spheres have historically failed to coexist in harmony and as in any park of the world a large majority of visitors will undoubtedly break the numerous laws and restrictions set forth. It is no secret, from a psychoanalytical perspective, that human beings are more likely to break the law once that law is enforced and articulated. It is a basic function of the human psyche to want what is forbidden and the truth about symbolic laws is that by enacting a dichotomy of good and evil (I am good if I don't enter the forbidden space and evil if I do) they, all too often, bring forth the crime they seek to prevent.



2018-08-15 | Picturesque trail at the limits of park.

What is most troubling about the politics of this space, is the fact that human will, and urban development are philosophically at odds with the preservation and maintenance of wildlife. One just needs to look back one-hundred years ago to understand that the lively ecology that once existed at this site was completely wiped out in favor of a port project, and it was only when it failed to take off and nature reclaimed the abandoned peninsula that city officials decided to invest in its preservation as a point of attraction in a city always looking to market itself as one of the most desirable metropolitan regions in the world. The Spit serves a double purpose in this regard: a) it serves as yet another vast recreational space for citizens b) it puts on display the city's green thumb and progressive attitude regarding environmental preservation, hence securing government funding for said initiatives.

## Baselands Ecological Significance

- 23 distinct ecological community types with more than 90% classified as common or non-native.
- 5 regionally significant flora species
- In 2014 -18 species of breeding birds including 1 threatened and 1 species of special concern
- Breeding site for northern leopard frog and American toad
- Snake hibernacula present



## 6. The Leslie Street Spit and creative destruction

Human beings are often permitted to destroy that which they create but are human beings allowed to (re) create that which they destroy in the natural world? Quoting David Harvey, Schopf and Foster suggest that the Spit can be interpreted as an example of what he calls creative destruction. The authors write: “One of the myths of modernity is that it constitutes a radical break with the past. The break is supposedly of such an order as to make it possible to see the world as a tabula rasa, upon which the new can be inscribed without reference to the past, or, if the past gets in the way, through its obliteration. Modernity is, therefore, always about “creative destruction,” be it of the gentle and democratic, or the revolutionary, traumatic, and authoritarian kind.<sup>109</sup> This notion is incredibly fitting to a place like Tommy Thompson Park, whose history dates back to the reconstruction of Toronto in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s and the destruction of low-income residences in order to accommodate the building of luxury condominiums and populate areas that were seen as being in the economic perimeter of the city. All of these initiatives were part of Toronto’s economic reform in the 90’s and much of the rubble of entire neighborhoods that were torn down made their way to the Leslie Spit. Schopf and Foster’s archaeological findings show that different regions of the park contain within them waste and rubble from these homes and their excavations have led them to find household items like tiles, toys, teacups, among others. Interestingly, some zones in the park contain dumping from different years in which waste disposal was progressively more lenient from 1964 to the present

The authors identify in their study the zones that pertain to specific years with some zones dating back to 1964 in which the aggregate of brick, concrete, and stone have been almost

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<sup>109</sup> Heidy Schopf and Jennifer Foster, “Buried Localities: Archaeological Exploration of a Toronto Dump and Wilderness Refuge,” in *Local Environment*, vol. 19, no. 10, 2013, 3.

completely covered by the growth of grass and other vegetation. Upon my numerous visits to the site, I certainly noticed that some areas looked and felt like any other park – by being completely covered with grass—but walking on the surface of these areas felt like walking on harsh concrete. Their study indicates that although vegetation has mostly colonized the exterior of the ground, a myriad of regulated and unregulated materials lies beneath the surface. What Heidi and Schopf designate as the *1964 zone* contains waste from the years where regulations were not enforced as heavily as they are today and dumping in this area included hazardous materials to the lake. “The material just had to look and smell passable in order to be deemed suitable for dumping at the Spit. These controls, however, were not satisfactory in restricting contaminated materials from being dumped into Lake Ontario.”<sup>110</sup> In other words, when regulations were not as rigorous, the city was involved in openly contaminating Lake Ontario despite stating that they were practicing clean fill techniques. Such unregulated items included organic material, food waste, diapers, electrical wire, medicine containers, and even toothpaste. All of the aforementioned materials are barely visible because of the dominance of the vegetation but excavation and stratigraphical analysis shows that all of the mentioned materials lie under the ground. It has to be stated that this area of the park is the easiest one to traverse with the exception of a few metal rebar structures and large pieces of concrete.

Roughly 3km into the park—in what the authors call the 1980 zone—the trails become more difficult to traverse and one starts seeing an innumerable quantity of bricks covering the shores of the peninsula. Apart from the brick landscape, the construction materials we see at the beginning of the park are more visible here and large blocks of concrete along with large rebar structures adorn predominantly the features of the landscape. It is also in this zone where we

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<sup>110</sup> Heidi Schopf and Jennifer Foster, “Buried Localities,” 8.

encounter most of the ecological efforts to re-wild the marsh, create a bird sanctuary, and promote the habitation of wildlife. Heidi and Schopf trace the origin of the bricks and concrete to a number of Ontario manufacturers and come to the conclusion that all the material found here is not an accumulation of faceless aggregates “[...] but rather a landscape full of memory about the removal of undesirable built resources of the city and their replacement with new forms of architecture.”<sup>111</sup> The core of their research deals precisely with this dynamic that saw the city finding a creative application for the leftovers of their efforts of urban development in which many old buildings were demolished with the purpose of modernizing the cityscape. The destruction of the old architecture of Toronto stripped the city of its historical heritage but in an effort to make use of the debris left behind the material was mostly dumped at the Spit with the hope that it would prevent erosion and build up the peninsula that had been dredged into existence in the 1900’s. According to the authors the 1964 and 1980 zones contain much of this decay which dates back to periods of elevated levels of urban destruction in Toronto.

The most problematic aspect of this period of urban renewal during the aforementioned years was the practice of “slum removal” that took place as a way to accommodate modern developments in a period marked by modernist planning. From the years of 1964 and 1968 the city decided to essentially remove entire neighborhoods in the areas of Queen Street, Augusta Avenue, and Dundas Street to accommodate the construction of Alexandra Park. The authors show us the numerous row houses that were removed to make space for these new developments and historical photographs show the general state of despair these homes were in. The development of Alexandra park was the city’s effort to section off affordable housing units that corresponded with an influx of immigrants and Toronto’s effort to “modernize” and expand the city center. “The plans for the

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<sup>111</sup> Heidi Schopf and Jennifer Foster, “Buried Localities, 11.

neighbourhood were made with the intention of grouping people with low income together and enclosing the community from traffic to create an environment that was focused on residents and children of the community.”<sup>112</sup> These efforts resulted in the racialization of demarcated zones and gave way to the rise of African American gangs and other drug related activities; essentially the area became Toronto’s designated ghetto. Much of the remnants of this development made their way to the 1964 zone in the park as part of the city’s clean fill initiative and excavation has proven that the ruins of the row houses can be traced under years of rubble and vegetation that followed the dumping of 1964-1968.

The period of 1980—which marks the highest influx of rubble to the park—corresponds with the development boom in Toronto that saw the city modernize the city center by building numerous office buildings. What we now know as the Bay Street financial center originates in this period and a significant push to create more financial offices and buildings started during the 1980’s. A significant number of 19<sup>th</sup> century historical buildings were torn down in order to accommodate this capitalist urban boom and buildings made of brick and concrete were removed in favor of the high rises we see in the area today. In line with the racialized developments of the 1960’s these new development plans were influenced by international financial initiatives that resulted in a significant decrease in the city’s local diversity. This era marked Toronto’s push to become an important player in the emergent global market economy and the main philosophy behind the destruction of historical landmarks had to do with modernizing the city in an attempt to compete with cities like New York and Chicago. Referencing Harvey, the authors theorize that this kind of break with the past in favor of modern architecture was a philosophy adopted by most cities at the time and an attempt to build anew in order to break with the shortcomings of the past.

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<sup>112</sup> Heidy Schopf and Jennifer Foster, “Buried Localities,” 15.



Interestingly, the same type of dynamic was at play in other spheres of culture and society and even the art world was beginning to separate itself from traditions of the past in order to create a new order of aesthetic paradigm. The rise of street art, hip-hop, electronic music, punk music all represented a significant shift away from the previous aesthetic traditions in order to create new ways of seeing and experiencing the world.

The urban renewal of the 1960's and 1980's meant that much of the city's old architectural heritage had to be destroyed in order to make space for modern Toronto and compete with global markets. Through the philosophy of creative destruction, the city rationalized the displacement of the ruins of progress into places like Tommy Thompson Park and the material memory of the city's past found its home on the surface of this man-made peninsula and its adjacent waters. The construction of trails and the aforementioned sculptures made with the debris of this period, symbolize an attempt by the visitors of the park to rebuild the memories of a distant past and could be interpreted as both a collective art exhibition with historical ramifications and a cathartic effort to remember that which the city has lost. As I have discussed previously in my journals, the many structures at the Spit remind the visitor of the dynamic character of ruins and their ability to return to nature – a characteristic that can be observed anywhere in the world at abandoned buildings and other ruins which eventually end up being reclaimed by nature. But in the case of the Spit, we have ruins which have been intentionally deposited here and which have not only been reclaimed by nature and the burgeoning ecology at the park but also manipulated, curated, and reclaimed by visitors throughout the years.

The sculptures and pathways that resulted from these years of destruction certainly qualify as examples of humanity's potential to find value in waste and they undoubtedly provoke aesthetic

pleasure and reflection to new and recurrent visitors (of which I am no exception). But what Heidi and Schopf teach us is that these vital and creative commons that resulted from years of development are not devoid of a tragic history of dispossession and gentrification. Critically examining the rubble leads one to the sad conclusion that what makes up the surface and interesting structure of the park is synonymous with the pain and suffering of those who were displaced to accommodate the spatial configuration of a city that favors the financially elite. During my encounters with the park, I have gone from romanticized enjoyment to feelings of environmental anxiety. But reading papers like this reminds me that beyond the many positive aspects of the place – which include habitat creation, public art practices, environmental regeneration, and communal spaces of recreation—one needs to critically examine the history and disturbing activities that enabled all of the creative potential of a site that is advertised as an urban wilderness. To quote this brilliant paper once again: “The Leslie Street Spit’s vibrant and celebrated ecology play an important role in masking the underlying history of the landscape. Recognising the Leslie Street Spit as the ruins of Toronto in an unromanticised manner allows one to assign greater meaning to the landscape. Viewing the Spit in this light allows it to function as a site of memory in addition to being a site of urban wilderness.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Heidi Schopf and Jennifer Foster, “Buried Localities,” 22.



## 7. The Leslie Spit and aesthetic criticism

So why the Spit as a topic? Why do I find a place like this to be powerfully sublime and discursively relevant from an aesthetic perspective? Allow Simon Critchley to answer this question: “[...] beyond endless video montages and the cold mannerist obsessionality of the taste for appropriation and re-enactment that has become hegemonic in the art world, the heart of any artistic response to the present should perhaps be the cultivation of the monstrous and its concomitant affect, namely *disgust*.”<sup>114</sup> My emphasis is on cultivating and *re-wilding*, through artistic and philosophical discourse, the *monstrous* landscape that is Tommy Thompson Park. I seek to do this not by experiencing disgust as a negative affect but rather questioning disgust means and how a place like the Leslie Spit challenges our perceptions of it by triggering biases and preconceptions about nature that we import to it when we experience it.

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<sup>114</sup> Simon Critchley, “Absolutely-Too-Much,” *The Brooklyn Rail. Critical Perspectives on Arts, Politics, and Culture*, The Brooklyn Rail, 1 Aug. 2012, [brooklynrail.org/2012/08/art/absolutely-too-much](http://brooklynrail.org/2012/08/art/absolutely-too-much).

It is through Robert Macfarlane's work in *Landmarks* that we encounter the road map for a creative lexicon of landscape and the natural environment that is pertinent to this dissertation's mission. In the book the author provides a glossary composed of "thousands of words from dozens of languages and dialects from specific aspects of landscape, nature and weather."<sup>115</sup> He discovers in this multiplicity of words that cultures preceding and adjacent to ours place value in maintaining and exercising a literacy of the land but what is happening to the Gaelic language is also occurring to the English language insofar as it is slowly but surely replacing place words for more technologically oriented words like blog-post, googling, snap-chatting, click-bait, etc. We are in an unprecedented moment of environmental catastrophes by the unstoppable practices of resource extraction and capitalist production and this trend is imitated by our language and cultural practices. In other words, at the same time nature is being depleted of its resources so too languages are being emptied of nature words and the vocabulary used to describe the natural world.

In all cities what was once experienced as landscape is now experienced as a *blandscape*. We are blasé about place, in the way that George Simmel used that word in his 1903 essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life'—meaning indifferent to the distinction between things."<sup>116</sup> What Macfarlane notes is that the poverty in vocabulary is not particular to the disappearance and extinction of natural phenomena and entities but rather has to do more with the disappearance of the people that know how to name them. The equivalence here is that what is not named is not seen; the lack of names and words of nature effectively decreases the visibility of natural phenomena. These practices of naming continue to grow in scientific and academic milieus but are increasingly becoming extinct in "ordinary" public conversations. Furthermore, this lack of

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<sup>115</sup> Robert Macfarlane, "The Woods and The Water," *Landmarks*, (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 1.

<sup>116</sup> Macfarlane, *Landmarks*, 23.

linguistic knowledge and application results in a collective attention deficit to the things (natural and man-made) that inform our surroundings. Via Max Weber, Macfarlane notes that this cultural attention deficit is a result of the disenchantment of modernity. In all modern cities the art of ‘wonder’ has been replaced by the ‘will’ in the form of calculation and domination of the world. Thus, voiding any experience of ‘wonder’ and Baudelairian ‘child-like’ poetic enthusiasm of the world in favor of modern rationalist worldviews. The age of reason brought with it the death of enchantment.

Macfarlane recounts a visit to the moorlands in the Isle of Lewis on the Outer Hebrides. He describes the moor or marshland as a “lateral landscape” which at first glance resembles a ‘terra nullius’ and is regarded as a lesser sight to behold compared to a manicured forest reserve or a sandy beach at the shores of a river, lake or ocean. His argument is that places like marshlands, ice caps, deserts, prairies, and so on confront us in such a way that bars a familiar aesthetic and linguistic reaction. We see “nothing” because we expect “nothing” to be aesthetically impactful. So, in order to begin developing a relationship to places in the linguistic and symbolic order of “nothingness” one needs to remove the preconceptions that a place like this offers “nothing” to the imagination. In the moorlands the author is confronted with words that succinctly describe the features of the natural world and the haunting revelation is that Gaelic as a dialectic is headed to its inevitable disappearance.<sup>117</sup> This is precisely what Macfarlane’s work, and to an extent, this dissertation, seek to present: a revitalization of our appreciation of the land, place, and nature by way of an aesthetic and linguistic presentation of the poetics of place.

Similarly, to the moorlands of Lewis, the region in which the Leslie Spit is located began as a marshland and was viewed by the city of Toronto as a waste of space and a space composed

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<sup>117</sup> Macfarlane notes that approximately 58,000 people are speaking or learning to speak Gaelic in the Scottish region.

of *nothing*. The transformation of the marsh started in 1910 and continues today with the surprisingly positive impact the habitat creation projects have had on the land. But the fact that it simultaneously operates as an active dump site ruins the allure for those looking to experience nature in the same way it is available in Canada's many national parks. Some visitors even reported feeling back pain after hiking the park's trails for a prolonged period of time, something that is explained by the fact that the park's "ground" is clearly unnatural and is made up of the accumulation of more than one-hundred years of silt, dirt, metal, concrete, and regulated waste. Needless to say, the ground does not provide the smooth, sponge-like experience of an old growth forest ground or even that of an inland meadow.

The Spit fits into the category of a *xenotopia* and a *lateral landscape* in the way Macfarlane describes the moor of Lewis. The park operates with an omnipresent ambivalence as both a creative influence on the landscape and a destructive force on the environment and its adjacent ecologies. What Macfarlane notes is that places of this kind evade interpretation and have a quality that makes them perceptually ambiguous and ambivalent to the beholder. A desert or an ice cap do not provide much stimulus to our imagination— not because they lack an essential aesthetic quality— but because our present vocabulary is limited when it comes to thinking and talking about nature in general and places with bare features in particular. In aboriginal, ancient, and disappearing cultures language was equipped to describe the aesthetic effects of specific features of nature; effects that were described as being more poetic and descriptive instead of simply utilitarian. I am at this place to present its poetic attributes – not by glamorizing apocalyptic industrial practices—but by experiencing the park as a landscape reflective of our post-capitalist sensibilities and practices.

Macfarlane writes about the preserved place-language of the Lewis moorlands: "use-language-its development a function of the need to name that which is being done and done to.

That this lexis should also admit the poetic and metaphorical to its designations is testimony to the long aesthetic relationship between the Hebrideans and their land.”<sup>118</sup> A look into the old histories of most of these places reveals an abundance of terms, phrases, and words that are not actively utilized in our present lexicon. Fueled by apathy, urbanization, capital, and technological innovation our contemporary languages no longer require or see the importance of the “tongue” of the natural world. The inescapable reality is that in times of global capitalism, nature and landscape become means to an end, seen primarily as raw resources used to fuel the capitalist machine. In Canada, even when an area is environmentally protected, the construction of trails and monetization of entry frames occupy the land in a way that is discursively problematic insofar as they organize and curate natural spaces for the purpose of human recreation.

At the moor of Lewis Macfarlane is presented with a comprehensive glossary of place words about the moor that have been lost in today’s vocabularies. The names he discovers are at once poetic and descriptive and tend to focus on the many specificities of places that we often overlook. Some of the words include areas in the grass with a darker hue of green (Bugha), a hole on the marsh filled with water (botann), and the shadows on the marsh by “clouds moving across the sky on a bright and windy day.”<sup>119</sup> What these words reveal is a profound attention to detail in the features of the landscape and a poetic appreciation of the world and land we inhabit. These words favor a poetic appreciation of place over utilitarian words that favor the objective qualification of the features of place.

“The glossary reveals the moor to be a terrain of immense intricacy. A slow capillary creep of

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<sup>118</sup> Macfarlane, *Landmarks*, 18.

<sup>119</sup> Macfarlane, *Landmarks*, 19.

knowledge has occurred on Lewis, up out of landscape's details and into languages. The result is a lexis so supplely suited to the place being described that it fits it like a skin. Precision and poetry co-exist: the denotative and the figurative are paired as accomplices rather than as antagonists."<sup>120</sup>

### **8. The Leslie Street Spit: Monstrous and Sublime**

It is precisely this poetic approach that I am importing to Tommy Thompson Park through my videography and photography practice. Instead of providing a study of a place that relies on objectively geographical and archaeological facts, my creative research seeks to make visible the complicated poetry of the space. Beyond its numerous and converging paradoxes of ecological creation and destruction, the park is also a collective public art gallery and commons where artists and non-artists collaborate year-round. The many rebar structures located in this space – whose origin is unknown—represent to me and many of the visitors of the park an aesthetic convergence of monstrosity and the sublime. The monstrousness is present in the sheer fact that these metal structures are remnants of industrial decay that have been violently juxtaposed with the landscape and bring nothing beneficial to the environmental sanctity of this protected wilderness. The thousands of rebar structures located in the shores of the park are a stark reminder of the original purpose of the place and its function as a waste disposal.

That being said, there is something at once aesthetically pleasing and psychologically disturbing about these forcefully juxtaposed metal forms in what otherwise seems like an ordinary wilderness reserve. Here one is faced with conflicting sentiments and an interrogation of the etymology of the sublime reminds the viewer that often the most sublime artworks are those that disturb us to our core. To quote Simon Critchley: “Art should not be comfortable. It should be a

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<sup>120</sup> Macfarlane, *Landmarks*, 19.



blow to the back of the neck [...].”<sup>121</sup> And in this way the Spit assaults our senses relentlessly and without any irony by forcing us to think of the origin and consequences of our relationship to waste, society’s role in the destruction of the environment, and the effects of urban development on the earth and the few green spaces available in a city that is in a constant state of growth and innovation. What makes the Spit such an aesthetically radical proposition is the fact that it is not an art gallery or a museum but rather, accidentally, became a venue for some of the most interesting artworks in the city of Toronto. These metal pieces straddle the fine line between the sublime and the monstrous by being always on the verge of becoming absolutely too much to our aesthetic sensibilities.

Critchley suggests that in the context of the comfortable and pleasing commodification of art today, artists must look to depart from the sublime and delve into the monstrous in order to wake up the viewer who is far too accustomed to exhausted hegemonic standards of beauty. In other words, the art of our time – which has been influenced by environmental catastrophes and a once in a lifetime pandemic – should not focus its scope solely on creating beautiful and easy to digest affects since these do nothing but perpetuate the status quo and hegemonic worldviews. Artists like Jeff Koons bring nothing aesthetically radical to the table and art of this kind all too easily – and problematically— enters the circuit of commodification and exchange<sup>122</sup> without pushing the boundaries of art and challenging consumers’ sensibilities. The point of favoring the monstrous in art is not simply to provoke and disturb, but far more importantly, it plays a political

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<sup>121</sup> Simon Critchley, “Absolutely-Too-Much,” in *The Brooklyn Rail. Critical Perspectives on Arts, Politics, and Culture*, The Brooklyn Rail, 1 Aug. 2012, [brooklynrail.org/2012/08/art/absolutely-too-much](http://brooklynrail.org/2012/08/art/absolutely-too-much).

<sup>122</sup> The emergence of NFT (non-fungible tokens) is a further and more literal step into the complete commodification of art. This emergent paradigm is one that symbolizes the total commodification of art and the transformation of art into money. If the aura was already threatened by the rise of technological media of capture and distribution, I would argue that with NFT the aura is practically non-existent when a work of art is created and distributed as currency.

and social role in that the monstrous is capable of disturbing the screened and veiled artifice of our daily lives.

The ubiquity of the screen in our lives means that art is simultaneously easier to create and to consume but with this ease of use comes the danger of falling into a state of comfortable numbness. In order to break away from this, art needs to focus its gaze to styles and subject matter that allow us to feel once again and wake us up from the passive slumber created by the spectacles of Netflix and Instagram. The point of delving into the monstrous is to violently tear away the veil of screened aesthetic spectatorship and push back against the commodification of lived experience. There is, of course, a precedent to this aesthetic paradigm with artists like Francis Bacon who sought to perpetuate violence on our senses and disturb the veil produced by the banality of art of his time. The danger of this approach, as is testified by the coveted popularity and monetization of his work, is that even the violent and aesthetically monstrous has the potential to become comfortable and aesthetically banal. This is why my attempt to present the monstrous in my photographs and videos is one that takes as its subject the literally monstrous effects of industrialisation and the destruction of our environment.

### **9. Ecocinema and the Anthropocene**

Ecocinema as the name suggests is a category of filmmaking that includes the environment as a strong part of its message, but not all films about nature or the environment can be considered ecocinema. In fact, the meaning I would like to propose is related more so to paradigms about the Anthropocene and the current ecological crisis we inhabit. In this context ecocinema is made up of “films that at face value might not be ecologically oriented ‘nonetheless offer us needed perspectives on the relations between the human and nonhuman’ (Willoquet-Maricondi: 2010,

3).<sup>123</sup> In other words, ecocinema faces us with the inevitable truth of our current ecological crisis and our vicious role in it. “The Anthropocene is not only a period of man-made disruption. It is also a moment of blinking self-awareness, in which the human species is becoming conscious of itself as a planetary force. We’re not only driving global warming and ecological destruction; we know that we are.”<sup>124</sup> Moreover, we are not only becoming aware of our parasitic influence on the development and future of our environment, but we are tasked to live with the guilt, existential dread, contradictions, and negative self-awareness that comes with this realization. Ecocinema is thus tasked with making visible these tensions between the human and the non-human and in some way evoke a realization or awakening of the fickle constructions that hold these categories together.

In my videography of the Leslie Spit I sought to include a lot of rock formations and rebar constructions as the main actants—to borrow Bruno Latour’s term—of the film. I always approached these non-human objects with the utmost fascination and considering their origin from the rubble of urban spaces I always considered them to be full of life and vitality. In Toby Neilson’s reading of ecocinema he reminds us that rocks and other “lifeless” and “inhuman” objects become central characters in a cinema that seeks to make visible the connection between the human and non-human (even if that connection is not always intentional as his reading of *The Lord of the Rings* proves). Here he is evoking Haraway’s ideas about the Anthropocene: “Donna Haraway argues that in the turbid times of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene we need to ‘make odd

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<sup>123</sup> Toby Neilson, “What Is ECOCINEMA? A Case Study Analysis with Jim Henson’s Labyrinth.” *Anthropocene Cinema*, 6 Mar. 2019, [www.anthropocene-cinema.com/what-is-ecocinema-analysing-jim-hensons-labyrinth/](http://www.anthropocene-cinema.com/what-is-ecocinema-analysing-jim-hensons-labyrinth/).

<sup>124</sup> Alex Blasdel, “A Reckoning for OUR SPECIES’: The Philosopher Prophet of the Anthropocene.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 15 June 2017, [www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/15/timothy-morton-anthropocene-philosopher](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/15/timothy-morton-anthropocene-philosopher).

kin' (2016), that is, make unexpected partnerships and allegiances with other forms of life."<sup>125</sup> In my videography these alliances are both visible and intentional when it comes to my inclusion of rocks, rubble, metal, and rebar, and of course the commanding presence of Lake Ontario surrounding the park. Rocks and metal constructions become my actors and the 'odd kin' I make when establishing a relationship with this park that attempts to exclude my humanity—as much as I could—from the final product.

Another inspiration for this kind of ecocinema that takes into account the vital materialism of the objects one encounters at the Leslie Spit is the work of Jane Bennett. Her theory of vital materiality looks to ascribe agency to the non-human and more specifically to the things which we often leave to the side and often classify as abject. In the context of the Leslie Spit, one encounters a place made of abject waste and industrial by-products shun away by society and desecrated to abject dump sites. Bennett dedicates a section of her book *Vibrant Matter a political ecology of things* precisely to debris and views it—through the lens of Spinoza's theory of the thing—as affective objects full vibrant materiality and agency. When encountering litter over a storm drain in Chesapeake Bay she writes: "Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick. As I encountered these items, they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing—between, on the one hand, stuff to ignore, except insofar as it betokened human activity (the workman's efforts, the litterer's toss, the rat poisoner's success), and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects."<sup>126</sup>

At Tommy Thompson Park I encounter precisely this kind of matter pregnant with vitality stemming from the human activity that precedes its arrival to this resting place. The rebar that one

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<sup>125</sup> Neilson, "What Is ECOCINEMA? A Case Study Analysis with Jim Henson's Labyrinth."

<sup>126</sup> Jane Bennett, "Chapter 1: The Force of Things," *Vibrant Matter a Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

sees everywhere tells a story of a building that it once held together, the bricks and stone carry with it the history of a home or a dwelling that once upon a time gave shelter to human lives, and the debris which includes all kinds of domestic objects carry with them the lived experiences of the human beings that once used them and gave them meaning. At the Spit I was always confronted, and to an extent perceptually overwhelmed, with what Bennett calls the ‘excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects’ contained within the rubble and debris that make up the surface of the park. This intense affectation kept me coming to the park and they were what ultimately led me to include it as a part of this dissertation, a collection of photographs, and the videography I have created.

The desire to document and give space to this place and its objects is still connected to the profound realization of the Anthropocene as the root cause for this kind of transformation of nature, but having been an avid reader of Bennett, I was also captivated in a positive way by its vibrant thing-power. These objects spoke to me and in some ways, I felt compelled to tell their story through writing, photography, and video. This “[...] stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call, even if I didn’t quite understand what it was saying. At the very least it provoked affects in me: I was repelled by the dead rat and dismayed by the litter, but I also felt something else: a nameless awareness of the impossible singularity of that rat, that configuration of pollen, that otherwise utterly banal, mass-produced plastic water-bottle cap.”<sup>127</sup> That singular nameless awareness is what attracted me to the park – and I suspect it is what attracts archaeologists and other scholars to this place—more so than the horror that one inevitably feels upon realizing that what seems to be a park like any other is in fact a man-made construction made entirely from rubble and industrial debris.

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<sup>127</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter a Political Ecology of Things*, 4.

## 10. Site-specificity and slow cinema

Taking a lesson from the approach of critical topography and the films *El Sol del Membrillo* and *Rivers and Tides*, which I wrote about in my master's thesis, I was also inspired by a site-specific aesthetic as an approach for my videography of the park. The term *site-specific cinema* is one that I must credit to Professor Gerda Cammaer who deployed it as a way to contextualize my video work about Tommy Thompson Park. In her view the slowness, dedication to place, and realism inherent to this videography all follow the methodology of site-specific artworks within the context of cinema. Such a term is not necessarily an existent cinematic category but having a connection with the field of critical topography and documentary aesthetics makes this term appropriate to talk about my own video work. During my master's thesis I explored site-specificity at length by creating a monograph of the film *Rivers and Tides* by Thomas Riedelsheimer which chronicles the work and process of artist Andy Goldsworthy. In this body of work, I analyzed Goldsworthy's work and proposed a number of theories about why location and place both shape and condition the origin and outcome of his work.

Goldsworthy is someone that prioritizes the places where he chooses to conduct his work and allows the natural conditions of these sites to radically determine the work itself; in many ways Goldsworthy allows himself to act as a conduit for the forces at work in a specific location. Inspired by this approach I sought to allow the space, in this case the Leslie Spit, to dictate the direction and final form of the videography. I allowed the place to speak in its own voice by allowing slowness and duration to take precedence over montage and editing and attempting to put forward a composite of images that allow the viewer to feel like they are present to the space rather than being present to my aesthetic and philosophical judgments about it.

*El Sol del Membrillo* by Víctor Erice, which is explored at length in the first chapter of this dissertation, is of profound inspiration in my cinematic work and it presents another iteration of site-specific art and cinema. The focal point of the film is the way in which Antonio Lopez García paints a tree in his backyard and allows the natural conditions around him to dictate both the duration and the outcome of the work. The entirety of this artistic endeavor is mediated by place and it culminates with the incompleteness of the oil painting, which is chronicled in the film, due to the impossibility to paint with the same sunlight that was an inspiration for the work. When most painters would simulate the light, they desire to represent in their work, the Spaniard's faithfulness to realism prevents him from completing the work and the filmmaker is there to accompany this journey. The filmmaker imitates this realist rhetoric by accompanying the painter through his process and staying true to the timeline of his labor without changing the shooting schedule or filming any footage out of sequence. This is what makes the film, in my opinion, a work of site-specific cinema with the site being both the artist at work and the tree in his backyard.

And although site-specific cinema is not a formal category of filmmaking it does have a heritage that can be traced back to modernism and more recently to the formal category of site-specific theatre.

“In Western theatre the Futurists and Dadaists in the early 1900s to 1920s, the Happenings and Richard Schechner's environmental theatre of the 1960s and '70s, and the recent trend in immersive theatre from the 1990s onward have all grappled with activating unusual, nontheatrical spaces for theatrical experimentation.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Rachel Bowditch et al., “Four Principles about SITE-SPECIFIC THEATRE: A Conversation on Architecture, Bodies, and Presence,” Mar. 2018, [jhuptheatre.org/theatre-topics/online-content/issue/theatre-topics-volume-28-number-1-march-2018/four-principles](http://jhuptheatre.org/theatre-topics/online-content/issue/theatre-topics-volume-28-number-1-march-2018/four-principles).

All of these experiments in site-specific performance are rooted in place and seek to explore and prioritize the vital materiality of the spaces as a way to make visible the aesthetic potential that is inherently present in spaces and places outside of the theatre. Debord and the situationists wanted to reveal that mundane public spaces were rich in artistic potentiality and that in some ways the spaces and social roles we inhabit are inherently performative.

“Part of working site-specifically is finding unusual, provocative spaces that have theatrical potential. Creating this work becomes about dialoguing with, and potentially around, the uniqueness of what the space and architecture have to offer. How can urban architecture be activated and transformed into realms of theatrical potentiality? How can performance reveal alternative layers to the reality of a landscape?”<sup>129</sup>

With my videography, *The Waste Land- A kino-poetic adaptation*, I am attempting to present the aesthetically monstrous character of a place that testifies to the profound change human beings have had on the landscape. To do so I have made some artistic choices that enhance the affects I felt when being physically present. My writing and poetics about the space tell a story but through my videography I wanted to intensify the feelings of existential dread, starvation, and lack that I one feels when walking its rusty trails. For this reason, I chose to include a fragment of TS Eliot’s *The Waste Land* that dealt with thirst, lack of water, and dread. The juxtaposition of these verses with the stark landscape of the park allowed me to have a parallel line of thought that enhanced the troubling images I presented. Since I mainly relied on images of water, I felt that including a poem about the lack of water would create the tension necessary to jolt the viewer’s attention and produce a polarity that enables a different form of spectatorship. By sequencing Eliot’s famous lines with images of a monstrous landscape I am attempting to create a film that

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<sup>129</sup> Bowditch, “Four Principles about SITE-SPECIFIC THEATRE: A Conversation on Architecture, Bodies, and Presence.”



allows the viewer to create the narrative and meaning of the images in their minds; hence, the connections become the responsibility of the viewer since poetry elicits a radically subjective response.

The choice to include verses of *The Waste Land* was in part to the connection its title has to a place which by all means is a literal wasteland and secondly, the poem's expression of loss and desolation seemed like a perfect fit to what I felt the park evoked in my being. Even though Eliot's poem is not literally describing a wasteland (that would be far too boring) it metaphorically summons the spiritual wasteland and existential solace the poet felt after the war. Furthermore, since poetry elicits a metaphorical reading which is somewhat open to interpretation, I felt it was an adequate companion of a collection of images that could be viewed as dramatically suggestive of my own worldview. Looking back to chapter 1 of this dissertation, I was deeply inspired by the aesthetic documentary style of Víctor Erice and felt that in order to add an aesthetic dimension to these documentary images of ruination I needed to include Eliot's lyricism in order to distance the film from the genre of pure documentary. The ensuing result was a style of documentary poetics that functioned simultaneously as cinematic/documentary realism and aesthetic play.

In addition to the inclusion of poetry as a way to counteract the brutal realism of the images I presented I also chose to slow down the speed of most of the images. Upon close examination the viewer will realize that many of the shots I have included are not arranged in their normal speed. This was done for a myriad of reasons which I will explain briefly. First, it was an attempt to slow down the viewing experience dramatically. This choice harkens back to Erice's influence on my work and the sublime slowness with which he filmed and directed *El Sol del Membrillo*. I have discussed this characteristic of his work at large in the first chapter of this dissertation, but briefly stated his film forces the viewers to adjust to the slow pace of his images and confront

within themselves the desires implanted by the fast-paced editing techniques of mainstream cinema. Erice does not physically slow down the images like I do but rather relies on long durational shots to create in the spectator a meditative pace that is drastically different to the fast and effective storytelling techniques deployed by most directors<sup>130</sup> of his time. To me the slow pace of this film is its defining feature, and it serves both its thematic and technical purposes by imitating the slow pace of painter Antonio López García and the themes of time and death that permeate throughout the entire film. The film is a successful example of art imitating life.

On this same point, slowness serves more than a purely aesthetic purpose insofar as slowing down spectatorship represents a violent and somewhat monstrous attack on conventional modes of storytelling and viewership. As Critchley beautifully demonstrates in his essay the purpose of challenging the aesthetic status quo is not a selfish attempt to be different from the rest but rather of poking holes into the current state of somnolent aesthetics that perpetuate our lives. In this sense, boredom as an effect of slowness becomes a radical affect in the context of high-speed images and their accelerated circulation in the circuit of media exchange. It is with this point in mind that I decided to slow down my images to create a different, and to some extent, more embodied experience of mundane reality. Secondly, this methodological decision was an attempt to create an altered state of mind in the viewer that resonates with the feelings of thirst and starvation evoked by Eliot's poem. The images themselves already evoked a disturbing feeling of post-apocalyptic dread and environmental eradication but juxtaposed with this poem and their slow-moving transformation through post-production I sought to both enhance these sentiments and create a visually poetic aesthetic experience. Having poetic images of thirst and lack of water next to literal

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<sup>130</sup> Erice was influenced more by directors of the Italian neorealist movement and the work of Andre Bazin than he was by the contemporary filmmaking standards of his industry.

images of moving water, helped create a tension that was productive of metaphor and philosophical reflection.

### **11. Synthesizer Music and Hauntology**

When thinking about the sound that would accompany the images of this videography, I opted to remove the original audio of the video footage for a synthesizer soundtrack to further amplify the psychedelic effect of the images along with the synthetic artificiality of the landscape as a whole. The synthesizer was the perfect tool for this soundtrack since it has a sonic texture that is at once warm and synthetic; simultaneously musical and machinic. Synthesizers are utilized to artificially recreate—through electronic soundwaves—the sonic characteristics of instruments such as pianos, strings, and even the human voice. It is this relationship to an organic artificiality that resonated with the themes I encountered at the park in all its manufactured glory.

I wanted to create, however, something that had a brooding and foreboding droning character while refraining from creating a musical piece that was too suggestive and interfered with the flow of the images. For this I relied on playing only two or three notes repetitively while adding a heavy amount of delay to the original signal. The synthesizer I used has an on-board bucket brigade delay module and pushing this module to its maximum position gave the audio signal a ghostly and more repetitive character. These techniques gave the piece an ethereal and ruminating ethos that resonated with the feelings evoked by this modern wasteland. The synthesizer was the perfect musical tool to evoke these ghostly affects and its heritage in the musical industry and culture shaped it to be used in this manner. Since its introduction into the world of music with composers like Wendy Carlos and Karlheinz Stockhausen, synthesizer music

evoked an uncanny reaction in the way it sounded like traditional instruments but with a futuristic, and up to this point, unfamiliar sound palette.

Mark Fisher has delved into this phenomenon at length in his text *What is Hauntology?* where he takes the Derridean concept and applies it to aesthetics, specifically to electronic music. During its first appearance in the music scene with bands like Kraftwerk and Tangerine Dream the synthesizer introduced new motifs to the world of rock n' roll and with Kraftwerk in particular it had begun to shape the sound and aesthetic of the music altogether. It was in the 1980's that young men in a disenfranchised Detroit took inspiration from bands like Kraftwerk and began creating what we know now as techno music. Since they did not have the means to access expensive synthesizers these artists created their sound with computers, tape machines, and other tools that were at their disposal. I will not provide a primer of the influence of the synthesizer in electronic music and later in techno and hip-hop, but it is important to mention that its influence was far-reaching. But after this musical and aesthetic blossoming and all the way into the present, electronic music found itself at a crossroads regarding its futuristic genesis. Fisher writes:

“What defined this “hauntological” confluence more than anything else was its confrontation with a cultural impasse: the failure of the future. By 2005 or so, it was becoming clear that electronic music could no longer deliver sounds that were “futuristic.” From the end of World War II up until the 1990s, electronic music—whether produced by high- culture composers such as Pierre Schaeffer or Karlheinz Stockhausen or by synthpop groups and dance-music producers—had been synonymous with a sense of the future, so

much so that film and television would habitually turn to electronic music when it wanted to invoke the future.”<sup>131</sup>

The sci-fi and futuristic aesthetic that synthesizer music evoked in listeners was effective during its origin with albums like the 1967 *Silver Apples in the Moon* by Morton Subotnick which was composed entirely on a Buchla modular synthesizer. Even today when listening to this record you are transported to an ethereal and strange state of mind due to its automated patterns, synthetic repetitions, and quirky bleeps and bloops. But this kind of aesthetic, as Fisher explains, is no longer viable in a world where that strange futuristic sound has become ubiquitous in all music including commercial pop songs and radio hits. The synthesizer was essentially reduced to a keyboard that producers relied on to create the hook for a song or to add texture and atmosphere to an otherwise traditional piece of music. In other words, the once futuristic edge of the synthesizer was reduced to another cog in the machine of wholesale music culture, in which innovation and experimentation became less desired due to its lack of profitability.

“More broadly, and more troublingly, the disappearance of the future meant the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live. It meant the acceptance of a situation in which culture would continue without really changing, and where politics was reduced to the administration of an already established (capitalist) system. In other words, we were in the “end of history” described by Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama’s thesis was the other side of Fredric Jameson’s claim that postmodernism—characterized by its

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<sup>131</sup> Mark Fisher, “What Is Hauntology?” *Film Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2012, 16, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16). Accessed 2 Aug. 2021.

inability to find forms adequate to the present, still less to anticipate wholly new futures— was the “cultural logic of late capitalism.”<sup>132</sup>

But in recent years this paradigm began to shift and synthesizer companies of the past like Moog Music, Dave Smith Instruments, and Korg started to manufacture analog synthesizers akin to those that influenced and changed music during the late 1960's and 1970's. Once again, the futuristic sound of voltage-controlled sound waves entered the cultural arena as more than ornamentation for a Lady Gaga hit song. The manufacturers harkened back to the original architecture of these machines and with a hefty price tag they started to catch the attention of nostalgic musicians and young artists looking to conduct experiments in sound design. I find myself in this latter category and this is why I purchased my first Moog synthesizer after being obsessed by the famous Minimoog which one can hear in records from the 1970's by Pink Floyd, Rush, Tangerine Dream, Emerson Lake & Palmer, Yes, and many others. Moog's new line of instruments which include the Matriarch were advertised as having the “vintage” sound we knew and loved from these records in the past. Moog and Dave Smith Instruments even went as far as re-issuing clones of the very synths that were occupied by these musicians in the 1970's in the Minimoog and the Prophet 5.

In terms of the hauntological quality of these instruments and the music of today one has to mention that these manufacturers saw an emerging need that had been revived by musicians like Aphex Twin and Boards of Canada who are credited by many as having pioneered the genre of ambient music, also known as hauntological music. This genre looked to the past at bands that favored a futurist electrotonic aesthetic and adapted this historical sound to the present. Not merely a nostalgic form of mimesis but rather a haunting echo of this past aesthetic with musical forms

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<sup>132</sup> Fisher, “What Is Hauntology?” 16.

and motifs that made it relevant to their contemporary context. In the 1990's Boards of Canada, in particular, shaped their sound by using old synthesizers, broken down tape-machines, degrading tape loops, and an overall low fidelity (known now as lo-fi) recording aesthetic that evoked a ghostly referentiality of the synthesizer music of the 1970's.

“Provisionally, then, we can distinguish two directions in hauntology. The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic “compulsion to repeat,” a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern). The second refers to that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behavior).”<sup>133</sup>

Boards of Canada's sound belongs in the second direction of hauntology outlined by Fisher since it created a sound and a musical aesthetic that was yet to be actualized but had in some ways already peaked its head in the late 1980's with the innovative use of electronic instruments by techno and hip-hop musicians. Their “ambient” and “lo-fi” sound existed virtually and their early work in the 1990's with albums such as *Geogaddi* became the actualization of this virtual praxis. Favoring the usage of the cassette and recording with decaying tape reels gave their music that haunting nostalgic sound while their innovative usage of synthesizers and modern equipment placed it in a contemporary musical context. Adam Harper explains it in the following manner: “The various sorts of weathering they apply to this material (usually involving poor quality, nth generation tape copies or headroom-excess noise) heightens the effect of this temporal-clash, as does the combination of contemporary experimental breaks with the comparatively old-fashioned synthesiser style.”<sup>134</sup> It is through these techniques that the signature sound of Boards of Canada

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<sup>133</sup> Fisher, “What Is Hauntology?” 19.

<sup>134</sup> Adam Harper, “Hauntology: The PAST inside the Present,” *Hauntology: The Past Inside The Present*, 27, Oct.

and other bands like them could be understood, as Harper puts it, to contain the past inside the present.

All of this brings me to the Moog synthesizer I elected to use for the soundtrack of my videography. It fits this precise category of hauntological musical devices since it is engineered to sound both classical and futuristic (per their marketing campaigns). Its signal path is completely analog and modelled after some of Moog's most historically significant modules dating back to the 1970's.

“Moog are keen to emphasise that its signal path — and therefore its sound — is determined by the historic modules on which it's based. The oscillators are distant descendants of the Moog 921s found in many of Moog's modular synths in the 1970s, the mixer is based upon the Moog CP3, the filters are based upon the Moog 904a, the VCAs upon the Moog 902, and the delay lines upon the Moog 500 Series Analog Delay module. Of course, there's still digital stuff in the Matriarch because it supports MIDI and has a digitally implemented step sequencer, but the signal path and the lack of patch memories (which some people believe can interfere with a 'pure' analogue sound) ensure that it's a synth for purists as well as pragmatists.”<sup>135</sup>

What makes this instrument a living example of a hauntological device is the way it incorporates aspects of the past and Moog's engineering heritage while maintaining all the contemporary technologies of the present like MIDI implementation and sequencing. Even the on-board delay module is based on Moog's 500 Series of effects pedals which are not produced

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2009, [rougesfoam.blogspot.com/2009/10/hauntology-past-inside-present.html](http://rougesfoam.blogspot.com/2009/10/hauntology-past-inside-present.html).

<sup>135</sup>Gordon Reid, “Moog Matriarch Semi-Modular Synthesizer,” *Moog Matriarch*, 1 July 2021, [www.soundonsound.com/reviews/moog-matriarch](http://www.soundonsound.com/reviews/moog-matriarch).



anymore and have achieved a cult status of their own. For this soundtrack I relied heavily on this effect which drowns the signal of the synthesizer in reverberating echoes and gives the sound its signature ghostly character. The choice was not arbitrary but rather an intentional effort to evoke a sense of lament and howling wind that informed the post-apocalyptic images it was tasked with musicalizing. In Ihor Junyk's words this sound, resembling a howling wind, gave a voice to the strange land that is the Leslie Spit.



## Conclusion – Nostalgia for the Future

*“Tomorrow belongs to those who can hear it coming.”* David Bowie

I have chosen to end this dissertation with a somewhat grim and apocalyptic imagery by bringing together the images of Tommy Thompson Park and the poetic premonitions of TS Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. The transition from a nostalgic painter holding on to the past, to a meditation about a graveyard being refigured into an art gallery, and finally the Leslie Street Spit as a sublime ruin gives the reader three distinct examples. I decided to end the dissertation with the philosophical and artistic exploration of Tommy Thompson Park because it was physically accessible to me and in a less obvious way it encapsulates many of themes present in Víctor Erice’s *El Sol del Membrillo* and Gordon Young’s *Bird Stones*.

What set the Leslie Spit apart from these sites is its ecological significance within the broader context of one of academia’s most prevalent topics, the Anthropocene. What better place to study the anthropogenic ecological impact that defines our era than a place which is man-made out of rubble and which simultaneously behaves like an ecological sanctuary? The Leslie Spit is a product of our industrial excesses and its material surplus which ends up in the shores of Lake Ontario and accidentally becomes “nature” by housing a vast ecology of birds, plants, mammals, and lively wetlands. The term accidental is one that we must use when talking about the Spit and a book about this precise notion was published during the time this dissertation was written<sup>136</sup>. Beyond Burley’s book many academics and graduate students have undertaken the Spit as a site for their studies because of the way it encompasses so many themes that are relevant to

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<sup>136</sup> *Accidental Wilderness: The Origins and Ecology of Toronto’s Tommy Thompson Park* by Walter H. Kehm and Robert Burley was published in 2020 and contains a collection of photographs and essays about the origins and ecology of the accidental nature of the Leslie Street Spit.

contemporary academia and the ecological anxiety that defines an era marked by the radical changes human beings have inflicted to the landscape.

This dissertation does not look at all of these contemporary works and instead focuses mainly on the publication *Buried Localities* by Shopf and Foster (2014) which is in my opinion one of the most important and original texts about the site. This text also precedes many of the books and articles that have been published in recent years and focuses on the objective history of this place without romanticizing its materiality. But returning to the term accidental wilderness, it resonates with this project in manifold ways but the most important is the sense that I myself came to discover this place completely accidentally. It was after an afternoon coffee with my mother-in-law in her east end Toronto house that she suggested I visit the park only 5 minutes away. I happened to have my camera with me that day and became immediately fascinated by this strange urban wilderness with its metal forests and contradicting affects. This accidental discovery took place at the beginning of my doctoral studies in 2012 and up until this point my dissertation project was meant to excavate themes from my master's thesis and the work I had done with the film *El Sol del Membrillo*. But after the philosophical and aesthetic excitement provoked by the park, I knew I would have to find a way of bringing together this previous work with the ideas I was already starting to come up with in relation to Leslie Spit. I accidentally stumbled into what would become a long scholarly and artistic endeavour.

The park spoke to me right away and ideas about the Anthropocene along with apocalyptic affects began to influence the cinematic and photographic work I set out to put together. When thinking of ways of creating a videography about the park I knew from the start that I had to include some textual element as a way to connect the images to the discourse of Cultural Studies. The choice was a difficult one, but I had recently purchased a copy of TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a

viewing companion to Lucy Walker's film *Waste Land* about the photographic work of Vik Muniz at the world's largest landfill, Jardim Gramacho in Brazil. This Brazilian landfill, and the documentary about an artist creating with it, inspired me in many ways and despite the obvious differences both sites were testimony to the excesses of capitalism and some of the sublime aftereffects that sites of this kind of uncanny horror are able to produce. In the case of the biggest landfill in the world, Vik Muniz is able to work with the *catadores* – who through their resilience earn their living by collecting and profiting off the waste people leave behind—to produce sublime sculptures out of garbage.

At the Spit the industrial waste is repurposed and refigured by artists and ordinary visitors into lively sculptures, inuksuk, and abstract figures. But despite these inspiring sights one can't ignore the fact that the place is full of waste and most of the lovely metal structures reside in the waters of Lake Ontario. I chose TS Eliot's poem *What the Thunder Said* as the text I would weave with my slow images from the park. The text makes constant references to drought and lack of water and my images are mostly of the waters of Lake Ontario since it is what you will see the most when you visit the park and where most of the interesting rebar sculptures are located. The tension between water and drought produces in the viewer a meta-reflection about what would inevitably be one of the ultimate outcomes from the incessant practices of resource extraction, the end of water.

The Leslie Spit is yet another example of the Port Lands' heightened significance to artists in academics in the present. Many artists and scholars are shifting their attention to this area of the city due to its paradoxical ecological place within Toronto. Initially a site for industry in the shape of dredging projects, cement plants, and other factories, it now looks like a nature/industry hybrid that serves as recreational space for city-dwellers and a habitat for different faces of nature. Nature

and human beings have reclaimed much of this post-industrial landscape on the shores of Lake Ontario, giving renewed meaning to the concept of reclamation and posthumanism. The dissertation begins with a traditional form of artistic transformation at Antonio López García's garden where painting becomes the way to salvage the past from disappearing completely. At the Cambridge Mill Cemetery artist Gordon Young reclaims an urban space at the fringes of society by revitalizing a decaying space with art. The Port Lands is an exciting space and cultural moment in the sense that it has become a site within a city in which nature attempts to reclaim what was once lost, destroyed, and exploited. In the Port Lands the interplay of industry and nature opens a window into a potential future in which nature becomes threatened to the brink of collapse by the hands of humanity. In this tentative yet plausible future one would assume— given the experimentally positive results of Tommy Thompson Park—that nature would find its way and thrive even within the most uninhabitable circumstances.

## Part 2 – Videography

A. The Waste Land- A Kino-poetic Adaptation

B. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Tq8gCE1f5tCBti0HUGIbIA2bfLUDIMZj/view?usp=sharing>

With this videography I hope to create a work that has both truth value and poetic significance in the vein of *El Sol del Membrillo*, a film that has inspired both my academic vocation and artistic endeavors. The videography will be composed of documentary video footage I shot at the park for approximately 4 years along with an excerpt of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The purpose of this text and image composite is to present a video work that reads as both text and videography while being grounded in an *ecocinema*, *site-specific cinema*, and a slow cinema aesthetic. The work of Erice has inspired me to create a work of realism that is both durational and metaphorical and which is not defined solely by one aesthetic category but integrates the world of realism and poetry into its aesthetic structure. Aside from the work of the Spanish filmmaker, my interest in dark ecology and the emergence of the concept of the Anthropocene has also influenced me deeply to focus my attention on a site with such paradoxical significance. These theoretical and aesthetic explorations have led me to identify my work as *ecocinema* and *site-specific cinema*, and ultimately that of the aesthetic document.



## Part 3 – Appendices

- A. Appendix 1: Translation of Responsibility and Aesthetic Significance of a National Criticism by Víctor Erice
- B. Appendix 2: *El Sol del Membrillo (Dream of Light)*: A Map of the Film]

## **Appendix 1 – Translation of Responsibility and Aesthetic Significance of a National Criticism by Víctor Erice**

"To write as we write in Madrid is to take a note, it is to write in a memoir, it is to perform a desperate and sad monologue for one alone. To write in Madrid is to cry, it is to seek a voice without finding it, as in an overwhelming and violent nightmare. Because you don't even write one for yours. Who are yours?" (Mariano Jose De Larra)

It is evident that the new situation that Spanish cinema is going through is demanding a great part of our professionals a hasty rethinking of orientations. For those of us who believe we have maintained a posture ethically linked to reality, the dilemma of attitude change, in essence, does not arise. But contrary to what some think, and precisely by virtue of this link, the current situation demands with the utmost immediacy a greater effort to delve into the meanings and consequences of the problems that we are going to have to face in our work. Something that, transferred to the moral plane, comes to test once again our degree of commitment and our efficacy.

The possible contact with very diverse styles of modern cinema – in its majority unknown to our audiences and representatives of different cultures – raises once again, with a much more rigorous level of demand than up to the present, the responsibility of critics and their role. In this examination, for reasons of efficiency, I am going to refer exclusively to specialized critique, since until now it is the only one that has maintained in its attitude, with greater or lesser coherence, the postulates of a certain aesthetic that can be investigated.



### **The friction of critique**

Within the field of national critique, it can be proved, with notorious frequency in recent times, the clash of different – and sometimes opposing – attitudes towards the cinematographic phenomenon. On the one hand, a deeper and more representative position can emerge from discussions and active knowledge, because it clearly speaks of the existence of a genuine concern. Unfortunately, until now they have generally been about friction and not constructive confrontations, of easy moralizing anathemas and not of rigorous examinations, of fervent acts of faith and not concrete reasoning. Such a situation is, however, shortly after all of us collaborate, in a position to be widely surpassed.

It already signifies important progress - due, above all, to the efforts of the realist generation that has preceded us - that for the first time in many years, polemics have transcended the simple plane of opposition between "sold-out" criticism and "pure" criticism, and they have come to be raised with some insistence in the field of aesthetic ideas. Consequently, the condemnations of certain methods, the accusations of "contention" and "formalism", of "politicism" and "reactionism", necessarily respond to facts that have their most decisive roots in the present development of our culture. Reducing, more or less unconsciously, the scope of these judgments is in most cases a logical measure of efficacy or of immediacy. The current situation seems to me conducive to attempting a more general examination of the issue, which perhaps we should have addressed earlier. Because the rapid and complex evolution of the reality is forcing us too many times to insist on last minute efforts to try to accommodate our critical stance to a modern perspective to compensate in any case for our insufficient film culture. And these pronouncements, necessary, urgent and honest, I do not know to what extent they can go, in a more or less near term, to separate us from authentically national roots.

What do these struggles ultimately represent? What state of affairs are they a product of? What possible consequences do they entail? Putting into practice an eventual clarification of these questions seems to me a necessary undertaking, especially if the desired transformation of our cinema is to take place. What we can be sure of is that there is a certain sector of the public that cannot be kept waiting boringly contemplating small gestures in friction that do not even reach controversy; to which even less can one pretend to conform to abstract definitions; who, above all, can never be forgotten.

### **A cultural signification**

The search for answers to the questions asked must be carried out within the current situation of our culture within the framework of a circumstance, which if it is defined by something is by being the product of a period of crisis. In this sense, all this complex of manifestations is the consequence, in my opinion, of the attempt to overcome, both from one side and the other, by different or contradictory paths, that crisis mentioned. The effort that this attempt entails keeps us in most cases in a provisional state that the nonexistence or invalidity of our cinematographic tradition does nothing but harm. The brief and valuable struggle maintained by two magazines in the past<sup>137</sup>, the isolated example of the occasional filmmaker, and the importance — logically increasingly out of date — of some conversations<sup>138</sup>, are necessary supports, but hardly useful to the organic consolidation of a culture. In reality, our isolation and our possible errors of adequacy are the result

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<sup>137</sup> It refers to the fight between the *Nuestro Cine* magazines (where Víctor Erice collaborated and where this note was published) and *Film Ideal*. The first, founded in 1961, maintained a left-wing editorial line, with a Marxist dialectical theoretical approach, with an emphasis on the social. The second, founded in 1956, maintained a Catholic and anti-communist line, and from the beginning of the sixties it began to approach its conceptions to those proclaimed in France by *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

<sup>138</sup> It refers to the Salamanca Conversations, a meeting held in May 1955 in which professionals from all sectors of the Spanish film industry participated. In it he proposed to reflect on the state of Spanish cinema after the Civil War, and to try to find common solutions to the problems faced by the entire industry.

of the lack, for too long now, of a national aesthetic theory that examines the problem of art with a realistic and critical stance. And I deliberately refer to art in general, because, contrary to the attitude of some, we do not want to enclose cinema within a watertight compartment, surrounded by mystery, and to which only four or five privileged people have access. Whether we like it or not, cinema is influenced by a whole series of ideological, political and economic vicissitudes. For this reason, the problems that arise here have characteristics of pressing generality.

What is our modern cultural tradition in the field of aesthetic theory? In the event that there is one, in what degree of progress, of consciousness is it found? The quite bleak panorama of an entire past is present when the time comes to answer these interrogations.

The theory of film criticism has inevitably been influenced by the positions that our principal authors have held in artistic matters. Despite their old and well-known disinterest in cinema, our intellectuals have not been able to prevent their lamentable inhibition from having had an impact, as naturally have the conscious attitudes they have made known in their works. However, in the first quarter of the century it is true that there have been vital endeavors, the anguishing searches for renewal and realism that have materialized in a few important novels and in a poetic movement of exceptional magnitude. Unfortunately, most of the time, a lucid ideological conscience was lacking to specify these attempts and channel them into a concrete artistic theory. For this and many other reasons, among which our civil war stands out, a critical tradition in accordance with the needs of the times could not be formed. And, despite everything, there were results and attitudes, positive and honest, that could be taken advantage of, but that in the field of collective resonances were systematically stifled by the supported reaction of the bourgeois currents. All of which, in short, is a clear exponent of the struggle in the field of aesthetic ideas, which – as Lukacs points out – is determined by the opposition of two types of attitude: the

one that believes in reason and the one that abandons itself to the prestige of irrationality; the one that believes in the effective action of man in history and the one that leads to absolute negation. That is to say, the opposition between realism and anti-realism.

The results of these confrontations, in an indelible past for our national life, come to be reflected, as we will see later, in our aesthetic present. Thoroughly examining their evolution seems to me to be a task that at the moment is beyond my possibilities for very different reasons. However, given its importance, I will try to sketch, albeit briefly, some of its more general characteristics in order to better situate current critical positions. Thus, with respect to those two tendencies — realism and antirealism — that have been pointed out, I will allow myself to choose the authors that I consider most illustrative, in order to reach some quick conclusions. In any case, I will resort to the reproduction of known texts so that they are the ones that lead the reader to a free opinion.

### **Realism and anti-realism**

In modern times, our aesthetics, with few exceptions, have remained dormant in concepts that had nothing to do with the evolution of technique and history. Naturally, this has been contributed by the delay produced by a whole series of political and economic events that have affected the country throughout the century. It would be absurd not to take them into account; but, since it is not possible to carry out a detailed study of them, it will suffice to point out that all the problems that will appear successively have their origin in these conditionings.

In the evolution of our culture, and within a realistic posture, if we look for a valid starting point –and in many aspects current– from which to contrast the different phenomena, we will surely have to go back to the 19th century, and once there take the example of Larra: «Literature

can never be but the expression of the time, literature is the expression of the progress of a people and the spoken or written word is nothing more than the representation of ideas; that is to say, of that same progress»<sup>139</sup>.

Larra, direct and vigorous precedent of the generation of 98, testifies with his articles of a morally rooted attitude in the time that he had to live in. The literary genre, through it, abandons parasitism, acquires awareness of its time, ceases to be an instrument of evasion to become a means of communication: «We therefore refuse what is called literature among us in the day; We do not want that literature reduced to the finery of saying, to the sound of rhyme, to singing sonnets and odes of circumstances, which grants everything to expression and nothing to idea, but a literature daughter of experience and history, and lighthouse, therefore, of a time to come; studious, analytical, philosophically profound, thinking it all, saying it all in prose, within reach of the still ignorant crowd ». In this paragraph, the opposition between two aesthetics already defined above is specified: the one that wishes to communicate ideas, an active look at things, and the one that elegantly leaves the world intact. Art as action in history thus takes on its most human mission and becomes the defender of a freedom that enables man to choose his destiny, «Freedom in literature, as in the arts, as in industry, as in commerce, as in consciousness. Here is the currency of the time, here is ours, here is the measurement with which we will measure; in our critical judgments we will ask a book, can you teach us something? Are you not an expression of human progress? Well, you are good » [3].

Larra's torn conscience, fraudulently conditioned by the contradictions of the thought in which he was educated and the time in which he lived, could not avoid isolation, moral loneliness and the feeling of incapacity. His tragic end is nothing more than the profound expression of a

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<sup>139</sup> M.J. Larra, *Literatura. Profesión de fe*. El Español, 1836, BAE 127, 134.

powerless will to carry the anguishing weight of a lonely, unequal and almost hopeless struggle. His writings are an example of a sincere, honest and admirable attitude, which means an essential effort in the task of bringing aesthetic ideas to a level of social consciousness and human progress.

However, his solitary and rebellious cry, his active and conscious romanticism will be crushed, throughout the nineteenth century, by counterrevolutionary waves of reaction. For years, in art, the alibi of formalism will help to hide the true aspects of reality. Literary criticism – clothed in glorious scholarship, investigating aesthetic phenomena considering them from the absolutely timeless, examining history as an abstract and immobile entity, turned over to a dissected and inconsequential past – will turn its back on progress and will serve to ignore a present in grave decomposition.

The generation of '98, which was a sincere reaction against this state of affairs, will maintain a general nonconformist attitude that seemed definitively cornered. It would be unfair to deny the significance of this movement, but, amid the authenticity and importance of several of its representatives, one cannot fail to point out today, in the light of known historical consequences, the lack of realist commitment of some of its most significant ideas.

The protest, with the evolution of certain conditioning and the passing of the years, became, in the mouth of this generation, fundamentally skeptical, lost in a humanism that did not suppose struggle, but rather anguished contemplation, which was not rebellion against a historical situation of man, but lament for a metaphysical nature of man. These were the reasons, among others, why, alongside honest, sentimentally realist positions, there were other positions that, under an excuse of stylistic perfection and moral search, were only empty, more or less concealed formalisms. As always happens, each time a movement of agitation occurs on the artistic plane, the decadent

aesthetic had to be apparently in the vanguard and, putting on a new garment, hide the decrepitude and invariability of its contents.

In this way, and moving on to illustrative examples, what in Larra supposed a demand for concrete and social freedom, in Azorín is a request for an abstract freedom: «(...) freedom of words, tired of the prison in which old rhetoric has kept them»<sup>140</sup>. What was a consciousness firmly linked to an epoch becomes, in the hands of antirealism, a timeless consciousness without projection. Here is what Azorín says referring, significantly, to Larra himself: «Of course, the vision of Larra disregarding the external, of the social accidents, would have gone to the depths, to the intimate and permanent causes. (...) the observer (Larra) would have been able to verify that the evils and vices that seemed peculiar to his time were of all times, that man does not march but very slowly towards the light »III. The evasion of history and literature as political conservatism are present here. Lacking ideas and willpower to enter the world of action, the author, and consequently art, is locked in a negative subjectivism. It is therefore consequential and enlightening that Azorín writes: «Reality does not matter; what matters is our dream. Interested in time, doubt and contemplation in this writer do not turn on a historical time; the temporal structure that interests him is the moment, because it signifies transience towards nothingness, negation of history and, consequently, of all human meaning. After his stylistic wanderings, this is the content that we perceive. And are we not here before an incipient precedent of dehumanized art that Ortega will proclaim?

In this protracted polemic, the prospects for the royalist position were not favorable in the years that followed. The example of an Antonio Machado would be a bit drowned in the

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<sup>140</sup> Erice cites the prologue of the book of Superrealism (1929) by José Augusto Trinidad Martínez Ruiz, better known for his pseudonym «Azorín».

skepticism, increasingly ironic and insincere, of the generation of 14. During the years 23 to 30, intellectual life was paralyzed in its most renovating tendencies and it was precisely in that time, when the aesthetic ideas of the reaction were used to gain strength. The generation that emerged around the 27<sup>th</sup> had a universal importance and repercussions not yet surpassed. The evolution of the political situation allowed them a consciousness and a maturity that was in the process of forming a culture and expressive media with popular projection. What that generation could have come to constitute, rooted in Spain, is something that events have prevented us from verifying. What can be practically verified are the results of a whole series of artistic concepts sustained to this day.

We have lacked a realistic aesthetic theory that formed tradition. There was a series of novels, poetry books and attitudes; but only the representatives of decadent art had a voice and vote at the time of systematizing and extending an aesthetic doctrine. When it comes to the current repercussions, this is the point where the conditions of a modern critique are posed with greater clarity. Because our most officially recognized intellectuals have done nothing but maintain and disseminate those sources in which they were educated, those old theories, reluctant to progress, clumsy imitation, in their time, of the ideas of the German irrational philosophers; those that evolved, have been and continue to be dictated in a large part from our academies.

In fact, in the cinematographic field, they are today serving, under the guise of avant-gardism, as aesthetic spokesman for a number of critics. Its sources are the twilight crimes of a French intellectual reaction, as for another, in the past, it was the Germanic fatalistic doctrines. They continue to march on horseback from the currents that some out there have put novelty labels to skillfully play a political card and hide a national anemia. And, above all, we continue to turn our backs on a reality that, as individuals situated in a specific historical circumstance, we must



investigate by looking at the roots for authentic renovations that, modern or not, will always be those that our culture, outdated or not, permit us.

This desire to be faithful to a perspective of ours enables me to consider these theories - which were already circulating with delay in Spain in the year 28, showing signs of palpable old age- concretized in some Spanish author and not in French, who are the ones who usually cite the most often the critics I refer to. In the order of false renewals, it is not necessary to search outside our border; here, by our side, unfortunately, there are plenty of examples.

### **Dehumanized art**

"The social effects of art are, at first glance, something so extrinsic, so remote from the aesthetic essence that it is difficult to see how, starting from them, one can penetrate the intimacy of styles." This is what José Ortega y Gasset wrote in 1928 in his book *La deshumanización del arte y otros ensayos (The dehumanization of art and other essays)*. Ortega, who appeared at the time of the fatigue of the generation of '96, exposed a philosophy that came, in large part, from a country that was on the way to the Hitler era. The bourgeois conscience in Europe had entered a crisis and was contemplating with anguish its decadence and its unjustification. It urgently needed a revitalization to save her from sinking. Thus, he played his last and most decisive card: irrationalism as a system. Ortega, trained in the sources that led to this exaltation, became the representative of an ideology that defended aesthetic ideas, modernist in appearance, that led art to its most complete degradation.

As we have seen, Azorín affirmed: «Reality does not matter. What matters is our dream. Ortega will take this to its maximum consequence. "The artistic object is only artistic to the extent that it is not real." Now that there is so much talk in certain sectors of film criticism of the power

of the filmmaker's "gaze" - gaze, that is, contemplation or, what is the same, style, not as rational action over things, but as an idealization of reality, it is worth noting that - in Spain, in the year 28 - these horizons were already discovered and brought with them serious aberrations. Let's see some.

An aristocratic conception of thought that supposed the deepest contempt for the public, both reader and spectator: «The time is approaching when society, from politics to art, will once again organize itself, as it should, in two orders or ranks: that of egregious men and that of vulgar men. All the discomfort in Europe will flow and heal itself in this new and saving split. The dough cooks and does not understand. Let us try to do the reverse. Let us extract its essential principle from young art, and then we will see in what profound sense it is unpopular »

An escape from reality to escape any moral commitment, any social contact, and take refuge in picturesque artificial paradises; the greater or lesser intelligence and distinction of the artist will lie in the degree of skill and perfection that he demonstrates in that flight: “Reality constantly stalks the artist to prevent his escape. How clever is the great escape! He must be an Ulysses in reverse, freeing himself from his everyday Penelope and navigating through the rocks towards Circe's witchcraft. When he manages to escape for a moment from the perpetual stalking, let us not harm the artist with a gesture of pride, a brief gesture like Saint George, with the jugulated dragon at his feet »V.

The denial of moral sense, of the seriousness and efficacy of art as a means of communication; consequently, the total irresponsibility of the author is proclaimed: «If it can be said that art saves man, it is only because it saves him from the seriousness of life and awakens in him unexpected expertise. The magic flute of Pan, which makes goats dance on the edge of the

forest, is once again a symbol of art; to be an artist is not to take seriously the man who is so serious that we are when we are not artists »VI.

A cult of form - already detached from all human content - as a perfect representation of the beauty of gratuitousness: «I have always been surprised that even people of the trade are reluctant to recognize as the truly substantial part of art, the formal, that to the vulgar one seems abstract and inoperative »VII.

We know, because historical events have shown us, what these words led to, this language cut off from all reality, powerless to establish any communication. Frustration forced violence to replace thought. The European malaise that Ortega cited was not cured in that "new and saving split" (that of egregious men and that of vulgar men). Too high a price had to be paid to prove it: "Two world wars have been needed, and the concentration camps, and the atomic bomb to undermine our good conscience," they said. The irrational evasion, which a certain art proposed, was surpassed by reality; Ortega also could not avoid being responsible. That is why we maintain that art, compromised or alienated, has a social repercussion; which will be a method of knowledge and communication; that form signifies a moral attitude, but style will always be conditioned by the ideas that are handled and, ultimately, by content.

However, it is not a question of making an extensive critique of artistic notions so outdated—which, on the other hand, can introduce a nuance of an easy diatribe—, but rather of looking for some of the conditioning factors of our aesthetic tradition, of finding the Spanish roots of certain expressions of current criticism. It cannot be forgotten that, behind Ortega's thoughts, there is the expression of his numerous followers, of an ideology, of a class that has had repercussions, through teaching, in the focus of our culture. And education, in the plane of culture, involves a series of

repercussions that do not affect solely the controversy of some specialized magazines, but that transcend an entire collectivity

### **The False Renovations**

Today times have changed, and no one blatantly accepts the old formula of art for art's sake anymore, because it refers to epochs that are preferable to forget. The postwar period, for those who gambled wrongly, resulted in a hasty rethinking of language. Expressions that were too clear and extreme had to be eliminated. Ortega, for example, rectified, among other things, his theories of the cult of sport and the beauty of play for the sake of play. In the field of ideas, it was necessary to look for new alibis to defend the interests of always. And in art, far from the effect of the war, anti-realism will present its new credentials. Cards that come wrapped in an expression of abstract beauty and an atemporal humanism that seeks to unite with the transcendent with each word, each gesture or each movement of travelling. We also believe that style is a matter of morals. However, it is our concept of morality that differs, the one that is very far from that relativistic moralism that seeks hidden truths in the most banal and picturesque gestures of life - even those that only signify clear lies-occult truths.

In an article on criticism that appeared in *Film Ideal*, the comment of a French critic is reproduced - regarding a sequence from the film by Gillo Pontecorvo, *Kapó*, in which the suicide of one of the characters takes place - the meaning of which the author of the article is quick to make his own<sup>141</sup>. About this scene, referring to the director, it is written: «The man who decides to travel forward to reframe the corpse in low angle, trying to exactly inscribe the raised hand of

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<sup>141</sup> Erice refers to the legendary article "Of Abjection" by Jacques Rivette, an article published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* n° 120, June 1961. It is interesting to contrast the point of view raised by Erice in this note with the famous article "The travelling of *Kapó*" by Serge Daney.

the latter in an angle of its final frame, only has the right to the deepest contempt ... There are things that can only be approached with fear and shudder; death is one of them, without a doubt. How can you not feel like an impostor when filming something so mysterious? In any case, it would be better to ask the question and somehow include this interrogation in what is filmed. I choose this comment because it serves very well, without more detailed illustrations, to make known a certain aesthetic position that, apparently, is being adopted by this sector of criticism.

In the paragraph I am transcribing, Pontecorvo is protested because he has desecrated the "mystery" of death. I would say that, in reality, he protests because the director has given to language and to the acts their authentic sense. To us, as to Pontecorvo, we are only interested in the human, moral sense of that death, because obviously it is not about death in the abstract, death turned into an institution and an alibi by so much literature and so much cinema incapable of facing life. Here it is something so immediate, so devoid of enigma, with desperately jumping over an electric fence. On the other hand, in the Nazi concentration camps - the place where the film takes place - the idea of death was devoid of any mystery; in fact, it had a daily dimension, even its application was rationally studied and sanitized to the point of taking advantage of human remains, which is still a tragic paradox in men that for a time exaltedly claimed to be in possession of the mystery of a higher and transcendent destiny and then they dedicated themselves to this bloody exploitation of man. If something can typify the fact of death, as with all human activity, it is being situated, emerging suddenly within the framework of an existence that gives it meaning. For this reason, in *Kapó*, the suicide of this character supposes something as important as the expression of an alienated will, a reflection of a conscience whose freedom has been crushed.

In other times this death would have served to make a criticism of Cowardice —with a capital letter—; today it is used to protest against those who persist in giving a real meaning to the

behaviors. Because Pontecorvo, when approaching - in that much criticized travelling movement - that electrocuted woman, lucidly confronts a behavior, and, assuming it, that action is nothing more than the end point of a knowledge. Sincere moral honesty is present here; the director uses language, rationalizes it and gives it an ethical sense. On the contrary, the author of the article I comment on strives to rid language of all meaning or to make it atemporal. It is, as always, that words and actions are lifeless objects, definitely buried, without past, present or future; mute, impenetrable, mysterious, reduced to nothing. To a nothingness that is the only transcendence. And what is this but a way of joining the transcendent? Perhaps, ultimately, it is the same "opening to the transcendent" that Karl Jaspers, a philosopher interested in Nazism in his time, proclaims today.

In *Kapó*, the transcendence that we are passionate about does not begin behind that last gesture where a life ends, but it is found much earlier. It is in that concentration camp where man is reduced to a dispossession, where his freedom and his conscience are denied to him. This is why we are concerned about those German soldiers who carry out exterminating slogans; their morals, their feelings, their conception of love; we are concerned about the ideology that can make this implantation of violence its law of life and the political system that protects a situation where a circumstance occurs in which - as occurs in the Italian film - it can arise in a split, sudden and brutal, the painful choice between individual happiness and collective freedom.

But those critics — consciously or unconsciously, it's the same thing — come to tell us that all these things do not exist or are not interesting. Thus, when faced with a certain class of films, they will insist that the arguments - although they defend, for example, colonialism - do not matter, that the ideas - although they sometimes exalt violence and racism - do not matter; that only the sounds are of interest and not the words, the gestures and not the behaviors. And in this way,

liquidators of all conscience and all responsibility, affirm that, by virtue of the "artistic" importance, the rest must be ignored so that art can subsist. The simple operation of opening a newspaper is enough to radically prove the opposite: that pain and injustice, the alienation of love and the daily struggle of man to win his freedom continue to exist. Alienated by their own language, prisoners of objects that do not belong to them, of gestures that they cannot assume or carry out, these attitudes run the risk of being locked into their own consumption.

Ultimately, the only thing hidden behind these seemingly harmless artistic concepts is a renewed attempt to dehumanize art. We have already seen the dangerous consequences that this class of enterprise brought in the past. And let no one think that I intend, based on language comparisons, to justify a rejection. If I did, it would be a purely formal rejection. And it is not only the fact of some formal similarities - which, on the other hand, I could amply illustrate - that gives a general meaning to these phenomena. Beyond the coincidences and divergences - which, of course, there are - in the expression, what matters is to verify the identical ideological roots of both positions.

Consequently, all this series of influences define a certain environment of our culture and demonstrate that behind this opposition of criteria and moral concepts beats an undoubted aspect of our aesthetic tradition. And one has to wonder, among other things, if all this current of hollow aestheticism, varnished with French influences, is nothing but the mentally challenged son of outdated ideas, unfortunately rooted in our cultural teachings. Those that chaotically figured, amid the endless quotes and the piling up of names, in our art and literature books in high school. Those that, protected by a philosophical system, we have listened to in the classrooms of the University. Those that, turned into a brilliant literary game or simply a fun pastime, continue to appear in the repertoire of the cafeteria gatherings. Those that, simplified, circulate on the street, among the

manuals and popular aphorisms. Those ideas, remnants of a bourgeois aesthetic, that embody a collective aspect of our culture.

Within the framework of this general dimension, we have to test our capacity for synthesis. From this perspective we have to work, because, naturally, it is not only a question of liquidating, but also of building. In any case, it is a matter of raising and putting into practice a realist position that returns us to the channels of a firmly assumed responsibility. And it is then that we must answer the question: What are the prospects for a critique of realism?

### **Perspectives of a realist critique**

Talking about current perspectives of a realist cinema critique means talking, especially, about the culture of realism in that specific field. The realist tradition, in what constitutes our work, has suffered the consequences of some special circumstances that prevented its proper development. From the valuable initiative of *Nuestro Cinema*<sup>142</sup> until today thirty years have passed; during that time the existence of three or four magazines and the publication of the odd interesting Spanish book fill in a rather discouraging panorama.

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<sup>142</sup> The magazine *Nuestro Cinema* (1932-1935) was directed by Juan Piqueras, called the "Spanish Delluc" (pioneer of Spanish cinematographic historiography, founded the first cinema club in Spain). From a left-wing editorial line, in his organic manifesto he appealed for:

1st absolute independence against the contradictory and strong interests that influence from production to the film press.

2nd technical and artistic criticism of cinema as a manifestation of the decadence of bourgeois culture.

3rd exposition of the economic facts that muzzle the individual and collective forces that could lead the cinema on its true path.

4th criticism of the social content - negative and affirmative - of the films. ».

Juan Piqueras was assassinated by the Franco regime in 1936. The legacy of *Nuestro Cinema* was continued, almost thirty years later, by the magazine *Nuestro Cine*, at least in its initial stage.



After the war, it was necessary to await the appearance of *Objetivo* (1953) —preceded by the movement of concern created around the IIEC<sup>143</sup>, a film club and the magazine *Indice*— to find something truly important. *Objetivo*, an exemplary magazine for many concepts, meant an active presence within the panorama of film criticism. In those times, there were too many things to be counted against: with a full past since the end of the war of inactivity; with a present in which everything remained to be achieved. Old myths had to be demolished and false positions denounced; it was necessary, mainly, to make an examination of conscience. From this constructive environment arose the First National Conversations of Salamanca, conversations of great importance for our criticism, a complete dissection of a cinematographic corpse so many times covered up. Through criticism, they tried to incorporate into Spain the most renovating current of that time: neorealism. A neorealism that in Italy was already in crisis, but that in our country it was urgent to raise. But all these purposes could not be carried out because of the same reasons that *Objetivo* ended up disappearing.

Later, and within a realist intention - I therefore put *Film Ideal* aside, without this meaning, far from it, denying its repercussion - *Cinema Universitario* could have continued and renewed a line of great importance for our cinema. But, especially with the passing of recent times, it has not been like that. From then to today things have changed a lot; the development of the problems is no longer the same, although their root remains the same; the styles and the dilemmas are of another kind.

If at a specific moment there were objective conditions that justified a lack of adequacy or possible isolation, later those conditions ceased to exist. Searching for the causes of this immobility

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<sup>143</sup> The Institute for Cinematographic Research and Experiences (IIEC) was created by Ministerial Orders of February 18 and 26, 1947, with the aim of "attending to the best theoretical-practical training of students, in the disciplines that make up film production."

means delving into paths of realism that are necessary for clarification. Because it seems to me that this example, the result of a: contradictions in our national life, makes possible an examination that can benefit all of us who try to maintain a realist posture.

I would affirm that the aforementioned quietism was already latent in a position that, in some of its consequences, was moving towards an uprooting of any movement produced within the development of the cinematographic structure. Something that had its origin in the incipient isolationism that he appeared in phrases of 98, repeated by *Cinema Universitario*, which at one time spoke of the University as a saving device; from the austere provincial corner as a refuge of authentic freedom and independence in which to criticize; of quixotic tombs as necessary crusades of realization. It would be unfair for me to separate these manifestations from the circumstances that made them consequential at first; it is the fact that, except for anecdotal variations of expression, they continue to be used today which forces me to consider them.

Works cannot be judged without situating them in their real context. And situating them means knowing that context completely; it means many hours of watching movies, sometimes insignificant, which, in fact, define the collective dimension that the public represents. It is not a question of criticizing a single film, of abstracting the cinematographic fact in order to judge it comfortably, because there is a danger of making equally abstract judgments, which may mean producing, in different ways, ontological truths for our cinema. The use of repeated statements of thought in editorials does not serve to overcome the deficiencies, due to inaccurate or atemporality, of the rest of the content.

A critic cannot know the phenomena without being in contact with them, that is, without the practice of his work being developed in the same conditions of those phenomena. Knowledge has a historical character and cannot be acquired without taking part in practice that modifies

reality. This series of contradictions raises a more general dimension, one of the most important problems of a realist position: the one that arises from the, sometimes traditional, mismatch between statements of principle and moral practice, between culture and life. moral. It is the unity between these two parts, which really constitute one, that we must carry out in our actions; the one that we want to specify in our writings to channel criticism into something truly constructive, with projection and efficiency. That is why it is also about those attitudes that pursue a realism, with which we have —whether we want it or not— points of contact, are incorporated into a total practice, something that does not mean resignation, but only overcoming current modes. And this evolution is justified, it acquires its most authentic moral root in the fact that human knowledge - in the same way as any objective process - is full of contradictions and struggle, and that it is, in fidelity to that authentic definition, how man recovers and knows every moment.

Today, forced by the structural immobility of our society, lacking a theoretical and cinematographic tradition, we have had to investigate the meanings of the pronouncements of modern Italian cinema, as in the near past Zavattini and neorealism were resorted to in another further away from Russian cinema and its world-famous theorists. But, above all, it is a matter of finding a national ferment that places these teachings, that realizes them in practice, that modifies them to the rhythm of reality, that makes them truly ours. While in other countries science fiction, as a possible realist style, is the subject of long and interesting discussions, here, in Spain, we have to clarify the stuttering of realism that is possible for us. This is how things are, but as we do not seek timeless destinies, as we are inextricably linked to this situation, to the extent that we are authentic and responsible we will be at the forefront; We will not try, therefore, to implant here, through a gratuitous leap into the void, perspectives or styles that do not yet correspond to us and that are falsely saviors.

These general characters, outlined here, do not respond to the idealism of a simple more or less literary controversy. It is about the circumstances that I believe the critics of this magazine have encountered, and from this situation we want to build a position that adapts to the demands of the moment. We are not seduced by immobility in aesthetic ideas because we do not believe that reality is static; because we think that an ideology is denied, suffocates and becomes ineffective when it is not tried as far as possible to confront it with a national life. If in this attempt we manage to establish constant contact with people, that contact, dialectically, will make us update our language and popularize our ideas. Otherwise, you run the risk of speaking in a language that the public does not understand. Which, in short, amounts to the same as criticizing in the desert.

The set of these phenomena responds to an actual perspective of realist criticism, which, as I have already pointed out, necessarily suffers from the deficiencies that the national aesthetic tradition possesses in theoretical matters. Elevating this controversy to the level of difficulties and needs, in this sense urgent and collective, is the measure so that, in a more or less near future, they can be resolved.

### **Toward a critical collaboration**

At the beginning of this perhaps too long article, I pointed out the constructive meaning that polemics must have. It seemed to me that, given the current junction, delimiting positions, defining criteria and calculating possible repercussions was the best way to propose a possible critical collaboration on a non-misleading basis. Anyway, behind all the problems there is a sector of the public, some readers, for whom we have obligations; there is a situation in which, it seems, you want to give your cinema a more authentic or modern look. Therefore, we have to call for

responsibility and characters that can unite us, that in fact unite us, in a common front for an authentic Spanish cinema, which, at least until now, we all believe is necessary and urgent to exist. And since the Salamanca Conversations have been cited here, it will be good to remember and try to find, once again, the spirit of collaboration that brought them into effect among men of the most diverse tendencies. That collaboration that can help transform, as far as possible, our cinematography. Because it is film production, it is films that, among other things, need a solution.

This work does not want, logically, to have a definitive character, but rather tries, even if it is disjointed, to outline a series of questions that need to be rethought. To expose as much as possible the current panorama of the cultural and aesthetic contradictions in which film criticism unfolds; that criticism crossed by a dangerous aestheticism and by a realism in need of affirmation of clarification and union; this criticism faced with an audience that must know and take into account circumstances that seem to require a new Spanish cinema. In any case, the impressions expressed here can be enriched, expanded and modified with the contributions that may derive from a serious critical confrontation and the evolution of reality.

Being aware of the responsibility that all kinds of pronouncements entail seems to me that it is the only way by which film criticism can definitively incorporate itself into today's culture, to contemporary problems, thus trying to overcome the present situation. I try to mean above all, human and moral improvement<sup>144</sup>.

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<sup>144</sup> Víctor Erice, "Responsabilidad y Significación Estética De Una Crítica Nacional, Por Víctor Erice," Edited by Sebastián Santillán, *Revista Marienbad, Marienbad Revista De Cine y Cultura Audiovisual*, Jan. 2012, [www.marienbad.com.ar/documento/victor-erice-responsabilidad-y-significacion-estetica-de-una-critica-nacional](http://www.marienbad.com.ar/documento/victor-erice-responsabilidad-y-significacion-estetica-de-una-critica-nacional). Published originally in *Nuestro Cine* N°15, Madrid December 1962.

## ***Appendix 2: El Sol del Membrillo (Dream of Light): A Map of the Film***

Key:

1. The Painting/The tree \*\*
2. María /Her Work \*\*
3. Drawing \*\*
4. The Workers \*\*
5. Time: \*\*
6. Contemplation \*\*
7. News Broadcast \*\*

### **Madrid: Fall, 1990**

1. **Saturday September 29<sup>th</sup>** (Begins the process). \*\* Film Duration: **(00:00:00-00:04:32)**
  - a. Credits roll. **(00:00:00- 00:00:40)**
  - b. The film begins with a long shot of a street in Madrid, Spain. It is a fairly quiet street, presumably a residential area composed of large houses hiding behind their high walls. Antonio López García is seen at the distance walking towards the camera. He is carrying with him a rolled-up canvas and a suitcase. The camera follows him until he reaches the door to his house, he unlocks the door and enters. **(00:00:41-00:01:08)**
  - c. At the other side of the door, Antonio is greeted by his dog Emilio. He goes towards his studio, unlocks its door and enters. **(00:01:09-00:01:39)**
  - d. The studio is dusty, Antonio proceeds to sweep the dust and prepare the area where he will be building the canvas. **(00:01:40-00:01:54)**
  - e. Antonio begins to build the canvas, he constructs it piece by piece<sup>145</sup>, starting by nailing together the wood that will make up the frame. He then measures and cuts out a rectangular piece of wood that will serve as the posterior foundation to the canvas. He nails this piece into the completed frame. **(00:01:55- 00:04:32)**
  
2. **Sunday September 30<sup>th</sup>** Film Duration: **(00:04:32-00:15:18)** \*\*
  - a. Antonio steps out into his garden to contemplate the trees adorning it; he is specifically attending with his gaze a tree with light green fruits. The day is radiant, and the sun is resonating in harmony with the tree's figure and outline. He drinks a glass of wine and looks at the tree very attentively; he smells it, contemplates it,

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<sup>145</sup> Deleuze discusses a materiality of the artwork that goes beyond the content of the work, it is one that is linked to the real material properties of the entirety of a 'work'. He writes: The material is so varied in each case (canvas support, paintbrush or equivalent agent, color in the tube) that it is difficult where in fact the material ends and sensation begins; preparation of the canvas, the track of the brush's hair, and many other things besides are obviously part of the sensation. How could the sensation be preserved without a material capable of lasting? And however short this time may last it is considered as a duration." Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Hugh Tomlinson, and Graham Burchell, "Percept, Affect, and Concept," *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 166.

- and begins to get acquainted with it<sup>146</sup>. The camera gives us a shot of the quince fruit, which at this time of the year still has hints of green but yellow is starting to predominate the pigment of its flesh. **(00:04:32-00:05:57) \*\* \*\***
- b. In the next shot, Antonio is seen bringing a ladder and placing it next to the tree. He is using it to nail down two metal poles that will hold the horizontal and vertical threads that will determine the center of the image. He ties up the string from one pole to the other and then ties a pendulum in the middle that will produce the proper amount of tension to lower the planes accordingly. He lowers the pendulum with utmost precision. **(00:05:58-00:07:51)**
  - c. He brings out the easel and places it in a calculated distance and angle in relation to the tree. **(00:07:52-00:08:09)**
  - d. Now he proceeds to bring the canvas and places it on top of the easel. He stares back to the tree, making sure that the easel and canvas are in the exact desired position. He moves it a little to the left. **(00:08:11-00:08:28)**
  - e. He begins to establish the point where he will stand, marking it with a shovel<sup>147</sup>. **(00:08:29-00:09:03)**
  - f. He digs two nails into the ground, they serve as markers for where the tips of his shoes have to be all the time. This assures he is standing in the same place every day. He takes some time to meditate with precision the vantage point he will be occupying. **(00:09:04-00:09:57)**
  - g. The painter draws with his pencil a vertical line on the canvas, corresponding to the one created with the threads. He then makes sure that his canvas has the same measurements as the grid he has created outside of it. **(00:09:58-00:10:49)**
  - h. He smears horizontal paint lines<sup>148</sup> onto the wall behind the tree. **(00:10:49-00:11:23)**
  - i. After establishing a horizontal grid in the walls behind the tree, he traces with the pencil a horizontal line on the canvas<sup>149</sup>. **(00:11:23-00:11:49)**

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<sup>146</sup> This part of López García's process is very similar to Andy Goldsworthy's method. The Scottish artist makes it a priority in all his works to 'shake hands' with the place he is working in. He walks around the site and explores it as a way to introduce himself to the place and allow the place to get used to him. By spending a moment smelling it, touching it and contemplating it, López García is also shaking hands with the place (quince tree). The connection is even stronger in the sense that he has planted and nursed the tree. In this sense both artists (even though it is more explicit in Goldsworthy) could be said to practice a form of Land Art.

<sup>147</sup> At this point it becomes clear that the painter carries out a very rigorous method of perspective. He is very demanding about having the right point of view when painting this tree. He makes sure he is always standing in the same place every day and that the tree is always framed under the x and y axis he has constructed around it. His process is mathematical in the sense that the object of representation is always in the center of the Cartesian optical grid.

<sup>148</sup> "The graphic line is defined by its contrast with area. This contrast has a metaphysical dimension, as well as a visual one; the background is conjoined with the line. The graphic line marks out the area and so defines it by attaching itself to it as its background. Conversely, the graphic line can exist only against this background, so that a drawing that completely covered its background would cease to be a drawing." Walter, Benjamin, "Painting, or Signs and Marks." *Selected Writings: Volume 1 1913-1926*, (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard U, 1996), 85.

<sup>149</sup> "A picture must be held vertically before the observer. [...] It is possible to look at the study of a head, or a Rembrandt landscape, in the same way as a painting, or at best to leave the drawing in a neutral horizontal position.

- j. Back inside his studio, he places the different colors of oil paint on the paint palette. The chosen colors are white, yellow, orange, red and different shades of brown and green. **(00:11:49-00:12:43)**
  - k. Now outside, Antonio draws small white “marks” on the tree, presumably to establish exact distances between each part of the tree<sup>150</sup>. He marks a leaf and the bark; and measures with a compass the distance between them in the canvas. **(00:12:43-00:13:51)**
  - l. Mixing some of the colors he has chosen he creates a brown/greyish tone. With this color, he begins to draw a branch adorned by a couple of green leaves. With a lighter tone of green, he begins to paint the rest of the leaves. The screen fades to white. **(00:13:51-00:15:18)**
3. **Monday October 1<sup>st</sup>** [First declaration of intent<sup>151</sup>] **(00:15:20-00:35:31)**
- a. The camera presents a still shot of the painter’s home from the street outside. We see its white façade hiding behind the walls that protect it. The house has two stories, it is coloured white, a short grey wall surrounds it, and the door is coloured with bright blue. **(00:15:20-00:15:27)**
  - b. Antonio is inside his house rinsing and washing his brushes meticulously. **(00:15:27-00:15:46)**
  - c. A group of workers is shown arriving at the house, we hear them speaking in their native language which we find out later is Polish: “If we don’t finish soon, we’ll lose shares.” They are shown settling into their quarters and getting dressed for

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[...] We see here a profound problem of art and its mythic roots. We might say that there are two sections through the substance of the world: the longitudinal section of painting and the cross-section of certain pieces of graphic art. The longitudinal section seems representational; it somehow contains the objects. The cross-section seems symbolic; it contains signs. Or is it only when we read that we place the page horizontally before us? [...] What matters here is not the merely external fact but the spirit: Is it actually possible to base the problem on the simple principle that pictures are set vertically and signs horizontally, even though we may follow the development of this through changing metaphysical relations through the ages?” Walter Benjamin, "Painting and the Graphic Arts," *Selected Writings: Volume 1 1913-1926*. (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard U, 1996), 82.

<sup>150</sup> Also of interest is the painter’s direct contact with his object of representation. His method is so precise that it almost becomes invasive. In a latter part of the film one of his daughters laments the poor shape the tree is left in with all of her father’s white marks. The painter, however, treats the tree with utter delicacy and allows nobody to touch it. Paradoxically, the mark is also a sign of presence so one could argue the painter and the tree have at this moment entered a symbiotic relationship.

<sup>151</sup> This instance in the film can be considered Antonio’s first explicit declaration of intent. Right until this moment we have only seen the painter quietly and serenely going about painting a tree. The camera has just functioned as an invisible non-invasive observer. In this sequence the painter expresses to his wife exactly the sight he is going to attempt to paint. Antonio wants to paint the tree as if it is illuminated by the morning sun. He has derived that during this small gap of 1 hour the sun hits the tree and its fruits with the most intensity. He is aware of the difficulties of painting only the morning sun amidst the changing seasons and the temporal limitations of this particular sunlight.



- work. Antonio is smoking a cigarette and having a beverage while he contemplates the tree from inside the house<sup>152</sup>. **(00:15:46-00:16:48) \*\* \*\* \***
- d. Antonio walks out to the garden and resumes the painting. The workers start working on tearing and repairing a wall. **\*\* (00:16:49-00:17:22)**
  - e. A young man is woken up by the hammering of the contractors and the sounds of a street vendor electronically amplifying his voice with a megaphone. **(00:17:23-00:17:47)**
  - f. Antonio resumes his painting. María, his wife, is shown entering the house amidst the repairs. She encounters the young man (whom we assume rents one of their rooms) who tells her that the construction and the barking of their dog Emilio (in conjunction with the barking of other dogs in the neighbourhood) has been going on all morning. He informs her that he is on his way to his first English class<sup>153</sup>. **(00:17:48-00:18:25) \*\***
  - g. María intersects paths with the workers as they carry debris outside of the house. **(18:25-18:43)**
  - h. María is shown working inside her studio; she is working on an engraving which she is tracing with the help of a magnifying glass. From her studio we can listen to Antonio singing. **(00:18:44-19:02) \*\***
  - i. Antonio paints cross-shaped white marks on a leaf and on a quince and we hear him singing out loud. Life in the house is presented as slow moving. María works on her etching, Antonio paints, and the workers continue the renovations. Erice shows us what Madrid looks like outside of their house. We see numerous buildings, some of which look abandoned. In many of the apartment windows we see the light of television screens. Cars are shown driving by and we hear the sounds of birds humming juxtaposed with cars honking. Kids are playing by the train tracks and we see three trains drive by<sup>154</sup>. **(19:03-00:23:39) \*\* \*\* \***

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<sup>152</sup> This moment in the film marks the first encounter with a group of workers in charge of finishing renovations for parts of Antonio's home. The filmmaker's choice to include them in the film is brilliant since it shows us two different yet similar relationships to time and work. In the case of the workers, they are constricted by the time expected to fulfill the time agreed with their employers to finish the renovations. Their labour is motivated by responsibility to another that pays them. In the painter's case, time affects his work in the form of the very sunlight he is choosing to work with. It only has a short duration of a few hours; hence he must maximize the time he spends painting it. Without this sunlight the image's composition and lighting would be completely altered, altering his strict impressionistic agenda. The painter's work is motivated by a sense of personal responsibility as he is not working for anyone but himself, this work is not part of a commission. He primarily paints for himself and if his work is not satisfying to him, he does not make it available for purchase. His margin of error and efficiency is individually constructed.

<sup>153</sup> The conversation between María and the young man marks the first instance of dialogue in the film. Up until this point the viewer is exposed to the routine and process of López García without the aid of speech.

<sup>154</sup> The filmmaker constantly juxtaposes the rhythms of the artist's house with the rhythm of the city outside. Shots of high-rises and trains remind us of the technocratic society the painter inhabits. Television screens are always present when the camera peeps into the many apartment buildings situated in Madrid. In contrast to this, the painter and his wife spend their time in meditative silence as they work on their respective artworks. I believe that the contrast is intentional by the filmmaker; serving to remind us that a life of creation and self-reflection (art) can serve as an alternative to fast-paced and chaotic city life (technological capitalism). Whenever he is painting, Antonio sings with joy.

- j. The sun is shown eclipsed by dark clouds. Antonio is speaking with María <sup>155</sup>:  
(00:23:40-00:23:48)



- Antonio: “It’s gone. A little while ago, the sun came out over there from the right. But it went and hid behind those clouds.” (00:23:49-00:24:00)
  - María: “The day is pretty bad isn’t it?”
  - Antonio: “You can’t imagine how pretty it was. The golden fruits...Really pretty! (00:24:03-00:24:09)
  - María: “Yes I see. The season isn’t going to help you much.” (00:24:10-00:24:16)
  - Antonio: “I’m going to try it anyway. I think I have to paint the sun. Even now it looks lovely. Just look, isn’t the fruit lovely?”
  - María: “How long will this sun last?”
  - Antonio: “That’s the worst part, very little. Maybe a couple of hours in the morning. I mean for the light I want. Later, it’s on the tower. During that time, while it is on the house, the upper part of the tree is lit. It’s very pretty too, lovely. The tree is plunged in shadow except for the golden upper part. All the quinces...That quince over there, all that area. It’s lovely. It’s very good too. And then, the light comes from over there. The tree is lit from behind. But the morning light has something special. The early sun, the most golden of all. (26) (00:24:33-00:25:20) \*\*
  - María: “The fruit is lovely with the sun.”
  - Antonio: “I’ll paint it with the sun. I’ve never done a fruit tree with the sun”. (Declaration) (00:25:24-00:25:29)
- k. He asks María how she has been doing with her work and the pain in her injured hand. María tells him that her work is going well, and the pain has been getting better. (00:25:30)
- l. The painter leaves the site and goes for a walk with María. Erice gives us a long shot of the same street where Antonio first arrived from. We see the couple walk into the horizon. (00:25:30-00:25:39)
- m. The workers contemplate the painting, they speculate that he probably started it in the morning. They find the marks in the tree strange. Back in their quarters, they practice Spanish, specifically the words corresponding to the seasons. The words are otoño (fall), verano (summer), invierno (winter). The frame fades to black, time has elapsed, and the worker’s quarters are now empty. (00:25:39-00:27:59) \*\* \*\*

<sup>155</sup> This conversation between the painter and his wife marks the first moment in the film where Antonio talks.

- n. The workers resume their job, they are shovelling debris from the house floor and taking in the new bricks for the wall they have torn apart. We hear classical string music playing in the background. **(00:27:59-00:28:16) \*\***
- o. Antonio resumes his painting while listening to music on his stereo player. Erice juxtaposes shots of the workers and García as they take on their respective tasks simultaneously<sup>156</sup>. The young man we saw before is also painting in his studio; he is surrounded by other finished works; his style is akin to surrealism or abstract expressionism<sup>157</sup>. He paints as time goes by, in the following frame he is shown contemplating his work in progress, quietly as the sun starts setting and less light is coming into his room. He contemplates in darkness. **(00:28:17-00:29:26) \*\* \*\***
- p. Antonio's daughters arrive to the house, they are at the garden contemplating the painting and they discuss it with wonder. The camera focuses on the painting; one of the daughters expresses she feels sorry about the marks her father has painted on the tree<sup>158</sup>. **(00:29:27-00:29:52) \*\***
- Daughter: "Look, it's full of marks. Really full. Poor thing."
- q. Antonio tries on a jacket and a pair of shoes his daughters have brought for him. The jacket fits well but the shoes are too small for his feet. He takes the shoes off and gives them back to his daughters; they say goodbye and leave him to continue his work. **(00:29:53-00:31:08)**
- r. He resumes painting; the day is still cloudy, and the sun remains hidden behind the clouds. He continues painting and marking leaves. **(00:31:08-00:32:48)**
- s. As he joyfully paints, we listen to the news playing from his stereo player, the announcer discusses current world issues. While we listen to the broadcast, the film transitions to a montage of aerial shots of the city. We see the sun setting on the buildings and train tracks as a train makes its way on the rails. The broadcast continues; the announcer is talking about Israel and the Soviet Union establishing diplomatic ties, the Spanish president has addressed the war in Iraq and expressed discontent over ongoing speculation about conversations on how to proceed with the Arab nation, and Saddam Hussein, in his latest speech, proclaims "holy war" against the foreign troops in Saudi Arabia. On that same day it is announced that the following day October 2<sup>nd</sup> Germany will no longer exist as a democratic republic<sup>159</sup>. The unification ceremony will be taking place in Berlin, United

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<sup>156</sup> Besides the juxtaposition of city life and the life of an artist, Erice strengthens his theory of artistic labor by juxtaposing the labour of the workers and the artistic work of Antonio, María, and the young painter. Both spaces are site of construction and in the case of the workers the house and its new walls are the site of an economic negotiation, a testimony of the exchange of services. For the painter the place is a site of spiritual investment. It is important to differentiate between these two sites as one testifies to the active presence of an individual (the act of creation) and the other testifies to the transactional dimension of work.

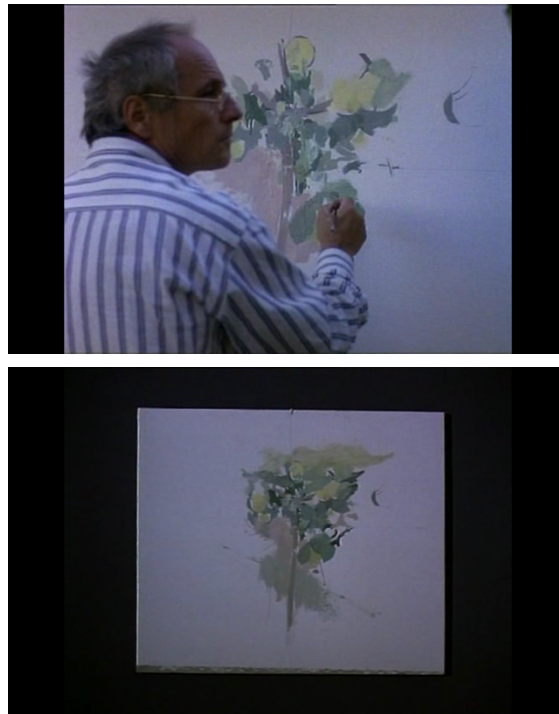
<sup>157</sup> It is interesting to note differences in age as productive of differences in style. The more experienced Antonio chooses realism because of his love of tradition. Younger generations often favour those genres that challenge traditional values.

<sup>158</sup> As we already stated, his approach can sometimes be considered too invasive for the sake of concise replication.

<sup>159</sup> The intentionally audible radio broadcast gives the film a very special sense of sociohistorical context. Erice makes the news audible, which in retrospect provides a future audience a scope of very important historical and social upheavals that took place at the same time that the Spanish artist worked on this painting.

Germany's new capital. Finally, the broadcaster announces the death of 33 people in traffic accidents during the previous weekend. 16 have been severely injured. **(00:32:48-33:53) \*\***

- t. Antonio has left the site. The day is over, the sunlight has almost dissipated entirely, and the workers are leaving the house. María and Antonio go out again and the young painter arrives at the house and takes the dog Emilio indoors. The camera takes us into the city at night; it appears illuminated by the artificial lights emanating from television screens inside almost every building. We see the site at night-time, the tree, easel, and strings. The site of the artist's work is illuminated only by strong cinema lights<sup>160</sup>. The camera slowly zooms to a close-up of the painting in progress. **\*\* (00:33:54-00:35:32)**



4. **Tuesday, October 2<sup>nd</sup>** **(00:35:40-00:37:31)**

- a. Heavy rainfall confirms that the bad weather has persisted, and the sun appears covered by rain clouds. The dimmed sunlight is producing a sombre atmosphere. Antonio is forced to bring a tarp to cover the tree, the painting, and himself. The workers help him cover the site; they place the tarp carefully making sure not to obstruct or touch the tree. Antonio directs them. **(00:35:40-00:37:17)**
- b. The camera presents the site covered by the tent at nighttime. The day has ended, and Antonio has not been able to paint. **(00:37:17-00:37:31) \*\***

<sup>160</sup> Here, and in many other sequences, Erice makes a commentary on the nature of cinema and the visual arts in general. Light is not only a main concern for the painter but the basis for the chemical reaction productive of a cinematic image. More than a shot of the tree at night, these and other sequences like it, show light in the foreground of the image. The filmmaker could have chosen to show just the tree with the lights outside of the shot (as it is done in most films), but he chooses to show the actual lights standing next to the object being recorded.

5. **Monday, October 8<sup>th</sup>** (00:37:31-00:37:33)

- a. The camera presents another still image of the painting, this time it looks more advanced. However, not much progress has been made in the last five days presumably due to the bad weather. \*\*

6. **Tuesday, October 9<sup>th</sup>** (00:37:40-00:37:46)

- a. Another still shot of the painting reveals a more advanced version; more leaves have been added to the work and it now possesses a more visible body. The screen fades to white. \*\*



7. **Wednesday, October 10<sup>th</sup>** [Reception] (00:37:47-01:03:30)

- a. A long shot of the street shows Antonio's friend, Enrique (who is also a painter), arriving at the house. He reaches the door and rings the doorbell; María recognizes his voice immediately and opens the door. He greets María and they talk about his trip and how it was really good to have time to read on his way there and back. Enrique asks for Antonio, María informs him is in the garden already expecting him. (00:37:47-00:39:09)
- b. He goes out to the site where Antonio is painting. They greet each other and Enrique explains he was on his way to buy new acrylics and decided to stop by. They have a conversation about the beauty of the tree and the difficulties of painting against time<sup>161</sup>. \*\* \*\*
- Antonio: "You can't imagine how much the light changes. The sun starts over here. It finishes over there. I'm aiming to catch a little at midday when the sun lights the upper part. Most of the tree is in the shadow. The light here. That's what I am aiming for."
  - Enrique: "Well it's splendid. The quinces are so full. They're truly beautiful, truly beautiful. They're tempting (he reaches to grab one)"
  - Antonio: "No, don't touch them."
  - Enrique: "I barely did. Plus, I wouldn't touch them too much since this could erase those little marks you have drawn on them." (00:40:54)

<sup>161</sup> "Now, the more we fix our attention on this continuity of life, the more we see that organic revolution resembles the evolution of consciousness, in which the past presses against the present and causes the uprising of a new form of consciousness, incommensurable with its antecedents." Henri Bergson, "The Evolution of Life- Mechanism and Teleology," *Creative Evolution*, (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998), 27.



- c. Antonio asks Enrique what he thinks of the size of the canvas. Enrique thinks it is appropriate. Antonio explains that María told him he should have used a bigger one. Enrique agrees it could have been a little bigger, but its current size suits the forms of the tree. **(00:40:56-00:41:17)**
- d. Antonio tells Enrique that he is considering lowering down the body of the tree about 6 centimetres to give the tree more space to breathe. Enrique, after standing in the exact position Antonio does, agrees and says it does look kind of short and could use more space to “breathe” better. **(00:41:17-00:43:01)**
- Antonio: “That’s right. It doesn’t breathe enough.”
- e. Antonio asks his friend’s help in drawing a new horizontal line on the painting to start applying the spatial modifications. **(00:43:01-00:44:00)**
- f. The camera shows us the sun, it is shining but there are several clouds surrounding it. Antonio keeps painting with Enrique by his side; they listen to opera music on the stereo. **Time** goes by. **(00:44:00-00:44:49)\*\***
- g. Antonio asks Enrique for the **time**; he tells him it is 20 until 6:00. Enrique asks him if he got in touch with Conchita, who has a picture of them when they were at *San Fernando School of Fine Arts*. Enrique believes it would be a beautiful thing to have this picture<sup>162</sup>. The two painters reminisce about the days when they went to art school together. Antonio remembers he was with Conchita at the campus when he met Enrique who was wearing camouflage clothes at the time. Enrique remembers this very well, he remembers seeing Antonio, drawing with Conchita to his side. García, at the time, tried to appear quiet because he thought Enrique was a military officer. Enrique had ambitions of being a cartoonist when heading to Madrid, but the Fine Arts school with its Art scene won his heart in the end. Enrique also remembers how Antonio looked like a veteran already going around with paint pail in hand at a very young age. He (Enrique) also remembers the first sculpture he ever drew; *The Apoxyomenos*. He remembers sketching it with light charcoal and struggling to give it more movement than what it already had. Enrique was not content with the results and his teacher at the time commented on how Enrique was probably involved in the Korean War (this explained, in the professor’s mind, the desire to make the picture more “violent”). After this experience he learned his lesson and did a better job in his second drawing of *The Venus*. **(00:44:49-00:48:15)**
- h. The two friends remember their teachers. Antonio remembers one of them in particular who left a lasting impression on him; a teacher by the name of Soria. Enrique remembers he was a funny looking individual with ‘plain feet’, a funny voice, and a peculiar walk. Enrique remembers him always saying to them: “let’s see your values!” Antonio remembers something else which always stuck with him. **(00:48:16-00:48:39)\*\***
- Antonio: Soria told me something that really helped me. The only thing that did. It still does. I didn’t understand it then. He used to tell me. “Fuller, fuller”. But we were so awed by our teachers that I never once dared ask him what it meant. And then, time went by. I understood. And it’s so important, at least for me.” **(00:48:39-00:49:13)**

<sup>162</sup> This is one of many references to photographs and their nostalgic/memorial value. Throughout the film the photograph, and by extension cinema’s, memorial value is exalted. Photographs are often associated with special memories in the film.

- i. The painters reflect on how things change over **time**<sup>163</sup>, Enrique says that teachers demanded too much respect and kept their distance from the students. It is because of this distance that students like Antonio gave too much respect to Soria and were not able to ask him what he meant by making things fuller. But today it's very different. "Kids in college don't say "sir" ... to their teachers." **(00:49:13-00:50:10)**
- j. Antonio reminds Enrique of a beautiful nude he drew in one of the classes; it was a drawing inspired by Botticelli. Enrique nods with a feeling of gratification and nostalgia. Antonio also remembers the painting of a monk that was based on a real monk posing for the class. Enrique says he sold this painting to an American couple and only remembers it by the photographs he still has of it<sup>164</sup>. **(00:50:10-00:52:17)**
- k. They keep reflecting on the past, Antonio mentions that the best part about those days was being able to work alongside a good friend like Enrique. They remember the music they listened to, intense friendships, love affairs, the few leisure hours they had, the coffeehouses they frequented (some of which no longer exist) and their wonder at discovering the world for the first time. Antonio didn't frequent the same places as Enrique did, since he was 14 and Enrique was 21. Enrique also remembers seeing from the window of a coffeehouse, a young and introverted Antonio López humming and directing with his hands Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> symphony. The two friends share a laugh. **(00:52:17-00:54:05)**
- l. The camera moves backwards and gives us a still wide shot of the site. In it we see Antonio painting, Enrique sitting by his side, the stereo on the ground, the tree, and the tarp behind it (in case it started to rain again). Classical music plays from the background and they comment on how important music was during those times. The camera then shows us the sun which appears partly covered by clouds. **(00:54:05-00:54:38)**
- m. Change of scene. The camera is now looking closely into different sections of a reproduction of Michelangelo's painting, *The Last Judgement*. The camera focuses on the faces of the spectators at the scene; they all have a frightened look in their eyes. They are inside Antonio's studio where he offers Enrique a drink and a piece of cake. Enrique accepts the offer and asks for a glass of Coca-Cola. **(00:54:38-00:55:32)**
- n. The painters contemplate with amusement the work of Michelangelo, they begin to talk about it. They comment on how old the artist was at the time he painted it. They

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<sup>163</sup> "Memory, as we have tried to prove, is not a faculty of putting away recollections in a drawer, or of inscribing them in a register. There is no register, no drawer (there is not even, properly speaking, a faculty, for a faculty that works intermittently, when it will or when it can, whilst the piling up of the past upon the past goes on without relaxation. In reality the past is preserved by itself, automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present, which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would leave it outside." Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 4.

<sup>164</sup> Another reference to the photography's role in memory. These insights foreshadow the film's final argument about cinema standing in for the memory of Antonio's work.

are impressed that at the age of 63-64 he was able to paint such a masterpiece<sup>165</sup>. They discuss how it took Michelangelo 4 years to finish it, completing it when he was 67 or 68. They laugh at the macabre idea of the artist to include a self-portrait in the flayed skin being held by St. Bartholomew, probably in contempt to being commissioned by the church to paint it<sup>166</sup>. **(00:55:33-00:57:05)** \*\* \*\*



- o. Enrique brings up the rumour of Michelangelo being mad. For Antonio, however, this was not the truth. He believed Michelangelo simply had a bad outlook on life due to the power and influence the church had on people and on artists like himself at the time. Antonio and Enrique begin to speculate about the real meaning of the painting: **(00:57:06)** \*\* \*\*
- Antonio: “Isn’t it rather macabre to paint himself as Saint Bartholomew. They discovered it last century.”
  - Antonio: “He wasn’t mad. But he had a terrible outlook on life, didn’t he? To create a god who threatens not only the damned but also the innocent. They all look kind of intimidated by their god.”
  - Antonio: “Would you like to be in that paradise?”
  - Enrique: “I never believed in it. No, I wouldn’t like it, fawning all over God. I don’t believe in that. Besides, he’s a human God, isn’t he? God must be brought to man somehow that’s why God became a man<sup>167</sup>. **(00:58:36)**
  - Antonio: “Such a different God from the Greek ones. Just look at her over there, so very full of light.”

<sup>165</sup> In their theorizing of Michelangelo’s work, both artists come to the conclusion that all painters get better with age. For them, it has to do with the fact that as one gets closer to death, life is experienced more intensely.

<sup>166</sup> “I do not mean that connoisseurs and lovers of art find no words with which to praise such objects to us. They are eloquent enough; it seems to me. But usually in the presence of a great work of art each says something different from the other; and none of them says anything that solves the problem for the unpretending admirer. In my opinion, what grips us so powerfully can only be the artist’s intention, insofar as he has succeeded in expressing it in his work and in getting us to understand it.” Sigmund Freud and Peter Gay, “The Moses of Michelangelo,” *The Freud Reader*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 523-524.

<sup>167</sup> “The first consequence of our substitution is most remarkable. If the totem animal is the father, then the two principal ordinances of totemism, the two taboo prohibitions which contribute to its core-not to kill the totem and not to have sexual relations with a woman of the same totem-coincide in their content with the two crimes of Oedipus, who killed his father and married his mother, as well as with the two primal wishes of children, the insufficient repression or the re-awakening of which forms the nucleus of perhaps every psychoneurosis.” Sigmund Freud and Peter Gay, “Totem and Taboo.” *The Freud Reader*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 495.



- Enrique: “Yes, she embodies a healthy spirit and soul. And physical prime. While here, all these strong men are scabby.”
  - Antonio: “Sorrowful, guilty<sup>168</sup>.”
  - Enrique: “Michelangelo looks tremendously sorrowful. They look guilty. It was another world, another thought, another time. So much worse. I mean, Phydias can be seen as a religious artist but you don’t notice it. All you see is joy and beings in their prime. And they’re powerful, muscle everywhere, but they’re so...”
  - Antonio: “As if they denied life.”
  - Enrique: “Exactly.”
  - Antonio: “I will bring you the Coca-Cola.”
  - Enrique: Thank you. Can you also get me a piece of cake? Antonio? **(00:59:48)**
- p. The camera fades in into a beautiful shot of the sun moving in between clouds. Next, the camera fades into the site where it reveals the same characters present before. We see Antonio painting, Enrique sitting down beside him, the tree, the radio reproducing its music, and the painting. They are talking and listening to music, Antonio asks his fellow painter about a portrait he is currently finishing. Enrique comments on the beauty of the model and how he would be content to achieve at least seventy percent of resemblance. **(00:59:49-01:01:10) \*\***
- q. Enrique begins to reflect about the effects of age on painters and time itself: \*\*
- Enrique: “By the way, someone once told me that painters, middle-aged painters in Paris, men who are now the same age as us, work with feverish intensity. I didn’t understand it then, but I admired them for it. Now that I am that age, I understand it. I too work with intensity. Time is precious. I work non-stop now. I know we have much vitality; I know that but. Time as such (real time) can’t last much longer. We still have a few years but unconsciously our mind pushes us<sup>169</sup>.” **(01:01:11-01:02:06) \*\***
- r. Antonio keeps painting while Enrique sits quietly and meditatively. The sun starts to set, and we listen to the news broadcast on the radio. Antonio stops painting and they begin to take the materials indoors. We can still hear the radio and the broadcaster discussing global issues. The broadcaster discusses the Israeli conflict, Saddam Hussein’s call to all Muslim people to fight for the liberation of Jerusalem, NASA’s Discovery shuttle’s successful landing, and in Spain, the district attorney requests a 60-year jail sentence for two police officers. Officers Amedo and Dominguez have been involved in a terrorist operation resulting in 6 failed attempts of murder. The camera shows us the site as the sun has faded away and Antonio takes the canvas inside his house. The screen fades out. **(01:02:06-01:03:30) \*\***

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<sup>168</sup> “The ego ideal opens up an important avenue for the understanding of group psychology. In addition to its individual side, this ideal has a social side; it is also the common ideal of a family, a class or a nation. It binds not only a person’s narcissistic libido, but also a considerable amount of his homosexual libido, which is in this way turned back into the ego. The want or satisfaction which arises from the non-fulfilment of this ideal liberates homosexual libido, and this is transformed into a sense of guilt (social anxiety).” Sigmund Freud and Peter Gay, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," *The Freud Reader*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 562.

<sup>169</sup> "Experience shows us that the very basis of our conscious existence is memory, that is to say, the prolongation of the past into the present, or, in a word, duration, acting and irreversible." Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 17.

8. **Friday, October 12<sup>th</sup>** (01:03:31-1:03:44)

- a. Fade in. The scene starts with a still life of a more advanced version of the painting. (01:03:35-1:03:44) \*\*



9. **Monday, October 15<sup>th</sup>** (1:03:45-01:04:24)

- a. We see another version of the painting with very few details added. (1:03:45-1:03:55)
- b. The image transitions to a close up of a quince fruit. Antonio is making a white "mark" on its dark yellow skin. Antonio marks all of the quinces that will feature in the painting. (1:03:56-01:04:24) \*\*



10. **Tuesday, October 16<sup>th</sup>** (01:04:25-01:05:12)

- a. The bad weather persists and the sun hides behind black rain clouds. It is raining, but with the protection of his carp, Antonio continues painting. (01:04:25-01:04:44)
- b. Transition to the inside of the house. The camera shows us a close-up of María's work in progress (the etching), then we are shown her empty workstation and a disconnected phone beeping. The image switches to the workers building the wall. They are taking measurements and cementing the bricks that will compose the wall. The camera shows us Antonio outside; he is still painting even though the rain has become stronger. (01:04:44-01:05:12) \*\* \*\* \*

11. **Thursday, October 18<sup>th</sup>** (01:05:13-01:05:24)

- a. Still shot of the painting with minimal progress.



12. **Tuesday, October 23<sup>rd</sup>** (01:05:25-01:06:36)

- a. Close-up of the painting. This time it is more advanced with the addition of some main branches and other details. However, on this day, work has come to a standstill because of the relentless bad weather. The site is abandoned; even the young artist is affected since the lights in his unit are out. He calls María but it is too late to get anybody to fix it. He is upset because he was in the process of painting before the power ran out. (01:05:25-01:06:36)



13. **Wednesday, October 24<sup>th</sup>** (01:06:37-1:12:11)

- a. Antonio is painting outside. It has continued raining and the tent covering him is starting to leak. As the rain gets progressively worse, the artist looks up to skies in despair and contemplates the situation. He goes to light up a cigarette but disposes of it since the rain does not even let him light it. He quickly takes the canvas and materials inside. (01:06:37-01:08:11)

- b. Time-lapse of Antonio and María preparing a canvas together<sup>170</sup>. First, they apply glue to the wooden surface and after that step they carefully place the cloth on top. From inside this dark room, we see the dark sky outside; rain has persisted pouring with tremendous force. They continue preparing the canvas hoping that it will be ready the next day. Antonio looks distraught, we can infer that he is thinking of abandoning the painting, at this point he mentions beginning a new project in the form of a drawing. María is trying to help but the painter angrily refuses her help. The lights go off, Antonio looks at the rainy sky, lights up a cigarette and leaves the room alongside María. The camera turns to a dark corner where the painting stands against the wall in abandonment, as the rays of the moon and the streetlights illuminate its colourful surface. The sequence testifies to the end of the painting; a lost battle with **time**<sup>171</sup>. **(01:08:12-1:12:11)**



**14. Thursday October 25<sup>th</sup> (01:12:12-01:13:21)**

- a. It is a new day, the camera stands inside the unlit house, witnessing the light of dawn making itself present inside the abode. **(01:12:12-01:12:24)**

<sup>170</sup> Up to this point, the weather has gotten progressively worse. The painter has attempted to continue despite the difficulties this presents. In this sequence the rain has finally defeated the painter. Up until now he has kept optimistic about the possibilities of painting under midday's radiant light, but today (with even his protective tarp leaking) he has to stop. This is of particular importance since it testifies to García's humbleness; accepting when his own desire to complete something is no match to the cruelty and indifference of nature.

<sup>171</sup> In the text *Interrogating the Real*, Slavoj Žižek asks if there is a closer connection to "the real" via failure or illusion rather than Truth: "Why is error, illusion, immanent to truth? Why does truth arise through mistakes?", is therefore quite simply: because substance is already subject. Substance is always already subjectivized: substantial Truth coincides with its very progression through 'subjective' illusions. At this point, another response to the question 'Why is error immanent to the truth?' emerges: because there is no metalanguage. The idea that one is able from the outset to account for error, to take it under consideration as error, and therefore to take one's distance from it, is precisely the supreme error of the existence of metalanguage, the illusion that, while taking part in illusion, one is somehow also able to observe the process from an 'objective' distance. By avoiding identifying oneself with error, we commit the supreme error and miss the truth, because the place of truth itself is only constituted through error."

Slavoj Žižek, Rex Butler, and Scott Stephens, "The Symbolic Act," *Interrogating the Real*, (London: Continuum, 2006), 22.

- b. Antonio, painting in hand, makes his way downstairs to the basement. He is storing the painting in a storage room where he keeps finished and unfinished works.<sup>172</sup>  
**(01:12:24-01:13:21)**



**15. Friday, October 26<sup>th</sup> (01:13:21-01:16:31) \*\***

- a. Antonio commences a new project. On the white canvas<sup>173</sup> María helped him prepare; he is drawing the tree with a fine pencil. A brief time-lapse reveals the prodigiousness of his drawing skills. The tree's form is beginning to emerge quickly in the canvas and the weather is better but light rain persists. The quinces are still yellow, but parts of their skin are beginning to rot. The technique and positioning are almost identical to that of the painting. The painter looks happy again, his joyful singing confirms it. The rain increases in intensity, the painter takes a contemplative break and lights up a cigarette.

**16. Saturday, October 27<sup>th</sup> (01:16:31-1:17:20) \*\***

- a. The camera pans slowly from the top of the tent to the canvas containing the new drawing. The radio is broadcasting the news of the day. On this date, the weather seems to have gotten better with more sun and very little rain. The camera continues panning until it reaches the ground. Antonio enters the shot; he is shovelling aside the water that has collected on the ground. In the radio we hear the dailies as Antonio proceeds shovelling intensely. "The gulf war has produced an increase in

<sup>172</sup> Antonio has a special relationship with unfinished work. In a video interview for Boston's Museum of Fine Art he states: "Percibí que ya había llegado al final del camino que inicié. En otros caso el cuadro esta sin acabar, se vende sin acabar, lo entregas a los demás sin acabar podías haberlo continuado pero hay que respetar los motivos por los que el trabajo se ha interrumpido. El cuadro se acaba por muchos motivos: o porque realmente llegas al agotamiento en relación al tema, porque el motivo desaparece de tu vista y no lo puedes seguir.

Translation: "I perceived that I had arrived at the end of the road I started on. In other cases, the painting remains unfinished, it is sold unfinished, you hand it over to the others. You could have spent more time finishing it, but one must respect the reasons the work has been interrupted for. A painting can end for many reasons: or because you really reach exhaustion in relation to the theme, because the motive disappears from your sight you can no longer follow it." mfaboston. "Conozca El Artista: Antonio López García." YouTube, YouTube, 28 May 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKo-WjDAQvQ>.

<sup>173</sup> The special (and almost magical) symbolism of a white canvas is not its nothingness. Rather, as Deleuze teaches us, a white canvas is quite the opposite of nothing, it is actually a space pregnant of all possible potentialities (virtual and actual).

petroleum which is in the moment at 33.7 dollars. The stocks in Madrid have gone down four points, in Tokyo three hundred forty-six and in New York there has been a decrease in forty-eight points. More troops are being deployed to aid in the Persian Gulf conflict. Atletico de Madrid is playing against Barcelona in their home stadium, the Vicente Calderon.” The camera zooms into the stereo placed on a chair next to the worksite. The announcer makes a prediction of the weather<sup>174</sup>: “Cielos muy nubosos en la mayor parte de la peninsula. Los chubascos seran frecuentes y de origen tormentoso en la mitad norte<sup>175</sup>.”

### 17. **Sunday, October 28<sup>th</sup> (01:17:20-01:18:40)**

- a. We are at the site where Antonio is gathered with his daughters, their partners, and María who is giving him a haircut. The family sits around a table drinking coffee or tea. The day seems cold, but the family is enjoying being outside in the garden. Antonio asks for a chocolate and one of his daughters mentions she noticed that he was no longer working on the painting.
- Daughter: “I have seen this morning that you have chosen to abandon the oil painting.”
  - Antonio: “That’s right I have started on the drawing.”
  - Daughter: “When did you start working on it”?
  - Antonio: “Two or three days ago.”
  - Daughter: And what happened? You didn’t like the other one? It didn’t convince you?
  - Antonio: “The weather<sup>176</sup> (time) was so rotten, so unsettled, so horrible. I couldn’t go on painting. I wanted to represent the sun on the tree. But the light changed so often, I couldn’t go on.”
  - Boyfriend: “Will you be able to pick it up next year?”
  - Antonio: “Absolutely not<sup>177</sup>.”
  - Antonio: “You see, next year the quinces, the leaves will have changed. All I did was complain about the weather, I haven’t been very lucky. This year has been worse than usual.”<sup>178</sup>
  - Daughter: It’s been some time since you painted an oil of a quince tree.
  - Antonio: “I know, this is why I wanted to paint it. Your mom has told me it looked beautiful and that I should try to paint it.”
  - Boyfriend: [laughing] “Careful (María) he is going to try and blame you.”

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<sup>174</sup> It is important to note that weather forecast in Spanish is: “prediccion del tiempo”. Which translates to “prediction of time.”

<sup>175</sup> Translation: “Today, cloudy skies in a major part of the peninsula. Rain showers will be frequent and stormy in the northern half of the region.”

<sup>176</sup> In Spanish, the word being used for weather is “tiempo.” In English, time.

<sup>177</sup> Antonio knows that when the painting tells him it is time to finish working on it, he must comply. It is not common for him to retake works in progress.

<sup>178</sup> Jonathan Crary in his *Techniques of the Observer* shows through the work of Müller the ways in which the sensation of light is produced. The first agency is of importance to us: “By the undulations or emanations which from their action on the eye are called light, although they may have other actions than this; for instance, they effect chemical changes, and are the means of maintaining the organic process in plants.” Jonathan Crary, "Subjective Vision and the Separation of the Senses," *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1990), 90.



- Antonio: “No, no it is good like this. The only thing is that time<sup>179</sup> (weather) has not been on my side. The truth is I have been unlucky. This year has been especially horrible.” (01:17:20-01:18:40)

- The camera shows us the place where the family were gathered, the seats are now empty. The camera begins to pan upwards to the roof and a tree that stands next to the table and chairs. The top of the tree is composed of bright yellow leaves and the impact of the sun makes it seem more radiant. (01:18:40-01:19:01)

18. **Monday, October 29<sup>th</sup>** (01:19:02-01:19:34)

- The camera presents a close-up of a quince, marked all along its surface with white paint. Its skin is yellow and wrinkled. Antonio paints more white marks on its skin.



19. **Thursday, November 1<sup>st</sup>** (01:19:34-01:19:46)

- Antonio is marking a quince again. The image fades out to a yellow light.

20. **Friday, November 2<sup>nd</sup>** (01:19:46-01:28:50)

- The scene begins with a shot of the sun, which is shining bright, but clouds still surround it. (01:19:46-01:19:59)
- Two people (a man and a woman) accompany Antonio at the site. He pours them a glass of wine; the woman does not speak English and the man translates the conversation between Antonio and her. They ask him several questions concerning his work. (01:19:59-01:21:28)
  - Interviewer: “Is it the first time you’ve painted this tree?”
  - Antonio: “The third time. Last year I made a smaller drawing.”
  - Interviewer: “Surely you like this tree very much?”
  - Antonio: Yes, I do I like quince trees. The tree and its fruit. I’ve drawn other trees, but I have a kind of tendency to work on quince trees. I don’t know why.”<sup>180</sup>
- He explains that he planted the tree and has been painting it before its death.<sup>181</sup> (01:21:28-01:22:54)

<sup>179</sup> Once again weather is referred to as time. García is talking to his family after long days of struggling. He accepts his defeat with honour and knows this is a battle won by time (weather).

<sup>180</sup> Towards the end it is clear that his desire to paint quince trees repeatedly is an unconscious attempt to relive a time where his parents lived. By painting this tree, he is going back to those days of childhood. Memory becomes actualized.

<sup>181</sup> "It might therefore be said that, though the germ-plasm is not continuous, there is at least continuity of genetic energy, this energy being expended only at certain instants, for just enough time to give the requisite impulsion to the

- Interviewer: “It is a very nice fruit, perhaps you have planted this tree yourself?”
  - Antonio: “Yes, I planted it about four years ago.”
  - Interviewer: “In that case you may have a reason to paint it.”
- d. The interviewers inquire about his technique and how it is very different to other painters of his style. They tell him that other painters copy a photograph of their subject to achieve maximum similitude.<sup>182</sup> **(01:22:54)**
- Interviewer: “I have noticed you use a technique, a method that is different from all the other painters. A lot of painters I know copy a photograph to feel comfortable.
  - Antonio: “The best part is being close to the tree<sup>183</sup>. That is more important than the end result for me<sup>184</sup>. Photography doesn’t give you that.”
  - Interviewer: “It must also have to do with the love you have for this tree?”
  - Antonio: “Of course”.
  - Interviewer: “Another impressive feature of your style is how compact the composition is.” **(01:22:50)**
  - Antonio: “I like the order created by symmetry. I centered the tree on the paper. The heart of the vision is the center of the paper<sup>185</sup>.”
  - Interviewers: “Apparently, a lot of artists avoid doing this because people don’t seem to like it.”

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embryonic life, and being recouped as soon as possible in new sexual elements, in which, again, it bides its time. Regarded from this point of view, life is like a current passing from germ to germ through the medium of a developed organism.” Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 27.

<sup>182</sup> “It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced.” Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” *Essay in The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2008), 22.

<sup>183</sup> With this statement we can confirm that García’s project is not entirely about precision and realism. He favours being next to the tree over the end result, meaning that what he values in his process is the time being spent with his subject. Photography does not give you the real exchange of forces and affects that being next to a tree every day can give you.

<sup>184</sup> Deleuze discusses the way in which sensation and materiality merge in the process of artistic creation. He writes: “How could the sensation be preserved without a material capable of lasting? [...] We will see how the plane of the material ascends irresistibly and invades the plane of composition of the sensations themselves to the point of being part of them or indiscernible from them. It is in this sense that the painter is said to be a painter and nothing but a painter, “with color seized as if just pressed out of the tube, with the imprint of each hair of his brush,” with this blue that is not a water blue “but a liquid paint blue.” And yet, in principle at least, sensation is not the same thing as the material. [...] Sensation is not realized in the material without the material passing completely into the sensation, into the percept or affect. It is the affect that is metallic, crystalline, stony, and so on; and the sensation is not colored but, as Cezanne said, coloring. That is why those who are nothing, but painters are also more than painters because they bring before us, in front of the fixed canvas, not the resemblance but the pure sensation “of a tortured flower, of a landscape slashed, pressed, and plowed, giving back the water of the painting to nature.”

<sup>185</sup> “If resemblance haunts the work of art, it is because sensation refers only to its material; it is the percept or affect of the material itself, the smile of oil, the gesture of fired clay, the thrust of metal, the crouch of Romanesque stone, and the ascent of Gothic stone.” Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Hugh Tomlinson, and Graham Burchell, “Percept, Affect, and Concept,” *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 166.



- Antonio: “That may be, but doing it this way, the tree, in my opinion, has presence<sup>186</sup> (in Spanish he says human presence). By centering, by avoiding all aesthetic games on paper with space, the object is shown in an ordered way in relation to symmetry<sup>187</sup>.”
- e. He is asked about the marks and the threads on the tree<sup>188</sup>. **(01:25:03)**
  - Antonio: “The threads. This is the vertical line. If you prefer, the center of what I see. It’s also the center of what I’m representing. This thread over there is the horizontal line also in the center. So, taking these vertical and horizontal lines I can place all my elements. Now, these horizontal marks over here on the quinces and on the leaves show since I started working how the fruits are because of the weight, how the branches have bent. Since I started the tips have gone down some five centimetres. I go correcting. I follow the tree. I’m always parallel to the development of the tree.”<sup>189</sup>
  - Interviewer: “Is it possible to include in your painting the sunlight on those leaves over there?”
  - Antonio: “I am afraid not. It is a very limited language in that sense. Se trata unicamnete de reflejar el limite de las formas y a travez del limite de las formas representar el arbol. [« I may only show the boundaries of shapes and through the boundaries show the tree.”]
  - Interviewer: “So will you finish this work in an oil painting?”
  - Antonio: No, no, the weather with the sun changes so much that I had to abandon the oil painting and switch to a drawing. The light is marvelous, but one has to know when to quit. I had to quit. One must be able to renounce to something (laughs).” **(01:28:50)**

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<sup>186</sup> It is interesting that Antonio’s rigid approach is not about the aesthetic of space. He says in this segment that he is not interested in experimenting with aesthetic space but only trying to give a solemn quality to the object by placing it in the center. By doing so he says the tree gains a human presence, since we are naturally inclined to look at the center of images, this tree is not pretending to be somewhere else (postmodernism) but it is found in the center, the place where our eyes look to instinctively.

<sup>187</sup> Hegel favours works of art made by men over natural sites because of the spiritual connection to the products of a human mind. “An animated being in nature is within and without an organization appropriately elaborated down to all its minutest parts, while the work of art attains the semblance of animation on its surface only, but within is common stone, or wood and canvas, or, as in the case of poetry, is idea, uttering itself in speech and letters. But this aspect, viz. its external existence, is not what makes a work into a production of fine art; it is a work of art only in so far as, being the offspring of mind, it continues to belong to the realm of mind, has received the baptism of the spiritual, and only represents that which has been moulded in harmony with mind. A human interest, the spiritual value which attaches to an incident, to an individual character, to an action in its plot and in its denouement, is apprehended in the work of art, and exhibited more purely and transparently than is possible on the soil of common unartistic reality.” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Bernard Bosanquet, and O. J., Inwood, “The Conception of Artistic Beauty,” *Essay in Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 33-34.

<sup>188</sup> In this sequence, Antonio explains every detail about his mysterious approach. He explains what the threads are for and what the paint marks on the quinces, wall, and leaves are for. The most important aspect of this method is the fact that he is following the tree’s development with utter precision. Since the fruits have been marked with horizontal lines, Antonio is able to lower his painting/drawing as the fruits get lower with time. In the time he has been painting, some of the quinces have come down at least five centimetres. Here it is clear that he is not after a photorealistic tree, but only to accompany the tree’s growth and development which is a practice akin to a naturalist more than to a painter.

<sup>189</sup> The uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition. Of course, this tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. An ancient statue of Venus, for instance, existed in a traditional context for the Greeks (who made it an object of worship) that was different from the context in which it existed for medieval clerics (who viewed it as a sinister idol). But what was equally evident to both was its uniqueness—that is its aura. Originally the embeddedness of tradition found expression in a cult. As we know, the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals—first magical, then religious. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, 24.

21. **Monday, November 5<sup>th</sup> (01:28:50-01:31:11) \*\***

- a. We see the ground; it is muddy and wet. The camera pans upwards and we see Antonio humming and working on the drawing. The painter draws joyfully, tracing the fine details that compose the form of the tree<sup>190</sup>. The camera goes around the **site** and gives us close-ups of the objects that inhabit it. The close-ups of the tree, Antonio's hand delicately tracing, his humming, the canvas, the ground, his feet, and a table give a full picture of Antonio's work **site**. Antonio is in a meditative state, singing while he draws.



22. **Saturday, November 10<sup>th</sup> [Reception] (01:31:11-01:34:29) \*\***

- a. Two men wearing suits are at the **site** and they contemplate the drawing and comment on how beautiful the tree is. They discuss Antonio's methodologies.
- **Man 1:** "This is the situation. He places himself here in line. He places his feet here and refers to the vertical line along with the horizontal to keep the same point of view. He has to see everything from here."
  - **Man 1:** "I could not paint that close to the tree. If it was me, I would place myself a bit further back. In the position of a spectator instead of protagonist."
  - **Man 2:** "I've always wondered about that obsession with physical space, about square inches. For me, feelings about colors are all powerful."
  - **Man 1:** "No, what we have here is the perfect union between feeling and order. It's as if he were distrustful."
  - **Man 2:** "But it's always feeling and order. Reason and intuition go hand in hand. **(1:31:11-1:33:01)**
- b. Antonio, María, and the wives of the men arrive at the **site**. The rest of them are also wearing formal clothes. They gather around the tree and talk about the artwork.
- **Man 1:** "You don't mind that the imprecisions of the thing are visible?"
  - **Antonio:** [laughs] "No not at all. They are so evident, there is no point in hiding them."
  - **Antonio:** "It's a map, a map of the tree."
  - **Man1:** "Yes, it is a map from where you have chosen to stand."
  - **María:** You have left all the cigarette buds on the floor."
  - **Antonio:** "No, I have picked up most of them. Not all the ones I have smoked are there." **(01:31:11-01:34:01)**

<sup>190</sup> A drawing is more concerned with the structural aspects of a form. One can think of drawing of this kind as a map or a skeleton of the object. Instead of making the forms out of the amalgamation of different colors, the drawing traces the lines that configure the form. In a way it is more about semblance and the geometrical coordinates of an object and less about colour impressions.

- c. The group leaves the **site** and Erice gives us a still shot of the scene after the people leave. We listen to the sound of a door closing and the screen fades to black. **(01:34:02-01:34:29)**

23. **Monday, November 19<sup>th</sup>** **(01:34:30-01:37:31)** \*\*

- a. Antonio is drawing in the company of his son. He is assisting his father by holding a leaf that is covering a quince, allowing Antonio to draw the fruit. He is using a large stick and moving according to Antonio's directions<sup>191</sup>.
- Antonio: "The poor thing won't last long."
  - Javier: "Have you had the same problem with other trees?"
  - Antonio: "Well I've never painted so late in the year. We're in mid-November."
  - Antonio: "Look how the quinces are still getting fatter. What do you think?"
  - Javier: "Incredible."
  - Antonio: "Look how lovely it is with the sun over there."

24. **Friday, November 23<sup>rd</sup>** **(01:37:31-01:45:53)** \*\* \*\*

- a. The camera shows us the drawing by zooming in on all its constituent parts. Antonio is heard giving instructions to Enrique. **(01:37:31-01:37:46)**
- b. Antonio is shown drawing alongside Enrique who is helping him by holding the decaying leaves of the tree. It is a windy day and both of them are wearing winter clothing. Antonio is smoking a cigarette while he draws.
- Antonio: "Aren't these quinces full of lumps?"
  - Enrique: "It looks great. Now don't start. I think this area is fine as it is. You may be suffocating it a bit. Why don't you work on the lower part of the bottom leaves? Just a little more to finish it."
  - Antonio: "Damn wind!" **(01:37:31-01:39:10)**
- c. The wind is blowing intensely, and the day seems cold. Antonio looks distraught by the weather and Enrique is still holding the leaf away from the fruit. Enrique begins to sing, and Antonio stops him so they can sing together. The two begin to sing together. The first attempt is considered awful by Antonio because they couldn't synchronize their voices completely. The second attempt is considered regular. Finally, they try again for a third time and Antonio considers it a better attempt<sup>192</sup>. **(01:39:10-01:41:27)**
- Antonio y Enrique: "Cariño, cariño mío, ramito de mejorana, espuma que lleva el río, lucero de la mañana. ¡Ay serrano que alegría! que publiquen los papeles que seré pa toa la vía la alegría de Juan Vélez. Planté por Sevilla entera banderas de desafío y dice cada bandera: ¡Cariño, cariño mío!<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> The leaf needs to be held manually because the tree is decaying, and the leaves and its fruits are progressively moving down on the picture. An important aspect of López García's realism consists of maintaining the exact conditions when painting (as much as this is possible).

<sup>192</sup> Even in a casual event such as this performance, Antonio is always striving for perfection and harmony. He insists they repeat the song until both their voices sing in harmony. The inclusion of this spontaneous song performance contributes to the realism of the film.

<sup>193</sup> Lyrics originally by Antonio Quintero y Rafael de León. Music by Manuel López-Quiroga



- d. Antonio keeps working on the drawing while Enrique holds the small leaf out of the way. They start talking about Conchita's photograph, the one with the two of them during their time at San Fernando school of fine art. Enrique remembers their similar look; he describes their appearance as passionate but poor as dirt.
- Enrique: "It was very beautiful, I explained it to you the other day. We were at the doors of the school and the picture was taken right in front of us. I remember it [the photograph] and it impressed me so much because the gesture of both of us was the same. Hungry for art and in poor rags. We looked at little pissed off. Well, I hope Conchita finds it one day and maybe she has it." [sighs with nostalgia<sup>194</sup>] **(01:41:19-01:43:20)**
- e. Antonio follows up Enrique's meditation on **time** by wondering how much time he has spent outside with the tree.
- Antonio: "Do you know how much time I have been here? Since I began the painting and the drawing?"
  - Enrique: "I don't know."
  - Antonio: "Months, weeks." **(01:43:20)**
- f. With the artist's voices still audible, the camera transitions to a montage sequence of Madrid at sunset. The sunlight of this hour impacts the top of buildings and houses. We see the sun as it begins to hide behind the horizon. **(01:43:20-01: - 01:45:53)**
25. **Monday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>** **(01:43:54-01:44:51)** \*\*
- a. The scene opens up with a still shot of the **site**. The camera is looking from the same point of view<sup>195</sup> as it did in the previous shots. Antonio, wearing a warm coat and carrying his tools, enters the picture. He contemplates the tree; it has lost most of its leaves and fruit. He picks up a quince that has fallen to the ground, which is now almost fully depleted of grass and covered in cigarette butts. The fruit's skin

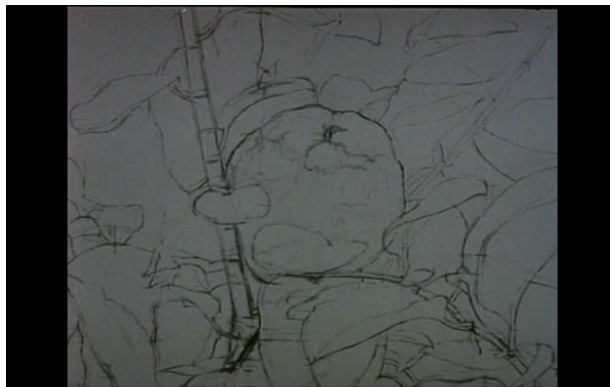
<sup>194</sup> Enrique is always longing for that sentimental place of young adulthood. The youthful passion about art that they both shared while attending Art School. These memories recur in Enrique, triggered by the realization of the relentless passage of time but also by the fact that Antonio and him still share the same passion for art (in a sense with age this passion has increased). That they shared at the time.

<sup>195</sup> Erice does something very interesting throughout the entire film. Whenever we are presented with a still shot of the site, he places his tripod on the same point of view. Compositionally, he is imitating Antonio's method and giving it a cinematic dimension. Antonio stands in the same place every time he paints so that he is always looking at the same tree. This concerns perspective, and the fact that if you were to look at the same object from a different location, you would see an entirely different object. The film gives us a collection of 'stills' of the site where Antonio has been working.

is still bright yellow, but it has numerous bruises on its exterior. He raises it to his nose and absorbs its powerful aroma.



- b. Close-up of a quince inside the drawing. **(01:44:45-01:44:51)**



**26. Sunday, December 9<sup>th</sup> (01:44:52-01:47:07) \*\***

- a. Antonio is drawing outside on the site. He has placed a mirror in front of the canvas in order to have another image of it. He perfects it by constantly referring back to the mirror-image. The day is windy, causing the leaves on the ground to fly away from the tree. As he continues to draw the day reaches its final moments of light.





27. **Monday, December 10<sup>th</sup> (01:47:08-01:51:05)** [End of the work and the final meditation with the quince tree] \*\* \*\* \*
- a. Still life of the **site**. Antonio, who is sitting down, contemplates the drawing through its mirror-image. He is in a deeply contemplative state. The camera now looks around the site paying special attention to the drawing and Antonio's facial gestures. It also looks at the tree and at the quinces, still hanging with the marks showing how much time and gravity have affected their position in regard to the horizontal thread. The camera zooms into four individual quinces that have fallen to the ground. Their skins are flayed<sup>196</sup> and full of white paint marks, some of them seem to be rotting. \*\* (01:47:08-01:48:01)
  - b. He begins to cut down some of the remaining good quinces from the tree, signifying the end of the work. He takes the canvas and the mirror inside and the workers help him move the carp. He proceeds to remove the vertical and horizontal threads along with the easel.
    - Antonio: "It's over". (01:48:01)
  - c. A worker comes to the **site** and removes a quince from the tree, he smells its fragrance. The screen fades to black.



28. **Tuesday, December 11<sup>th</sup> (01:51:05-02:09:02)** \*\*
- a. We are inside the house, a short time-lapse shows the workers finishing the reparations of the wall. (01:51:05-01:51:44)
  - b. Antonio is inside his studio contemplating the drawing. He stares deeply into it and then the camera shows the viewer what it looks like. (01:51:05-01:52:26) \*\*
  - c. His daughters and the house cook are outside picking up quinces to make jelly. The cook wonders how can such a small tree bear so much fruit? We are shown a close-up of the work and the following shot shows Antonio cleaning up in his workshop. (01:52:26-01:52:46)

<sup>196</sup> There is interesting resonance taking place in the film between the flayed skin of Michelangelo, in Antonio's reproduction, and the flayed skin of the quinces during the month of November.



- d. One of the workers is washing the paint marks off a quince's skin. He brings it to the table and begins to peel it so that he can try it along with his co-workers. They are not impressed by its flavour and consistency. The scene ends with their empty quarters after they leave. **(01:52:46-01:55:09)**
- Worker: "It tastes like an unripe pear. Nothing to go wild about. Good for marmalade. A bit dry isn't it." **(01:55:09)**
- e. Montage scene: The camera looks around the table where the quince has remained almost uneaten. The camera then shows us the remains of the tree, a quince drops to the ground sharing the fate of the other quinces that have already fallen. The sequence that follows is a shot of the city at night illuminated by artificial lights, mostly composed of television screens. The camera focuses on a few of the screens and numerous buildings. **(01:55:09-01:55:46)**
- f. We are shown the artist's house at night. A light in a bedroom is switched on. Antonio is lying down on a bed. María closes the blinds and Antonio positions himself on top of the bed, holding a photograph on one hand and a crystal ball on the other. María lights up the scene and positions him so that he is in the exact position as he was before<sup>197</sup>. She lights up the painting and begins to work on an (almost finished) painting of Antonio. Antonio tells her what he thinks of her process. \*\*
- Antonio: "To work on a painting after so long. I think I could prepare a canvas that same size. You'd start again completely free from the beginning without worrying. I think that would be the best."
  - María: "Maybe I will, I don't know. Give me a few days. What you're suggesting may be the best solution. But I want to try something. Let's try it."

<sup>197</sup> At this moment in the film, we become familiar with María's painting practice and method. Antonio has to lay down in the exact position every time and the painting will only go on during the time Antonio remains awake. This obsessive attention to realism is almost exact to Antonio's method.



- g. Antonio contemplates the picture of him and his friend Paco in Greece<sup>198</sup>. After looking at it for a brief moment he suggests taking a trip to Greece soon<sup>199</sup>. He falls asleep, dropping the crystal ball whose sound alerts María that Antonio has fallen asleep. When this happens, she stops painting, turns the lights off, puts the crystal ball in his jacket pocket and leaves the room. **(01:55:46-02:02:46)**
- h. Montage sequence: The camera shows us Madrid at night. We see the lighted needle monument in the background, it is shining bright in contrast to the rest of the buildings. We see windows with television screens illuminating them. The light in the needle building goes off. Screen fades to black. **(02:02:46-02:03:31)**
- i. Dream Sequence: [Sounds of a power generator running] In a wall in the garden, we see the shadow of a film camera standing next to the tree. The next shot is of the camera and a cinema light standing in front of the tree at night, approximately where Antonio used to stand<sup>200</sup>. The light turns on automatically, illuminating the quinces lying on the ground. A close-up of a timer reveals the automated process of lighting and the following shot shows the tripod's feet, placed next to the nails Antonio has used. The moon is revealed as dark clouds move past it. We are now inside the artist's house; it is dark, and the moonlight is illuminating its interior. With limited light, we see many of the artworks he has kept over time. We see paintings, sculptures of people's torsos, and a mask of the painter's face. We are shown the moon once again quickly followed by the painter sleeping deeply. Erice zooms into his face and we begin to listen to Antonio's muffled voice. As he speaks the camera surveys the work **site** at nighttime, with its rotting fruits, illuminated by

<sup>198</sup> Another instance of a photograph evoking a memory.

<sup>199</sup> María's painting is not about the ambition to finish the work. It is about spending the time with Antonio and creating a visual memory that will accompany them. The photograph Antonio is holding up is meant to stir up memories of youth in him. The crystal ball contains the prisms of vision, its allegorical significance towards the visual arts is evident. It also serves to alert María that Antonio has fallen asleep (since it drops to the ground). It is the marker that the duration of painting him has come to an end since she only paints when he remains awake.

<sup>200</sup> The image of the camera where Antonio used to stand is a very powerful metaphor of the role of technology in art. It speaks to the power technology has in the face of human absence; cameras, sensors, and other technological media have the potential to do the work of the artist. However, the film and this image in particular question the integrity of technological reproduction, asking what is lost when we remove the human observer from the process of representation.



the cinema light. We see the shadow of the tree and the camera; the sequence ends with a close-up of Antonio's face<sup>201</sup>. **(02:03:31-02:06:30)**

- Antonio's Dream Testimony: Estoy en Tomelloso delante de la casa donde he nacido. Al otro lado de la plaza hay unos árboles que nunca crecieron ahí; en la distancia reconozco los hojas oscuras y los frutos dorados de los membrilleros. Me veo entre esos árboles junto a mis padres acompañado por otras personas cuyos rasgos no logro identificar. Hasta mi llega el rumor de nuestras voces, charlamos apaciblemente. Nuestros pies están hundidos en la tierra embarrada. A nuestro alrededor prendidos de sus ramas los frutos rugosos cuelgan cada vez mas blandos. Grandes manchas van invadiendo su piel y en el aire inmóvil percibo la fermentación de su carne. Desde el lugar donde observo la escena no puedo saber si los demás ven lo que yo veo. Nadie parece advertir que todos los membrillos se están pudriendo bajo una luz que no se describir. Nítida y a la vez sombría que todo lo convierte en metal y ceniza. No es la luz de la noche tampoco es la del crepúsculo ni la de la aurora.<sup>202</sup> **(02:06:30-02:09:02)**



<sup>201</sup> The dream sequence can be understood through the lens of Walter Benjamin's theory of technological media. The light that Antonio describes as "clear yet at the same time sombre and turning everything it touches into metal and ash" symbolizes the light of modernity. Technological reproduction claims the role of the painter as the most precise form of mimesis and artistic reproduction. However, as the film teaches us, the human element in the process of reproduction is irreplaceable. A machine cannot dwell, or understand duration, which is what the painter does when he spends many hours attempting to replicate a sight.

<sup>202</sup> Translation: "I am in Tomelloso in front of the house where I was born. To other side of the plaza there are some trees that have never grown there before; from a distance I recognize the dark leaves and the golden fruits of the quince trees. I see myself in between these trees, next to my parents, in the company of other people whose features I can't quite identify. The rumour of our voices reaches me, we converse peacefully. Our feet are sunken in the muddy land. Around us and attached to their branches the wrinkled fruits hang ever riper. Giant stains invade their skin and in the immobile wind I perceive the fermentation of their meat. From the place where I observe the scene I can't tell if the rest can see what I am seeing. No one seems to notice that all the quinces are rotting under a light that I find hard to describe. Clear yet at the same time sombre and turning everything, it touches into metal and ash. It is not the moonlight nor the twilight or the light of dawn."



29. Spring: Everything is blossoming again, and we see the corpses of the quinces left behind from last year. The quince tree is starting to grow quinces again. Antonio sings in the background, we also hear birds humming, and the usual sounds of the city. Life begins again, a testimony of the cycle of life. The movie ends with a eulogy: “Paco Solorzano in memoriam.” (02:06:30-02:10:44)



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