

Jens
Andermann

MUNDUS IMMUNDUS

UNWORLDING, AFTERLIFE, AND THE CINEMA



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Unworlding, afterlife, and the cinema

CCC2 Irreversibility

Series Editors: Tom Cohen and Claire Colebrook

The second phase of 'the Anthropocene' takes hold as tipping points speculated over in 'Anthropocene 1.0' click into place to retire the speculative bubble of "Anthropocene Talk". Temporalities are dispersed, the memes of 'globalization' revoked. A broad drift into a de facto era of managed extinction events dawns. With this acceleration from the speculative into the material orders, a factor without a means of expression emerges: climate panic.

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For Maja

Introduction

The time of cinema and the time of the end, suggests Jennifer Fay, have converged ever since the moment marked, according to the running clock superimposed on the image, as 5:29:21 Mountain War Time, July 16, 1945. It was in that very instant that, in the deserts of New Mexico, the first nuclear bomb was detonated – the event also known as “Trinity Test” that resulted, among many other things, in the appearance of a new mineral, trinitite – captured by different cameras recording in 16 and 35 millimeters, respectively. Directed at a posterity that, as the philosopher Günther Anders put it, they addressed as “not yet non-existing”, the final images of *Trinity 1945* (a sudden darkening of the screen after a panning shot that follows the rise of the projectile, then a burst of white light that only fades little by little to reveal the contours of the atomic mushroom) ushered in an unprecedented temporality. Theirs, Anders suggested, was a time “of the possibility of self-extinction [that] can never end, but by the end itself”¹. Yet, Fay reminds us, this was also the moment on which the Anthropocene Working Group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy finally settled to date the beginning of the “new geological era” that will potentially lead to the extinction of all organic life on Earth – not because Trinity had been the cause or origin of this anthropogenic process but rather because it provided its clearest, most indisputable stratigraphic index yet. If this were the case, Fay concludes, *Trinity 1945* would have at once caught and lost sight of that epochal threshold, since the opposite ends of the color spectrum that suspend the visibility of the liminal event “perhaps mark[ed] the beginning of the end of cinema as the inheritor of Renaissance perspective and the rational human spectator that it presupposed”.²

Now, maybe the fact that the Working Group had landed on Trinity to date the Anthropocene, among a panoply of candidates ranging from the beginnings of agriculture to the invention of the steam engine, reveals more than anything the colonial mindset that underwrites the concept itself, as Matthias De Groof argues citing a reflection by Kathryn Yusoff: “The spectacle of a dystopian ‘end of the world’ – caused either by humanity as such or by some uncontrollable force – erases the fact that ‘imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialism have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence’”.³ The movie camera, De Groof continues, has also been present practically for as long as it exists in these violent “ends of worlds”

(and beginnings of others) that supply the baseline to our colonial-modern age. Sometimes it had to give a little nudge, too, as in the massacre of “Selenites” in Georges Méliès’s *Voyage dans la lune* (1902) or the lynching of blackface “Negroes” by virtuous Klansmen in D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), a veritable founding sequence of American action cinema. Western modernity’s technologies of extermination and those of the image not only intersect, as Paul Virilio has shown, to the point of merging into a single device such as the drone (which is literally an exploding camera)⁴ but also as an imagetic production of affect destined to enhance our enjoyment with that same machinic destruction. *Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl’s “documentary” of the parading Hitlerite masses, is but the most synthetic of these choreographies of violence, stripped of even the most elementary narrative packaging. As a “fable running contrary to itself”⁵ because it cannot but interweave the register of material reality with its affective investment on behalf of viewers, whose drives and fantasies are what inhabit the latter as a “world”, the cinematic machine today also accompanies and enhances our “new geological era” by opening itself to the convergence of two series. As it turns, willingly or not, into an index of the annihilation of planetary life as the temporal horizon of our existence, cinema in its character as audiovisual spectacle also infuses this mattering of disaster with our contemporary becoming-fascist as a way of being-with, and of enjoying, the world’s unworlding.

Mundus immundus – the becoming-worldless of the world itself – would then be a way of naming that which Hannah Arendt conceives of as *Entweltlichung*: as “world loss” triggered by “the two-fold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self”.⁶ It calls out the abject – literally *obscene* – space and time surging from this abandonment of the middle plane of the earth-world, yet it also refers to the enjoyment such unworlding can unleash, as if by delighting in its destruction we ourselves no longer formed part of this unworldly world. This is the kind of salvation Saint Augustine already had in mind when he coined the enantiosemy, or “false paradox”, in his *Treatise on the Gospel of Saint John* (*Tractatus in Ioannis Evangelium*, 5th century): “Sic delectat te mundus, semper uis esse immundus, si autem iam non te delectat hic mundus, iam tu es mundus” – If you set your heart on the world, that means you want to remain unclean forever; but if you no longer set your heart on this world, you are already clean.⁷ The paradox is a false one in a grammatical as well as a logical sense. “Immundus” (dirty) is not the opposite of the noun “mundus” (world) but of the adjective (clean); hence, the implication that the terrestrial realm is altogether of a fallen, spoiled, abject state (“mundus est immundus”) only mobilizes the rhetorical power of the paradoxical

for something different, the attribution of a quality, a mode of being, to all things of this world. It is only in this slippage from the substantive to the adverbial that world-denial becomes the core of early Christian eschatology, but on the condition that the real paradox (“mundus est immundus:” the clean is the dirty) that lingers temptingly beneath Augustine’s rhetorical sleight of hand remains strictly forbidden to even consider. The world’s mundane worldliness is to be left behind only in its abandonment, be it towards the City of God awaiting us in the heavens or the one we already carry within our souls. A theology that, with only the slightest of tweaks, continues to be preached today by the tech-billionaire messiahs of Silicon Valley: global warming may be a scam perpetrated by feminists, Muslims, Jews, and communists but, just in case, let’s double down on every kind of drilling and fracking available to, sooner rather than later, be ready to terraform distant planets to take refuge on (provided, of course, our skin color and wallet size is the correct one).

In film theory, a long and rich ontological tradition from Jean Epstein and Siegfried Kracauer to Gilles Deleuze and Stanley Cavell has insisted that, rather than as a mimetic device for recording the world (*Abbild*) or as utopian model or compensatory fantasy (*Vorbild*), cinema should be understood first and foremost as imagination (*Einbildung*) in movement; a type of movement that is at the same time “the movement of thought, of affect and of image”.⁸ This entangled movement at the very core of film form, Adrian Ivakhiv observes, is remarkably similar to what Félix Guattari understands as *ecosophy*, namely: “an ethico-political articulation... between the three ecological registers (the environment, social relations and human subjectivity)”.⁹ As entangled movement and as a form of mutual repercussion between thought, affect and image, Ivakhiv concludes, cinema is also a mode of worldmaking, of *poiesis*, that “takes the shape of a world, a cosmos of subjects and objects, actors and situations, figures moving and the grounds they move upon”.¹⁰ This worldmaking is, in the first instance, of a “geomorphic” kind: it establishes a dimension of spatiality through which it distributes the values of here and there, of center and periphery, of ownership and alienness, by leaning on our own movement through the profilmic and material world from which it assembles its own. The world of film, moreover, has a “biomorphic”, or perhaps better: “animamorphic” dimension, since every displacement across this spatial matrix also brings something to life by way of its “animation”. Any material body, in cinema, is susceptible to being set in motion, whether physical or affective, and is therefore at least potentially animated, invested with a “soul”. And finally, this setting-in-motion that is the effect of framing, montage and camera

movements also invariably enters into a relationship of gazes which, in cinema, is the matrix of all social and intersubjective relations: an “anthropomorphic” dimension through which cinema produces (us), again and again, (as) human subjects, even if the diegetic bearer of this gaze is a monster or a machine. Tensed between materiality and affect, between the world-object of the geomorphic register and the world-subject of the anthropomorphic one, cinematic worldmaking occurs in the middle, the domain of animation that we could call “the biosphere”. It is there that the borders and entanglements between subjectivity and objecthood, between the sensible and the inert, are constantly negotiated and actualized.

If, according to Ivakhiv, worldmaking and filmmaking are thus essentially one and the same, how can we account, from and with cinema, for the *world-unmaking* that envelops our own living and dying? If, indeed, cinema as a cosmomorphic form is the only one capable of looking disaster in the eye (a term that, as Timothy Morton reminds us, is etymologically rooted in the fall, the becoming-evil, of a star: *dis-astron*),¹¹ what can it then teach us about the world’s becoming-unworldly, and also about the multiple forms of afterlife that insist on persisting beyond the end? Our question is not so much about the film industry’s amazing capacity of reassembling even the atomic mushroom back into the libidinal economy of the spectacle: about how films make us “stop worrying and love the bomb”, as Kubrick famously put it in *Dr. Strangelove*. Rather than to the apocalypse as culture-industrial commodity I suggest we entrust ourselves to the imaginative force (*Einbildungskraft*) of those “other cinemas” that have interrupted and complicated Hollywood’s cosmology practically since the medium’s inception, introducing through its fissures alternative image-sound ecologies: filmic “worlds” where anthropomorphic subjectivity ceases to be the measure of “ethico-political articulation”. It is here that I want to look for openings towards the vibrant materialities of existents and forces that – *pace* Amitav Ghosh – narrative realism knows only as background noise distracting us from foreground action.¹² It is in the dissident, counter-hegemonic zones of cinema, then, where we will look for other imaginations of finitude and survivance than the ones enshrined in the “geocratic grand narrative of the Anthropocene”,¹³ in Christophe Bonneuil’s and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz’s expression: imaginations of survivance not as the salvation, seconds before the Big Blast, when we will finally hand over the reins of “Spaceship Earth” – as *Anthropocene* (2018) by Edward Burtinsky, Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier implores us – to the enlightened pilots of science but, instead, as the domain of lives left over, of life as excess and remainder of a vanishing world.



Figure 1: Saline workers in *Araya*
(Margot Benacerraf, Venezuela/France, 1959)

Salt of the earth

Take *Araya*, for instance. A mere fifteen years after the images of the blast in the New Mexican desert, Margot Benacerraf's mesmerizing documentary (Venezuela 1959) returns to the figure of "explosion" to convey a different kind of terminal rupture in the intertwined temporalities of life and matter – in other words, the end of a "world". Here, however, this world is experienced as such precisely on account of its self-contained, insular character that sets it apart from the planetary dimension invoked by *Trinity 1945*. Its limits are those of the arid Venezuelan peninsula east of Caracas, facing Isla de Margarita, from which the film takes its title. Shot in dramatic black and white by Giuseppe Nisoli, highlighting the brightness and sharp contrasts between the white salt and the brown, semi-naked bodies of those who extract it by land and sea, the film anticipates the tone and mythical temporalities of literary magical realism in its construction of a cosmic narrative that encompasses nothing less than the origin and end of a world. From the very first shots narrating the formation, in remote times before the appearance of humans, of the salt-land from the interplay of sky and water, this *contredanse* of the elements is reflected in the rhythmic, pulsating editing sequence, the musical score by Guy Bernard and the poetic voice-over by José Ignacio Cabrujas. Together,

these three intertwined rhythms produce a “milieu” that the bodies of the peninsula’s salt workers and fishermen with their tools and accessories will inhabit like so many dancers who, day after day and from one generation to the next, repeat the gestures of a great cosmic ballet (see Figure 1). The fragile balance of this world of extremes hangs on the execution of this choreography (between the bodies and their material environment yet also, on the level of film form, between gesture, sound, and poetic voice).

This is why, when it finally does occur, the arrival of extractive capitalism’s machinery can only happen in the fashion of *Trinity 1945*, splitting in two the film’s time and space: as a sudden explosion that momentarily blinds and deafens us, disrupting the rhythmic weave which, until then, had tied together bodies and things; words, music and image. The arrival of excavators, trucks, dynamite, cranes, and hydraulic drills amounts to what Jason Moore calls an “ecological revolution”, destined at “finding new quantitative – and *qualitative* – means of appropriating the biosphere’s work/energy”.¹⁴ Signaled by a brisk rupture in filmic rhythm, ecological revolution here means the passage from one “historical nature”, produced by a particular regime of appropriation, to another: from the salt mine operated by a hyper-exploited workforce under conditions of precarious subsistence to the automated, industrial extraction of the underlying mineral layers and fuel reserves. Similar to what happens in “The Pulverized Mountain”, Carlos Drummond de Andrade’s seminal 1968 poem about the destruction of his native town’s largest peak by strip mining, this new historical nature literally *removes the middle ground*, the precarious balance between bodies and material elements that together composed the small “world” of Araya. Where, up until then, “modernity had appeared only as chronic absence”, as José Miguel Wisnik puts it in his compelling reading of Drummond’s poem, it suddenly “arrives in the form of catastrophe”.¹⁵

However, in the film just as in the poem, this same “absence of modernity”, preparing the ground, so to speak, for the narrative construction of its arrival as a sudden, catastrophic rupture, is in fact of a retrospective kind. It is being proclaimed through filmic and poetic languages that are in fact plainly contemporary with the very manufacturing of worldlessness they are denouncing. From the opening shots in *Araya*, the machinery of modernity is very much present, but in the mode of ellipsis. It is, of course, thanks to cranes, dollies and other gadgets that Benacerraf’s camera is able to frame the interactions between bodies and matter as unmediated, rhythmic interplay, all the while its own succession of pans and cuts between panoramic long shots and close-ups is sustained (as are the electronic elements that intervene

in the soundtrack) by the very same technological modernity that, on screen, “explodes” only towards the film’s very end. If *Araya* rests on the contrast between different temporalities, these not only clash but they are also interwoven with one another. On the level of the story, their relation is of a successive and cataclysmic kind, while on that of composition it is of a simultaneous and corrosive one. Instead of the sudden irruption of catastrophe (“Esta manhã acordo e/ não a encontro” – Today I wake up and/ cannot find it anymore, as Drummond says of his native mountain), from this second, actively disavowed vantage point things and bodies appear from the outset marked as vestiges and survivors, subject to what Rob Nixon has theorized as “slow violence”: a violence “that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporary scales”.¹⁶ These “long dyings”, Nixon concludes, tend to remain outside representational frameworks where they appear only as marked absences: in short, as ellipses. *Mundus immundus* – the theme of an “unworldly world” – refers to this paradoxical framework of enunciation where the “world” can be alluded to only in the past tense, on condition of disavowing the agents of its “long dying” that can only be registered elliptically, in the form of a dis-encounter (“today... I cannot find it anymore”). The explosion which, in the mode of catastrophe, ties the “after” of the signifier back to the before of the signified is, more than anything, a catastrophe of meaning. What it truly refers to is the radical disconnect between both sides of the divide: the impossibility of reinstating continuity between the narrated past and the present of enunciation. Ellipsis is the rhetorical master figure of *mundus immundus*, making each and every act of enunciation subject to an unspeakable that, rather than interrupting the chain of meaning, becomes itself the syntactic principle that subtends it.

There are other ways, of course, for cinema to engage with unworlding as underwriting its own mode of (de)composition. *Surire* by Bettina Perut and Iván Osnovikoff (Chile 2015) focuses, just as *Araya*, on a salt flat, this time located in the region of Arica-Parinacota, on the border between Chile and Bolivia. Part of the Lauca National Park (created in 1970 under the Allende government) and declared a World Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1983, to protect the different species of flamingos and the Andean rhea (*suri* in Aymara) from which the salt flat takes its name, and also an Indigenous Development Area, *Surire* is at the same time a zone of ulexite extraction – an extremely rare mineral used in the production of fiberglass and other optical materials – thanks to a special permit granted during the Pinochet dictatorship. In 2024, the Chilean state sued the mining company

operating the site for irreparable environmental damages, following several years in which no births of flamingo chicks had been recorded and the birds' mortality rate had increased dramatically.¹⁷

To capture this strange and conflictive juxtaposition between different types of "reserve" with a sacrifice zone of extractive capitalism,¹⁸ Perut and Osnovikoff move from the "expository" to the "observational" documentary (in Bill Nichols's classic typology).¹⁹ Instead of *Araya's* voice-over and nondiegetic musical soundtrack, *Surire* restricts itself to the ambient noise and speech of characters (almost never addressed to a camera that instead maintains its "fly-on-the-wall" stance even when filming an agonizing fly in extreme close-up). Yet "observation" remains possible here only thanks to constant changes of framing, depth of field and scale, as well as a soundtrack attuned to the various layers of noise and stillness coexisting in each of the salt flat's multiple dimensions. Similar to *Araya's* origin story of sky, water, and salt, *Surire* begins with an extreme close-up of the bubbles forming in the encounter between water, sand, air, salt, and underground chemical reactions, to immediately cut to a wide-angle panoramic view of the lagoon and the cordillera where only the drifting clouds' reflection on the water disturbs the stillness of the ensemble. But this shot of "all things together", we immediately realize, has been achieved only at the price of dislocating us in relation to the previous one, whose place in the frame (if it even has one) is now impossible to determine. It is an "establishing shot" no longer able to establish anything because, from its extreme distance (which is also the reason for the "harmony" of the landscape image) it also loses sight of practically all things moving through that same setting: human and animal bodies, machines, dust clouds, toxic overspill. Many of the frames in *Surire* – in addition to the extreme close-ups of various bodies and surfaces that reveal the environment's (quite literally) *microscopic* effects – engage in attempts of refocusing this frustrated establishing shot. Frequently taken from a distance with a telescopic lens and thus with a low depth of field, in many shots the area of sharpness is readjusted, sometimes repeatedly, as if to re-establish the relationship between figure and background that had been severed in the opening sequence (but failing time and again, as there is always something more, something this shot still cannot account for). One of these internal montage sequences, for instance, shifts focus from the flamingos standing in the middle of the lagoon to what, instead of a mound of earth or a pier in the distance, turns out to be a huge line of trucks queueing up on the road to the mine (the soundtrack, meanwhile, also approximates us to the engine noise which, initially, had seemed but a distant, ominous rumble).



Figure 2: Birds and machines dividing the image in *Surire*
(Bettina Perut/Iván Osnovikoff, Chile, 2015)

Surire doubles down on these readjustments of focus within one and the same shot with constant, cascading changes of framing. In one exemplary sequence, Perut and Osnovikoff cut from an image of a single truck on the road raising a cloud of dust to a larger frame that offers a view of several other vehicles making the same journey, and finally to a panoramic long shot of the army of trucks crisscrossing the valley like a column of ants. There is, in *Surire*, a constant concern with the position, focus length, and scale of the image, since none seems to be able on its own to find the right distance and depth of field to represent the salt flat in its totality, as an “order of things”. What Perut and Osnovikoff encounter in the Andes is, literally, *the end of landscape*: the cinematic sound-image comes up against its own incapacity to accommodate the different “worlds” that, rather than coexist, compete and clash with one another. There are at least three different “worldings” vying for our attention: wild nature, the pastoral landscape inhabited by the last Aymara herdsmen of the area with their llamas and their dogs, and the sacrifice zone of the mine and the roads crossing the territory like an arterial system. If between the first two there are points of contact and compatibility that, on a formal level, are expressed through shared frames between wild and domesticated animals, the third is the one that undercuts any possibility of a single totalizing, comprehensive image. Whenever the mine and its infrastructural extensions enter the frame, whatever else appears in the image is turned into an ominous, diffuse presence: that is, it takes on the form of an ellipsis, a marked elision. Even the constant correcting and refocusing of sharpness and depth of field cannot replace what the

extractive gaze has already lost sight of, turned into the invisible that separates things and bodies from one another (see Figure 2).

The questions I want to ask, then, are about the forms of disaster as conveyed through film, and about how those visual and sonic forms can become modes of thinking where words fail us. What the names of “Anthropocene”, “Climate Change”, “Hyperobject” and so many others barely call out is an abyss of the very symbolic order that contains them: something that is beyond words because it announces the silence and even erasure of them all. If, as Amitav Ghosh has surmised, “to think the Anthropocene will be to think in images”,²⁰ he does not merely encourage us to take refuge in visual forms where words fail us, where there are no longer any concepts capable of conveying the scale and nature of the disaster. To think in images also implies asking ourselves how images think, how they engage in forms of knowledge- and of worldmaking that rely on shade and volume, light and darkness, movement and stillness, deep and shallow focus, rather than on argumentative forms of persuasion, suspicion, or call to action. Thinking with images, as we will attempt to do here, is to draw out the critical work filmic images are already doing for us, by analyzing them not just on the level of form or composition but also by asking “what pictures want”, to paraphrase W. J. T. Mitchell’s provocative question.²¹ In a first instance, we will try to describe or gloss over what these images are showing or keeping from us, to then resume dialogue once more with the conceptual realm and with what it can scarcely name anymore. The movement of film, we shall insist, is already a way of thinking, in the same way that it is a way of imagining and affecting (and that these three movements are in fact one and the same).

Rather than engage in film criticism, then, here we will draw on cinema as itself a form of critique that thinks about our vanishing world by folding back onto its own cosmomorphic scripts. Once we will have provisionally grasped, in a first gloss on selected shots and sequences from particular films, the modes of thought that sustain their compositional forms, we will return these to the level of the conceptual: more specifically, we will be relating them to some of the most auspicious frameworks available today for approaching the catastrophic dimension that surrounds and separates us from each other and from our co-existents. It is these frameworks that the titles of the following chapters allude to: Capitalocene, Negrocene, Thanatocene, Afterlife. Don’t expect more than a summary account of each of these notions, however. What we will try to sketch out, instead, are the questions a cinematic thinking would put to them, and thus also to make them move, as it were, to the baseline of these questions. Neither film studies nor philosophy, then: we will, rather, choose the essay form as our

way of stirring up a confusion between those two, no less risky for being deliberate. But that is, in the end, the advantage of assuming ourselves as survivors, as existing in the afterlife, in *mundus immundus*: we no longer have much to lose.

South as method

In Lucrecia Martel's *Nuestra tierra* (*Landmarks*, 2025), which chronicles the decades-long efforts of an Indigenous community to come to terms with the murder of its leader on the hands of white landowners, a drone shot of the hills and shrublands that (as an old woman's voice-over tells us) once provided a place of refuge when the first colonizers arrived, is suddenly cut short by an abrupt bump in the camera's surveying movement, followed by a twirling and tumbling of sky and earth until, as our gaze hits the ground together with the drone, the screen turns black. The consequence of an accidental clash with a hawk during shooting, the drone's Icarus-like downfall also looks back to two of the film's earlier sequences. The first of these features satellite images of the earth as seen from space (courtesy of NASA whose logo is visible on the capsule spinning in the foreground), the second archival video footage – shot by one of the perpetrators – of the chief's murder during which, similarly, the hand-held camera had slipped from its owner's grip and continued recording, out of focus, before it finally fell to the ground. By including the drone accident in the film (and by combining it with the voice-over of a community elder reminiscing about centuries of displacement and settler-colonial violence), Martel not only finds a singularly eloquent mode of associating the individual act of violence with a larger, planetary dimension, a violence spanning the earth as a whole. More importantly even, the sequence also frames the chief's murder within what Elizabeth Povinelli calls "the ancestral catastrophe": the shattering of a community's living bond with their territory, brought about by conquest and colonization which, says Povinelli, is "in the past and in the present". Ancestral catastrophes "continue to emerge time and again from the depths of colonialism and racism, [bringing] environmental damage to the soil of the colonial sphere".²²

At the same time, and just as importantly, the drone hitting the ground also countersigns the satellite shot opening the film, quite literally bringing back down to earth the "planetary consciousness" these opening shots (set to the first stanza of Ariel Ramírez's *Misa criolla*: "Señor, ten piedad de nosotros" – Lord, have mercy on us) appear intent on making us party to. In crashing from sky to soil, from the species-being of "humanity as a geological force" Dipesh Chakrabarty

urges us to make the cornerstone of a “planet-centric thinking” to the *humus* of a ground shared by native community and their more-than-human kin, *Nuestra tierra* offers a complex reflection on the conflicting meanings of earth (“tierra”) as shared planetary habitat and as a territory under dispute.²³ Both of these meanings, moreover, could rightfully lay claim to the category of “world”, yet their different vantage points (the kinds of visual and sensorial regimes they summon forth) do not coexist harmoniously; rather, they will sooner or later clash with one another. The “falling sky” of Martel’s drone sequence – to paraphrase the title of Yanomami shaman-intellectual Davi Kopenawa’s homonymous book co-written with anthropologist Bruce Albert – is not just a pun on the hubris of a particular, neocolonial way of seeing. Rather, it embodies in the cinematic form itself *another* figure of the end of time, different from the one advanced by *Trinity 1945*. Ancestral catastrophe as the time when the sky will have fallen to the earth signals the end of a “world” that, as Peter Gow puts it in a commentary on *The Falling Sky*, “is not the Yanomami equivalent of our notions of nature or the environment, but rather a livable world for the Yanomami people”.²⁴

Martel’s film, then, takes flight (literally speaking) from the juridico-political dispute over the murder of an Indigenous land defender to ask what we mean when we speak of the end of the world (and who we mean by “we”). Is it the “we” of a “planetary consciousness” that transcends our species-being, even if only in the face of disaster as, say, in the slow-motion opening sequence of Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* (2011) featuring the agony of men and beasts alike? Or are “we”, in what we think are the ultimate border-images of when our future and that of our next-of-kin (birds, horses) will come to an end, merely reliving – or rather, re-dying – the nightmare of all those *past* ends-of-worlds imperial expansion and the emergence of global capitalism have wrought on our colonial others, animal and plant ancestors included? As Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro have intimated, in matters of “end-of-the-world” the “veritable experts [are] the Maya and all other indigenous peoples of the Americas [who] have a lot to teach us now that we are on the verge of a process in which the planet as a whole will become something like sixteenth-century America”.²⁵ But if, in fact, “our” imaginations of coming disaster (very few of which match the sophistication of *Melancholia*) are but the uncanny return of all those past, disavowed unworldings “we” know only too well, Danowski and Viveiros conclude, then “maybe it is the species and each of us individually that is split in two, the alien and the indigenous living side by side in the

same body: suppose a small shift in sensibility has suddenly made that self-colonization visible to us".²⁶

It is this "small shift in sensibility" the results of which, at the same time, are no less than momentous, that *Nuestra tierra* might be trying to work on us as we turn from the opening shots of "spaceship earth" – "Planeta Tierra" – to the bottom-up vantage point of a land ("tierra") that is not so much *ours* as it is *us*, a form of grounded community, because it encompasses not just space but also time. In this sense, the reverse shot to the satellite image of Planet Earth is not the drone crashing to the ground but rather the shot of a large community table on which an elderly woman has laid out her collection of family photographs: generations after generations of native men, women, and children as well as their houses, their animals, their instruments and sacred objects. A "planetary turn", then, but not just in Chakrabarty's sense of thinking "ourselves" beyond history, as geological force bearing on our shared astronomical realm but also, just as importantly, one that *turns the planet on its axis* so as to allow those singular places to appear where the meaning of land as an extended, living matrix of human and more-than-human kinships is under threat due to the workings of modern-colonial unworlding.

Martel's latest film, I suggest, therefore contains a methodological lesson, one the chapters that follow will attempt to flesh out. In its exploration of the afterlife of violence, *Nuestra tierra* performs a twofold and – at first sight – contradictory movement, at once "zooming out" towards the planetary dimension the chief's murder and the larger, ongoing colonial genocide against native peoples must be mapped into, whether in the guise of neo-extractive developmentalism or of the nakedly fossil-fascist fantasy of earth-rape ("Drill, baby, drill!"). And at the same time, urging us to tie back this stellar, literally cosmomorphic, way of seeing earth as our shared, endangered planetary realm, to the term's other (and to some extent opposite) meaning as ground, soil and what lies beneath, the entanglements of human and more-than-human community as well as their chthonic ancestors. Just as in the briskly interrupted drone shot in *Nuestra tierra*, coming down from our planetary high will be no easy or peaceful matter. Entering the singular realm of Indigenous world-endings and their afterlives (Danowski's and Viveiros's "small sensorial shift" to expose and expulse the alien in ourselves) will require, Martel seems to suggest, for us to let go of the devices of planetary seeing and thinking, of allowing them to shipwreck as they crash to the ground. To think of afterlife in the wake of an unworlding that has already started taking place implies planetary consciousness going south.

None other, then, will be our way of approaching the aporetic chrotopoe of unworlding's afterlife – *mundus immundus* – as we alight in a beachside condominium in Recife or a shantytown alley on the outskirts of Lisbon, in a village on the Guajira peninsula in Colombia or by the Gleba estuary in Guinea-Bissau. To a greater or lesser degree, the films whose worldings and unworldings will provide our temporary home for thinking about disaster and its afterlives are situated on the margins of the “atlas of world cinema”, in Dudley Andrew's expression.²⁷ They are radically “neo-regionalist” insofar as they take us outside not just the planetary geographies of the kind of “world cinema” epitomized by films such as Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* (2006) – or, in arguably less pretentious fashion and, thus, also endowed with ironical self-awareness of their neocolonial globalism, the *Bourne Identity* or even the *James Bond* franchise – but also of the kinds of *national* cinema Andrew still has in mind, leaning on Fredric Jameson's classic (and controversial) reflections on the constitutively allegorical dimension of “third-world literatures” where even the most intimate is immediately tied to “the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society”.²⁸ On an “atlas” such as Andrew's, most of the films discussed here would be almost as hard to locate as the hamlet of Bacurau in Kléber Mendonça Filho's and Juliano Dornelles's homonymous film (2019) on Google Maps, having been erased by the authorities to become a sacrifice zone, locals included, for the benefit of US-American human-safari tourists. Unlike *Bacurau*, though, which reinscribes this allegorical, third-worldist dimension even while pretending to erase it, many of the films featuring in this book really are off the radar. Without necessarily qualifying for consideration as “weird cinema”, the spaces and times these films take us into tend not to feature on your average atlas of world cinema, insofar as they don't allow us any shortcut to a national “public culture and society”, third-world or otherwise, but rather demand our full attention to their singularity, their here-and-nowness, because the nature of their relation to a larger “world” has become opaque, enigmatic, perhaps even inexistent. In fact, their being out of sync with a “world” on the atlas of which they could still be placed and, thus, put in relation with other areas in terms of centers and peripheries, is one of the few shared characteristics of the films that will concern us here. To catch a glimpse of the afterlives of disaster, they seem to suggest, we must allow ourselves to be taken out of “the world”. The ride is almost certain to get bumpy: buckle up.

1 Capitalocene

In the final sequence of *Aquarius* (2016), Kléber Mendonça Filho's second full-length feature, the protagonist Clara – played, as an older woman, by Sônia Braga and, thirty years younger and recently recovered from a serious illness, by Bárbara Colen – visits the offices of the construction company that bought up her entire building except for the apartment she lives in. Having just received notice of the building's irrecoverable condition, due to the termite nests sourced from demolished properties that the company planted all over the empty units, Clara confronts Dom Geraldo, the owner of Bonfim Construction, and his grandson Diego, in charge of “the project”. When these already sense victory seeing Clara, suitcase in hand and ready, it appears, to finally pick up her check and leave Aquarius Building, she has other ideas: “I survived cancer. It's been more than thirty years”, she tells them, “and these days I've been thinking: instead of *having* cancer, I'd rather be *giving* it”. Upon which she proceeds to open her suitcase and scatter the infested wood on the conference table. Mendonça Filho cuts from the real estate moguls' expression of alarm to the termites entering and leaving their tunnels while we hear, instead of their movement in the crumbling wood (as in the Gothic sequence of their discovery in the building), the music that had already accompanied the opening credits featuring historical postcards of Recife and the beach neighborhood of Boa Viagem where the story takes place. It is a song by Taiguara (the most censored singer-songwriter in Brazilian history), titled “Hoje” (Today) but recorded in 1968, prior even to the narrative past Clara's words bring back to the table: “Today/ I carry on my body the marks of my time, / my despair, the life of a moment, / the rift, the hunger, the flower, the end of the world”.²⁹

Aquarius addresses through the medium of film, as played out in the relation between bodies and the city, the tense dynamic between *immundus* and *afterlife*. By *immundus*, what I am referring to is, in a broader sense, the increasingly vertiginous collapse of networks of reciprocity, antagonism and complementarity among existents that, in their interplay, make up the “world” as extended semiosis and as habitable environment. At the same time, and in a narrower sense, I will also use the term to refer to certain forms of interruption or withdrawal of cinematic worldmaking, that is: to a rift between the geo- and biomorphic dimensions of a film and the anthropomorphic dimension, one that complicates and conspires against our “inhabiting” of this

onscreen universe. In some cases, this difficulty of inhabiting what, therefore, also fails to offer itself to us as a world, is established from the outset, as in Perut's and Osnovikoff's *Surire*. Elsewhere, as in *Aquarius*, we experience it only gradually, eventually losing our footing in what, at the beginning, we still took for granted in its solid, immutable there-ness, as a "world" sustaining the action that takes place in it. From this outright refusal or gradual corrosion of the filmic world, radically singular spaces and times emerge that can no longer be inscribed in larger units ("worlds"). We could think of this cinema of singularities as "neo-regionalist", not just for how it clings to the concrete and particular but also for the way in which – as in Latin American literary regionalism of the twentieth century – these emerging singularities are closely associated with an intensifying extractive matrix and the collapse it visits on living milieus.³⁰ What we will call "afterlife", then, has to do with the ways in which films, despite everything, urge us to linger in times and spaces that resist our inhabiting or where, little by little, we are made to lose our footing. Afterlife is the mode in which certain films teach us to endure in the desert of meaning.

With the notion of "Capitalocene", Jason W. Moore compels us to think the "double internality" between the web of life and the capitalist system of production. Instead of an external environment and repository of resources (Marx's "free gifts"), what we call nature – says Moore – is in fact the historical mode of mutual entanglement that is being constantly actualized in the form of a "*world-ecology*, joining capital, power and nature".³¹ Therefore, the value of the commodity responds not just to the struggle between capital and labor but also to the constant appropriation of what capitalism needs to "find" in the form of "Cheap Nature": foods, fuels, human and nonhuman work/energy, "raw" materials. These, of course, are not simply out there waiting to be plucked, but must be *produced* at all times as *the other of the commodity*. The "Great Frontier [...] had to be imagined, conceptualized, and seen", Moore points out, through the combined effects between "tools and power, knowledge and production [...] specifically organized to treat the appropriation of global space as the basis for the accumulation of wealth in its specifically modern form: capital".³² In the expanded field of world-ecology, the crises and transformations of capitalism not only represent changes in the regime of accumulation in terms of the biopolitical organization of the capital/labor relation (Taylorism, Fordism, "semicapitalism", etc.) but also and above all, as "a repertoire of strategies for *appropriating* the unpaid work/energy of humans and the rest of nature outside the commodity system".³³ The extractive frontiers – the "colonial margins" but also "reproductive

labor” and other areas of violent capture and appropriation of the living – thus recover their centrality as sources of “ecological surplus value” that must compensate, time and again, for the effects of cumulative crisis that the capitalist regime cannot resolve internally. But then, Moore suggests, the moment of implosion or planetary entropy that technopolitical discourse is naming today with the notion of the Anthropocene would correspond, rather, to the “end of Cheap Nature” and therefore to “the limits of capitalism as *oikeos*”, a crisis arising from “the tension between capital’s efforts to control and commensurate extra-human nature, and the latter’s co-evolutionary capacity to elude and resist that control”.³⁴

Apartment complex

Interweaving political and social conflicts with bodily plots of illness and healing as well as with nonhuman forces of production-destruction, the ending of *Aquarius* offers a compelling image of the Capitalocene as an age of entanglement between capital and the web of life it colonizes, or rather: phagocytizes. Let us quickly recall the film’s plot. Right from the outset, Mendonça Filho’s camera alternates between different spatio-temporal layers, panning from the reefs on Boa Viagem beach to the group of youngsters arriving by car to smoke a joint, then back to the coastal avenue and the apartment building where people are already waiting for them at a party. The year: 1980, the song playing on the car stereo: Queen, “Another One Bites the Dust”. Only somewhat later, on the trio’s arrival at the apartment where Aunt Lúcia is throwing a party for her seventieth birthday, we realize the irony of this musical selection: the short-haired one who made her brother and in-law listen to the track did not in fact bite the dust but survived cancer, after long and painful therapy (as an emotional Adalberto, her husband, will tell us and the other guests at toasting time).

And it is again towards Boa Viagem beach that Clara sets out, thirty-five years later and with a long black mane of hair, following a fade-out from the party and the dancers, some of whom we will meet again either in the flesh or as ghosts (including Adalberto, who will have died seventeen years ago). The beach, for its part, now appears besieged, on one side, by a phalanx of high-rises and on the other, by sharks whose lurking presence we are warned about by large signs in Portuguese and English, and also by Roberval (Iranderh Santos), the friendly coast guard who reluctantly escorts Clara out into the tide. The building – no longer painted pink but pale blue – also shows signs of time’s passing: not only is it overshadowed now by the neighboring

glass-and-steel towers but Clara's apartment (whose collection of records, books, posters and bric-à-brac the camera pans along as if caressing them) is also the last to remain inhabited. All others are empty and in possession, garages included, of the Bonfim company whose owners – Dom Geraldo and his grandson Diego (Humberto Carrão), recently graduated from a fancy US business school – show up soon enough at Clara's door to deliver their “new and improved” purchase offer. With, in addition, some very good news (as the handsome, chatty apprentice tycoon tells her): the project will now bear the name of the building that previously existed in its place – meaning, of course, the very same one that Clara still insists on calling home: “Aquarius”. Things, from there, cannot fail to go south: following her refusal to sell, Clara will suffer the harassments, first, of a nocturnal mass orgy in the apartment above and then the occupation, every Sunday, of the entire place by a Pentecostal church, even before two repentant company employees tell her about the insect life eating away at the building's structure.

Rather than, as Betsy Jones Moreland's character in Roger Corman's homonymous B-Movie apocalypse, the last woman on earth – whose “possession” sets up a life-and-death struggle between the remaining males, both obviously white and US-American–,³⁵ Clara is the last woman of a world on the verge of vanishing as soon as she lets down her guard: a world subtly tied through musical and artistic references to the years of “democratic transition” in Brazil and its revival of pre-coup struggles for justice and redistribution, soon to be crushed again by neoliberalism and the debt crisis. *Aquarius* makes use of a very specific repertoire, a kind of narrative and scenic architecture that film theorist Pamela Robertson Wojcik calls “the apartment complex”. Tracing its ramifications from romantic comedy (*The Apartment* – Billy Wilder, 1960) and thriller (*Rear Window* – Alfred Hitchcock, 1954) to psychological horror (*Rosemary's Baby* – Roman Polanski, 1968), the apartment setting, Robertson Wojcik argues, “not only motivates the action but projects and delimits a character's identity in terms of gender, ethnicity, and class”.³⁶ Frequently, it fulfills that role as a kind of initiation site where the fortunes of the couple-to-be are put to the test (*Breakfast at Tiffany's* – Blake Edwards, 1961) or become entangled in the web of ghostly presences inhabiting the space (*Le locataire* – Roman Polanski, 1976). Whatever its genre affiliation, Robertson Wojcik concludes, the conflict almost always revolves around the new kind of subject to whom the apartment (as a housing unit characteristic of the post-WW II city) provides a place that is both intimate and closely interwoven with its environment: the young, single woman, about to start a professional career

(from which, with luck, she will be “rescued” by the male neighbor, to cruise onward into marriage and suburban bliss). Despite its affiliations with the supernatural (not altogether absent in *Aquarius*, as in the dream sequence where Juvenita, the childhood maid, wanders the nightly corridors searching for the pearl necklace she allegedly stole from Clara’s mother), the apartment complex is also a kind of seismograph, a socio-sexual X-ray, staging in the format of a chamber piece the tensions and fractures that run through the city at large. So too in *Aquarius*: even though, as friends and foes insist, Clara is “no longer of age” for this kind of housing, her apartment and the building as a whole reveal themselves as a microcosm traversed by multiple plots and experiences – starting with Ladjane, the current maid and resident of the working-class neighborhood of Brasília Teimosa, with whom Clara, as her sister-in-law puts it at a family gathering, maintains the kind of bond typical of the progressive middle class, seamlessly combining affection and overexploitation (Ladjane’s son, recently killed by a drunk driver, is yet another of the ghosts wandering through the apartment and the film).

The apartment complex, in other words, revolves around the takeover of domestic space – of “intimacy”, almost always of a female kind – by a foreign body that takes possession little by little of its nuts and bolts. In current cinema, a host of films have incorporated this generic framework, the main change being the replacement of the demonic emissary who takes charge of its host’s life with an infiltration from the social margins, from the “underworld” that rises to the surface. In Beto Brant’s *O Invasor (The Trespasser, 2001)* – a key film of Brazilian cinema’s “renaissance” of the late nineties and early 2000s – the hitman hired by two São Paulo real estate agents to get rid of a competitor enters (via the teenage daughter of one of the partners) into their peaceful bourgeois family life, threatening to reveal the terrible secret that underwrites it. At the same time, he also gleefully takes possession, one by one, of the benign white patriarch’s symbols of distinction (bed, car, house) to the point of leaving him with no other choice than to assume in his own hands the homicidal violence he had intended to outsource. In *Parasite (2019)* by Bong Joon-ho – almost twenty years later of ferocious neoliberalism – it is an entire family of underworldlings, literally of sewer folk, who encrust themselves with increasingly ingenious subterfuges in their hosts’ lives and mansion (here, too, the teenage daughter is the first target of attack). Now, however, the invaders’ path is no longer clear, as it was for their Brazilian relative: this time, the house turns out to have already been taken over by other parasites (who have built their habitat in basement tunnels, similar to the termites swarming in the



Figure 3: The apartment as setting and as character in *Aquarius*
(Kléber Mendonça Filho, Brazil, 2016)

structures of Clara's apartment building), a discovery that unleashes a life-and-death struggle between both parties for the right to occupy the space where the crumbs will fall from the bosses' table.

What, then, are the elements that *Aquarius* introduces into this generic framework, at once intimate and urban, and how do they situate us on the geo-political scale of the Capitalocene? As Robertson Wojcik explains, the apartment in cinema serves at once as a narrative matrix and as a kind of proto-character to whom, in certain instances, the point of view is delegated, whether onto its various exteriors (the city or the backyard connecting it to other apartments-microcosms) or onto events that take place inside it. So too in *Aquarius*: at different moments, the camera pans over the groups and individuals walking, playing sports or making out along the coastal avenue and the beach. We initially attribute this gaze to Clara until we find her asleep in the hammock of her small terrace when that same pan "returns", following a 180-degree turn, to the interior of her apartment in pursuit of some noise from inside the building. The apartment establishes, in this way, a parallel viewpoint, of ominous origin, that does not correspond so much to the threat that hangs over Clara and her home (identified right from the outset with the real estate developers) and rather to the building itself as the addressee and corresponding part of an affective relationship with its human inhabitant (see Figure 3). Instead of a mere setting, the apartment becomes an actor in its own right, the bearer of a gaze: the material becomes agential or, in Ivakhiv's terms, the film's geo- or objectomorphic dimension becomes entangled with the anima- and even subjectomorphic dimension.³⁷ And this animation of

the material is replicated through an emphasis on the materiality of bodies, first and foremost Clara's own, which, just like the building where she lives, bears "the marks of her time" (her mastectomy scar will eventually find an ominous counterpart in the zigzagging lines traced by the termites on the upper apartment's walls).

But the apartment, at the same as it challenges the figure-background dichotomy, also imposes on the narrative a particular space-time pattern, where the environment (the city, and even the earth and the sea) makes its presence felt through successive "appearances", within the four walls of the apartment (as well as in the hallways, the garage and the surrounding units), of multiple emissaries from that same exterior. The apartment provides both a stage that the representatives of the outside world "enter" and "exit" in genuinely theatrical fashion, and it functions as a viewing and listening platform whose fortifications towards that same exterior are under constant threat of sonic or visual perforation. Just as the main character, the film maintains with the broader environment of the city and the narrower environment of the home a relationship of alternating advances and retreats that together provide the scaffolding for its narrative.

Just as the urban environment materializes, then, through successive "entries" into Clara's apartment (in addition to the "invasions" spearheaded by Diego, she also receives visits from children and family, from a pair of journalists who interview her about her musicological career, and even from a young for-rent gigolo), her own outings to the beach and the city also intertwine her life and her body with these environments that, just as Clara herself, "bear the marks of their time". From the beach where, in addition to the shark warnings, high-rises have mushroomed, to the city center where Clara, upon arriving for her appointment with a journalist friend, finds herself confused at the entrance of an old cinema now converted into an appliance warehouse, Recife appears to us less as an inert material environment than as a suffering body of which Clara's apartment represents some kind of organ or even of consciousness or "soul". The point of connection between this extended body and that of Clara herself are, precisely, the more-than-human co-existents: the termites that, taken from their hiding places and brought to the business table by Clara, occupy the final frames, but also the sharks, invisible except for their black silhouette on the signs prohibiting access to the water.

Indeed, in the period in which the film's first part film is set – 1980 – this danger did not yet exist. The first fatal shark attack was only recorded in 1992; two years later, the death toll had already climbed to ten. At the time of writing, 67 shark attacks have been registered in Greater Recife, with 26 fatalities.³⁸ The predators' increased

presence coincides with the construction, a few miles south of the city, of the industrial port of Suape, the largest in the Brazilian Northeast, dedicated mainly to grain and fuel exports, which was inaugurated the same year that the first accident occurred. The giant pier, along with the excavation of drainage channels to facilitate access for large transoceanic vessels, impacted on the coastal currents, deepening the cleft that separates Recife's beaches from the more distant reefs and sandbanks. This, in turn, attracted large quantities of rays, the preferred prey of sharks which, at the same time, arrived in the area in greater numbers due to their tendency to accompany boats to the shore. The destruction of wetlands and lagoons, whether due to the construction of the megaport or the opening of new construction areas along the lucrative coastal strip, have continuously decimated ecosystems where many species of fish and shrimp breed, pushing them towards the Jaboatão River (which meets the sea close to the beaches of southern Recife) and thereby attracting maritime predators even closer to the coast.³⁹ Today, the beaches of Recife have become the most dangerous area in the entire South Atlantic, with more than half of shark attacks in all of Brazil having occurred in the city.

Aquarius, right from the title, which invokes this oceanic ecosystem only to turn (as does the camera after the first shots of waves breaking on the reefs) towards Clara's building and apartment, uses ellipsis as its predominant mode of reference to this greater outside. The sea, just as it does for the city itself, at once "frames" and remains mostly outside onscreen action. This, of course, is precisely how "apartment complex" narratives tend to at once allude to and remove themselves from, the larger framework of the city. Mendonça Filho doubles down on this elliptical mode of reference extending it to the terrestrial and maritime environment, as they intersect with, and reinforce, the entangled plotlines of speculative urbanization and extractive capitalism. Indeed, the use of intertitles to separate the film's narrative segments ("Clara's Love", "Clara's Cancer") showcases this elliptical mode of reference, repeatedly confusing our expectations about what is going to happen. At the same time, they also anticipate the assemblage of disjoint elements Clara's performative act in the final sequence will bring to its dramatic climax. Her announcement of "giving cancer" to the real estate developers is at once a declaration of war and one of survivance: between word and action (scattering the infested wood on the table), she puts into practice the very kind of entanglement her speech-act is proclaiming. *Giving* cancer – and thus, ceasing to *have* it, as an individualized victim, a "patient" – is to connect it to a larger web of relations and thus to imagine a form of afterlife, a way of sharing finitude.

The final sequence of *Aquarius* confronts us with *an act of radical impatience*. It stages the (performative) declaration of someone who has resolved to survive. Survival, or afterlife (in the double sense of staying alive and of assuming life's own condition in the Capitalocene as remainder and excess), is what is being announced as well as put into practice here in the act of returning to those who are its very agents, the unworlding of the world: *mundus immundus*. In bringing the "infestation" back to the very site from which it originated – the "conference table" where "deals are struck" – Clara confronts the speculators with their own parasitic condition, and thus also with the fact that, for better or worse, they are themselves bound up with the lives they invade and phagocytize in an inescapable dying-in-common. To "give cancer" is to expose (to "put on the table") this shared condition between the agents and victims of disaster, albeit not to offer a truce, much less a common cause. Quite the contrary, it is a declaration of war, of the war of and over the future: of the world's unworlding.

Cancer and capitalism

As a performative act, Clara's "giving" of cancer is not just another of the metaphors of the disease that Susan Sontag, on the eve of the HIV-Aids crisis, associated with a modern politics of extermination.⁴⁰ Rather, the assemblage between language, gesture and vibrant matter (insects, rotten and polished wood) that Clara sets in motion is of an intra-active kind, to draw on a concept coined by Karen Barad to rethink performativity "not [as] an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words" but rather in "an agential realist elaboration [that] allows matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming, in its ongoing intra-activity".⁴¹ For Barad, "matter is not a support, location, referent, or source of sustainability for discourse" but is itself endowed with agency and therefore also with historicity, to the effect that discourse and materiality are not in a position of mutual exteriority but of reciprocal affection: "[D]iscursive practices are specific material (re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted".⁴² That is, unlike a metaphor (a type of figuration), an intra-action is a mode of intertwining that does not reduce the thing to the status of a signifier but maintains the non-coincidence between body and sign at the same time as it insists on their mutual imbrication: "Discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to one another; rather, the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity. But nor are they reducible to one another. The relationship between the

material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment”.⁴³ Therefore, “all bodies, not merely ‘human’ bodies, come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity – its performativity”.⁴⁴

If the “world”, then, does not forego its performative iteration but instead has its being in an infinite chain of intra-actions, then the conjunction between illness and speculative urbanism that Clara “enacts” in the final sequence of *Aquarius* is but one of many manifestations of the Capitalocene as “double internality” between capitalism and nature that make up a world-ecology in catastrophic crisis. The fact that this dimension features in Mendonça Filho’s film only in elliptical fashion, as the ominous background of a “domestic drama”, does not diminish its importance, on the contrary. The image world of the Capitalocene, Jennifer Fay proposes, “is not devastation, but the persistent routines of everyday, first-world, middle-class life and the transnational industries and military infrastructures that support it”.⁴⁵ Being set right in this routinized middle-class world, where the ominous cracks and stains of disavowed catastrophe are starting to proliferate, *Aquarius* introduces us to a form of non-metaphorical reflection on illness and “environmental crisis” (the becoming-uninhabitable of the world-ecology of late capitalism) and on the politics of survivance triggered by their intra-active entanglement.

The Marxist tradition has reflected on the sanitary and environmental effects of capitalism almost from the outset. Already Friedrich Engels argued that, far from being just a side effect, the epidemic nature of diseases such as tuberculosis, diphtheria, cholera and whooping cough among the English working class as a consequence of urban sanitary conditions that amounted to a daily mass homicide, was a structural and necessary factor in generating and maintaining the exploitative relationship between capital and labor.⁴⁶ For his part, as John Bellamy Foster has shown, Marx drew on the geochemical studies of Justus von Liebig about the depletion of soils due to an incipient agroindustry, to theorize about the “metabolic rift”, the non-reciprocal – indeed, extractivist – relationship capitalism introduced between human action and “external nature”.⁴⁷ Over the last fifty years, the concentration of wealth and consequent widening of the social gap – since 1960, global inequality indices have multiplied at least threefold⁴⁸ – has further highlighted this pathogenic nature of capitalism. Currently, chronic diseases are the leading cause of death in the world (63 percent versus 27 percent for communicable diseases in 2008); in Europe, the incidence of childhood cancer has increased by 35 percent over the last thirty years.⁴⁹ Deaths from workplace accidents have grown exponentially following the outsourcing of manufacturing to the Global South, while agrochemicals and global

warming have practically turned uninhabitable vast areas of the interior of the United States and the South American soybean belt. In the Pacific islands, in addition to the health catastrophe caused by floods and tsunamis, cases of trauma and mental illness related to climate events have increased dramatically.⁵⁰ In Brazil, in 2023 the incoming Lula government declared a health emergency in the autonomous Yanomami territory, part of the state of Roraima where Bolsonaro had won the presidential runoff in a landslide, in the face of a wave of child malformations and deaths due to mining raids and mercury contamination of rivers, malnutrition, diarrhea and malaria.⁵¹

The philosopher Byung-Chul Han maintains that “what we call growth today is really a carcinogenic proliferation bereft of any goal of its own. We are experiencing an ecstasy of production and growth that resembles a death drive”.⁵² Finance capitalism, Han suggests, having turned into a self-referential system of pure probabilistic calculation, has brought to new extremes the “denial of death as absolute loss” that is at its origin.⁵³ Money (in its original form as amulet or medallion) is nothing but the sublimated blood of the sacrificial animal providing the patient with immunity against death; yet such negation implies at the same time a pact with death, one that has to be reaffirmed in each subsequent transaction in order to postpone the collection of the debt thus contracted. We are faced, then, with a new kind of death drive, Han concludes, different from the Freudian one (of a biological nature, as the immanent tendency of every living thing to return to the inert state from which it emerged). Late capitalism, by contrast, has elevated the Un-Dead into the guiding principle of a zombie-like life, a life that evades death so as not to confront its own striking resemblance to it: “The self-alienation of humanity has probably reached the degree that allows it to enjoy its own annihilation as an aesthetic pleasure. What Walter Benjamin said at some point about fascism is valid today for capitalism”.⁵⁴

If Han’s association between cancer and capitalism is still of a figurative kind, for Canadian sociologist John McMurtry we have literally arrived today at “the cancer stage of capitalism”. For McMurtry, “the global economic disorder [is] carcinogenic in all the key characteristics of the disease”, since it will inevitably lead to “life-system collapse at the social level of life-organization”.⁵⁵ There are two aspects to this convergence. On the one hand, cancer is the metabolization of capitalism’s regime of production by way of the carcinogenic substances we consume, be it in the form of commodities (cigarettes, alcohol, junk food) or by being exposed to the toxic effects of their manufacture as in Louisiana’s “cancer alley” or in the mercury-poisoned surroundings of open-sky mines. On the other hand, the capitalist regime itself

has, according to McMurtry, experienced a mutation over the last fifty years that transformed it into the functional equivalent of the disease, in addition to an active agent of its propagation. If, in classical capitalism, the commodity was still the mediating element between successive instances of accumulation of money ($\$ \Rightarrow C \Rightarrow \1), in late capitalism even this “fetishization” of the real relations of production is absorbed by the proliferation of money itself in the form of derivatives, futures, hedging, etc. – that is, by a ghostly relationship of pure self-referentiality. This dematerialized regime of accumulation that McMurtry calls the money sequence ($\$ \Rightarrow \$1 \Rightarrow \$2 \Rightarrow$) maintains the same parasitic relationship with the bodies and physical substances it puts into circulation that cancer does with the cellular tissue it invades and destroys in order to self-propagate. Devoid of “life-function” (that is, ridding itself of the question of social reproduction which Taylorism and Fordism still had to contend with), “the self-multiplying money-to-more-money sequences [...] are carcinogenic in their nature”.⁵⁶ Cancer and capitalism are immersed in a kind of feedback loop to the effect of turning even the immune functions of living things against themselves and converting them into forces of phagocytation.

As literary theorist Joseph Vogl points out, this critique of “financialization” predates capitalism itself and already emerges in classical thought. In the Aristotelian polemic on the art of accumulation (*chrēmatistiké*), money appears as an unnatural ingrowth in the cycle of *oikonomia* governed, instead, by a balanced relationship between needs and available goods. Chrematistics breaks open this circular time of mutual obligations, which tied the economy to politics and to the life cycle of individuals and the community at large, replacing it with an open temporality devoid of limits. The time of money is an anti-political temporality since, as a deferral of the counterpart to an indefinite future, it transcends the citizen pact sustaining the *pólis* as an *autárkeia* or community of patrimonial households. And it does so by way of monstrous delegation to an object – the coin – of the procreative power of the citizen-patriarch. Chrematistics is an occult science that subverts and phagocytizes the well-being of bodies and of the social body; its deferred future cannot but lead to the ruin of the *pólis* itself.⁵⁷

According to Vogl, modern political economy surges as an attempt to show, against such critiques that gained renewed traction after the introduction, towards the end of the eighteenth century, of banking obligations detached from effective gold reserves, that the market is not the ruin of politics but its very salvation. From eighteenth-century theories based on Puritan moral philosophy and new physical and astronomical paradigms, about *homo oeconomicus* and the market

as the balanced sum of individual interests, to postwar ordoliberal thought, the marketplace is where the laws of nature are spontaneously and providentially enacted in the form of a rational ordering of the relationships the human species maintains with itself and with the world. Just as humanistic theodicy that had attempted to supply rational proof for the existence of God, liberal “oikodicy” has a markedly tautological character. At the same time that it expresses “the conviction that commercial events represent an exemplary area of order, balance, integration mechanisms, allocations endowed with meaning, and thus of social rationality itself”,⁵⁸ political economy also proclaims itself as the legislative instance over these same processes and, therefore, endowed with a prescriptive capacity. “The concept of the market is [...] model and program of truth at the same time, from which follows the mission of turning into reality the very laws of the market themselves”.⁵⁹

Just as Han and McMurtry, Vogl attributes to the system logic of capitalist theory and practice a tendency of “autopoietic closure [...] according to which each payment is made on condition of the possibility of an open chain of future payments”.⁶⁰ That is, it no longer *compensates* for a service performed or a merchandise received but rather *anticipates* a debt yet to be satisfied. Immersed in self-referential circularity, economic theory and practice of the last half-century have conducted a semiotic turn where the sign goes from indicating the relative position of bodies and objects in dynamics of supply and demand to marking the *temporal* relationship between cascading futures. From the vantage point of an economy essentially founded on credit, the present value is determined exclusively by the margin of expectability of future values. In this colossal barraging operation against the contingencies of the physical world (a “denial of death”, in Han’s terms), computing risk scenarios through increasingly complex algorithms allows the future to be subsumed as late capitalism’s ultimate extractive frontier. As if to confirm Marx’s *dictum* on the “annihilation of space by time”,⁶¹ late capitalism has modeled time after the example of visual landscape as a form of spatial capture: now, “the vanishing point is found in a future beyond the future [...] The process of effective risk displacement works only if each future yet to be fulfilled can be extended towards yet another scenario of futurity”.⁶² Hence, this time, the specter that haunts the screens of Wall Street and its satellites surges not from the unredeemed past but from a future already exhausted in its reserves of potentiality. The recent financial cataclysms, Vogl concludes, demonstrate the exhaustion of time as the sole resource for a regime that knows no other option than ever-accelerating flight forward.

This gradual abstraction of the regime of accumulation from any material anchorage is, of course, nothing but the index of the irreparable damage it inflicts on the material world and on the bodies therein (the fantasies of intergalactic escape on which our “anarcho-capitalist” billionaires spend fortunes equivalent to the budget of entire subcontinents are proof, if any were needed, that this rabble know perfectly well what they are on to). As feminist theorist Márcia Tiburi succinctly puts it, capitalism today “does not merely aim to abuse the bodies it takes hold of to maintain itself or to violate the ecosystems on which it depends while holding on to its fantasy of infinity but it aims, rather, to destroy the world, which also implies destroying itself”.⁶³ The notion of the unworldly or “immund” (*l'immonde*) that Jean-François Lyotard associates with the landscape form, as that which exceeds the visual order of the painting and, therefore, must be relegated – literally “abjected” – beyond the “horizon” or vanishing point (which is, at the same time, the frame of reference that organizes the entire field of the visible) has morphed into the temporal matrix of late capitalism in relation to a future mortgaged in advance. This relationship, the only one capital still maintains with the material and the living, is one of pure destructiveness since it opens, says Lyotard, a zone of “the implosion of forms themselves”, in the face of which “the mind fails”.⁶⁴

The concept of “Wasteocene” advanced by Marco Armiero sums up this unworlding drive on the part of contemporary capitalism: one that, as *Aquarius* suggests, has now spilled over from the extractive frontiers to the urban abodes of the middle classes themselves. Wasteocene names the intra-active processes that yield an increasing number of disposable bodies and places: a sacrifice zone that already encompasses most of the Earth’s surface and its existents. Refocused from the terrestrial soil we walk on, Armiero suggests, the geospheric notion of “climate crisis” finds its organospheric counterpart in a network of socio-ecological relations destined to render living substances and bodies disposable. And it is this regime of “destructive production”⁶⁵ or of “slow violence” and not the material fact of the discarded, wasted body that we must turn our attention to: “Wasting is a social process through which class, race and gender injustices become embedded into the socio-ecological metabolism producing gardens and dumps, healthy and sick bodies, pure and contaminated places”.⁶⁶ Abjection and disgust are the affect dynamics of a “logic that unites humans and nonhumans in its production of wasted lives and places”, and in which “global capitalism acts as a parasite, invading the productive tissues of communities, squeezing the most out of them, and fleeing as soon as the margins for profit become too small, but not without leaving a long lasting legacy of toxicity”.⁶⁷

Making something or someone disposable requires, therefore, a systemic and violent action of cutting them off from any kind of reciprocal relationship, to the point of making them an other to themselves: from the slave plantations to the “cancer alleys” of toxic agroindustry that, as in the American south, are frequently located in the exact same places. At the antipodes of these “othering practices” are the “multi-species liberation alliances” that arise from what Armiero calls commoning practices.⁶⁸ Instead of a relationship of consumption and othering that generates disposable bodies and places, commoning practices focus on the reproduction and regeneration of resources and communities, enacting modes of reciprocity that, says Armiero, often arise from the “epiphanies of the Wasteocene”: “revelatory moments which open a fracture in the normalizing structure by exposing the other side of the wasting line”.⁶⁹ The ending of *Aquarius*, in which Clara makes common cause with the termites, appropriating the “othering practices” of the enemy, could be thought of as just such a moment of revelation of the “other side of the wasting line”. It is an epiphanic moment in which, against all expectations, a possibility of doing-in-common emerges by way of intra-action: a multispecies alliance of liberation in the Capitalocene.

Afterlife and the uncommons

As an intra-active performance that articulates matter, multispecies vitalities and the struggle for a habitable space in a single becoming, the ending of *Aquarius* represents an epiphany of the Wasteocene: a revelation – an exposure to the senses – of the rift tearing at the seams of a world gone to waste. As such, it allows us (as Lyotard puts it, referring to the abyss on which painterly landscape is founded) “a glimpse of the inhuman and/or the immund (*l'immonde*)”.⁷⁰ Clara’s act of speech and action reaches out towards what beckons from the other side of this rift, from the non-place where late capitalism has relegated the future of the living. *Aquarius* does not delve into what this alliance of survival will be like or how speculative capitalism’s destructive forms of othering, of wasting (which have resulted in the becoming-uninhabitable of Clara’s home) might be turned into a commoning practice. All it does is announce, in Clara’s voice, the will to persist even in becoming-homeless but leaving us, as it were, on the threshold of this afterlife which represents the film’s “open ending”, and perhaps ours as well.

The extended fade-in that opens *La mujer de los perros* (*Dog Lady*, 2015) by Laura Citarella and Verónica Llinás could be thought of as a counterpart to this final sequence and thus, also as the crossing of

the threshold *Aquarius* can only point to in the mode of the future conditional. Citarella's and Llinás's film places us in a space that is out of focus and practically blackened-out, save for some vague glimmer in the distance, the camera appearing to advance quickly as if avoiding obstacles that we sense more through listening than vision. The hour seems to be dawn: there are bird cries and a rooster crowing somewhere far away, while close-by (close to where the film places our bodies) the rustling of branches and leaves can be heard as well as the sound of animal panting as if from one or more dogs – the same that, maybe, are the bearers of this roving, nervous gaze. It is not until minute 2:30 that, illuminated by a lunar ray or perhaps by some distant streetlight, we finally make out a head and then a human face peering into the darkness before, suddenly, the woman (played by Llinás herself) points her slingshot at something in the distance.

The film introduces us, then, to our first dawn out in the open. It begins by stripping us of the elevated vision that, as Ivakhiv argues, anthropomorphizes the filmic “world” from the outset, attributing to it a human subject that carries forward gaze and action. Here, by contrast, we are dealing with a (mobile) position of listening and even of smell, beckoning us into a space-time where priority is given to the bio- or animamorphic dimension. In Ivakhiv's expression, it is in this more-than-human field of mediations, indeed, “in the middle, where the action of world-making takes place”.⁷¹ Unlike *Aquarius* where humans and insects remain on different visual planes, such that only a jump cut can put them in relation and in spatio-temporal continuity, here the distance between a human and a canine point of view is frequently uncertain or just a matter of an up or downward pan, especially in sequences dedicated (such as the one at the beginning) to shared activities such as hunting and scavenging that has everyone, dogs as well as woman, crouching on all fours, eyes and noses pointing towards the ground.

Just as Clara in *Aquarius*, this woman who will remain anonymous until the end, is determined to *inhabit* a place others have abandoned, and to find a use and value for things and lives discarded: to make a world in the midst of unworlding. And like Sônia Braga's character, Llinás's also “carries on her body the marks of her time”, although the scar, in *Dog Lady*, is not on her skin but in her throat. Just as she is never being named (not, at least, by a proper name: “old witch” or “dog lady” are some of the epithets thrown at her), she does not speak either. Or at least not in the language of humans, although she does sometimes listen to, and even nod in agreement with, conversations of third parties. And just as she does not seem to be deaf, she is not exactly mute either: at times, when necessary, she growls or hisses



Figure 4: Commoning practices in *La mujer de los perros* (Dog Lady, Laura Citarella/Verónica Llinás, Argentina, 2015)

to call or to warn off the dogs that accompany her along the fields, trails and ditches of a remote neighborhood, way beyond the belt of suburban homes, where she has built her shack. It's rather that her "world", if it ever was one, is no longer that of words, the film gives us to understand. In its place, it has become one of intra-actions, that is: of an incessant material re-signifying that results in "commoning practices", in a constant forging of livable community from what has been wasted, discarded, abandoned (including, the film suggests, the dogs themselves, rescued from the abandonment suffered at the hands of their previous owners). "Dog lady", in fact, is not just one of the epithets hurled at the woman by those on the other side of the fence (by the "townspeople"); it is also one way of naming the "multispecies alliance" surging, Citarella and Llinás propose, through the commoning practices the woman and the dogs carry out together throughout the year: from collecting edible remains and all kinds of receptacles from the garbage for use in capturing rainwater or waterproofing the roof to providing shelter and warmth for one another on winter nights or cornering some muskrat in the grassland (see Figure 4). Think *Nomadland* (Chloé Zhao, 2020) without the epic of open roads and scenic landscapes: survival not as adventure or tragedy but as a sequence of ordinary, small acts of alliance-making, of commoning practices just beyond the margins of "consumer society" the discards of which these acts transform into a habitat.

The withdrawal of speech, therefore, in no way implies a "dehumanization" of the character. On the contrary, we see her immersed in an

incessant activity of caring for her small community and its home, of cleaning and tinkering, preparing food and checking the dogs' fur, and also of looking after herself with an ironclad discipline of grooming and of running errands. Rather, the woman's renunciation of words (and of her own name) has, in *Dog Lady*, the character of an ellipsis: it is what exempts Citarella and Llinás from any need of "explaining", of providing their character with a backstory that would justify her expulsion from a society she knows only too well. In the absence of words, it is the woman's actions that capture our attention, placing the film in the time of things happening, in the present. As Llinás explains in an interview with Roger Koza, providing her character with language "would have distanced us from the present. And the life of that woman is all present, just like the life of her dogs".⁷² It is the renunciation of language, precisely, which opens up this horizontal space and time, "all present": an open arena for practices of interspecies commoning beyond the determinations of a subject and its relationship with "society". Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena have advanced the concept of "the uncommons" to refer to "heterogeneous assemblages of life that do not necessarily make themselves using the division between humans and non-humans [yet] are *both* obliged into that distinction *and* continue to exist exceeding it".⁷³ The uncommons, they conclude, amounts to "a condition that disrupts (yet does not displace) the idea of 'the world' as shared ground: an idea that appears as the condition of possibility for the common good and the commons".⁷⁴ Uncommoning practices surge, then, against the withdrawal of "world": they have, like the cinema that encourages and records them, the character of incessant experimentation. When "all is present", there is no routine or memory to be activated for this or that problem. There is only *bricolage*, the finding of new functions for some of the vestiges and leftovers from the other side of the threshold, such that they can be reincorporated, in playful fashion, into the interplay of bodies and materials that make up the small community, as is a wooden frame found in a landfill that the woman ends up fitting into her hut, turning it into a "window" of sorts.

But this present of "pure action" that forges experimental community is, crucially, also one of performance. As Citarella and Llinás explain in the same interview, except for one of the dogs ("the greyhound Muñeca whom we borrowed"), all of them are, in fact, the dogs Verónica lives with in her daily life, in which each has their own name and, she explains, also a "distance that (according to some mysterious laws) each of them maintains in relation to me". Hence, *Dog Lady* also poses an interesting question about the status of animal participation, about the dogs' "actorship": are they *doing* something or are they

playing at doing something? Or, put differently: what do the dogs play at when they “enter the game” of their suddenly mute owner taking them, so to speak, out of the house, into an open field of experimentation? Donna Haraway, in the reflections she dedicates to agility, a sports game she used to practice together with her dog Cayenne, suggests that play is the dimension of encounter and invention par excellence between species:

Play is the practice that makes us new, that makes us into something that is neither one nor two, that brings us into the open where purposes and functions are given a rest. Strangers in mindful hominid and canid flesh, we play with each other and become significant others to each other. The power of language is purported to be its potentially infinite inventiveness. True enough in a technical sense (“discrete infinity”); however, the inventive potency of play redoes beings in ways that should not be called language but that deserve their own names. Besides, it is not potentially *infinite* expressiveness that is interesting for play partners but, rather, unexpected and nonteleological inventions that can take mortal shape only within the finite and dissimilar naturalcultural repertoires of companion species. Another name for those sorts of inventions is joy.⁷⁵

In *Dog Lady*, the practices of commoning and uncommoning – the ones the film narrates and the ones composing it – are of the order of play, in the sense proposed by Haraway, as a matrix of encounter different from that of language. In German, “Schauspieler” – actor – is, literally, “the one who plays to show”, and it is in this sense of showing something they have invented (a pose, a gesture, a real or imaginary “referent”) that woman and dogs act on a shared plane. The playful community is beyond necessity: there is no reason beyond sheer curiosity that drives us to enter the game. What’s more, “losing our minds” (or at least, suspending them) is in fact the very condition for us to be in the game: in order to play (to play at self- and other-invention), we first have to lose sight of necessity. In relation to life itself, playtime is a time of excess, time left over: afterlife. It is in suspended life-time that the game’s continuous present can unfold, the sole purpose of which is to prolong as much as possible the suspension of any temporality other than that of the game itself, to postpone once more, and yet again, the end of the game, the “coming to reason”. Thus, as we play, we also suddenly find – indeed, invent – that “common cause” beyond the goals each of us pursues on entering the game. In the simplest fashion – and therefore, also the most powerful – *Dog Lady* calls

out in one and the same act the two meanings of afterlife: as survival on the limit, in a situation of extreme need, and also as the suspension of any need, in a pure state of joy. This is the tension, too, that frames the film's beautiful final sequence, when the woman, filmed in a large panoramic shot, crosses a field with her dogs at dusk when, suddenly, she collapses and the dogs stop, sniff her and look at each other uneasily until, after a near-endless minute and a half, she gets up again and walks on. Once more, the end has been postponed and the film can conclude: the game continues.

2 Negrocene

Halfway through Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa's *Cavalo Dinheiro* (*Horse Money*, 2014), a shot sequence of motionless, solitary men and women in dilapidated rooms and alleyways interrupts the narrative, while a song by the Cape Verdean band Os Tubarões (The Sharks) plays on the soundtrack. It's as if the tenuous thread of diegetic progression had suddenly collapsed under its own weight, crushed by a constant temptation to become pure image devoid of all remaining temporality. Pointing us back to Jacob Riis's nineteenth-century photographs of homeless New Yorkers that preface Costa's film, these shots of lonely, dark-skinned men and women whose surroundings transmit an almost physical sensation of glacial cold only admit historical time in the form of an aural trace. In "Alto Cutelo", the Os Tubarões song called after a village on Fogo Island, forced exodus is alluded to as an ancient and therefore almost mythical story of drought and exile each of the individuals portrayed seems to have relived as a destiny or a curse, despite already knowing all too well its outcome: a life exposed to the elements, to "the rain, the wind, the cold", a life squeezed out from them in shipyards and cement factories, "betrayed even more than their white brothers". A wasted life, with no chance of return, however much the song's final stanzas continue to dream about it. Held together only by this shared destiny of abandonment but bereft of any sense of chronology or correlation between one image and the next, the sequence is essentially fantastic in nature. It's as if those portrayed had returned from a death they have not yet found out about, as if they were still clinging to a life that clearly abandoned them a long time ago. Theirs are lives left over, it seems, even from the tenuous storyline that envelops them; survivors of a shipwreck that happened, perhaps, even before they were born (see Figure 5).

In contemporary cinema, no filmmaker has returned to the problem of afterlife as persistently as Costa. The Portuguese director's cinema is one of survivors, whose stories unfold in an orphaned, empty time after "History" has reached its conclusion, a time when weaving words and gestures into units of meaning has become a challenge for actors, director and spectators alike. *O sangue* (*Blood*, 1989), his lyrical debut, already raised the problem of orphanhood right from the beginning (and thus, also of the difficulty of communication and of the constant danger of getting lost). More explicitly even, afterlife (as a scandal that shocks and challenges the community of the living)



Figure 5: Frame from the “musical interlude” in *Cavalo Dinheiro*
(Horse Money, Pedro Costa, Portugal, 2014)

is the central theme of *Casa de lava* (*Down to Earth*, 1994), Costa’s “Cape Verdean remake” of *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943), Jacques Tourneur’s B-movie classic. In Costa’s version, a comatose laborer’s return (Isaach de Bankolé) to the island of Fogo, accompanied by the Portuguese nurse who cares for him (Inês de Medeiros), upsets relations between the islanders, bringing back to the scene, in the form of this body suspended between life and death, what had been conferred to oblivion and dispatched far away: the colonial violence of the Salazar dictatorship’s “labor camp” but also its silent continuity in the no less violent Portuguese construction sites and precarious caregiving jobs that generations of young people have been expelled to. With *Ossos* (*Bones*, 1997) Costa finds the location that will anchor all his subsequent work: the Fontainhas neighborhood on the impoverished outskirts of Lisbon with its population of immigrants and youths of African descent, addicts, and destitute white Portuguese. Here, survival starts, literally, at birth, since both Tina (Mariya Lipkina) and her boyfriend (Nuno Vaz) to whom she entrusts her newborn so he can find someone to sell it to, are constantly on the verge of taking their own lives and of abandoning those of others. To survive means to get by on leftovers, like the crumbs the young man scavenges from garbage cans at the market, with which he tries to feed the baby, almost poisoning it in the act.

Afterlife is above all a question of temporality, as *In Vanda’s Room* (2000) will find out – a transformative work in Costa’s oeuvre, marked by the transition from 35mm to digital video and, therefore, also by

a more intimate and even co-authorial relationship between director and characters. How occupy the extreme present to which abandonment exposes? A practical rather than abstract question, as we see in Nhurro's, Pango's, Russo's and Muleta's constant search for yet another refuge from the advancing bulldozers in charge of "clearing" the old shantytown for the construction of a brand-new shopping center, moving their supplies of lighters, rubber belts and syringes from one shack to the next. But it is also about not allowing the thread of conversation and gossip to dry up, like the one Vanda and her sister Zita maintain while they smoke heroin in their moldy room: a constant stream of words that spread out across the family shack and the neighborhood like some kind of semiotic glue to ward off the advance of destruction. *Colossal Youth* (2006), shot when the demolition of Fontainhas and the relocation of residents to the new (and even more peripheral) complex of Casal da Boba was practically complete, adopts an archaeological or even mythological approach, returning time and again from the bright empty spaces of the urbanization to Fontainhas' dark labyrinth of alleyways. Now, the story unfolds on the watch of Ventura (Ventura José Tavares Borges), the patriarch who patiently reassembles the neighborhood "family" by paying visits to his "daughters and sons", a bond no less heartfelt for being purely imaginary.

Ventura effectively takes over from Vanda the baton of the "vectorial" character, in Edson Pereira da Costa Júnior's expression, tasked with creating "spatial figures of passage that facilitate communicability by reducing real and symbolic walls".⁷⁶ Just as Vanda in the previous film, Ventura is the one who leads us through doorways and who finds and engages those on the other side in order to allow for the composition of frames, figures, sequences. Similar to the work of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, John Cassavetes, or Robert Guédigian, Costa's cinema is communitarian in nature, relying on an always-growing *troupe* of actor-collaborators whose lived experiences underwrite plotlines and motifs at the same time as they contribute to the intensity of onscreen performances, supplying a rich body of resonance to the lead voice of subsequent vectorial characters (Vanda, Ventura, Vitalina Varela).

The compositional function of the vectorial character in Costa's work, then, is akin to that "new type of actor" Gilles Deleuze saw emerging in some areas of post-war filmmaking, different from both industrial cinema and the social realism proposed by Italian neo-realism: "Not simply the non-professional actors that neorealism had revived at the beginning, but what might be called professional non-actors, or, better, actor-mediums, capable of seeing and showing rather than acting, and either remaining dumb or undertaking some

never-ending conversation”.⁷⁷ Ventura, in *Colossal Youth* and even more so in *Horse Money*, Costa’s next film, will assume in this sense a role that goes beyond Vanda’s in the previous one: not only is he the vectorial character whose movement and speech keep the fragile community from falling apart, but he is also its narrator and even its prophet, capable of summoning to the scene other spaces and times and, thus, of transforming (sometimes with his mere presence) the ruins into a theater of memory.

Indeed, it is that indefinite and therefore enormous void hanging over the vestiges of a shared place (and the lives spent there) that *Horse Money* will explore: a film already stripped of the last remainders of a documentary register that still lingered on in *Colossal Youth* through the presence of Vanda or of Paulo, survivors (literally speaking) from the previous film. The destruction that has already occurred is what transforms the characters, here and in *Vitalina Varela* (2019), Costa’s subsequent film, into bearers of a fiction and the ruins – whether or not they are in fact those of Fontainhas – into stage props strung together solely by the interior monologue of the character-narrator and the choral movements he or she summons to the scene. In both films, the underworld in which these sequences take place, nocturnal and subterranean, has no other referent than the story that invokes and the voices that inhabit it. But this same dreamlike, even ghostly dimension also allows multiple temporalities and geographies to be sedimented there, superimposing figments from anti-colonial struggle, the aborted Portuguese revolution of 1974, and the emergence of diasporic populations with “re-enactments” of the defining moments of the characters’ own intimacy. The chronotope that surges on this crossroads, however, exceeds even the lived experience of its leading couple and of their interlocutors: its background of blackness is but the vestibule to an even vaster abyss, an unworlding impulse that countersigns the image even as it composes it.

Forms of fracture

It seems no mere coincidence that Costa’s first film was released in 1989, the very year that sealed the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, and just three after Portugal’s entry into the European Union, marking the definite closure of the emancipatory horizon opened up by the Carnation Revolution of April 1974. The temporality of afterlife in which all his films seem to take place in one way or another is, therefore, historically marked, coinciding with the foreclosure of the horizon of futurity that had sustained the modern time of politics as well as a certain type of radical cinema that used to move to the same

forward-rushing baseline (the protagonist's desperate run from the desert to the sea at the end of Glauber Rocha's *Black God, White Devil*, 1964, is among its most forceful filmic manifestations). But as we shall see, this time without futurity and this in-between space, neither exterior nor interior, in which Costa's films play themselves out, also refer to a broader spatiotemporal extension that is at once the foundation of modernity and the abyss into which it collapses: the Atlantic Ocean as the arena and as the pit where, since the fifteenth century, an "Earth without a World" – in Malcom Ferdinand's unsettling expression – was taking shape.⁷⁸

Whereas in *Aquarius*, Clara's performative declaration of survival also implied a leap towards the political (albeit in terms exceeding the idealist and anthropocentric notion of politics), in Costa's cinema to survive is rather a question of tying the narrative to the profilmic, of making action and actorship converge. How to survive is a question of poetics rather than politics, at least, as Jacques Rancière points out, in the sense of "the wish to explain and mobilize" in which twentieth-century militant cinema had understood the political, of making "a show of the state of the world to expose structures of domination and mobilize energies to change them".⁷⁹ Instead of a politicized art (with the purpose of "mobilizing viewers"), Rancière concludes, in Costa we are faced with a politics of art where it is the shared work of producing (again and again) the "work" that forges a common ground and allows for (re)constructing bonds of affection and solidarity in the midst of abandonment: "it is an art in which form is linked to construction of a social relation".⁸⁰

Costa's cinema, and in particular the most recent trilogy, composed of *Colossal Youth*, *Horse Money*, and *Vitalina Varela* (sustained by the latter and by Ventura, respectively, as the "vectorial leads") is characterized by a fracturing of times and spaces that afflicts the characters' lives (the filmic ones but also the real-life individuals playing them). *Horse Money*, the central film of the trilogy, is also where its two main narrative threads converge: that of the immigrant worker who, shortly after his arrival in Portugal, suffered a debilitating work accident, and that of the wife left behind on the islands who, having waited forty years for the plane ticket her husband had promised her, finally arrives in Lisbon three days after his funeral. The fracturing of times and spaces is what prevents the construction of a linear narrative, anchored in successive frames linked by cause-effect relations or by spatiotemporal continuity. In Costa's films "the shot is a prison", as Pereira de Costa Júnior observes, whose edges towards the subsequent as well as the previous one are guarded almost obsessively: "Nothing disturbs this type of composition: there are no figures entering the shot, the

camera does not move and there are no actions that burst in, demanding an exit from the frame or even just the rearrangement of bodies”.⁸¹ Instead of the continuity editing of narrative cinema, what emerges in Costa is therefore not a montage of attractions replacing narrative progression with associative series of an allegorical nature. Rather, it is a mode of storytelling that assumes fracture as its formal principle, using it to build a fractal narrative whose bifurcations, zigzags and dead ends reembody the labyrinthine and unpredictable connections of the Fontainhas neighborhood’s alleys and doorways. Like those walking through the shantytown, the spectator can only encompass what is immediately close and present; anything more distant than that – including origins and outcomes – is lost in the misty darkness that envelops the frame on all sides.

Multiple forms of fracture run through all three films, starting with the one separating Fontainhas’ former inhabitants already relocated to Casal da Boba from those remaining in the semi-destroyed neighborhood. Superimposed on this spatial divide, in *Colossal Youth* and especially in *Horse Money*, is the fracture that heaps up temporal layers from the lived experience of Ventura and his interlocutors like so many mounds of rubble in a bombed-out city or the aftermath of an earthquake (associations that are never far away from *Horse Money*’s and *Vitalina Varela*’s nocturnal settings). But it is this same out-of-timeness – the impossibility of constructing meaningful sequences – that maintains present simultaneously a before and an after, fundamentally but not exclusively those of the accident suffered by Ventura at age nineteen (as the old man indicates to the doctor taking his details) during construction of the Gulbenkian Foundation, the art center on the – then – outskirts of Lisbon, inaugurated in 1969 after seven years of work. Yet there’s also the before and after of the knife fight (over a woman?) with Joaquim – Vitalina’s deceased husband – who may or may not have left Ventura hospitalized and who, in *Horse Money*, returns time and again from the shadows wearing the red shirt Vitalina gave him on the day of his departure. Or it could be the before and after of the factory’s closure whose ruins Ventura roams in the company of Bemvindo, his godson who has been waiting twenty years for his salary, or that of his flight towards the hills while army tanks roll through the city (but which ones? Those of the revolution of April 25, 1974, to which the motionless soldier in the elevator seems to allude, or those of the failed fascist counter-coup of March 1975 – the date Ventura indicates to the doctor – carried out by commandos fresh from the colonial wars in Africa?). The point of origin – the “cause” of trauma – is impossible to pin down, perhaps because there’s more than one to begin with, and what these and other scenes in *Horse Money*

have in common is, rather, the simultaneous presence of multiple temporalities, deposited in the old man's body and speech. And finally, there is also the spatial fracture associated, in *Horse Money* and especially in *Vitalina Varela*, with the life of the female lead. Her arrival from the islands after forty years of separation, waiting in vain for the plane ticket Joaquim had promised her on his last visit that left her pregnant, cannot cancel out the distance that separates both worlds and instead transforms it into a gap that is no longer just spatial but temporal and perhaps existential in kind: "Go back, you don't have anything here", as one of the cleaning ladies waiting for her at the plane's exit ramp tells Vitalina, three days after Joaquim's funeral.

It is this web of fractures, however, that paradoxically establishes a certain type of continuity between Costa's films, in the sense that the narrative threads appearing only in fragmentary fashion in every single one of them acquire greater clarity as they resurface in the subsequent one, albeit not so much in the way of a puzzle gradually coming together as in that of a kaleidoscope, where the same elements are dismantled and recomposed into new figures every time they change position. All in all, we could distinguish three types of fracture in Costa's cinema: first, the one that erodes *community*, breaking down the networks of solidarity and resistance (the alliances of survival) constructed, against all odds, in a state of abandonment. As Costa Júnior observes, the elementary form of alliance that ties community to environment in these films is the meeting around a table, "not just any table but the table of the poor. [...] The meeting around the table, in the Fontainhas films, brings out what is most personal and sometimes most painful for each character on scene".⁸² Thus, the sequence from *In Vanda's Room* where Russo scrapes off with a knife the filth incrustated in the dilapidated table he insists on taking along to the next shelter, is less absurd than it appears. In fact, it is deadly serious, in its attempt to contain *in extremis* the advance of unworlding, refusing to concede by abandoning the table to the bulldozers (in *Horse Money*, the post-demolition movie, the table, as an object around which bodies congregate, has given way to the hospital bed, where we can no longer be sure if those gathering around it are alive or dead).

A second type of fracture afflicts *continuity*: the characters' biographical sense of chronology and the films' diegetic one. It manifests in the very situation of abandonment the characters find themselves in (as Ventura tells the doctor: "our illness is the mold on our walls"), resulting in an *accidented* life, in which time refuses to pass and instead piles up, to the effect that every frame is inhabited by a multiplicity of moments, bodies and voices. The long sequence in *Horse Money* featuring Ventura's "dialogue" with a statuesque soldier in an elevator

whose motionless, monochrome body is the source of multiple voices and whispers – recalling different moments from Portugal’s political history and their entanglements with Ventura’s own life – represents a kind of hallucinatory climax of this discontinuous, sedimented temporality. A third type of fracture, finally, almost always directly related to the previous one, is the one that affects *contiguity* in space. However, this geographical rift that afflicts the lives of those “contracted” to live out their time in the diaspora (as well as their loved ones on the islands, whose physical absence continues to make itself felt in the Fontainhas films) manifests itself above all on the level of the cinematic form. It is not a theme or motif, yet, for that very reason, it is what motivates the non-consecutive nature of settings in individual sequences of shots as well as between one sequence and the next.

Community, continuity and contiguity, then, are the forms of fracture that, in Costa’s cinema, turn into compositional principles in their own right. Their effect is a paradoxical kind of open form where each frame must struggle against its own “imprisonment” and for keeping alive the very possibility of another shot. In this way, Costa’s films also leave multiple loose threads, from which the next one is already being woven. This open form also extends to intra and extradiegetic quotes and references, including the birth, marriage and death certificates that Vitalina reads out aloud in *Horse Money* or the paintings by Géricault (“Portrait of a Negro”, 1823) and Rubens (“The Flight into Egypt”, 1614) that appear in *Horse Money* and *Colossal Youth*, respectively. As Rancière observes, rather than adding erudite associations, these paratextual incorporations contribute instead to “a *figure* [that] in the middle of the film discusses the filmmaker’s art and his relationship with him and with his own character’s body and consequently of their respective politics”.⁸³

Critics have generally paid less attention to the paratextual references to the Cape Verdean cultural repertoire of Costa’s characters-collaborators, most notably through the songs of Os Tubarões that Ventura frequently listens to or hums *a cappella* in *Colossal Youth* as well as *Horse Money*. These musical quotations are “intradiegetic” not only because of their more intimate relationship with the character than the references to canonic Western artworks: it is Ventura himself who invokes these songs in moments of personal crisis or loss. In *Colossal Youth*, with his head bandaged (presumably from having fallen off the scaffold at the construction site), he plays the Tubarões song “Labanta Brasu” (Raise your arms) on the record player, a revolutionary anthem celebrating the islands’ independence that, in the context of the precarious quarters Ventura is sharing with his co-worker Lento, turns into more of an exhortation to persevere even

when solitude and abandonment take their toll. In *Horse Money*, it is Bemvindo (Ventura's godson and survivor of an epileptic seizure that left him in a coma for three months) whom he tries to cheer up by singing together "Pépé Lopi", the title-giving *koladeira* from the band's first album. Bringing to the scene a sonic trace of the islands (one that corresponds, moreover, to the historical and biographical moment *before* the characters' departure into exile and, thus, also prior to the entry of Cape Verdean music into globalized world-music circuits), these aural quotations add yet another layer to the way Costa's cinema inscribes fracture as a compositional principle, juxtaposing disjointed times and spaces.⁸⁴

The "musical interlude" midway through *Horse Money* where, through shared listening, a tenuous kind of community momentarily surges between isolated lives, also doubles down on (and thus pushes to its very limit) the film's own self-reflexive position in the context of the trilogy. As does *Horse Money* as a whole, in relation to the intersected life-stories of Ventura and Vitalina, the "Alto Cutelo"-sequence suspends narrative "action" in favor of a succession of stills not very different from Jacob Riis's photographs at the beginning of the film. It provides a kind of interior vanishing point for a narrative arc that is itself tending towards pure painterliness, towards a loss of narrability for the lives it can no longer account for. As Nuno Barradas Jorge contends, "there is a stylistic and thematic rapport between these *tableaux vivants* shot in the early twenty-first century and Riis's photographs".⁸⁵

But the song that accompanies these images on the soundtrack (unlike the silent sequence of Riis's photographs at the beginning) does not just "narrate the miserable lives of Cape Verdean immigration in Lisbon", as Jorge claims.⁸⁶ It does not merely mirror on the level of sound what we see in the images; rather – and crucially – "Alto Cutelo" also tells us about what is missing from these: about the drought that spoiled the harvest in the homonymous village on Fogo island, about the woman who hasn't been able to cook for a week to feed her children, just one of whom found work, for a hunger salary, in the "road brigades".⁸⁷ It sings about the land the family had to sell at half price to pay for the husband's trip to Lisbon, where he traveled as a "kontratadu" only to find more misery and deception. Also known as "Novo kontratadu" (A new hire), the song – penned by poet, musician and political activist Renato Cardoso and recorded in 1976 shortly after the archipelago's independence –⁸⁸ is structured in a call-and-response pattern (a form usually associated with other traditional genres from Santiago island such as the *tabanka*, from which "Alto Cutelo" also adopts the accordion – here replaced by a Hammond organ – as lead instrument). A lead voice narrating the "parallel lives"

of the woman struggling to survive with her children in Alto Cutelo and of the husband who “trabadja na tchuba na bento” (works in the rain, in the wind) in Lisbon’s shipyards and construction sites, is complemented by a choir adding commentary on the causes of their affliction – “djá seca” (the drought); “sploradu” (exploitation) – as well as providing additional detail, such as the meager payment earned by the child and the “kumida a presa” (hasty food) the husband consumes in Portugal. But from this story in two voices that traverse the distance by giving it poetic form there also emerges, in the song, a nascent “konsiensia de mim” (consciousness of myself), concurrent with the change in the last stanza from the third to the first person, culminating in a demand for the right to work one’s own land (“nos tera”, as the choir insistently repeats at the end of the song):

*But one day, I'll go back to my land
 Monte Gordo and Malagueta
 They'll have to give us water
 With the strength of my arms, conscious of who I am
 I'm the one who works it, the land is mine
 With jujube growing in Cutelo (our land)
 Corn in the fields (our land)
 And ships in the harbor (our land)⁸⁹*

It is during these last stanzas, when political awareness ensues from denouncing the evils suffered by the community, that image and soundtrack drift apart from one another. Those appearing onscreen (only one half of the couple the song invokes: the migrants left stranded in Portugal) have already gone, as Rancière puts it, from exploitation to abandonment, living “their condition in a manner stigmatized in Brechtian times: as a destiny”.⁹⁰ If the song, therefore, deploys the dialogical structures of Cape Verdean music in order to forge once again a sense of community and thus a solution for the diasporic situation, the image sequence refers instead to a moment long after the song has ended, for which the latter’s combative last strophe is already but a faint memory. Here, even shared listening can no longer heal the fracture cutting each image off from the next and from its own missing half (the life of loved ones on the islands). The proto-photographic frames remain separate from one another because, as Mariana Cunha and Catarina Andrade put it, what these anonymous portraits bring to the fore is a shared trait of all the film’s characters, the way they would usually be relegated to the status of “extras, accessories of humanity, who are always in the shadow of the ‘true’ heroes of History”.⁹¹ The immobile postures of these bodies belong to those condemned, in classic narrative cinema, to remain in the background of the image. Yet

even as they are placed at the “center of the scene”, they do not suddenly and magically turn into “actors of their own destiny” (as in the song) but rather confront and challenge us to face up, to endure their inaction. “In registering immobility, as produced by the performance of the characters as well as the camera and the duration of the shot, [Costa’s] films unveil the individual stories of those whose lives have been suspended, silenced, stolen”.⁹²

But in reality, the “Alto Cutelo” interlude is not altogether external to the narrative. The first beats coincide with a shot of Vitalina, dressed in white before a nocturnal background in the city center, an ambulance passing behind and children, in their white school uniforms, running towards her shouting her name: the moment, we realize, that she learns of Joaquim’s death and starts dressing in black (as later in the same sequence, when we reencounter her standing motionlessly in some alleyway in Fontainhas). We know this because, just before, she has described this very moment to Ventura, but the version we are now watching is “out of place”: Vitalina is already in the center of Lisbon, when the event actually took place in her village in Cape Verde. Next, Joaquim appears (in old age but dressed, as he is throughout the film, in the red shirt Vitalina gave him on the day of his departure to Portugal). In subtle but no less forceful fashion, then, the “anonymous” shots remain interwoven with the main threads of the narrative (and the islands with the diaspora, just as in the *Os Tubarões* song) by linking them to the “vectorial characters”. It is their tenuous presence, interspersed with the anonymous shots of “extras”, that binds these isolated lives back to the narrative, without denying for a moment the triple fracture that has cut them loose from all bonds: their incapacity to come back (as in the song) from uprootedness and separation. But in making this multiple fracture its structuring compositional principle, *Horse Money* also reopens a possibility for common ground, for the sharing of experiences: not the return journey, “conscious of who I am”, which the narrator of “Alto Cutelo” still dreams of but, rather, a coming together over the fracture that runs beneath, and denies, the world: *an alliance of survival in the unworld: mundus immundus*.

The hold of the world

In his political, legal, and religious history of “absolute space”, Henri Lefebvre points to the *mundus* of the Italiot township, prior to the rise of Rome, as a paradigmatic site. The *mundus* represented a different mode of dominating otherness from that of the imperial city, placing an “abysmal dimension” at the very center of the village in the form

of an enormous well into which all shapeless and unclassifiable thing were to be cast:

The *mundus*: a sacred or accursed place in the middle of the Italiot township. A pit, originally – a dust hole, a public rubbish dump. Into it were cast trash and filth of every kind, along with those condemned to death, and any newborn baby whose father declined to ‘raise’ it (that is, an infant which he did not lift from the ground and hold up above his head so that it might be born a second time, born in a social as well as a biological sense). A pit, then, “deep” above all in meaning. It connected the city, the space above ground and land-as-territory, to the hidden, clandestine, subterranean spaces which were those of fertility and death, of the beginning and the end, of birth and burial [...] The pit was also a passage-way through which dead souls could return to the bosom of the earth and then re-emerge and be reborn. A locus of time, of births and tombs, vagina of the nurturing earth-as-mother, dark corridor emerging from the depths, cavern opening to the light, estuary of hidden forces and mouth of the realm of shadows, the *mundus* terrified as it glorified. In its ambiguity it encompassed the greatest foulness and the greatest purity, life and death, fertility and destruction, horror and fascination. “Mundus est immundus”.⁹³

As Lefebvre suggests, Rome and subsequently Christianity would reverse the spatial constellation outlined by the Italiot *mundus*, still marked by a matrilineal relation to the land, in which the informal and terrifying was being contained by placing it at the material and symbolic heart of the township. As indicated by the Augustinian enantiosemia (false paradox) of the “mundus immundus”, which deliberately and performatively confuses the substantive and adverbial meanings of the Latin “mundus” as alternately signifying “world” and “clean”, early Christianity would extend this “immund” – dirty or impure – dimension to the entire terrestrial realm (including the tangible flesh of sinful bodies), with the sole exception of the “sacred” places where patriarchal power resided as a conduit to heaven itself: churches, the Vatican, and the “sacred city” at the head of empire. Virtue would now consist in renouncing this unclean world, “where Sin had turned Divine creation into its inverse”.⁹⁴

Now, if Lefebvre had not limited himself so rigorously and strikingly to the classical and medieval world, surely he would not have missed the similarities of the pre-Roman *mundus* with another, infinitely larger pit that would become the abject center of a different

imperial geography, our own: the Atlantic Ocean. The chasm between Old and New World was also the non-place of slave ships carrying in their holds the chained, captive bodies of men, women and children abducted from Africa to the extractive zones of the Americas from where the ships carried back to Europe the mineral and vegetal gold torn from the New World's rocks and soil. This "circum-Atlantic" complex, in Joseph Roach's expression, was the true world-machine that Camões's navigators, in *The Lusiads*, had still dreamed up in the Indian Ocean.⁹⁵ A device for the extraction, appropriation and violent transfer of bodies, energy and matter, this machine would set in motion the great "ecological simplification" of the Plantation, a contraption that swallowed human and non-human bodies into an abstract equation between time, volume and yield, giving rise to what Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway have suggested we should therefore call the "Plantationocene".⁹⁶

The hold of the slave ship, according to Malcom Ferdinand, represents the counterpart to the "colonial matricide" that ushered in the Plantationocene through the genocide of the Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean and massive slash-and-burn deforestation of its native forests, at once "clearing the ground" for large-scale monocropping and providing the fuel that powered the foundries and distilleries for metals, sugar, cocoa, coffee and other colonial staples. If these technologies of production and governance on which "colonial inhabitation" was founded, operated "the erasure of the idea that the inhabitants of these lands are the children of these lands", so that colonization also meant "the transition of a land that revered a mother to a land that revered a father"⁹⁷ – the patriarch and owner of the plantation and of the enslaved bodies that worked it, exposed to his absolute power over their lives and deaths – the "politics of the hold", as the space and time that separated people from their lands and communities and also from their own bodies, was tasked with producing "a relationship to the world and a way of relating to the other" marked by an irreparable fracture. As Ferdinand concludes:

[T]he primary aim of hold politics is to keep certain humans offside of the world. The colonial enslaved person is not solely someone who is mistreated, someone who is legally the possession of another human being, and someone who does not receive a wage for his work. The colonial enslaved person is also kept in an alien relationship to the world. [...] Enslaved Black people were those to whom *the world is refused*. [...] colonial enslavement of Black people in the Americas consisted of a *refusal of the world as a mode of relation*.⁹⁸

Together, the enslavement of Africans and the monocrop plantation established “a violent way of being in relation to other human beings through a *hold politics* and a destructive way of inhabiting the Earth and of being in relation to non-humans that constitutes the *Negrocene*”.⁹⁹

The hold, we should remember here, is at once a physical location – the space below deck where “cargo” is stored: that is, the merchandise, that to which is attributed the character of a thing, and also the “ballast” that is thrown overboard in moments of danger – at the same time as it is the central element of a dispositive of extreme violence that begins with the assault and forced abduction of people from their villages and culminates in the “branding” of slaves on the opposite shore, where the survivors are auctioned and separated from their families and communities. In much the same fashion, the object and result of this dispositive – the “Negro” – does not exist prior to, but is rather produced by, the politics of the hold:

*Hold politics produces off-ground individuals. [It] is the engineering of beings detached from their ancestral affiliations, the land that they cultivate, the nature of which they walk alongside, and the world through which they travel: Negroes. [...] The Negrocene names the era when the productive work of the Negro, directed at expanding colonial inhabitation, played a fundamental role in the Earth’s ecological and environmental changes.*¹⁰⁰

What is at stake, then, is nothing less than a geo-political apparatus, since, as Kathryn Yusoff reminds us, “voiding subjects was also about voiding a relation to earth that was embodied, organized, and intensified by those relations to place: taking place is also taking ways in which people realize themselves through the specific geologies of a land”.¹⁰¹ In this “traffic between *the inhuman as matter* and the *inhuman as race*”, in Achille Mbembe’s poignant expression, Blackness is a kind of mineral and energetic deposit at the core of the individual, to be extracted through violent operations of uprooting, depersonalization, and torture: “Blackness, in its magnificent obscurity, represented the synthesis of these two figures. It is constantly produced [as] a social link of subjection and a *body of extraction*”.¹⁰²

Geology of the *kontratadu*

The archipelago of Cape Verde occupies a place at once emblematic and singular in the Negrocene’s emergence as a regime of “material, social and political production of Negroes” – that is, of “off-worlders

whose vital energy is forcibly dedicated to fuel the lifestyles and ways of inhabiting the Earth of a minority”.¹⁰³ Sighted for the first time in the mid-1450s by Genoese navigators in the service of the Portuguese crown, the islands started being populated after 1460, the year the first *capitania* was established on Santiago – the archipelago’s largest island – followed by another on neighboring Fogo some years later. Many of the islands, especially those in the Barlavento (Windward) chain to the north, remained uninhabited until well into the sixteenth century, serving only for occasional “harvesting” expeditions in search of meat and hides obtained from wild cattle abandoned there by settlers. Scattered across a strip between latitudes 14 and 17 north and between 280 to 450 miles off the precipice on the Senegalese coast from which they receive their name, the islands, of volcanic origin, represent in geoclimatic terms the western end of the Sahara desert. They share the Sahara’s biseasonal cycle characterized by a long dry season – the “time of the breezes”, from December to June – followed by a brief and irregular rainy season – the “time of the waters”, from August to October – with November and July as transitional months.¹⁰⁴ Although some islands with higher elevations possess microclimatic variations thanks to the capture of ocean fog, the exposure to prolonged droughts, frequently unleashing famines and epidemics, is a grim constant in Cape Verdean history. Especially severe ones include the 1773-75 famine, in which two thirds of the population of Fogo perished, that of 1831-33, causing more than thirty thousand victims (with epicenters in Santo Antão and Fogo, which lost more than half of its population), and more recently those of 1903-04, with more than ten thousand deaths, of 1941-43 (killing almost a third of the population of Fogo and São Nicolau), of 1946-48 (with a loss of 65 percent of the population of Santiago), as well as the prolonged drought of the late 1960s, the very moment when Ventura, Joaquim and other countrymen of their generation would have fled to Portugal.¹⁰⁵

The archipelago shares with other Atlantic islands occupied by Portugal in the fifteenth century the pattern of colonization by privateers, including Madeira, Porto Santo, the Azores and (a decade later than Cape Verde) São Tomé and Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea. It is on those islands where, as Jason Moore has shown, “a new ecohistorical pattern” emerged, further consolidated with the establishment of plantation regimes in the Americas and the Caribbean, one that would shape emerging capitalism “not only as a world-economy but as a world-ecology”. In its dizzying acceleration of intense extraction and resource depletion, this new regime that had its laboratory in the Atlantic islands, ushering in a cascading displacement of the extractive frontier to ever more remote, “unexplored” soils, amounted to a

“reworking of time” and a “revolutionizing of space”, as Moore succinctly puts it: “The rapid extension of commodity relations to frontier zones tended to produce, at first, great booms, and later, to undermine the socio-ecological conditions of production and therefore, eventually, the conditions of profitability”.¹⁰⁶ The “colonial inhabitation” whose Caribbean unfolding Ferdinand analyzes, then, has its first antecedent and prototype in the conversion by force and with recourse to a forcibly displaced and brutalized workforce, of uninhabited lands into *tabula rasa* and into bodies of extraction. Henceforth, it would be by taking possession of overseas lands in the Americas and the Caribbean *as if they were uninhabited*, that Iberian expansion coalesced into its world-historical form of colonial matricide.

Even so, Cape Verde’s position in this emerging world-system is unique. Lacking the means, due to their geoclimatic conditions, of sustaining a stable population and practically without mineral deposits or soils useful for establishing monocrop plantations (except for small cotton estates on Fogo and Santiago), the islands fulfilled, more than anything, a strategic role in Portuguese imperial geopolitics. Its relative proximity to the coasts of Senegambia – the principal area for capturing slaves in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – as well as its position at the crossroads of the trade routes to Brazil and the Portuguese dominions in the Indian Ocean, turned the islands, especially after the establishment of a *feitoria* in Santiago in 1520, into a kind of satellite warehouse of Lisbon’s Casa da Mina, the administrative and archival center of the first century of Portuguese expansion. Cape Verde was, in other words, a clearing house for inspection, collection of royal taxes, and valorization of human “merchandise” kidnapped on the African mainland. Even though the slave population on the islands never exceeded fourteen thousand and, following a peak in the first century of occupation, declined to a mere five to ten percent of the population,¹⁰⁷ Cape Verde nonetheless remained a key link and source of added value in the transatlantic traffic, since purchasing “pieces” on the islands reduced the risk of violent incursions into mainland Africa and saved the work of violently converting the recently captured (“*escravos boçais*”) into docile slaves (“*escravos de confissão*”).¹⁰⁸ Cape Verdean freedmen also played key mediating roles in trade with the African coast, either as *grumetes* (militiamen) or as *tangomãos* and *línguas* (“negotiators” and “translators”), many of them accumulating considerable wealth and power in alliance with the *lançados* (island-based merchants and smugglers who operated off the African coast, circumventing the royal monopoly). The publication, just over ten years after the initial settlement of Santiago, of royal decrees withdrawing, under penalty of death, the privileges over the

slave trade previously afforded to residents of Cape Verde, highlights the almost immediate tension between the Crown and its colonial satellite, whose very survival depended on the capacity to exploit its competitive advantage over the former.¹⁰⁹

It is this contradictory in-between position as a mid-oceanic clearing house for the slave trade but itself lacking even the most basic conditions for establishing a plantation society, that sets Cape Verde apart from the emerging Iberian colonial empires. From early on, this resulted in the emergence of an exceptionally horizontal “crioulo” (Creole) society in ethnic, linguistic, and social terms. Already in 1620, a royal edict ordered embarking to the islands shipments of “degraded” women (i.e. those convicted of prostitution, adultery or proxenetism), so as to “root out as far as possible the race of mulattoes”. Yet, a century and a half later, the anonymous author of a *Chorographic and Chronological Report on the Bishopric of Cape Verde* laments the abandonment of the custom for a *pardo* – a Black or mulatto – to get off his horse on approach of a white person.¹¹⁰ Outside the port and commercial centers, there emerged on the islands a society leveled by the “generalization of poverty” while at the same time characterized by singular forms of linguistic, nutritional, and musical transculturation.¹¹¹

Even though, then, slavery and large-scale monocropping never became defining institutions of the island societies (marked instead, on the one hand, by trade and smuggling and, on the other, by smallhold farming and sharecropping), the kinds of uprootedness and dehumanization set in motion by colonial plantation regimes nonetheless resurfaced soon enough. Long before the formal abolition of slavery (decreed in 1869 for the remaining Portuguese colonies outside Brazil), the figure of the “kontratadu” (contracted laborer) emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, in the aftermath of the great droughts and famines that periodically hit the archipelago. Generally for an initial period of two years, these “contracts” committed its signees to labor in the sugar plantations of São Tomé and Príncipe, under conditions that varied little from those suffered by Angolan and Guinean slaves and prisoners. On the plantations, indentured workers and slaves toiled indiscriminately under the command of white overseers and were exposed to punishments and torture that included whipping and chaining. Instead of death by starvation, then, the contracts offered death-in-life (indeed, mortality on the plantations was high). Entering into the contract implied, in effect, the suspension of any right to appeal in exchange for a future compensation the contracted party was no longer in any position to claim once they had “indebted” themselves to the companies facilitating their passage

to the plantation islands further south. The subject of Cape Verde's unofficial anthem (the *morna* "Sodade", composed in the 1950s by Armando Soares), in the Cape Verdean "kontratadu" we find an early incarnation of what Ferdinand calls plantationary emancipation: "the preservation of colonial inhabitation and its plantations (as) the condition for the abolition of the slave trade and the enslavement of Blacks in the Americas" and, we should add, also in the circum-South Atlantic as a matrix and laboratory of coloniality.¹¹²

A kind of missing link that supports Sidney Mintz's hypothesis about the continuity between plantation and factory, the figure of the "kontratadu" juxtaposes those of the slave and the worker.¹¹³ The "kontratadu" is an anachronistic being who suspends time in his ghostly existence far from home, caught between a past that refuses to end (the slave plantation) and a future of compensation and return that the very conditions of the contract turn, quite literally, into a dead letter. The "kontratadu" inhabits, in other words, a fractured present and a space of uprootedness characterized by world-denial: the bifurcated space and time, precisely, that the voices of "Alto Cutelo", the Os Tubarões song, make manifest in their call-and-response exchange across the distance. Also known as "Novo Kontratadu", the song's lyrics propose a history lesson: they associate the fate of the most recent wave of migrants recruited to work in Portuguese constructions, shipyards and factories with that of their predecessors on the plantations and also, implicitly, of the hundreds of thousands of Cape Verdeans who gave their lives on whalers, docks, and mines in North America, Europe and Africa, and on the seas between them. Although official statistics are sketchy, it is estimated that the diasporic population of Cape Verdean origin exceeds that of the islands by a factor of three or four. Cape Verde, unlike other Atlantic islands, thus anticipates not so much the plantation as the matrix of colonial inhabitation as it anticipates a post-colonial formation, characteristic of our own present and embodied in the "kontratadu": that of a reservoir of human surplus, forced to give up their land, their body and their community. No longer kidnapped by force but leaving "on their own initiative", as micro-entrepreneurs of their own misery, it is these suspended lives and their contradictory territories and chronologies that Costa's cinema explores – a kind of archaeology, or perhaps better: a *geology* of the "kontratadu" as an emblematic figure of survival in the unworld, of *mundus immundus*.

Reenactment and afterlife

We can now put a name to the “abandonment as destiny” that, as per Rancière, represents the shared condition of Costa’s diasporic and “post-proletarian” characters (and also, as Vitalina Varela reminds us, those whom they left behind on the islands). It is the very same name already suggested to us in *Horse Money* through the long quotation of the Os Tubarões song right at the center of the narrative: *kontratadu*. As a figure that refers, at one and the same time, to the singular case of the Cape Verdean diaspora and to what it has in common with other migrant communities, the “novo contratado” or new hireling is also an emblem of what Achille Mbembe calls “the becoming-Black of the world”: of “this new fungibility, this solubility, institutionalized as a new form of existence and expanded to the entire planet”.¹¹⁴ The “kontratadu” inhabits the colonial-modern fracture where the differences between the factory and the plantation become blurry and where people live and die in a continuous present, under a suspension of time itself.

But if, then, *Horse Money* and the triptych it forms together with *Colossal Youth* and *Vitalina Varela*, also articulates a demand, the latter is not about putting into words what its characters would not have been able to say “in real life”. Rather, this claim takes the place of the characters’ “real-life demands” somewhat in the fashion of the letter that Ventura writes to Vitalina “in the name of” Joaquim. It is not a demand to restore life to those abandoned by it (and who, thereby, abandoned their community and their loved ones) but rather for a dignified *afterlife*, that is: a right to be mourned. What Rancière states with respect to *Vitalina Varela* can be extended, in that sense, to all three films in the triptych: “the film should be regarded as the unfolding of a long lament that not only mourns Joaquim’s death but his very life, a life buried in this underground universe [...] The film does not unfold a simple service to the dead, but the implacable process of a life already similar to death”.¹¹⁵

To articulate a framework for the mourning of lives that were not, could not be, wept: this is, perhaps, the kind of afterlife that Costa’s last three films call for. Considered in this fashion, the ghostly characters – such as Joaquim and Lento – take on special importance. Both of them “return” again and again from the realm of shadows after we have been told about their deaths: about Joaquim’s, through the official certificate Vitalina reads out aloud; about Lento’s, through the “accident” we are made to witness once more onscreen, when he tries to fix the makeshift connection to the high-voltage cable of the hut he shares with Ventura. Between their lives and afterlives in the form of



Figure 6: Fontainhas as “hold of the world” in *Vitalina Varela*
(Pedro Costa, Portugal, 2019)

an onscreen reenactment, an abysmal distance opens up that is, quite literally, a question of life and death. Yet, this ghostly condition of their reappearance only highlights the one shared by all the other characters. The one who bears this ghostly condition, it is worth clarifying, is not necessarily the “fictional” character alone nor, therefore, is it necessarily “someone else” who “plays Joaquim” or “Lento” (at least, not to a greater extent than those who “play themselves” like Ventura and Vitalina). Because, in truth, any reenactment, whether “autobiographical” or not, coincides in the same purpose: that of producing in front of camera a life that can be mourned when it becomes extinguished, when all there was before was a deleted name and a death suspended in the hold of the world (see Figure 6).

Hence, also, if there is any literary model or precedent we could attribute to *Horse Money*, it would certainly be Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “The South”. Like Borges’s Juan Dahlmann, prostrate in a hospital bed after suffering an accident, Ventura too conjures up his memories and ghosts in order to imagine and to fabricate an alternative ending. All of *Horse Money*’s gestures and dialogues, whether “real” or “imaginary” (including, perhaps, the conversations Ventura has with Vitalina and the letter he writes to her), revolve around this

same problem: how to replace and remedy the events of a life in order to make it narratable and to make room for a good death. That is why Costa's reenactments, as Rancière suggests, have the character of "short performances of redemption".¹¹⁶ It is through reenactment that, for once endowed with the weight of a "character", anonymous "extras" like the ones we saw in the "Alto Cutelo" segment collaborate to constellate sequences, plots, meanings in common. Reenactment is the building of alliances of survival by imagining oneself otherwise. This is why the charge that is routinely leveled against Costa's cinema – that of "aestheticizing poverty" – is based on a profound misunderstanding: as if it were not through beauty that "the poor" exercise their imagination of living differently, and thus of surviving, despite having been abandoned to the bottomless darkness of the hold of the world.

The light that returns, in the final shots of *Vitalina Varela* featuring the sun-bathed cemetery where Joaquim's remains have at last been laid to rest, thus also manifests one of the central aims of Costa's cinema: to find a way out of the hold of the world, even if only for those who participated in the film's own making. Costa's films do not aim to "set an example" in the way the Os Tubarões song had still attempted to do during the struggle for independence. To return to the light is no longer to re-align on native soil as foretold in the final stanzas of "Alto Cutelo" but merely to be able to mourn a life that was extinguished in the non-place of the contract: in the hold of the world. To mourn is also to insist that this life did in fact take place, and therefore a way of making it re-exist by removing it from the limbo where it had been held captive. The grief Pedro Costa's films allow for, by exercising and performing it, is of a political kind precisely because of its intimate and personal nature, since it disputes that abandonment was the only destiny in store for the "novos kontratados", the off-worlders. The "second burial" taking place at the end of *Vitalina Varela*, in bright sunshine and, this time, in the presence of the protagonist herself, has no other meaning than this re-affirmation of a compact between earth and community, which exile had left suspended. To tread on the earth, even if it is in the distance of the diaspora, and thus also to reopen a horizon of afterlife for the lives and deaths of the Negrocene, the lives that have not been mourned: such might be today, Costa intimates, the miracle of cinema.

3 Thanatocene

A man looks out at the plain. Eyes narrowed, he scrutinizes the horizon, as if he had to force himself to actually see something out there, the same as we are, since the shot's shallow focus forces us to guess what this lump or that shadow might be that we glimpse among the monotonous gray of sky and plain (see Figure 7). A shack, or perhaps rather a truck? And those furrows over there, next to the man's shoulders, could they be a dried-out riverbed or maybe the tracks of a tractor or an excavator? Is this really a vast desert or not, rather, a quarry, an open pit mine? We will never find out in the more than three minutes the sequence lasts because the camera insists on restricting our visual field to the torso of that man who, possibly, shares the myopia the images impose on us. In any case, no matter how hard he tries, he does not seem to find anything worthy of interest or attention in that blurry background he gazes out into, before turning, once some of the other men enter the frame whose voices we had begun to hear, towards the stage of poverty and petty violence that we will not leave again throughout the film. Rather than towards the landscape, the sequence summons us into "the field of history". But of a history that, lacking a background, a setting in which to take place, remains suspended in its own abyss, without an axis of orientation. Such seems to be the paradoxical premise of *El movimiento* (*The Movement*, 2015) by Argentine director Benjamín Naishtat: that time, the "historical process", if we look at it by itself, subtracting its spatial support, fades out to the effect that we can no longer distinguish a before from an after, causes from effects, friends from enemies. Unlike such "true-story" neo-Westerns as Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) or Justin Kurzel's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2019), *The Movement* does not indulge in period settings nor in scenic views of rugged frontier landscapes, though neither does it dismiss their mythical stories of foundation outright. Rather, Naishtat summons the violent birth pangs of early nineteenth-century Argentina in much the same way that he introduces its setting, the pampas: as a vague, near-abstract set of gestures and figures of speech with no particular referent nor anchorage in any place in particular. Lost in space, time loses all meaning, it becomes *the time of meaninglessness*, and this is, perhaps, also how history enters the desert. History in the desert is pure time without ground and, thus, it can only be a time of death, a time of the end of times: *Thanatocene*.



Figure 7: Figures without ground in *El movimiento*
(The Movement, Benjamín Naishtat, Argentina, 2015)

This is the name, too, by which historians Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz refer to the way in which total war, unleashed by fascism's general mobilization of the 1930s, was recalibrated by advanced post-war capitalism, the exponential growth of which was due above all to military technologies of mass destruction now applied to the realm of life in its entirety. What economic history calls the "productivity boom" or "the third industrial revolution" is in fact the integration of technologies of mass destruction with civil forms of surplus generation, including agro-industrial usage of chemical exfoliation agents first introduced in the counterinsurgency wars of Algeria, Korea, and Vietnam or the adaptation by the fishing industry of nylon mega-nets and radioacoustic technologies for underwater location first introduced in the fight against German submarines during WW II. During the Vietnam War, 85 percent of the ammunition used by the French and American armies was aimed not at human enemies but at the jungle environment. Already during the Great War of 1914-18, the destruction of forests and arable lands due to artillery fire and mustard gas had equalled forty thousand years of natural erosion; more recently, the carbon dioxide emissions generated in just the first two months of Israeli bombings in Gaza exceeded the annual sum of CO2 emitted by the twenty countries most vulnerable to climate change, contributing to making 2023 the hottest year on Earth since the beginning of measurements.¹¹⁷ The "Great Acceleration", Bonneuil and Fressoz conclude, "was the result of the industrial mobilization for the war, followed by the creation of civilian markets designed to absorb excess industrial capacity". By "creating a practically uninterrupted

state of exception”, the military-industrial complex has also “justified and encouraged a ‘brutalizing’ of relations between society and the environment”.¹¹⁸

Michel Serres, in *The Natural Contract*, invokes the painting *Fight with Cudgels*, created by Francisco Goya towards the end of his life, between 1820 and 1823, which shows two countrymen sinking into the same swamp while they beat each other to death. As they sink into the ground, their bodies, too, merge with the mountains and plains in the background, the contours of their battered flesh fading out without them even realizing the ghostly condition that unites them beyond the frenzy of their fight. Earlier and better than anyone else, Serres concludes, Goya caught sight of how “global history enters nature; global nature enters history”, such that “we no longer fight among ourselves, the nations that call themselves developed; we have turned, all of us together, against the world”.¹¹⁹ It is on this idea, I suggest, that *The Movement* offers us an update, an illumination – literally speaking – having led us through the long night of two hundred years of Argentine history. Developed or not, Naishtat’s film seems to tell us, we have never stopped sinking into the same mud in which Goya had seen his opponents immersed knee-deep and where, if the squealing of circus brawlers and snake-oil salesmen who swarm around any corner of our planet are any indication, today we seem to be at least up to our nostrils.

The point we are going to argue here, then, is that Naishtat’s film offers a figure of our becoming-fascist, concomitant to the way we have taken our eyes off the world – one that, for this very reason, turns into unworld, *immundus*, as soon as we perform on it the trick of the gaze Goya already conveyed so clearly: our way of suspending, in the fit of road rage that has gripped us, our very sense of *being in the world*. The film proposes a particularly suggestive figure of this becoming-fascist thanks to a double distancing. On the level of temporality, it moves away from the immediacy of the present, towards “history”, but only to immediately hollow out historical time as it shipwrecks in the great open of a featureless, abstract space. As if anticipating its more blatant expressions only a few years after its release, *The Movement* offers a reflection on the Thanatocene as arising from a peculiar kind of juxtaposition between figure and background, which provides the film’s gyrating axis: *history* and *the desert*. As we shall see, Naishtat’s film steers clear of historical allegory – of returning, neo-Western style, to the nation’s founding fictions – even though it does summon to the scene the ghosts of the latter. The film, rather, impresses upon us something more fundamental, something that goes beyond allegory or indeed any type of figuration: the desert as the “end” of history, in

the double sense of a surface that refuses any inscription of meanings and in that of a destination history is always already headed for. In the desert, history turns into an absurd theater of cruelty, possessed with that blind rage that ignores even the very ground on which it is standing, and where it is thus condemned to keep digging, just like Goya's countrymen clubbing each other to death, that great sinkhole into which everything is going to perish.

Hence, if there is any movement at all in *The Movement*, it is in downward spiral. Take, for instance, the nightly rides undertaken by "El Señor", the main character played by Pablo Cedrón, and his henchmen, each of them shot individually in front of a black background as in an eighteenth-century Dutch portrait, to the effect that all we can see are their busts and the heads of their horses moving up and down, but without being able to ascertain the distance they are covering (if in fact they do) or even the one measuring between one rider and the next. Their "movement" appears reduced to mere jumps in place, the effect of a kind of frame composition where, as critic Iván Zgaib argues, even the sensation of a space-time continuum is lost. Instead, each sequence emerges as a singular episode from the overall darkness that envelops the screen from all sides, marked out by the cone of light from a candle or a stove that allows us a glimpse of the bodies and faces touched by its aura. Because of this almost constant lack of luminosity, Zgaib concludes, "descriptive elements are erased; the feeling of physical place disappears. As human silhouettes are exalted, the environment becomes almost impossible to make out". Consequently, actions become fragmented and "assume an abstract, indeterminate, imprecise form".¹²⁰

Shot in expressive, lugubrious black-and-white, with an aspect ratio of 4:3 (the kind used in the oldest films, before the introduction of widescreen cinema), *The Movement* seems to take us out of our present and back to the convulsive origins of modernity: "1835. Argentina. Anarchy. Plague", reads the initial intertitle. Set on a dark, windswept plain practically bereft of inhabitants, the film narrates – following an extensive and violent prologue in the encampment of "El Coronel" (Alberto Suárez) – the adventures of "El Señor" and his small posse who roam this almost phantasmagorical space looking to re-found "the movement". The cause of the latter remains uncertain as, in the verbose harangues El Señor propitiates to friends and foes, all we learn is about its many betrayals. But just as El Coronel's invocations of the light of justice and fatherland barely conceal his sadistic pleasure in torturing, killing and stealing from the weakest, neither are those of El Señor about the pure spirit of the people anything other than smoke screens behind which lurk only greed and homicidal opportunism. If

anything distinguishes Tyrians from Trojans, Naishtat seems to suggest, it is in the forms of evil: where El Coronel chooses to waste a cannon shot to blow off an old peasant's head and distribute among the troops the food he came to sell them, El Señor and his men resort to the more rustic technique of cutting an old homesteader's throat who had provided them with food and lodging.

Ultimately, preference for one kind of infamy or another is a question of taste; what matters, instead, is that the movement led by El Señor does not actually go anywhere but remains stuck in the same place, or perhaps not even so much as in a place since he and his posse are neither inhabitants nor guests there: just swindlers, murderers and looters. In this, years if not centuries go by since, when dawn finally breaks and El Señor and what is left of his court of murderers and clowns at last manage to gather a group of countrymen for an assembly, one or two show up on a motorcycle or in a dilapidated car, crossing the background of the image while other attendees of the rally are "interviewed" on camera. Anachronism on the level of time, then, mirrors and duplicates the elimination of space the film's camera and lighting have been working on us throughout *The Movement*: those landless "countrymen" that have suddenly turned up from God knows where might just as well be those of 1835 as of yesterday, since nothing much seems to have changed in their relation to the quagmire into which they keep sinking.

Naishtat's film, I want to argue, teases out what current neo-fascisms (Latin American and otherwise) have put into practice in the years following its release: the farcical character that takes hold of historical narrative when it is taken into "the desert", that is: brought under the spell of an extractive – despoiling – relationship with the material world and with the web of life. *The Movement's* greatest merit, I want to suggest, is to have pinpointed the place (or rather non-place) where historical narrative turns into farce. In reasserting as well as updating a great Latin American tradition of "cinemas of defeat" that had peaked in the aftermath of the US-backed military coups of the 1960s and 1970s, *The Movement* also revisits and ties together in novel ways the two main threads of that tradition: tragedy and farce.

The farce of fascism

If, as Marx famously contended, historical events and figures usually appear first in the mode of tragedy and then in that of farce, farce would be a way of narrating the history of the future. Tragedy, of course, is the analytical genre par excellence: it returns to a past the outcome of which it already knows in advance and which, therefore, it can only

show to have been the way how “men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past”.¹²¹ If tragedy, in looking back, establishes the meaning of present events as determined by past circumstances, farce projects into the future the meaninglessness of repetition, and even the repetition of meaninglessness. What tragedy invests with meaning, farce reveals once more in its essentially absurd character: Oedipus Rex turns into Ubu Roi. And it is repetition itself that sends tumbling down the meanings so laboriously interwoven by the tragic narrative. Instead of succumbing to the forces of destiny whose course his predecessor, the tragic hero, is unable to stop, the farcical lead barely falls into his own trap, to immediately get back on his feet, seconds later, in the manner of a slapstick performer. Tragedy refers to the truth of history; farce, to the deception of that truth.

Turning to the Latin American “cinemas of defeat” of the 1960s and 1970s is useful not only in terms of situating Naishtat’s film with regard to this earlier moment. It will also allow us to take a step further in analyzing the anachronistic historicism we started identifying in *The Movement*, putting it in relation to a wider dynamic of repetition and difference in which – as dissident postwar filmmakers in Europe such as Pasolini, Fassbinder, or Truffaut would suggest at roughly the same time – (neo)fascism itself is inscribed. I will focus briefly on a doubly marginal film, *Hitler III Mundo* (Third-World Hitler, Brazil 1968) by José Agrippino de Paula, a movie that was part of Brazil’s Cinema Marginal movement but remained quite literally invisible at the time of its production, due to the effect of censorship that kept it out of circulation until 1984. Shot underground, with remains of negative collected by the cameraman, Jorge Bodanzky, and occupying in the manner of a guerrilla platoon, with quick and improvised intrusions, a variety of locations including a soccer stadium, the backstage of a television show, and even a police truck – agents included – *Hitler III Mundo* “repeats” at least two forerunners, at the same time that it “registers”, albeit in refracted fashion, the violent preparations for “Institutional Act nr. 5” – the “Coup within the Coup” – decreed on December 13, 1968, which extended a blanket permit for the practices of torture and extrajudicial murder the military regime was expanding from its initial targets (unions and peasant activists) to cultural and academic milieus. On the one hand, with its entangled plotlines of the rise of a tropical “Hitler” and of his nemesis, a plump samurai, the film cites in cartoonish, B-movie style the agonistic constellation between the two political leaders of *Land in Anguish* (1967), Glauber Rocha’s great tragic analysis of defeat: the “dictator” Porfirio Díaz and

his “populist” adversary, Governor Vieira, between whom the protagonist, the poet Paulo Martins, shifted his loyalties. If Glauber’s film, released just the year before (whose initial cut, Caetano Veloso tells us, Agrippino was among the first to view and discuss)¹²² proposed in the key of baroque allegory a postmortem of the 1964 coup and the frustration of the revolutionary dreams shared by Cinema Novo, *Hitler III Mundo* incorporates its narrative outline in the same way in which it borrows locations, accessories and news items: as mere leftovers, narrative scaffolding that is being recycled in support or excuse for bringing to the screen the film’s other base material: the experimental dance show *Tarzan III Mundo – O Mustang Hibernado* (Third-World Tarzan: The Hibernated Mustang), premiered in 1968 at São Paulo’s Anchieta Theater.

With a choreography from Maria Esther Stockler (Agrippino’s partner, who appears in *Hitler* in the role of “Madame Divac”), the piece was exhibited as part of the São Paulo Dance Festival, introducing the SONDA collective founded, in addition to Maria Esther and Agrippino, by Carlos Eugênio de Moura and Yolanda Amadei. Like the film that “repeats” several of its episodes, *Tarzan III Mundo* consisted of unconnected scenes penned by authors linked to the marginal film and poetry movement: in addition to Agrippino and Jô Soares (a cult actor who plays the samurai in *Hitler*), there were contributions from visual artists Sarah Ferres and Efizio Putzolo. Several episodes recycled, in a trash aesthetic, motifs and characters from the transnational culture industry, including Soares’s contribution featuring Batman and Robin engaging in S/M sex and the title sequence, written by Agrippino, which reimaged Johnny Weissmuller’s character wandering among shards of plastic, cardboard and a burnt-out car, an urban jungle setting illuminated by the fluorescence of multiple TV screens.¹²³

Completed only months after the premiere of *Tarzan, Hitler III Mundo* sourced from the stage play costumes, actors, characters, and even entire sequences, such as the one of dancers rehearsing at a gym, whose “corpses”, in the following shot, we see piled up in the back room of a torture camp. The film shares with Rogério Sganzerla’s *O bandido da luz vermelha* (*The Red-Light Bandit*), made that same year, the role of precursor and reference point for a new marginal cinema whose “aesthetics of garbage is a radicalization of the Glauberian aesthetics of hunger”, as film historian Ismail Xavier points out. Just as Sganzerla’s better-known film, Agrippino’s represented “a profanation of the Glauberian ritual”, the poetics of entrancement of social relations Rocha, the Bahian director and theorist, had been radicalizing from *Barravento* and *Black God, White Devil* to *Land in Anguish*.

The garbage dump, the “Boca do Lixo” is, for Agrippino just as for Sganzerla, “the place of a Third World adrift, and the grotesque parade of corruption, misery and imbecility turns the national context into a tragicomic province on the margins of the civilized orbit”.¹²⁴ But where *The Red-Light Bandit* assembled from the “excrement” of yellow-press snippets and tropical kitsch (mambos, boleros) a grotesque and violent emblem of the city plundered by dictatorial capitalism, *Hitler III Mundo* also turns, in addition, to two kinds of avant-garde language – dance and poetry – in order to investigate, through gestures and the rarefaction of speech, the forms of *inscription of evil on bodies* and of *the unraveling of narratives*: the film’s own as well as those about revolutionary national liberation and fascist counterinsurgency constructed by the cinema of the Left, the culmination and tragic synthesis of which had been precisely *Land in Anguish*.

A radically “imperfect” piece of filmmaking (in Cuban theorist Julio García Espinosa’s programmatic sense of the term),¹²⁵ *Hitler III Mundo* repeats – recycles, reassembles – the juxtaposed diagnoses of the present from *Tarzan* and *Land in Anguish*, entangling them with one another in off-tune fashion. To being with, the film’s soundtrack verges almost constantly on pure noise, drowning out the actors’ voices under a sonic mesh of moans and grunts, percussion, engine noise, radio and television broadcasts. As cinematographer Jorge Bodanzky has explained, during sound editing, the first copy of *Hitler* turned out flawed due to a technical error, which resulted in sound being delayed by a few seconds in relation to the image. Agrippino, delighted with the result, immediately resolved to incorporate this mismatch into the final version.¹²⁶ The soundtrack’s delayed and therefore always in-excess meaning, inevitably mis-understood in relation to the shot it accompanies, reinforces the overall sensation of copy, of poorly recycled leftover. “Hitler” himself, in one of the first sequences in which he appears onscreen, poses in an ill-fitting uniform, his mustache askance and with strands of combover barely masking his bald scalp, next to a Nazi poster with the face of the *Führer*, by which he pauses for a few seconds as if embarrassed with his own second-rate imitation. Unlike Charlie Chaplin’s Adenoid Hynkel in *The Great Dictator* – or, more recently, Oliver Masucci’s undead *Führer* in David Wnendt’s *Look Who’s Back* (2015) and Udo Kier’s in Christoph Schlingensiefel’s *100 Years of Adolf Hitler* (1989)– Fernando Benini’s third-world Hitler needs no backstory or motivation: he jumps into action in much the same way as the samurai or as a cartoonish stone giant arrested by police on the roof of a São Paulo skyscraper: as a creature of the culture industry turned part and parcel of the popular imaginary (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: Middle-class life as neo-fascism in *Hitler III Mundo*
(José Agrippino de Paula, Brazil, 1968)

Right from the first sequence that serves as a kind of prologue, this theme of recycling or regurgitating of culture-industrial trash that underwrites *Hitler's* filmic aesthetics, is introduced in an episode narrating the “refurbishment” of the urban middle class into homicidal hordes. The sequence is told in the absurd key of a marital crisis: a kitchen, appliance noises in the background, the Wife, wearing a silk scarf and garish sunglasses, next to an empty refrigerator which, we are led to guess, has just stopped working. Enter the Husband, first in close-up, then in a medium-length shot of his besuited body elbowing hers out of the frame and gesticulating frantically at camera, eyes and mouth open to the extreme (even though, until the next shot, we cannot hear a single word). There, in what would be a “continuous shot”, were it not for the movement that has stalled in both takes, we reencounter the same couple in their car (a Volkswagen Beetle), which has broken down in the midst of an avenue, with other vehicles entering and leaving the frame at speed. Making explicit the previous shot's subtext of sexual and aspirational frustration, the broken-down car seesaws as if from a coital movement that is, in fact, the couple's escalating fight we hear on the soundtrack: “A puncture! Who's going to save us now?” – the Husband screams in voice-over – “We will die inside this car! We will enter a state of decomposition!” As the shouting continues

on the soundtrack, the next shot takes us into the repair shop the couple have finally reached, punctured tire in hand. But instead of taking the faulty rubber with him, the mechanic makes the consorts crouch on all fours and takes them, one by one, to the back room of the garage. It's here that, following a shot of dancers whom the Husband observes from a hydraulic platform, we reencounter him rummaging through their piled-up corpses (belonging, we shall later find out, to the "revolutionaries" who, throughout the film, are being ferried to and from the hospital to the basements where they are tortured and castrated). On the soundtrack, the screaming continues – in Spanish – in the voice of who we only now understand to be the police torturer: "The dynamite? Where's the dynamite!?"

Assuming disjuncture as a compositional principle that cuts through cause-effect relations, *Hitler III Mundo* forecloses any attempt to arrange individual segments into a continuous plot. Just as "Hitler" is killed at one point by the samurai and the latter by the former's lover/hitman, and both of them by a robot programmed in the "Intelligence Center for Third-World Coups", all are unceremoniously resurrected in the following fragment, not to mention the young and handsome guerrilla fighter who returns from death again and again, finally transmuted into an SS henchman receiving orders from his erstwhile enemy. One sequence undoes and overwrites the other; a mode of self-destructive meaning-making that Agrippino has alerted us to right from the opening credits. There, the cylinder of an electric typewriter could be seen running over the *already typed-out* list of actors and technicians, burying it under a nonsensical flood of letters, while animal roars and electronic noise on the soundtrack drown out the percussive pattern accompanying the initial black screen. Similar to this "un-writing machine", the film as a whole "picks up" chunks of pre-existing material (political speeches, cartoon characters, TV shows and "typical" Cinema Novo sequences) only to put these through a kind of waste shredder that recycles them into a "new", viscous materiality. The premonitory capacity of this narrative garbage is remarkable: among others, it alludes to the judiciary's complicity with state terrorism; the policing of female sexuality (the "decapitation" of Madame Divac on a soccer field, accused of having "seduced a boy"); the neo-fascists' narcissistic obsession with fashion and showbiz ("Hitler" and his right-hand man/lover, the one-eyed CIA agent, frantically soaping themselves in a bathroom before having breakfast, sporting Hawaiian shirts and swastika armbands, while they leaf through modeling magazines); outlandish hairstyles to patch up a more than obvious lack (the only truly hirsute ones, apart from the literally simian torturers, are the "revolutionaries" – hence perhaps the fascists' urgency to

externalize the “castration” they barely manage to disguise with buns and combovers); and religious fanaticism arising from the margins of society (Jesus and his apostles, “walking on water” in an open sewer next to a highway).

Over-the-top as it may sound, perhaps the accusation of “coup-mongering” that Glauber Rocha leveled against the Cinema Marginal filmmakers (promptly returned when these accused Cinema Novo of being an “elite, paternalistic, conservative, right-wing movement”) contained at least a grain of truth.¹²⁷ For, instead of a place of critical exteriority in relation to the fascist maelstrom, which *Land in Anguish* only holds on to by constructing its narrative as the agonizing protagonist’s stream-of-consciousness, in *Hitler III Mundo* the vantage point is attributed not to a particular character but to the diegetic universe itself. In the absence of critical, “consciousness-raising” exteriority, which even *Land in Anguish* would not give up on, in *Hitler* we are ourselves invited to delight in the pleasures of the fascist sewer and its inhabitants. We are enticed to find fun in serial trashing, or perhaps, in that which trash serializes and repeats, which is precisely the impossibility of keeping a distance from it and, thus, the triumph of what exists (unequal, exploitative, violent social and interpersonal relations). We thus return, but in a different key, to one of the main points argued in these pages: the “afterlife” of vestiges even when these can no longer forge a “world”, when what is entailed by the “nonsense” of the leftover is an unworld, *immundus*, to which the rubble and rot of discarded signs and things no longer lend any coherent meaning.

In *The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics*, Kriss Ravetto credits the work of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Liliana Cavani, and Lina Wertmüller for “their refusal to disengage nazi or fascist idealism from moral humanism”. Unlike a string of cinematic reckonings with fascism culminating in Steven Spielberg’s Oscar-winning *Schindler’s List* (1993), films such as *Salò* (1975), *The Night Porter* (1974), or *Seven Beauties* (1975) deny us “catharsis, that is, the sentiment of redemption” that comes with drawing a clear-cut line between “us” and “them”, between the fascists’ “inhumanity” and the shared sense of humanity in which we are urged to recognize ourselves: “Pasolini, Cavani, and Wertmüller do not advocate a *clear* antifascist position – they do not provide the audience with a cathartic release from their possible or potential implication in fascism – they are in turn subjected to the very judgments they set out to critique”.¹²⁸ *Hitler III Mundo* similarly deprives us of any position of critical exteriority and/or humanist ethical choice but, different from its European contemporaries, the film’s main concern is with a “third-world” position always already condemned to farcical repetition and to the regurgitating of the trash of history, much

in the same way that fascism might seem to be doing in a context of “first-world” civilizational breakdown. Strikingly, however, among the most important films made in Brazil under the Bolsonaro regime, most have tended to vindicate the insurgent allegories of early Cinema Novo rather than the tortured vision of *Land in Anguish*, let alone the eschatological trash of *Hitler III Mundo*. Films such as *Bacurau* (2019) by Kléber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles or *Divine Love* (2019) by Gabriel Mascaro coincide in appropriating hegemonic forms and genres (the Western, dystopian sci-fi) to forge from these looted genre frameworks allegories of liberation and of the violence of the oppressed, as if watching images onscreen could really exorcise the evil. Even when they appeal to futurism, these films share a certain nostalgia for an earlier time (such as *Bacurau*’s “Cangaço Museum”), a time when cinema would still have had the upper hand against the enemy’s vision machine.

The efficiency of such progressive nostalgia, however uplifting, remains doubtful. As Agrippino already knew (and put into practice in his grandiose and insane reply to *Land in Anguish*), fascist nostalgia, with its eternal reruns of elementary plotlines, tends to be much more effective than that of its progressive antagonists. Fascism invokes the names of the past as would a fungus or parasite: phagocytizing them until all that is left are hollow shells, mummified signs, dead forms. Its discourse abbreviates in the destruction of all meaning insofar as it eliminates the interlocutor and thus the very possibility of making sense, which relies on the effort of reaching out to someone else. In Márcia Tiburi’s formulation, fascism as a “dispositive of corroding the system that intends to establish itself as the system anticipates the extermination of the other in a language that is closed and, therefore, dead in its simplest ontological function. The extermination of the other is thus the extermination of the very meaning from which all other meanings derive and of the very possibility of producing meaning that is only achieved in the experience of otherness”.¹²⁹ Fascism turns language itself into a dumping ground. In the desert of history, the fascist farce makes narrative itself into a dumpster of meaning, in short: into time as Wastocene.

Suture and repetition

Similar to the challenge faced by Latin America’s cinemas of defeat from the 1960s and 1970s, our own seems to lie with recognizing the essentially fascist character of the current system of dominance – its deployment of repetition and farce – without losing sight of the novel and peculiar confluence that underwrites it between technologies of

affect and of mass destruction. Klaus Theweleit, in his classic and exhaustive analysis of the affective economy of Nazi Germany, has shown how, under classic fascism, this confluence between negative affects and technologies of extermination was channeled by a certain type of fetishistic masculinity. German cinema of the 1930s and 1940s appropriated the narrative core of Hollywood – the crisis and reconstitution of the heteropatriarchal couple – with two added or even alternative objects of libidinal investment that competed, sometimes openly, with the spectacle of the female star's body: "nature", especially of a mountainous kind, which assumed a sort of co-protagonism in the *Heimatfilm* genre, and the Nazi movement itself as a homosocial brotherhood that (as in Leni Riefenstahl's trilogy on the NSDAP congresses) acquired plastic value equivalent to the "mass ornament" of female bodies featured in the contemporary musical comedies of Busby Berkeley or Vincente Minelli.¹³⁰ The displacement is anything but fortuitous: as Román Setton explains, both in the mountain movies (where Riefenstahl made her debut as an actress) and in the initiation stories that tell the origins of the Nazi movement in a mythical key, the young hero must reject the advances of his female counterpart (in the latter, the "communist girl" who wants to seduce/castrate him with her sexuality) to instead choose the group of male comrades in whose defense he gives his life (but with whom his "soul" marches on towards final victory, thanks to the use of superimposed negatives). In these films, concludes Setton, we encounter "a recurring prohibition of National Socialism: 'no to sex, all love belongs to the Führer'", on whom, indeed, all the scopic vectors of Riefenstahl's films converge.¹³¹ In Susan Sontag's words: "The crowd's expression in *Triumph of the Will* is an expression of ecstasy; the Leader makes the crowd come".¹³²

As Theweleit concludes, it is because he must not even imagine this "other thing" that constantly lurks in his fantasy, that the soldier-male turns his own body into an armor, making the uniform he wears into a kind of second skin, so as to drown out once and for all every desiring impulse that might nest within him and that, in the form of a "Red Tide" (working masses, female genitalia), wells up from outside against his bodily dikes and those of "the fatherland". Against this fluid, contingent, abject excrescence of the living, the fascist ritual of uniformed bodies "in formation" offers the remedy of a sameness repeated to infinity and containing (freezing, "hardening") that which previously threatened the integrity of the soldier-male:

[The Nazis'] public rituals no longer depicted the subjugation of "nature" [...] directly as the subjugation of women, but instead as the subjugation of the masses, masses of men

[...] Before any of this could happen, the body had to be split apart thoroughly enough to create an interior and exterior that could be opposed to each other as enemies. Only then could the two parts re-form “in peace” in the ritual. What fascism promised men was the reintegration of their hostile components under tolerable conditions, dominance of the hostile “female” element within themselves.¹³³

Just as it did for the analysts of classic fascism, our difficulty in understanding the current juncture lies with the complexity of the assemblages between the needs of extractive capitalism and the regimes of subjectivation that respond to and propel these: with what Tiburi calls (quoting Mark Fisher) the “dystopian codes” of capitalist realism.¹³⁴ If, for classic fascism, the general mobilization of all productive forces towards total war, responding to capital’s necessities after the cumulative crisis unleashed by the Crash of 1929, required a political regime capable of channeling towards this same war the drives it conjured in the uniformed masses, neo-fascism is no less in need of an affect politics that re-channels extractive destruction into the enjoyment of watching others suffer. As the “realization of the victory of capital” – the expression is Juan Carlos Marín’s –¹³⁵ fascism offers a regime of governance capable of “link[ing] a micropolitics of sad affects (frustration, hatred, envy, anxiety, fear) to the macropolitics of the new fascism that gives political consistency to the subjectivities devastated in the financialization”.¹³⁶

In film theory, the concept of “suture” has been key to thinking about the interdependent production of cinematic narrative and its spectatorial subject. Originally coined within Lacanian psychoanalysis, where it refers to the subject’s position in the order of discourse that admits it only as a founding absence, as substitute – a constitutive slippage that also conjoins the symbolic and the imaginary –,¹³⁷ in its application to film, suture refers to the modes of inscription and delegation of the gaze on which the intrafilmic chronotope, the diegesis, is built. Introduced into film semiotics in the late 1960s by critics such as Jean-Pierre Oudart and Daniel Dayan, who associate it above all with the grammar of the shot/reverse shot, suture underwrites and seals the process of subjectivation that occurs in the relation between spectator and image, where an initial moment of pure fascination/identification gives way to one of disenchantment (the equivalent of the castration complex), associated with the perception of the frame and its limits, in other words, with what is missing from this same image which, therefore, spectators can only partially behold and possess.

Modeled on the mirror stage as the founding as well as permanently readjusted matrix of the Lacanian subject, cinematic suture names the moment of imaginary synthesis when this lack that continuously interrupts the signifying chain is “resolved” through an intradiegetic substitute to whom, after the fact, we delegate our own extradiegetic position (necessary to complete the constitutively open image). Suture, then, reestablishes the flow between one image and the next as if there had never been any interruption. As Stephen Heath summarizes, “the pure field of absence becomes the imaginary field of the film [...] thus the break in the initial relation with the image is sutured: sutured across the spectator constituted as cinematic or filmic subject, essential to the realization of image as signifier and to the articulation of shots together”.¹³⁸ In contradictory fashion that, in many aspects, replicates the dynamic of ideological interpellation as theorized by Althusser in his essay on state apparatuses,¹³⁹ the cinematic apparatus ties the spatiotemporal integrity of onscreen action to the *passivity* of the spectator whose ghostly presence (or “delegated action”) subtends and guarantees time and again the imaginary plenitude of the spectacle, in the same way that it reaffirms the imaginary coherence and stability of the bourgeois heteropatriarchal order for which cinema itself serves as a screen.

In her discussion of José Padilha’s *Elite Squad* (2007) – one of Brazilian cinema’s standout box-office successes of all time – media theorist Ivana Bentes offers some cues on how we might think about the mediations channeling today’s neo-fascist affects, as well as about the role of the moving image in arousing these. The film (anticipating TV serializations of the “war on drugs” including Netflix’ *Narcos*, 2015-17) follows the initiation of Matias, an idealistic young police officer, at the hands of the more experienced Captain Nascimento (Wagner Moura). In a series of increasingly graphic massacres and tortures of alleged drug traffickers, the battle-hardened older officer gradually turns Matias into one more of the vigilante warriors of the Special Operations Battalion, the “elite squad” of the Rio de Janeiro police. The lesson the film is offering (in marked contrast with the university class on Foucault the young man has to sit through) is directed not just at Matias but, Bentes suggests, also the spectator who “is conscripted into an attitude of complicity with a regressive and vengeful discourse”. Joining Matias in his apprenticeship, we too learn to see things from the Captain’s point of view and to enjoy his pleasure in exerting violence on the defenseless bodies of “enemies” who “asked for it”: “Captain Nascimento appeals to our own becoming-fascist [...] State terror, in other words, is cinematically and socially legitimized”, both in words and through a hand-held camera that places us close to

the events, “similar to TV news [...] Essentially, it is the same type of denunciatory indignation the media never tire of repeating and encouraging”.¹⁴⁰ Generating a sort of cinematic Stockholm Syndrome, the film leaves us no other option than to “desire what the narrative desires [...] The spectator is taken hostage”.¹⁴¹

Ironically enough, taking the audience hostage is exactly what Padilha himself had made the subject, in documentary form, of his previous film *Bus 174* (2002), reconstructing through TV news snippets the hijacking of a bus near Rio de Janeiro’s Botanical Garden, which ended with the killings at the hands of police of the assailant and one of the hostages. Broadcast live on TV for as long as negotiations lasted, the hijacking allowed Sandro, the assailant (himself the survivor of a police massacre of street kids), to become, during his last hours, a director and protagonist of sorts in his own action movie, as Tom Cohen suggests, handing down instructions to his hostages/supporting cast while simulating threats and executions in front of camera that would become sordid reality only when the police decided they had seen enough.¹⁴² It is as if Padilha, at this very moment, had understood that the affect machine set in motion by those images in dispute, the base material of his documentary, can only be taken advantage of by doubling down on the effect of neo-fascist subjectivation those same images desire, in constant feedback loop with our own desire invested in them. *Bus 174*, in other words, was the filmmaking lesson Sandro left to Padilha as his final gift and which, in *Elite Squad*, Padilha followed down to the letter, except for erasing its true author.

Or, indeed, by reinstating the true author, since Sandro, as Cohen argues, was himself already framed by the very same plot he had refused, time and again, to star in for the benefit of the cameras: “This isn’t a fucking movie!” Except that it is, or will sooner or later become one, as *Bus 174* and *Elite Squad* confirm, each in their own way, because Sandro’s was a body already destined for the screen even before he got on the bus. As Ivakhiv puts it, “we swim in a sea of images – visual representations providing ‘subject positions’ for us to insert ourselves into, spatial configurations, habituated bodily comportments and cognitive schemata that shape the ways we think, move, look, and act”.¹⁴³ And somewhat like those plastic fibers found in the darkest depths of the oceans, late-capitalist affects today contaminate every current of this sea of images, dragging us into our own becoming-fascist. In the regime of permanent image oversaturation that Tiburi characterizes as “aesthetic populism”, violence becomes omnipresent in the form of a spectacle to be enjoyed, such that “the system is implanted like a pen drive in the bodies available to it. It is a veritable linguistic chip whose devices are the screens – whether televisions, computers or

cell phones – that become prostheses of knowledge [and] that, in the becoming-cyborg of human society, turn into a new organ of sorts”.¹⁴⁴ Naishtat’s *The Movement*, I want to suggest returning to where we began these reflections, finds in its particular opening and closure of a distance in time a means not just of slowing down this bombardment of images but also of exposing, in this same temporal hiatus, the loss of place, of the sensation of shared groundedness in sentient materiality, as linking the affective economy of fascism to the Thanatocene as “a permanent state of exception [that] has justified and encouraged a ‘brutalizing’ of relations between society and environment”.¹⁴⁵

Invisible ground

According to Maurizio Lazzarato, neoliberalism’s fascist turn should be understood less as a contradiction than as the fullest activation of its destructive core inherent from the beginning. Hate speech and the adoption of war as an organizational matrix of society have been the daily bread of neoliberalism ever since its emergence under the genocidal dictatorships in Latin America: “Without civil war and fascism, without ‘creative destruction,’ no conversion of the economic, juridical, state, and governmental apparatuses. Since 2008, we have entered into a new sequence of this type”.¹⁴⁶ Only that, unlike in classic fascism, today the mobilization of negative affects no longer happens solely in order to “eliminate” a threat projected outward (Jews, Muslims, the working masses, the liberation movements in the former colonies), not least because any serious challenge to capitalist hegemony has vanished with the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989. Rather, Lazzarato argues, the final battle for which neofascism is mobilizing today is that of “capital organizing its escape, its ‘separation’ from society”,¹⁴⁷ for the sake of which it has unleashed a “war against the population”:

Total war changed into global war, in the sense that it constitutes the other face of globalization, the military aspect of the “civil” action of the world market. It is endemic, intermittent, always ready to break out, but against a background of war against the population [...] In contemporary capitalism, war is always, at bottom, a civil war, a war against the population. Capital’s war, unlike the war waged by the state, does not have as its basis the affirmation and extension of sovereignty, but the submission of humans and non-humans to the production of value.¹⁴⁸

What Lazzarato points to is an immediate convergence between a form of war and a form of accumulation. And let us stress here that

“population” far exceeds “humans” and also encompasses the living networks that sustain our relations with our coexistents. Today, all boundaries between war and “civil” forms of extractive accumulation, including the (biochemical, nutritional, sexual) “slow violence” wrought on peasant and Indigenous populations and people of color, have become at best tenuous if not altogether meaningless.

Released in times of electoral defeat and juridico-parliamentary coups against center-left administrations across Latin America, *The Movement* could be understood as reigniting a long literary and cinematic tradition of seeking in the nineteenth century’s narratives of national foundation an allegorical cue for the present. María Luisa Bemberg’s *Camila* (1984) is perhaps the most well-known antecedent for this kind of recourse to history. Unsurprisingly, then, the film’s reception has made much of the contrast between *The Movement* and a host of Argentine films from previous years that sought to reestablish an epic view of the past and thus also to reinscribe cinema as an ideological apparatus rallying audiences to the national-popular state’s cause: *Revolución: el cruce de los Andes* (*Revolution: Crossing the Andes*, 2010) by Leandro Ipiña, and *Belgrano* (2010), by Sebastián Pivotto, both released in celebration of Argentina’s independence bicentennial, are only the most prominent examples. Film critic Agustín Durruty argues that *The Movement*, rather than with an epic vision of history, aligns itself with a different genealogy, that of “revising folkloric-historical cinema through the lens of contemporary art cinema”, a mode of citation that could be related, albeit with certain nuances, to the “New Argentine Cinema” of the 1970s, including films such as Fernando “Pino” Solanas’s *Los hijos de Fierro* (*The Sons of Martín Fierro*, 1975) or Leonardo Favio’s *Juan Moreira* (1973).¹⁴⁹ At the same time, critics have rightly pointed to affinities with a militant cinema such as Peter Watkins’s revisionist *tour-de-force* reenactment of the Paris Commune (*La commune – Paris, 1871*, 2000), including the use, in the final sequence of Naishtat’s film, of the rhetoric of TV newscasts in the closing statements to camera of men and women in country dress, relating their impressions after attending the “rally” El Señor and his henchmen have set up somewhere in the limitless expanse of tumbleweeds and dust.

Unlike Watkins’s film, where anachronism is used in the way of a Brechtian device suspending the illusionary transparency of historical narrative, to introduce a reflexive instance that triggers a critical spectatorship, *The Movement* only deploys it at the very end, when the story has already run its course. Only at this point are we confronted, in the background of a shot suddenly endowed with depth of field, with objects from our own present that break down the fictional

pact of historical drama. As a series of ragged countrymen and women recount their impressions of the leader's speech to an imaginary film crew, a motorcycle and a battered combi van cross through the background of the image. In fact, these final shots seem to tell us, what we have traversed during the long night on the plain that takes up almost the entire film, was not geographical space but the almost two centuries separating the diegetic present of the first sequence from the time and space of the final one, which, to all appearances, are none other than our own. As Javier Trímboli puts it: "To create an anachronism aims to produce a truth, even if only for a moment. To begin with, the scourges, anarchy and plague, appear to be eternal, as do the budding, second-rate caudillos".¹⁵⁰

It is through constructing an abstract, unspecific space that *The Movement* unfastens the narrative from its temporal moorings. On the one hand, there is the loss of orientation, on the part of El Señor and his posse dispersing in the desert night, barely managing to stay united through frequent, and increasingly desperate, trumpet signals, while also becoming entangled in mutual suspicions, threats, and escapes until just a single follower (the most taciturn and bloodthirsty) remains at El Señor's side. On the other hand, historical time itself is gradually stripped of all specific reference, despite taking us back—as Trímboli reminds us—to 1835, the year of the charismatic caudillo Facundo Quiroga's assassination and thus, according to the foundational essay on the "barbarian" leader penned by polymath and future president Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, to the "secret" of an entire country the dead warlord had taken to his grave. Some of Sarmiento's prophetic historicism undoubtedly tinges *The Movement*: but where, for the historian, the twists and turns of civil war and the life and death of the "Tiger of the Plains" contained the profound (historical, even geological) truth of great forces destined to clash on the vast stage of the pampas, here the empty husks of political rhetorics are strewn across the desert like so many fossils, their substance having rotted away. Indeed, the fragmentary editing of El Señor's speeches further accentuates this sense of pastiche, even delirium, unleashing a torrent of words with no beginning or end that, therefore, can be cut and rejoined at just about any point without losing or gaining anything in the process. "Many words, but they mean little or nothing on one side; and are almost vacuous on the other", as Trímboli resumes: "There are no more lost treasures to be found in the past; only force, cunning, power and submission, and also indifference".¹⁵¹

Even though speech and costume might seem to associate Naishtat's film with a long-standing "historical-folkloric" cinematic and literary tradition, in Durruty's expression, going back all the way to

Sarmiento's *Facundo*, *The Movement* ultimately reaches very different conclusions. For if, to Sarmiento, the point was to excavate, through analysis of historical characters' telluric affiliations, the geological substratum of the present political moment in which "rural, colonial, and barbaric nature was transformed [...] into an art, a system, and a politics capable of presenting itself to the world as the way of being of a people",¹⁵² *The Movement* is interested rather in the detachment of words from things, and thus also the severance of politics from any relationship with the land. This is why El Señor and his faithful lose their way in the night of time – or as Cedrón's character exclaims, waist-deep in an expanse of water with no shore in sight: "Land of the Devil, cursed land, barren land, deserted land!" The only movement happening in *The Movement* is one that goes nowhere. Indeed, the sand flats where the leader and his people finally celebrate their gathering, in the light of day, appears to be none other than the one we saw at the beginning, in the sequence taking place at El Coronel's encampment. This time, however, once the speeches are over, the dusty amphitheater in the midst of the plain no longer hides what is in the background of the shot: dilapidated machinery, the stuff of our own present, with which the characters' rags and folksy expressions have suddenly entered into a different relation. Instead of some vague "historical-folkloric" space-time, what surges in these final shots is a tension between pastiche and documentary realism, between a Brechtian alienation effect and the dystopian vision of a time stuck in place; a time where yesterday is like tomorrow and thus without end.

Whatever it was, something had always been there in the background of the image – *The Movement's* final sequence seems to confirm – which had eluded us as we followed the movement of El Señor and his band through the darkness, something to which the film had made us turn a blind eye, or perhaps rather: a deaf ear. In the end, maybe the allegorical matrix of *The Movement* was not in the story and its allusions to nineteenth-century war, liberalism and dictatorship, to Perón, Alfonsín, and even to the mirage of *menemismo* in the 1990s and the roadblocks and protests of Argentina's 2001 financial default. Perhaps, rather, it was this overload of historical references that had led us astray no less than the characters themselves, while the real stuff happened elsewhere, in those parts of the screen where Naishtat's camera, in its construction of an "abstract space", actively discouraged us from looking for it. Because it was in this abstract, blackened-out part of the screen, effectively, where something ominous and tangible had remained present, from droughts, floods, and famines to "the plague". It was on this cursed ground, invoked and yet continuously

missed by El Señor's vociferous ramblings, where, undisturbed, the catastrophe had run its course.

Thanatocene is perhaps none other than this invisible presence, missed by a language mired in the narcissism of human history and politics, of the earth and its manifestations in the form of "plagues", of "natural disasters". If there is an allegorical dimension in *The Movement*, perhaps we should seek it not in historical formations but in geological ones. It is these, after all, that El Señor's wrath is addressed to when, having vanquished all the real and imaginary enemies in the night of time, he curses the only one he cannot escape. It is toward the earth, in fact, that those who will not or cannot inhabit it direct their rage. For, if the guiding principle of classic fascism's suicidal logic had been the general mobilization of all material and affective forces in the service of total war, the fascism of our own time seems rather to take aim at the very conditions of life itself; of life in its planetary, terrestrial dimension. It is towards the earth, the *geos*, that fascism is today aiming its destructive impulse, its intimate and suicidal desire to shatter even the very possibility of a common ground.

4 Afterlife

How does cinema work miracles? In Argentine filmmaker Lisandro Alonso's oeuvre, cinema is a machine of world-rarefaction that forges a space and a time of imminence, susceptible at any moment to the appearance of the unexpected. Until *Liverpool* (2008), Alonso's third feature, this dimension of radical potentiality had been predicated, paradoxically, on the *suspension* of the climactic moment of explosion, letting it fizzle out with the final disappearance from the frame of that body which, throughout the film, had held captive the camera's tense attention. At the end of *La libertad* (*Freedom*, 2001), the lumberjack Misael's place onscreen was given over to the campfire and the lightning in the sky; in *Los muertos* (*The Dead*, 2004), Alonso's camera finally panned downward to the one-armed toy footballer on the ground, losing sight of the protagonist Argentino Vargas. Only with *Jauja* (2014), Alonso's first collaboration with Fabián Casas as screenwriter, the previous movies' elementary plotline gained a new and transformative element: an "awakening" that took us into another time and place none of the preceding events had allowed us to anticipate. Yet even here, this "miraculous" leap was still no more than a coda to the previous ending, no different from that of *Liverpool* and of Alonso's earlier films: the main character's dissolution closing the cycle that had opened with his slow emergence from a boundless space.

Only with *Eureka* (2023), this narrative core that had sustained Alonso's films up until then would change, and radically so. Here, rather than a horizon of suspense and expectation, the miracle becomes the structuring pivot on which the narrative as a whole is constructed. As Alonso finally crosses the frontier – anticipated, most explicitly, in *Jauja* – into the realm of Indigeneity, the moment of transformation, of *metamorphosis*, moves from its previous location as the plot's point of flight to the very core of the narrative, since it is only by making this miracle happen that the film's three space-time layers can remain interconnected. Indeed, *Eureka* demands from its audience a leap of faith: by having us witness the transformation – by sharing with us the miracle of totemic metamorphosis, of the young woman's becoming-bird – the film also converts us from mere spectators into ritual witnesses, on whose gaze and on whose faith its very continuity now rests. The miracle, in other words, must happen right here, in the theater, or it will not have happened at all.

The pivotal shift this metamorphosis unleashes in Alonso's cinema could not be more momentous. At the beginning, shot in black and white, *Eureka* seems to finally take us into the generic framework *Jauja* – and, less explicitly, also *Liverpool*, *Los muertos*, and *La libertad* – had all gestured towards, with their stories of taciturn men on the move: the Western. But almost right away – Alonso wastes no time fast-forwarding to the ritual choreography of the shootout – the genre narrative is dismissed as mere window dressing, as a smokescreen behind which, now starring two young Indigenous women, appears the true story: one set in the ruinous present of ethnocide and its aftermath, in the *immundus* of the reservation. The film could have ended here, with this crossing of sides towards another time and other bodies. But it is not “historical reality” Alonso and Casas want to take us into. The question, in *Eureka*, is instead about how to continue telling stories there: how to keep alive a dynamic of imminence even in this nocturnal atmosphere of defeat and destruction. And the answer will be of a kind that only the previous border crossing (from the Western into “historical reality”) has made possible, a kind of exit towards the opposite side, activated through the knowledge kept by the shaman and his ancestral techniques of bodily metamorphosis across the totemic network of human and more-than-human relatives. The transformative leap, the irruption of the unexpected, in *Eureka* takes center stage, radicalizing itself in its re-occurrences from the initial alienation effect that breaks down the generic framework of the frontier narrative to the characters' successive entrancement and totemic transmutations.

Working miracles with cinema, then, has to do with narrating what lives on after “history” has run its course. As a matter of storytelling, this requires, as *Eureka* makes plain, moving across historical reality, stripping it of the myths erected by the victors, since only then can it finally and truly be left behind. And what emerges at the other end (in the space emptied out, subsequently, of settler colonialism's mythical trash of regeneration through violence and of the real, historical space-time of despair, of death-in-life)¹⁵³ is Indigenous survival, “the enduring nature of ancestral existence” despite and against the catastrophe that has already taken place, as Elizabeth Povinelli puts it.¹⁵⁴ Survival, or “survivance”, as Anishinaabe critic and writer Gerald Vizenor prefers, borrowing a term from Jacques Derrida, is embodied in “the aural sense of presence” forged by “imagic, totemic associations with birds and animals; by customary transmutations, and evasive, unrehearsed trickster stories”. Survivance insists on “the continuance of stories” as “narrative resistance to absence [...], nihility, and victimry”.¹⁵⁵

Narratives of survivance, in the work of contemporary filmmakers including Bi Gan, João Pedro Rodrigues, Apichatpong Weerasethakul,

Paz Encina, or Eduardo Williams, are rollercoasters of time and space, including frequent lapses or near-encounters between moments and bodies centuries and oceans apart from one another, swaps of point of view and even of “personality” in an exchange of gazes among existents that do not necessarily share a common species-being. As in *Eureka*, the place of Indigeneity, instead of providing a twilight motif for the cynical nostalgia of the colonizer turns into a site of strategic resistance in the Thanatocene. Against the eulogies to noble savages from Fenimore Cooper to Scorsese, stories of survivance imagine modes and figures of a paradoxical “re-existing” in the unworld forged by colonial-extractive violence.¹⁵⁶ They propose a twist on Deleuze’s notion of the “absent people”, the emergence of which the author of *The Time-Image* imagined being heralded by third-world cinema and its entrancements. As Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro argue in *The Ends of the World*: “Maybe it is impossible historically to go back to being indigenous. But it is perfectly possible – more than that, it is actually taking place – to experience a *becoming indigeneous*, local and global, particular as well as general; a ceaseless *re-becoming indigeneous*”.¹⁵⁷ If we have reached the point where, as the saying goes, only a miracle can save us, in cinema such miracle-making is associated with re-becoming Indigenous, both in terms of the stories being told and of the ways of telling them, that is, of the cinematic apparatus as such.

Modes of the miraculous

Two films of very different geographical and historical provenance allow us a closer look into the cinematic modes of re-becoming Indigenous as both a subject and a type of composition: as a metamorphic transformation in which the filmic process takes an active stake. *Mortu nega* (1988, roughly: “Those whom death refused”), directed by Flora Gomes, was the first feature-length film made in Guinea-Bissau after winning independence from Portugal; *Lapü* (meaning “dream” in the Wayuunaiki language) is a 2018 docu-fiction by Colombian duo César Alejandro Jaimes and Juan Pablo Polanco. Regardless of the thirty-year hiatus separating them, both films are notable for how they allow a nonwestern form of interpreting and intervening in the human and more-than-human world to take over filmic discourse, without letting go of the “cosmomorphic” grammar inherent in cinematic language, to use Ivakhiv’s expression: of the capacity of sounds and images to articulate a geomorphic dimension (a spatial plane) with a bio- or animamorphic one (the interplay of living – or better: animated – forms, whose movement draws out the underlying spatial

extension), as well as an anthropomorphic dimension (a production of “subjectivities”, of nodes of affective attraction).¹⁵⁸ In *Mortu nega* and *Lapü* – both calling out, right from their titles in native languages, a turn towards the local and the singular – these grammars of cinematic worldmaking also intersect with, and are reinforced through, shamanic and ritual dynamics of cure and healing administered to bodies and collectives in crisis. In both films, cinema must look within its own repertoire for functional equivalents to the techniques of dreaming and entrancement through which a nonwestern analytic reopens spaces of livable continuity for communities and individuals, in moments when all available resources for dealing with loss, pain and defeat appear to be exhausted. When the very endurance of the (filmic) world is at risk, cinema and ritual join forces to open up times and spaces for survivance.

In both films, the task of summoning ancestrality is entrusted to the rhythmic, kinetic, and haptic techniques of rituals and ceremonies of invocation and healing (dance, song, costume, amulets and ointments applied to the body). In *Mortu nega*, this occurs only towards the end, once the film has recounted in the chronological manner of narrative realism the adventures of Diminga (Bia Gomes), a peasant woman, and her husband Sako (Tuno Eugenio Almada), fighting in the anti-colonial struggle against the Portuguese until independence is finally won (Guinea-Bissau, the first of the Luso-African colonies to unilaterally declare independence in 1973, was also the only one where the guerrilla forces, under the command of Amílcar Cabral, managed to expel the colonial army from large parts of the territory even before the Salazar regime’s downfall in April 1974). Made just fifteen years later, amid a political and economic crisis that has only gotten worse over time, *Mortu nega* adopts a decidedly anti-epic perspective in narrating the foundation and misfortunes of the young nation. The narrative vantage point is with Diminga who, along with the elderly Lebeth (M’Make Nhasse), crosses a large part of the country on foot in the company of a caravan of women and children, from the southern border with Guinea-Conakry where they pick up weapons and ammunition to carry to Sako’s encampment, then on to their coastal village where they arrive just in time to receive news of the end of the war. But when Sako reappears somewhat later, still dragging a leg from a bullet wound, and the couple can finally begin rebuilding their lives and mourn the children lost during the years of violence, things once more take a turn to the worse. A prolonged drought destroys the crops; Sako’s wound flares up again and, despite the tireless efforts of Diminga, who turns to one after another of his former comrades now entrenched in power, neither in the village nor in the city hospital



Figure 9: The ritual call in *Mortu nega*
(Those Whom Death Refused, Flora Gomes, Guinea-Bissau, 1988)

does anyone have the remedies to save Sako from the amputation of his gangrenous leg or, worse, from a death that is becoming increasingly imminent.

It is at this point that Diminga – and the film as a whole – decides to play her last card. Waking from a dream with the violence and destruction of the recent war (narrated in a sequence of superimposed shots underlaid with percussive drumming), memories of which become intertwined with visions of present drought and of future catastrophe, Diminga and the village elders decide they must consult the dead. Diminga's dream, in fact, is a summary of sorts of the film's two temporal and thematic units up to this point – war and peace – while also offering a reflection on the way one has remained conjoined to the other. The transitional function of this interlude (the nightly dream followed by its “interpretation” on behalf of the women on the village square) is made clear by the following shot, with the previously invisible percussionist leaping from acousmatic liminality to the center of the screen, which now gives itself over entirely to the space and time of the ritual. From Diminga's dream (or nightmare) that concludes the narrative arc with the announcement of imminent disaster, the film exits, as it were, in the opposite direction: not back to its previous daytime realism but through the rabbit hole we are being called to by the drum on the soundtrack (see Figure 9). Now the drummer has made his appearance in the flesh, he is instantly joined by a growing crowd of dancers, musicians, and singers, some crossing the estuary in large barges, others arriving by land on the tails of a masked figure wearing a straw skirt, wool tail, and large buffalo horns. As we are about

to find out, this is none other than Djon Gago, a Balanta deity (one of Guinea-Bissau's largest ethnicities, residing south of the Gleba River, where, as one of the singers exclaims, "all the ethnic groups" have gathered for the ceremony).

The "crossing" occurs, then, on several levels at once, both geographically speaking (from the city and the rural village, the settings of Diminga's and Sako's story, to the ancestral lands on the opposite bank of the great river) and on the level of film genre (from narrative realism to ritual ceremony and, thus, also to song and dance as structuring elements: to "the musical"). And also, finally, we cross over into a different figurative language (from the couple and its misadventures as allegorical matrix of the new nation to the choreographic patterns composed by dancers, singers and musicians and the spiritual relationships with the ancestors their movement and sound is calling to the scene). As Akin Adesokan observes, "crowd scenes in films are not a novelty, but *Mortu nega* must rank high among films which have put literally an entire country on screen at one time".¹⁵⁹ Gomes remains faithful to the Balanta ceremony in which, compelled by the percussion's pulsating rhythm and the frantic footwork of the dancer impersonating Djon Gago, successive "coffins" are carried by other dancers to the center of the circle where "the dead one" is addressed and challenged by a soloist in alternation with the surrounding chorus. But as Manthia Diawara observes, just as in the previous, narrative-realist segment, Gomes modifies the established pattern and transforms "the funeral dance [which] in West Africa is normally performed by men, with women singing and clapping their hands or acting as spectators", drawing instead "on Cabral's notion of national culture, which transforms traditional rituals into revolutionary praxis, to bring women out of the shadow".¹⁶⁰ It is the women, once again, who take the floor and challenge the ancestors, just as, in the previous storyline, they were the ones who bore (literally speaking, as in the initial sequence of them shouldering the arms and ammunitions) the brunt of the struggle.

If, then, as David Murphy and Patrick Williams suggest, this ritual consultation with the dead should be read as a kind of cinematic implementation of the "return to the source" Cabral himself exhorted his comrades in arms to undertake, here just as in the latter's concept of revolutionary praxis such a "return" to the ancestral does not simply imply abandoning the previous segment's political and historical lessons.¹⁶¹ Much to the contrary: suspending the narrative-realist editing and actoral performances, *Mortu nega*'s filmic language now adjusts to the choreographic dynamics of the ritual, alternating close-ups of the dancers and singers with panning and dolly shots that follow the serpentine lines of the dancing columns, with the rhythm of montage

dictated by the pauses and syncopated beats of the drums. Just as in the ritual process itself, the climax occurs when the music and singing suddenly break off for the voice of the speaker to come forth who challenges the dead, taking stock (as Diminga had done previously in her dream) of struggles past and future. "Gathered here are all those who have sacrificed their lives for the struggle, and those whom death refused", one of them begins: "There are the combatants of yesterday and those of today, and also those who believe the struggle gave them a right to everything. There are those who are for unity and those who are against it". The ritual of the ancestors is, we begin to understand, nothing less than a tribunal of the revolution. And at this point, Diminga reappears to take the lead, resisting the attacks of the dancers carrying the coffin: "Djon Gago, we call you to this ceremony of the dead and the living to seek with you the path forward. In the presence of our ancestors from the heart of the bush, tell us the truth: who here desires the death of the baobab, the kapok, and the blood tree? Show us who they are!" And suddenly, among the dancers, masked figures with large, grotesque papier-mâché heads appear: emissaries, in fact, from another ritual tradition, the urban carnival of Bissau, where enormous heads like these, carried in street parades, are often used to satirize the white colonizers as well as the political and economic authorities of the day.¹⁶² Their appearance concludes the ritual sequence with a sudden cut that brings us back to Diminga's and Sako's village, where they wake up, healthy and smiling, to watch from the doorway of their cabin the rain that is at long last beginning to fall: the miracle has happened, and things are ready to begin anew.

In *Mortu nega*, then, "miraculous" resolution becomes possible through a confluence between the performative and ritual traditions of the Indigenous interior with those of the mestizo city: the summoning of the ancestors through the messenger-deity and the historical satire of the carnival parade. It is this sudden switch from individual drama to the spectacle of "all ethnicities" – the putting on screen, as Adesokan says, "of an entire country" – which succeeds in opening another opportunity for the leading couple and for their community besieged by drought where the realistic plot, "the narration of history", had reached a dead end. Having learned his trade at Cuba's San Antonio de los Baños film academy, Flora Gomes here adopts the fashion in which, according to Deleuze, the New Latin American Cinema of the sixties and seventies had mobilized the dynamic of entrancement to find, "beneath the myth, a living present" and thus, "through trance or crisis", had forged "an assemblage which brings real parties together, in order to make them produce collective utterances as the prefiguration of the people who are missing".¹⁶³ At the same time, Gomes's

film, with this miraculous recommencement of history forced out by juxtaposing ancestral rituals with urban popular tradition, also draws on two of Cabral's central ideas: first, that, far from having inserted Africa into world history, as Salazar's colonial propaganda alleged, "it is history which the colonialists have taken from us. [...] They made us leave history, our history..."¹⁶⁴ That is, the Portuguese occupation suspended or reinscribed, according to a logic of colonial domination, the multiple tensions and conflicts that ran through the region's dense multiethnic fabric, which, once liberation has been achieved, would inevitably return to the fore. Liberation, for Cabral, is thus not the end point of history but merely its beginning – or recommencement, since it will reactivate the struggles and contradictions left in suspense by the colonial regime. But the revolution – and this is the second point – will not just return that history to the point where it had been interrupted. Rather, "returning to the source", for Cabral, also implies taking these contradictions to a new and different stage, since the shared experience of liberation struggle will have triggered "the *confluence of the levels of culture* of the different social groups available for the struggle. The movement must be able to transform them into the national cultural force", that is, it must find ways of articulating the "*development of a popular culture*" founded on Indigenous values with the "*development of a national culture* based upon the history and achievements of the struggle itself".¹⁶⁵

Ancestral time, in *Mortu nega*, separates a before from an after. It is the time that works the miracle, but also, and above all, it is the time that allows history to "begin anew", pulling it out of its impasse. The issue, as the carnival masks appearing in the midst of the Balanta ritual were showing us, was always with the remnants from the colonial regime, be it through the measures handed down by the new authorities or through the well-oiled relationships these continue to entertain with the masters of old. The forms of ritual and those of political theater and satire collaborate to make a dark truth come out of the shadows; calling on the past ("re-becoming Indigenous") unlocks the present and opens it once again towards the future, in the process also harnessing a *popular culture* on its way to becoming *national*.

In *Lapü*, by César Alejandro Jaimes and Juan Pablo Polanco, relations between history and ancestral time are of a very different kind. Here, the ritual forms of the Wayúu, a people living on Colombia's Caribbean coast, do not serve an allegorical purpose – as, for instance, in Cristina Gallego's and Ciro Guerra's better-known *Pájaros de Verano* (*Birds of Passage*, 2018) where they provide a colorful backdrop to the larger, violent history of drug trafficking in the country. In *Lapü*, by contrast, the space and time of the story, and even of literally

every single shot, remain strictly limited to the intimate drama of crisis and healing narrated by the film and to its young protagonist, Doris (Doris González Yusayú). Here, the “ritual process”, in Victor Turner’s expression, does not, as in *Mortu nega*, open up an interstice, a space-time of passage within the diegetic chronotope, but it rather is that chronotope.¹⁶⁶ The film opens and closes with the beginning and end of a sequence of crisis and resolution that manifest themselves, just as in *Mortu nega*, in the form of a dream and the ensuing ritual that addresses and resolves the challenge. In *Lapü*, however, this leads to a different kind of contrast and juxtaposition between modes of filmic composition than in *Mortu nega*, where these had been identified with historical chronology and ritual ceremony, respectively, and thus with narrative realism and with the “musical”, the spectacle of song-and-dance. In *Lapü*, the former is replaced, broadly speaking, by a documentary grammar of observation, in Bill Nichols’s classification, that is: a camera that attentively registers every detail of the ceremony (from a position of medium distance allowing it to observe an action’s unfolding as well as the relationships between protagonists and secondary characters, settings and objects involved therein).¹⁶⁷ The ritual dynamic, in other words, is shot here not with recourse to spectacle, incorporating the ceremony’s own rhythmic, musical and choreographic patterns, but instead from a respectful, “ethnographic” distance. Instead, it is on the level of chronicling the – exclusively female – characters’ daily lives (including their relationships with deceased loved ones) that *Lapü* takes its leave from narrative realism to make room for the spiritual and dreamlike dimension that accompanies and gives meaning to the community’s interactions. “Lapü”, in the Wayuunaiki language, not only means “dream” but also encompasses the demands and warnings that dreams convey on behalf of our coexistents, living or dead. Lapü, in the words of Wayúu writer Rafael Mercado Epieyu, is “what orders our lives, during the cloudy, starry, or full-moon night [...] The origin of what we know comes from the world of Lapü”.¹⁶⁸

Lapü is the dream, but also its interpretation. Whereas, in *Lapü* the movie, this interpretative session and its ritual process are approached from a vantage point of documentary, ethnographic observation, the characters’ daily lives, by contrast, in their ebbs and flows between dreaming and wakefulness, call for fictionalization and actorship. Doris, the young protagonist, is restless after having dreamed of María Úrsula, her deceased cousin who has taken her own life after migrating to the city and an unwanted pregnancy. Having consulted the matter with her grandmother, Doris decides to undergo the ritual of exhuming and reburying the remains of her childhood friend, in order to appease



Figure 10: Doris preparing for the reburial of María Úrsula's remains in *Lapü* (César Alejandro Jaimes/Juan Pablo Polanco, Colombia, 2019)

María Úrsula's restless spirit and to let mourning take its course. Jaimes and Polanco resort to a deceptively simple device of conveying this affective and desiring presence of the loved one: in the dream sequences, Doris's real-life sister, Carmen, "plays" María Úrsula, so that the latter's "appearances" occur naturally, as just another conversation Doris has before and after her cousin's ritual exhumation (see Figure 10). Contrary to *Mortu nega*, ancestral time in *Lapü* does not irrupt in and through the ritual and its performative dynamics; rather, ritual, curative intervention is required here as a way of protecting the continued, lived existence on two levels that are mutually intertwined, by finally providing rest to the one who had left the community and who had not yet found her place among the dead and the living.

Taking advantage of the indeterminacy between experience and performance that characterizes performative documentary,¹⁶⁹ *Lapü* narrates its story of crisis and healing without ever straying from the ritual chronotope, and concentrating our attention on the experience of Doris. It is around her that we see unfold the villagers' preparations for the ceremony, the counseling sessions with the elders, and the spiritual cleansing of her body at a healer's cabin, all of them

mediated by Doris's dream-encounters with María Úrsula, which go from uncomfortable silence and anger to caresses and smiles. In addition to the exterior gaze assigned to us by observational documentary, *Lapü* also awards us a *witnessing position* not so different from the one occupied, alternately, by the counseling elders and the beloved dead one, who accompany Doris through her ordeal (María Úrsula, played by Carmen, makes a habit of suddenly appearing, trickster-like, in the women's tent, crouching next to Doris's hammock, to chat and giggle with her cousin about the fear and relief she felt during the exhumation process). The film, in short, inscribes us *within* its ritual and dreamlike logic, of which we receive no further explanation than the one given to Doris herself. We are, so to speak, one more in the crowd of villagers who keep the young woman company in her difficult task. As Ivone Margulies reminds us, "[t]heatricity is the term André Bazin uses to describe a filmic aesthetic that places the spectator in the 'unforgivable' position of the witness. This rigorous demand on the spectator is characteristic of contemporary re-enactment, as it intercepts the instability of testimonial truth with a compelling, theatrical co-presence".¹⁷⁰

Lapü's inscription of our spectatorship as a form of witnessing and, thus, also as contributing to the healing ritual's very success, however, is fashioned upon us through subtle filmic work of denaturalizing the shot and the editing sequence. In the opening sequence, for instance, in which Doris tells her grandmother about her dream with her cousin, the initial shots contain, instead of the speaker, close-ups of fabrics moving in the wind and of the cracks that crisscross the cabin's dry-earth wall, before cutting to the face of the old woman lying in a hammock as she listens. Only at the very end, Jaimes and Polanco cut to a medium-length shot of the room that also includes Doris who, we only now realize, was the one speaking all along, curled up in the same hammock where her grandmother was resting. The cumulative syntax of establishing shot, reverse shot of the listener, and close-ups of the spatial setting to situate their interaction, as it would have featured in narrative cinema's system of suture, is actively dis- and re-arranged here, to the effect of redistributing among bodies and things the values of personality, objecthood, and environment. Prior to, and in place of, the dialogue between the young woman who speaks and the old one who listens in silence, *Lapü* entices us to pay attention to the curtain fluttering in the wind and the cracks running across the wall, not so much as prefiguring the interpersonal relationship nor merely as an illustration of the to-and-fro between sleep and wakefulness that frames the sequence. Rather, it is the co-animation of all things that, here as throughout the film, introduces and maintains

the constant ebb and flow between these two modes of consciousness. At the same time, the way in which things and the environment are themselves endowed with agency and mobility (frequently anticipating the characters' actions who only much later proceed to touching or moving toward them) also enables transitions between one dimension and another. Such is the case when, in their second encounter, Doris and María Úrsula appear seated on her tomb, which will quite literally turn into their meeting place only a few days later when the villagers arrive at the distant cemetery where the latter's remains are buried. Except for this brief, anticipatory frame of the two young women sharing "common ground", their dream encounter remains neatly divided between two shots of approximately the same length in which, regardless of who is the speaker or the listener, we can only see one of the girls occupying half of the frame, with the other half given over to the void, to the absent body of the beloved cousin that manifests as a tangible lack in the environment.

In *Lapü*, then, we are dealing with a very different relationship between ritual and history, and therefore between narrative and performance, than in *Mortu nega*. Where, in the Bissau-Guinean film, ceremonial performance took the place of historical narrative when the latter had stalled, aiming to fasten national history once again to ancestral and popular roots, in *Lapü* ritual is narrative action. The ritual process provides "resolution" to a problem that, in terms of film composition, also demands performance, re-enactment. But unlike in *Mortu nega*, at no point in *Lapü* do we step outside the circle of family and village community. It is not that the Wayúu were not suffering from the advance of the extractive frontier and from the continuity of colonial violence. But rather than with this greater, "historical" context, *Lapü* is concerned with how to keep at bay what is external to the story the film wants to tell. Just as Doris and her village, Jaimes and Polanco are looking to solve with the remedies at hand a problem that, at the level of composition, can only be posed in the terms required by *Lapü*: those of the dream as a real presence and of its "interpretation" through ritual and through re-enactment.

The grammars of afterlife

In *Lapü* and in *Mortu nega*, then, we are confronted with different modalities of re-becoming Indigenous, with different narratives of afterlife that we must try to understand better by returning to two key terms introduced above: *survivance* and *re-existence*. Afterlife is of the order of the miraculous because of the way it insists on worldmaking in the midst of unworlding. Therefore, it is not the same as "survival".

It is not merely the not-yet-dying of the agonizing organism, whether from the disease inhabiting it or from the one that gnaws at the world at large, leaving it unable to provide shelter. Survival is the adrift-ness of existents deprived of the co-existents critically involved in their modes of being: their *holobionts*, in biologist Lynn Margulis's terminology, which Donna Haraway borrows for her notion of the "Chthulucene".¹⁷¹ It is what happens to an increasing number of critters in the Sixth Mass Extinction Event we are living and dying through and which, as Ursula Heise points out, effectively marks the end of the Western idea of "nature".¹⁷²

On another level – reversing the scales – survival also describes the reduction to a disposable life an increasing number of humans are experiencing under late capitalism, exposed to the double whammy of deindustrialization and the dismantling of the welfare state: the experience of abandonment shared by those made to inhabit what Marco Armiero calls the Wasteocene. It is the kind of space-time limbo in which the protagonist of Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) finds himself when, after suffering a heart attack, he is declared unfit for work by the company doctor but not by the state agency's algorithm and, therefore, dumped into a no-man's-land of endless on-hold calls and unreturned contact forms, stripped not only of any right to compensation but also of any possibility of appeal, one more of late liberalism's shadow army of the living dead. The film ends when, at last, the character dies of a second heart attack, but not before a young friend and companion in misfortune reads out at the funeral service his last letter to the authorities. In death, Daniel Blake can finally say his name, having exited the ghost state of precarious survival in which, up until then, he had found himself suspended.

Jacques Derrida, in a session from the second year of his seminar on *The Beast and the Sovereign*, dedicated to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, proposes that this postponed voice expresses a condition he calls "survivance". What really happened to Defoe's hero, and therefore unleashes the very novel that bears his name, is the terror of being buried alive, of having been "swallow'd up alive", Derrida says, without dwelling too much on the colonial setting of the cannibal-populated desert island.¹⁷³ Instead, what matters to him is the nature and agonal temporality of this death-in-life, simultaneously preceding and projecting itself beyond the moment of dying *that is already happening* and that the story attempts to "sur-vive", to anticipate as well as defer. Robinson's experience is nothing less than the most extreme form of our inability to live death, to bear witness to it and have access to it as the very capacity that distinguishes us from animals, as Heidegger would have it. We are all living dead insofar as we live our finitude as

the survivance of a death beyond our reach, “in a sense of a survival that is neither life nor death pure and simple, a sense that is not thinkable on the basis of the opposition between life and death”.¹⁷⁴ As Kas Saghafi emphasizes, this same ghostly character that emerges with our impossibility of self-possession (and which, in *Robinson Crusoe*, triggers the colonizing hero’s psychotic construction of an entire “new world”) is for Derrida the most life-enhancing experience that will happen to us in our passage through the world: “[S]urvivance is considered as life enhanced, more than life, the most intense life possible and not something above it or added to it”. Indeed, it is the fact that our death can only be experienced by another that opens every moment of our existence to alterity, to a survivance that, “rather than referring to my survival, has become what happens when I am turned over to the other. I am survived by the other”.¹⁷⁵

In a series of writings on Native American literatures in the US, Gerald Vizenor brings the Derridean concept to bear on writing practices that, in deploying the rhetorical versatility and deceptive appearances of tricksters alongside the “natural reason” and “customary words” of the ancestors, craft “simulations of survivance [that] undermine the literature of dominance”.¹⁷⁶ That is, Vizenor reincorporates the colonial dimension sidelined by the French-Algerian philosopher in his reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, which enables him to refocus in historical and political perspective the interplay between presence, absence, and ghostliness Derrida finds at work there, as a struggle in and for narrative continuity. Survivance as, literally, a matter of life and death – that is, of not being able to *know* one’s own death while being alive – for Vizenor also points to a dispute over narrative sovereignty insofar as, by challenging the historical “facts” as told by the perpetrators of settler-colonial genocide, the continued and active presence of the victims is vindicated in the very act of reclaiming the story:

Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories [...] Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry. The character of survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihilism, and victimry.¹⁷⁷

Vizenor seizes on Derrida’s question about the lack that underwrites and, thus, also unleashes every act of testimony, only to reframe it as a narrative problem that afflicts the White subject’s monologue yet, on the hands of tricksters and their metamorphic, simulative

hermeneutics, can also induce a proliferation of “double others”, of voices capable of bearing witness and thus, of restoring presence to the multitude of existents violated by colonialism. Vizenor’s “trickster hermeneutics” are a narrative and analytical position endowed with a capacity to confuse the historical testimony of the perpetrators and to restore presence to what remains phantasmatically latent there, opening the way for an act of political and narrative liberation:

Trickster hermeneutics is the interpretation of simulations in the literature of survivance, the ironies of descent and racialism, transmutation, third gender, and themes of transformation in oral tribal stories and written narratives. [...] Trickster stories are the translation of liberation, and the shimmer of imagination is the liberation of the last trickster stories. Trickster hermeneutics is access to trickster stories...¹⁷⁸

The difference between Derrida’s and Vizenor’s notion of survivance, then, does not lie, as Elizabeth Povinelli claims, in the latter’s personification of the Earth, due to which “multiple generations of human and more-than-human relatives still claim their obligations to the present”.¹⁷⁹ Rather, Vizenor is interested in the narrative and poetic operations (but also the analytical and critical ones: hence the importance of the concept of hermeneutics) that allow for an interplay of resonances to be reactivated, even and especially in the face of experiences of extreme uprootedness and exile. His own re-inscription of the notion of survivance effectively performs the very dispute between historical accounts that Vizenor wants to entrust the concept with. “To survive”, in his account, is essentially *to refuse being survived by* the colonizer. Instead of the “suspended state between the active and passive voice” of Derridean survivance,¹⁸⁰ Vizenor’s is focused on “the action [...] to remain alive or in existence, to outlive, to persevere...”¹⁸¹

Re-existence (“r-existência”), meanwhile, is a concept that Brazilian social scientists have developed in close exchange with Indigenous, *quilombola* (Maroon), and peasant activisms. In Portuguese, “r-existência” (re-existence) and “resistência” (resistance) are pronounced identically, to the effect that spelling here both inscribes and enacts what it calls out: an existence constantly resurging as active resistance to annihilation. But at the same time, as re-existence, this resisting action also precedes what it confronts (the extractive frontier, racial discrimination, patriarchy), rather than just responding to its effects. As Júlia Figueredo Benzaquén suggests, “re-existence” thus offers a challenge to the notion of “new social movements”, for “how can we call ‘new’ a resistance that has been taking place since the colonizers arrived on American soil?” While recognizing the originality

and creativity of current struggles, “re-existence” also inscribes these within a long-term frame, from which their power and vibrancy is at least partly derived. “[T]o re-exist is to contest coloniality’s monopoly on making present what is absent”.¹⁸² As Valter do Carmo Cruz sums up, re-existing movements and activism “do not just fight in resistance to those who exploit, dominate, and stigmatize them, but also for a particular form of existence, for a particular mode of existence and production, for distinct modes of feeling, acting, and thinking”.¹⁸³

Re-existence, then, shares with the notion of survivance, in Vizenor’s version, the paradoxical declension of an action in two times. Yet, rather than by appropriation, through “trickster hermeneutics”, of a term originating in Western critical theory, re-existence emerged as a rallying call in local contexts and practices of struggle. Perhaps the degree of confluence and tension between both notions has to do, then, with their respective forms of echoing as well as calling forth specific modes of resistance, with survivance designating more than anything a *poetics* and re-existence an *ecology*, a way of naming and of putting into practice a territory through the forms of inhabiting it. It does not matter that such territories are often of a relatively recent kind, as in the case of the *seringueiro* (rubber tapper) movement led by Chico Mendes, which emerged from the same advance of the extractive frontier against which it turns in defense of a land that is claimed as ancestral: to re-exist is always a performative act in the present tense that, resisting attempts to displace and disarticulate the community, struggles to keep open a future by invoking a shared past and a place of dwelling. As Alfredo Wagner de Almeida puts it:

It is the *seringueiros* who are constructing the territory in which the action of defending the *seringais* (rubber forest) takes place. It is those affected by dams and riverside dwellers who are fighting for the preservation of rivers, lakes, and *igarapés* (creeks). And so on: the *castanheiros* (nut pickers) defending the *castanhais*, [...] the fishermen, the threatened springs and waterways, the cooperatives, their methods of processing the collected raw materials. In the same way, the *pajés*, healers, and prayer leaders mobilize in defense of medicinal herbs and of the knowledges that transform these.¹⁸⁴

Survivance and re-existence, in conclusion, both allude to intransitive modes of endowing with presence, and thus also with the capacity for action, what the grammar of modern-colonial extractivism knows only as objects. Central to both concepts is the capacity for simultaneously recognizing and refuting catastrophe: their ability, in other

words, to keep in play and in tension with one another the two layers of time the “explosive” irruption of colonial modernity claims to have severed forever.

Afterlife, then, would be a way to name the tension between mere survival and these active modes of upholding presence, as well as the formal gestures and narrative twists that make possible the leap from one to the other. In the Spanish “sobrevida”, the prefix “sobre-” also refers to what is left behind (“sobrar”), to the remainder or the leftover of a past action or of a relationship that has ended. What is left over is what has ceased to represent, what has fallen outside the chain of signification and to which a value can therefore no longer be assigned (as happened to Daniel Blake, the protagonist of Ken Loach’s film). To live in a state of leftover, to sur-vive (“sobre-vivir”), is to inhabit the unworld – *immundus* –, the sacrifice zone from which only a miracle can save us.

Throughout his work, Walter Benjamin famously linked the concept of “afterlife” (*Nachleben*, *Fortleben*) to the vexing questions of translation and of historical understanding. “Historical materialism conceives of historical understanding as an afterlife [*Nachleben*] of what is understood, the pulse of which is still felt in the present”, he writes in his essay on the collector Eduard Fuchs.¹⁸⁵ Against “the eternal image of the past” established by historicism, the historical materialist, of whom the collector is a kind of allegorical personification, must “blow up the historical continuum” and forge a “critical constellation” through which the specific, singled-out fragment can once more come into relation with the present. The collector, in his “aversion to the museum” and his “originality in the selection of objects”,¹⁸⁶ is the one capable of returning speech to the fragment he extracts from the silent, anonymous mass of materials, just as the translator practices with the text a form of exegesis that does not ask for its general meaning but rather for the specific, particular intention it extends toward the language into which it is being translated. This latent intentionality towards something the text does not yet contain within itself is what Benjamin understands as its “translatability” and which, in a central passage of the essay, he therefore likens to the “vital link” each organism maintains with the web of life as a whole:

Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected to all living things, without meaning anything to them, so too does translation arise from the original. But not so much from its life as from its “afterlife” [*Überleben*]. Because translation comes after the original and because, for important works, which never find their chosen translators at the

time of their emergence, it constitutes the stage of their survival [*Fortleben*].¹⁸⁷

Unlike the diffuse afterlife of the animal and vegetal realm, that of literary works is easy to identify: it occurs “when a work has reached, in its afterlife, the stage of fame”, and it is this maturity or plenitude of meanings in “the life of the original” that finds in translation “its ultimate, broadest, and ever-renewed development”.¹⁸⁸ In the variety of its modes of persisting, then, Benjaminian afterlife also “surpasses” [*Überleben*] the life of which it is an echo or a trace, since in the course of its lingering-on it gradually expands (just as Derridean survivance) towards all the *other* meanings it comes in contact with.

Reenactment and revolt

In Benjamin’s conception, afterlife thus also entails an aporia that Jorge Luis Borges or Italo Calvino would have been fond of. For, if a work’s “mature life” as manifest in its translations (in the repetition of the act of writing, mediated by another language or simply by a difference in time and space) is indeed richer and more complex than its first iteration, isn’t it then also more *original* than the latter? Isn’t the supposed original a mere reflection or shadow of that which only in repetition comes fully into its being? Such exponential liveliness, however, also crucially depends on the original, which must never be extinguished, since it is from there – and more: from the act of constantly returning to it – that the “ever-renewed development” of translation derives its force. This two-way movement thus opens up a third space where original and repetition merge and are intensified: a zone not *between* but rather *beyond* them, opening itself towards meanings yet to emerge. This is why, in *Mortu nega* and in *Lapü*, the “miracle” of survivance also contains a metafilmic dimension, which speaks to the ways in which both films are not so much “representing” as rather actively forging the experiences of healing that unfold within them. Afterlife, in cinema, involves (just as it does, for Benjamin, in literature) an act of translation, in this case from lived experience to its reenactment in front of camera. It is reenactment that forces out the miracle, since in the medium of film it is the mode of *actualization*, and thus of assigning meaning to, the lives lived in a space beyond shelter, in the hold of the world, *mundus immundus*.

In cinema studies, this paradoxical notion of originality of/in repetition has received much attention in association to films that deliberately blur the boundary between documentary and fiction, including the work of Jia Zhangke, Jafar Panahi, or Miguel Gomes. Brazilian documentarist Eduardo Coutinho, who, over time, has been patiently

and methodically chipping away at the dichotomy between recording and staging, is another case in point. As César Guimarães points out in a thought-provoking analysis of *Jogo de cena* (*Playing*, 2017) and *Moscov* (*Moscow*, 2009), if the modern tradition inaugurated by Italian neorealism renewed filmic storytelling through the incorporation of a documentary register – thanks to formal and technical innovations such as the handheld camera, direct sound, and the sequence shot – the filmic image gained in richness and complexity precisely because the “border where the real and the fictional interact” had nonetheless remained visible there.¹⁸⁹ The performances, in other words, as they were brought into the realm of the everyday, became more powerful as they faced the challenge of relating to a real they could neither simply imitate nor completely depart from. In the contemporary scene of filmmaking, Guimarães suggests, we have moved from the search for “new ways of *inscribing the real* [to] new methods to certify the *reality of the inscription*”. Even if the content of this inscription frequently remains beyond our reach (since, as in the narrative “disclosures” made alternately in *Jogo de cena* by actresses and non-actresses, it may at times be associated with a gesture rather than with the words that are pronounced), “something of what is lived, converted into narrative material and thus transfigured, pierces like a splinter into the duplicated scene”.¹⁹⁰ Hence, as Ivone Margulies adds, “[i]t is not a story that is being told in the reenactment. Instead, it reframes the problem”.¹⁹¹

In cinema, then, the question of a “hyperreal” entailed by new modes of inscription involves a transformed relationship between documentary and fiction. Indeed, emblematic of this shift are the differences between *Cabra Marcado para Morrer* (approximately: The Peasant Marked Out to be Killed), Coutinho’s 1964 docu-fiction aborted by Brazil’s military coup, in which peasant activists were to re-enact the assassination of a union leader, and the “completed” version from 1984 (released in English as *Twenty Years Later*) which, based on the few remaining fragments, examines the previous project’s memories and impact on the lives of the survivors from two decades ago. In performance studies, on the other hand, discussions of reenactment have crystallized around certain kinds of historical revisiting, such as the mass restaging of battles from the Civil War in the US as well as around the embodied “repetitions” of past performances (Marina Abramovic’s *Seven Easy Pieces* realized in 2005 at the Guggenheim is the most cited example). If in the first case, as Mechthild Widrich suggests, “re-enactment is not just the political orchestration of a ‘living memory’, but a justification of what came before, the fulfillment of missed opportunities”, in “re-performance”, by contrast, the tension

between repetition and difference is not only not extinguished but is at the very core of the event: in its encounter with new audiences, socio-political contexts and technical mediations, re-performance “holds bodily presence in tension between an irretrievable past event [...] and a new work in the present, itself liable to later reconstruction”.¹⁹² Such re-incorporation of the past act by another body (or the same body in another time and therefore enmeshed in other historical contexts and technical mediations) triggers “a process of translation and retranslation” that refers to a “transhistorical” time, as Anne Bénichou argues, investing the past work with a contemporary value.¹⁹³ More than an archival impulse, however, re-performance seeks to activate “a capacity to identify in a past work still non-exhausted creative fields of ‘impalpable possibilities’”, as André Lepecki concludes, citing an expression from Brian Massumi.¹⁹⁴

Now, questions of the original and its afterlives are clearly different in relation to performance and the archive than in contemporary cinema when applied to rethinking the opposition between fiction and documentary. Indeed, in *Lapü* and *Mortu nega*, we might intimate, there exists no fundamental difference between the filmed ritual and any of its previous iterations in the profilmic. In fact, each was always already a way of actualizing an absent original, to the extent that the ancestral archive and its performative re-inscriptions had always been one and the same. Similarly, Coutinho’s cinema since *Twenty Years Later* had in many ways consisted in an ever more radical attempt at erasing, or at least elliptically suspending, the original event, and to focus instead on the second-degree originality of its retelling in the course of the documentary encounter, from which emerges a kind of truth that is revelatory rather than just repetitive in nature.

Among those who have pushed this idea of cinema as *reperformance without an original*, Brazilian director Adirley Queirós has made an especially bold case. In his films, as Esther Hamburger observes, “in the absence of archival materials, the victims [...] conquer the filmic space and, from their position of control over the images, produce the documents and evidence, as if to make up for the lack of archives”.¹⁹⁵ Similar to those of Pedro Costa, Queirós’s films refocus the problem of afterlife from a question about the past and its always incomplete retrieval in reenactment to one about the future, ushered in by the arrival of a “real actor” (Margulies) and her or his fictionalization of lived experience. Queirós’s work, in this way, amounts to a kind of experimental refutation of Jean-Louis Comolli’s famous assertion that only “fiction can evade referents, mask them. But there is no sci-fi documentary”.¹⁹⁶

To prove otherwise, nothing better than *Branco sai, preto fica* (*White Out, Black In*, 2014) and *Era uma vez Brasília* (*Once There Was Brasília*, 2017), the latter a kind of sequel to the former. Both movies also share largely the same cast whose life stories inform their narratives, as also occurs with *Mato seco em chamas* (*Dry Ground Burning*, 2022, co-directed with Joana Pimenta), each shooting experience already planting the seeds for the next one, in quite similar fashion to what happens in the work of Pedro Costa. Just as in the Portuguese filmmaker's concatenated narratives, here too this gradually expanding troupe of (non) actors stems from a poetics and politics of long-term immersion in one and the same location: the satellite city of Ceilândia, some fifty kilometers from Brasília, where, in 1971, the military government forcibly resettled inhabitants of the shantytown belt surrounding the capital (the same people, in their great majority, who just a decade earlier had been brought there to work on the construction of the modernist city). Ceilândia, the "land of the CEI" or Invasion Eradication Campaign (the forced displacement campaign's official anagram), is thus literally the dystopian reverse of the state utopia that lingers on the horizon of Queirós's images in the form of a luminous aura; the distance between the two (which an army of precarious workers have to cross day by day) is also that of an aborted future that has become someone else's past. Ceilândia, says Queirós, "is, in effect, a setting for classic science fiction literature and cinema [...] Ceilândia was the *favela* of Brasília, but it was Ceilândia that built Brasília. There is no conciliation between classes. In the end, whoever holds power betrays the other". Therefore, it is also a place already layered with narratives that cinema must learn to locate and bring to life: "Ceilândia is a stage prepared for all kinds of *Mad Max* stories, of *Blade Runner* ones, *The Martian Chronicles*, *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, and so many others that we can invent and reinvent. But, to be able to shoot them, you must first negotiate".¹⁹⁷

In this negotiation in which "filmic space [is conquered] by the victims" (Hamburger), counter-narratives emerge that don't so much exhibit as dispute the meanings of past injustice, giving rise to a "futuristic" plot of survivance. Such is the case of Marquim da Tropa and Shockito, the leads of *White In, Black Out*: one an ex-breakdancer, the other a former soccer player, both have lost the agility of their limbs in consequence of a beating suffered during a police raid on an Afro dance party, which left one in a wheelchair and the other with a prosthetic leg. In the film, however, the architecture of elevators and mechanical devices through which Marquim moves to his recording bunker where he transmits his music and his stories via pirate frequency and the multi-level warehouse and gym across which Shockito

moves with the agility of a trapeze artist, coaching other amputees, also forge another temporality in which the victims mutate into avenging cyborgs. Here as in *Once There Was Brasília*, where the journey of neighborhood activist and janitor Dildu, transformed into an interstellar Terminator headed to Planet Earth to prevent the construction of the Brazilian capital, is juxtaposed onto the parliamentary-judicial coup against President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, this hypothetical space-time surges from the cross-pollination between a delirious fiction and the oral storytelling in which the characters recount their own lives. Queirós suggests the term “ethnography of fiction” for this generic hybrid where the fictional character is pushed “to the limit of the archetypal” until he or she crosses the border into the singularity of lived experience, at the same time as she “interacts with the proposed spaces, which are almost always invented and produced”. Together, the two movements force out “a confluence, a trance, a taking possession of that territory and of the filmed stories therein”.¹⁹⁸

Similar to Flora Gomes in *Mortu nega*, Queirós revisits Glauber Rocha’s figure of trance, forging (as Deleuze had put it) “an assemblage which brings real parties together” as a way of forcing out “collective utterances”.¹⁹⁹ Here, this occurs in the most literal sense, such as the political parties created by Dildu and Andreia in *A cidade é uma só?* (*Is the City Only One?*, 2011) and again in *Dry Ground Burning*, in defense of public transport users and the prison population, the rallies and leafleting campaigns of which cross paths on the streets with those of their real-life opponents. The films take shape, then, from the “explosive” effect of these introjections into everyday life of fantastic, even “futuristic” elements, such as the clandestine oil well operated by Chitara (Joana Darc Furtado) and her all-female crew, who tap underground pipes and redistribute appropriated fuel in the neighborhood through their army of bikers. Shot in nighttime settings, on dusty roads at the edge of the sprawling belt of shacks and brown-fields, with black leather outfits reminiscent of *Blade Runner* or *The Matrix*, *Dry Ground Burning* is a feminist *neo-noir* where the subject of the plot – the appropriation of the means of production – is reflected in the cinematic form itself. This becomes particularly striking with the appearance of Léa (Léa Alves da Silva), Chitara/Joana’s half-sister, who, upon her release from prison, joins the film’s cast before being detained once more for drug trafficking. This juxtaposition between “real” and “fictional” conflicts with the law and their impact on the lives of actresses and characters alike imposes on the film a complex narrative and temporal structure of remembrance and foreshadowing, where the central “adventure” – the story of Chitara, the “Queen of the Ravine”, and her clandestine oil empire – is refracted through her

siblings Léa's and Cocão's recollections, to eventually culminate in the final gathering of the biker-gladiators heading out once more into battle. But Chitara's revenge, capturing and setting fire to the drone-assisted police truck, also offers, within this internal plot, an alternative ending to the "real" one, a triumph of the oppressed that prevails over the sordid story of the capture of Léa and Mônica, her girlfriend, narrated through the voice and images of the real-life police report. In the film, then, Léa survives twice: on the level of the fictional plotline, on being avenged by her sister, but also because it is to her that the film delegates the narratorial voice; by being the one who stays on to remember and not the one who is remembered by others after her renewed disappearance.

As Queirós suggests, in *Dry Ground Burning*, "the idea was to burn down everything that represents an anachronistic, oppressive, reactionary, and stupid Brazil", including Bolsonaro's real-time 2018 victory celebrations in the capital city whose fireworks in the distance we witness from the observation tower of Chitara's fortified oil well in Ceilândia. "We are invoking the power of the images of lived memory, of the adventures, of the desires that [the actresses] experience in remembering, projected towards a possible confrontation in the future".²⁰⁰ An incendiary cinema, then, or perhaps: an alchemist's cinema. Queirós's films are not just about real inscriptions within fiction, much less about their re-performance for the sake of forging an act of remembrance in the present. Instead, the question is about forcing out, through such acts of inscription, an *alternative reality* which sets itself up in opposition to the "original" one in a fashion not so different from the way Chitara's oil well feeds on the underground pipelines that run underneath the city. Queirós's aim, in other words, is not so much about re-enacting the real as it is about "puncturing" it for the sake of activating the insurgent possibilities lying latent therein.

Maybe this is, in the end, the most exciting way of thinking about afterlife in cinema. Just as the film (as experience and as finished product) becomes, for Léa, a form of re-existence that releases her – albeit momentarily – from captivity, afterlife in cinema does not simply amount to the fantasy of "repairing" a damaged world. Just as re-becoming-Indigenous is not about returning to a moment that is prior to ancestral catastrophe, Léa's cinematic afterlife does not simply restore her freedom as if the re-capture had never taken place. Instead, by making us understand it (based on the inscription of the arrest warrant on the soundtrack, framed in turn by Chitara's on-camera narrative of the event) as a systemic form of oppression and control of rebellious bodies, *Dry Ground Burning* also pushes actoral performances "beyond the archetypes" – in Queirós's expression – of marginality

and crime, and thus, also beyond “the eternal image of the past”, as Walter Benjamin calls it, in whose place surges the “afterlife of what is understood, whose pulse is still felt in the present” – in the very space and time of the movie theater where we are compelled to bear witness, and to respond to, this burst of rebelliousness.

Postscript

“Any dream about birds means good health”, Santiago Nasar’s mother tells him the morning of the day he is about to be killed; however (the narrator hastens to add) when listening to her son’s recounting of his nocturnal ramblings, “she didn’t pay any great attention to the trees”.²⁰¹ Like García Márquez in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, what we have attempted here (less eloquently, for sure) was to evoke an experience of catastrophe perhaps not yet fully consummated but whose progress, nevertheless, already feels all but unstoppable. Despite its origin in an aesthetic concern – what does an art have to offer that renounces worldmaking, and how or where does it place us in relation to it?– this inquiry into the conceptual scope and valences of “mundus immundus” could not but take into account, on the one hand, the manifest and irreparable destruction that is advancing on our environment and our very form of planetary existence and, on the other, the increasingly delirious kinds of enjoyment and exaltation this same destructive frenzy has unleashed.

Here, in other words, we have tried to pay attention to the trees and to what their condition portends: “wild” fires equaling multiple nuclear explosions per day in their combustive discharges that sweep across the Americas from end to end; “record” storms, floods, and droughts occurring at a dizzying pace while we revel in the orgies of cruelty visited practically every hour on Gaza and the West Bank; the deadly hunt for migrants across the US; the stigmatization and homicidal violence directed toward the lgbtq+ community, people of color, or religious minorities. Observing this increasingly voracious convergence between extractivism and fascism, between an economic regime committed to pure destructiveness and a political-affective one that likewise feeds on, and empowers, a will to exterminate, is in no way original. Whether privileging one aspect or another – the birds or the trees – a host of recent interventions in critical theory, political ecology, and the social sciences have sought to comprehend what Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective have poignantly dubbed “fossil fascism” – that is, the Capitalocene as both the end of modern forms of the political and as their ghostly, or farcical, return.²⁰² Written during the grim months between Javier Milei’s electoral triumph in Argentina and that of Trump II in the US, with the extermination of the Palestinian people and the post-pandemic surge of authoritarian neoliberalism as constant baseline, this book has little to add to

these diagnoses. Its focus, however, has not been on this dark present as such, but rather on how aesthetic artifacts already intuit (and thus forge) a future that lies latent therein. And perhaps cinema, in its temporality constantly torn between the recorded and the staged, actualized time and again by a form of spectatorship that is its foundation and supplement, is a mode of aesthetic expression especially hospitable to this kind of divinatory reading.

At heart, then, what has been at stake here is a political hermeneutics of contemporary cinema. As is well known, unlike other methods of interpretation, the discipline founded by Friedrich Schleiermacher more than two centuries ago proposed a science not so much of the text or the artifact as of our way of making sense of it: its main concern is with the “art of understanding” rather than with the work in and of itself. Such an approach also entails a radical *historicizing of aesthetic experience*, since all such understanding is necessarily singular and contingent. The hermeneut asks what *this* poem, *this* film, or *this* painting wants to tell *me* in this precise time and place (even though they might always have been telling me this, but to realize it I had to encounter them here and now). What hermeneutics proposes, then, amounts to a constant updating of meaning based on a *situated reading*; a dialectical method that, furthermore, also requires situating the text itself in order to understand from where it addresses me and manages to find in my own present the answers to questions it poses to me from its own time and place. Therefore, the films discussed in this book do not compose a unit of time or geography: their form of coincidence is not of the order of origin but of destiny; they enter into constellation only in relation to the questions we have been asking them, in order to return each of them, from this heuristic point of intersection, to their own singular place and time.

The achievements of this kind of method are by nature modest. Working within the hermeneutic circle, by definition, leaves to the reader the most important part of the task at hand. Having put in relation – and in tension – the time and place of each film with those of my own gaze, overshadowed by a disastrous present, all but leaves to you the challenge of undertaking, from there, the work of synthesis, the tiger’s leap towards the future, as Benjamin would have put it. Hermeneutics is but an auxiliary discipline: it works in the service and for the benefit of a theory yet to come. Even so, the modesty of its method perhaps also contains a political lesson in terms of how to unlock margins of survivance in this unworlded world, in *mundus immundus*, the coming of which we were unable to stop. Before moving on to strategic concepts and definitions, hermeneutics suggests, we must get out into the field, get our hands and feet dirty, by inquiring

yet again about the experiences and the stories that are circulating out there. This is ultimately what its entire ethics of listening is meant for: to work from the bottom up, from the grassroots.

Filmography

100 Jahre Adolf Hitler – Die letzte Stunde im Führerbunker (100 Years of Adolf Hitler, Germany, 1989). Directed and written by: Christoph Schlingensief. Cinematography: Voxi Bärenklau. Editing: Christoph Schlingensief, Ariane Traub. With: Udo Kier, Alfred Edel, Margit Carstensen. 60 minutes.

A cidade é uma só? (Is the City Only One?), Brazil, 2011). Directed and edited by: Adirley Queirós. Script: Adirley Queirós, Thiago Mendonça. Cinematography: Leonardo Feliciano. With: Wellington Abreu, Nancy Araújo, Marquim da Tropa. 79 minutes.

Anthropocene: The Human Epoch (USA, 2018). Directed by: Jennifer Baichwal, Edward Burtynsky, Nicholas de Pencier. Script: Jennifer Baichwal. Cinematography: Nicholas de Pencier. Editing: Roland Schlimme. 87 minutes.

Aquarius (Brazil, 2016). Directed and written by: Kléber Mendonça Filho. Cinematography: Pedro Sotero, Fabricio Tadeu. Editing: Eduardo Serrano. With: Sônia Braga, Maeve Jenkins, Irandhir Santos. 146 minutes.

Araya (Venezuela, France, 1959). Directed by: Margot Benacerraf. Script: Margot Benacerraf, Pierre Seghers. Cinematography: Giuseppe Nisoli. Editing: Pierre Jallaud. 90 minutes.

Babel (USA, Mexico, 2006). Directed by: Alejandro González Iñárritu. Script: Guillermo Arriaga. Cinematography: Rodrigo Prieto. Editing: Douglass Crise, Stephen Mirrione. With: Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett, Gael García Bernal. 143 minutes.

Bacurau (Brazil, 2019). Directed and written by: Kléber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles. Cinematography: Pedro Sotero. Editing: Eduardo Serrano. With: Bárbara Colen, Sônia Braga, Udo Kier. 131 minutes.

Barravento (Brazil, 1962). Directed by: Glauber Rocha. Script: Luiz Paulino dos Santos, Glauber Rocha, José Teles. Cinematography: Tony Rabatoni. Editing: Nelson Pereira dos Santos. With: Antônio Pitanga, Luiza Maranhão, Lucy de Carvalho. 78 minutes.

Belgrano (Argentina, 2010). Directed by: Sebastián Pivotto. Script: Marcelo Caamaño, Juan Pablo Domenech. Cinematography: Miguel Abal. Editing: Ariel Frajnd. With: Pablo Rago, Guillermo Pfening, Pablo Echarri. 90 minutes.

Blade Runner (USA, 1982). Directed by: Ridley Scott. Script: Hampton Fenchner, David Peoples. Cinematography: Jordan Cronenweth. Editing: Marsha Nakashima, Terry Rawlings. With: Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young. 117 minutes.

Branco sai, preto fica (*White Out, Black In*, Brazil, 2014). Directed and written by: Adirley Queirós. Cinematography: Leonardo Feliciano. Editing: Jordana Berg. With: Shockito, Marquim da Tropa, Dilmar Durães. 90 minutes.

Breakfast at Tiffany's (USA, 1961). Directed by: Blake Edwards. Script: George Axelrod. Cinematography: Franz Planer, Philip H. Lathrop. Editing: Howard A. Smith. With: Audrey Hepburn, George Peppard, Patricia Neal. 115 minutes.

Cabra marcado para morrer (*Twenty Years After*, Brazil, 1984). Directed and written by: Eduardo Coutinho. Cinematography: Fernando Duarte, Edgar Moura. Editing: Eduardo Escorel. 119 minutes.

Camila (Argentina, 1984). Directed by: María Luisa Bemberg. Script: María Luisa Bemberg, Beda Docampo Feijóo, Juan Bautista Stagnaro. Cinematography: Fernando Arribas. Editing: Luis César D'Angiolillo. With: Susu Pecoraro, Imanol Arias, Héctor Alterio. 105 minutes.

Casa de lava (*Down to Earth*, Portugal, 1994). Directed and written by: Pedro Costa. Cinematography: Emmanuel Machuel. Editing: Dominique Auvray. With: Inês de Medeiros, Isach de Bankolé, Edith Scob. 110 minutes.

Cavalo Dinheiro (*Horse Money*, Portugal, 2014). Directed and written by: Pedro Costa. Cinematography: Leonardo Simões. Editing: João Dias. With: Ventura, Vitalina Varela, Benvindo Tavares. 103 minutes.

Deus e o diabo na terra do sol (*Black God, White Devil*, Brazil, 1964). Directed by: Glauber Rocha. Script: Walter Lima Jr., Glauber Rocha, Paulo Gil Soares. Cinematography: Waldemar Lima. Editing: Rafael Justo Valverde. With: Othon Bastos, Geraldo Del Rey, Yoná Magalhães. 120 minutes.

Divino amor (Divine Love, Brazil, 2019). Directed by: Gabriel Mascaro. Script: Gabriel Mascaro, Rachel Daisy Ellis, Esdras Bezerra. Cinematography: Diego Garcia. Editing: George Crapp, Fernando Epstein, Livia Serpa, Eduardo Serrano. With: Dira Pães, Júlio Machado, António Pastich. 101 minutes.

El movimiento (The Movement, Argentina, 2015). Directed and written by: Benjamín Naishtat. Cinematography: Soledad Rodríguez. Editing: Andrés Quaranta. With: Pablo Cedrón, Céline Latil, Francisco Lumerman. 70 minutes.

Er ist wieder da (Look Who's Back, Germany, 2015). Directed by: David Wnendt. Script: David Wnendt, Mizzi Meyer. Cinematography: Hanno Lentz. Editing: Andreas Wodraschke. With: Oliver Masucci, Thomas M. Köppl, Marc-Marvin Israel. 116 minutes

Era uma vez Brasília (Once There Was Brasília, Brazil, 2017). Directed and written by: Adirley Queirós. Cinematography: Joana Pimenta. Editing: Frederico Benavides, Guile Martins, Adirley Queirós. With: Wellington Abreu, Marquim da Tropa, Andreia Vieira. 100 minutes

Eureka (Argentina, Portugal, Brazil, United States 2023). Directed by: Lisandro Alonso. Script: Lisandro Alonso, Martín Caamaño, Fabián Casas. Cinematography: Mauro Herce, Timo Salminen. Editing: Gonzalo del Val. With: Viggo Mortensen, Chiara Mastroianni, Alaina Clifford. 147 minutes.

Fantasma (Argentina, 2006). Directed and written by : Lisandro Alonso. Cinematography: Lucio Bonelli. Editing: Lisandro Alonso, Delfina Castagnino. With: Argentino Vargas, Misael Saavedra, Carlos Landini. 63 minutes.

Gisaengchung (Parasite, South Korea, 2019). Directed by: Bong-Joon Ho. Script: Bong-Joon Ho, Han Jin-won. Cinematography: Hong Kyung-pyo. Editing: Jinmo Yang. With: Song Kang-ho, Lee Sun-kyun, Cho Yeo-yeong. 132 minutes.

Hitler III Mundo (Brazil, 1968). Directed and written by: José Agrippino de Paula. Cinematography: Jorge Bodanzky. Editing: Rudá de Andrade, Walter Rogério. With: Fernando Benini, Maria Esther Stockler, Jô Soares. 90 minutes.

I, Daniel Blake (United Kingdom, 2016). Directed by: Ken Loach. Script: Paul Laverty. Cinematography: Robbie Ryan. Editing: Jonathan Morris. With: Dave Johns. Hayley Squires, Sharon Percy. 100 minutes.

I Walked With a Zombie (USA, 1943). Directed by: Jacques Tourneur. Script: Curt Siodmak and Ardel Wray. Cinematography: J. Roy Hunt. Editing: Mark Robson. With: Frances Dee, Tom Conway, James Ellison. 69 minutes.

Il portiere di notte (*The Night Porter*, Italy, 1974). Directed by: Liliana Cavani. Script: Liliana Cavani, Italo Moscati. Cinematography: Alfio Contini. Editing: Franco Arcalli. With: Dirk Bogarde, Charlotte Rampling, Philippe Leroy. 118 minutes.

Jauja (Argentina, Denmark, 2014). Directed by: Lisandro Alonso. Script: Lisandro Alonso, Fabián Casas. Cinematography: Timo Salminen. Editing: Gonzalo del Val, Natalia López. With: Viggo Mortensen, Vilbjørk Malling Agger, Adrián Fondari. 109 minutes.

Jogo de cena (*Playing*, Brazil, 2007). Directed and written by: Eduardo Coutinho. Cinematography: Jacques Cheuiche. Editing: Jordana Berg. Actrices: Marília Pera, Andréa Beltrão, Fernanda Torres. 80 minutes.

Juan Moreira (Argentina, 1973). Directed by: Leonardo Favio. Script: Leonardo Favio, Jorge Zuhair Jury. Cinematography: Juan Carlos Desanzo. Editing: Antonio Ripoll. With: Rodolfo Bebán, Elcira Olivera Garcés, Pablo Cumo. 102 minutes.

Juventude em marcha (*Colossal Youth*, Portugal, 2006). Directed and written by: Pedro Costa. Cinematography: Pedro Costa, Leonardo Simões. Editing: Pedro Filipe Marques. With: Ventura, Vanda Duarte, Alberto “Lento” Barros. 156 minutes.

Killers of the Flower Moon (USA, 2023). Directed by: Martin Scorsese. Script: Eric Roth, Martin Scorsese. Cinematography: Rodrigo Prieto. Editing: Thelma Schoonmaker. With: Leonardo DiCaprio, Robert de Niro, Lily Gladstone. 206 minutes.

La commune (*Paris, 1871*) (France, 2000). Directed by: Peter Watkins. Script: Agathe Bluysen, Peter Watkins. Cinematography: Odd Geir Saether. Editing: Agathe Bluysen, Olivier Ferrari, Patrick Watkins, Peter Watkins. With: Eliane Adalto, Pierre Barbieux, Bernard Bombeau. 345 minutes.

La libertad (*Freedom*, Argentina, 2001). Directed and written by: Lisandro Alonso. Cinematography: Cobi Migliora. Editing: Lisandro Alonso, Martín Mainoli, Natalia Blajeroff. With: Misael Saavedra, Humberto Estrada, Rafael Estrada. 73 minutes.

La mujer de los perros (Dog Lady, Argentina, 2015). Directed and written by: Verónica Llinás, Laura Citarella. Cinematography: Soledad Rodríguez. Editing: Ignacio Masllorens. With: Verónica Llinás, Juliana Muras, Germán de Silva. 98 minutes.

Lapü (Colombia, 2019). Directed by: César Alejandro Jaimes, Juan Pablo Polanco. Script: César Alejandro Jaimes, Juan Pablo Polanco, Canela Reyes. Cinematography: Angello Faccini. Editing: César Alejandro Jaimes, Juan Pablo Polanco. Actrices: Carmen González Yusayú, Doris Gonzáles Yusayú. 75 minutes.

Le locataire (The Tenant, France, 1976). Directed by: Roman Polanski. Script: Gérard Brach, Roman Polanski. Cinematography: Sven Nykvist. Editor: Françoise Bonnot. With: Isabelle Adjani, Roman Polanski, Melvyn Douglas. 126 minutes.

Le voyage dans la lune (A Trip to the Moon, France, 1902). Directed by: Georges Méliès. Script: Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, Georges Méliès. Cinematography and editing: Georges Méliès. With: Georges Méliès, Victor André, Bleurette Bernon. 14 minutes.

Liverpool (Argentina, 2008). Directed by: Lisandro Alonso. Script: Lisandro Alonso, Salvador Roselli. Cinematography: Lucio Bonelli. Editing: Lisandro Alonso, Sergi Dies, Fernando Epstein, Martín Mainoli, Ana Remón. With: Juan Fernández, Nieves Cabrera, Gisella Irrazabal. 84 minutes.

Los hijos de Fierro (The Sons of Martín Fierro, Argentina, 1975). Directed and written by: Fernando “Pino” Solanas. Cinematography: Juan Carlos Desanzo. Editing: Luis César D’Angiolillo. With: Julio Troxler, Tito Ameijeiras, Juan Carlos Gené. 134 minutes.

Los muertos (The Dead, Argentina, 2004). Directed and written by: Lisandro Alonso. Cinematography: Cobi Migliora. Editing: Lisandro Alonso, Ezequiel Borovinsky, Delfina Castagnino. With: Argentino Vargas, Francisco Dornez, Yolanda Galarza. 78 minutes.

Mato seco em chamas (Dry Ground Burning, Brazil, 2022). Directed and written by: Adirley Queirós y Joana Pimenta. Cinematography: Joana Pimenta. Editing: Cristina Amaral. With: Joana Darc Furtado, Léa Alves da Silva, Andreia Vieira. 153 minutes.

Melancholia (Sweden, Germany, France, 2011). Written and directed by: Lars von Trier. Cinematography: Manuel Alberto Claro. Editing: Molly Malene Stensgaard. With: Kirsten Dunst, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Alexander Skarsgård. 135 minutes.

Mortu nega (Those Whom Death Refused, Guinea-Bissau, 1988). Directed by: Flora Gomes. Script: Manuel Rambout Barcelos, Flora Gomes, David Lang. Cinematography: Dominique Gentil. Editing: Christiane Lack. With: Bia Gomes, Tuno Eugenio Almada, M'male Nhasse. 85 minutes.

Moscou (Moscow, Brazil, 2009). Directed and written by: Eduardo Coutinho. Cinematography: Jacques Cheuiche. Editing: Joana Berg, Jordana Berg. With: Paulo André, Teuda Bara, Arildo de Barros. 78 minutes.

Nhá fala (My Voice, Guinea-Bissau, France, Portugal, 2002). Directed by: Flora Gomes. Script: Flora Gomes, Franck Moissard. Cinematography: Edgar Moura. Editing: Dominique Pâris. With: Fatou N'Diaye, Jean-Christophe Dollé, Ângelo Torres. 110 minutes.

No quarto da Vanda (In Vanda's Room, Portugal, 2000). Directed, written and shot by Pedro Costa. Editing: Dominique Auvray, Patricia Saramago. With: Vanda Duarte, Zita Duarte, Manuel Gomes Miranda. 171 minutes.

Nomadland (USA, 2020). Written, edited and directed by: Chloé Zhao. Cinematography: Joshua James Richards. With: Frances McDormand, David Strathairn, Linda May. 107 minutes.

Nuestra tierra (Landmarks, Argentina, 2025). Directed by: Lucrecia Martel. Script: Lucrecia, Martel, María Alché. Cinematography: Ernesto de Carvalho, Federico Lastra. Editing: Jerónimo Pérez Rioja, Miguel Schverdfinger. 119 minutes.

O bandido da luz vermelha (The Red-Light Bandit, Brazil, 1968). Directed and written by: Rogério Sganzerla. Cinematography: Carlos Ebert, Peter Overbeck. Editing: Silvio Renoldi. With: Paulo Villaça, Luiz Linhares, Helena Ignez. 92 minutes.

O invasor (The Trespasser, Brazil, 2002). Directed by: Beto Brant. Script: Marçal Aquino, Beto Brant, Renato Clasca. Cinematography: Toca Seabra. Editing: Manga Campion. With: Marco Ricca, Mariana Ximenes, Paulo Miklos. 97 minutes.

O sangue (Blood, Portugal, 1989). Directed and written by: Pedro Costa. Cinematography: Acácio de Almeida, Elso Roque, Martin Schäfer. Editing: Manuela Viegas. With: Pedro Hestnes, Nuno Ferreira, Inês de Medeiros. 95 minutes.

Ônibus 174 (*Bus 174*, Brazil, 2002). Directed by: José Padilha y Felipe Lacerda. Script: Bráulio Mantovani, José Padilha. Cinematography: Marcelo “Guru” Duarte, Cézar Moraes. Editing: Felipe Lacerda. 122 minutes.

Pájaros de verano (*Birds of Passage*, Colombia, 2018). Directed by: Cristina Gallego y Ciro Guerra. Script: María Camila Arias, Jacques Toulemonde, Cristina Gallego, Ciro Guerra. Cinematography: David Gallego. Editing: Miguel Schverdfinger. With: Carmiña Martínez, José Acosta, Natalia Reyes. 125 minutes.

Pasqualino Settebellezze (*Seven Beauties*, Italy, 1975). Written and directed by: Lina Wertmüller. Cinematography: Tonino Delli Colli. Editing: Franco Fraticelli. With: Giancarlo Giannini, Fernando Rez, Shirlez Stoler. 116 minutes.

Rear Window (USA, 1954). Directed by: Alfred Hitchcock. Script: John Michael Hayes, Cornell Woolrich. Cinematography: Robert Burks. Editing: George Tomasini. With: James Stewart, Grace Kelly, Wendell Corey. 112 minutes.

Revolución: El cruce de los Andes (*Revolution*, Argentina, 2010). Directed by: Leandro Ipiña. Script: Leandro Ipiña, Andrés Maino. Cinematography: Javier Juliá, Daniel Mendoza. Editing: Alejandro Broderon. With: Rodrigo de la Serna, Víctor Hugo Carrizo, Alfredo Castellani. 90 minutes.

Rosemary’s Baby (USA, 1968). Directed by: Roman Polanski. Script: Ira Levin, Roman Polanski. Cinematography: William A. Fraker. Editing: Sam O’Steen, Bob Wyman. With: Mia Farrow, John Cassavetes, Ruth Gordon. 137 minutes.

Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma (*Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, Italy, 1975). Directed by: Pier Paolo Pasolini. Script: Pier Paolo Pasolini, Sergio Citti. Cinematography: Tonino Delli Colli. Editing: Nino Baragli. With: Paolo Bonacelli, Giorgio Cataldi, Uberto Paolo Quintavalle. 107 minutes.

Schindler’s List (USA, 1993). Directed by: Steven Spielberg. Script: Steven Zaillian. Cinematography: Janusz Kaminski. Editing: Michael Kahn. With: Liam Neeson, Ralph Fiennes, Ben Kingsley. 195 minutes.

Surire (Chile, 2015). Directed by, Script y Editing: Bettina Perut, Iván Osnovikoff. Cinematography: Pablo Valdés. 80 minutes.

Terra em transe (Land in Anguish, Brazil, 1967). Directed and written by: Glauber Rocha. Cinematography: Luiz Carlos Barreto. Editing: Eduardo Escorel. With: Jardel Filho, Paulo Autran, Glauce Rocha. 108 minutes.

The Apartment (USA, 1960). Directed by: Billy Wilder. Script: Billy Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond. Cinematography: Joseph LaSelle. Editing: Daniel Mandell. With: Jack Lemmon, Shirley MacLaine, Fred MacMurray. 125 minutes

The Birth of a Nation (USA, 1915). Directed by: D. W. Griffith. Script: D. W. Griffith and Frank E. Woods. Cinematography: G. W. Blitzer. Editing: D. W. Griffith, Joseph Henabery, James Smith, Rose Smith, Raoul Walsh. With: Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, Henry B. Walthall. 205 minutes.

The Great Dictator (USA, 1940). Written and directed by: Charles Chaplin. Cinematography: Karl Struss, Roland Totheroh. Editing: Willard Nico, Harold Rice. With: Charles Chaplin, Paulette Goddard, Jack Oakie. 125 minutes.

The Last Woman on Earth (USA, 1960). Directed by: Roger Corman. Script: Robert Towne. Cinematography: Jacques R. Marquette. Editing: Anthony Carras. With: Betsy Jones Moreland, Antony Carbone, Robert Towne. 71 minutes.

The Matrix. (USA, 1999). Written and directed by: Lana & Lilly Wachowski. Script: Robert Towne. Cinematography: Bill Pope. Editing: Zach Staenberg. With: Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, Carrie-Anne Moss. 136 minutes.

Trinity (USA, 1945). Produced and edited by US Department of Energy. 12 minutes.

Triumph des Willens (Triumph of the Will, Germany, 1935). Directed and edited by: Leni Riefenstahl. Script: Leni Riefenstahl, Walter Ruttmann, Eberhart Taubert. Cinematography: Sepp Allgeier. 110 minutes.

Tropa de elite (Elite Squad, Brazil, 2007). Directed by: José Padilha. Script: José Padilha, Rodrigo Pimentel, Bráulio Mantovani. Cinematography: Lula Carvalho. Editing: Daniel Rezende. With: Wagner Moura, André Ramiro, Caio Junqueira. 115 minutes.

True History of the Kelly Gang (Australia, 2019). Directed by: Justin Kurzel. Script: Shaun Grant. Cinematography: Ari Wegner. Editing: Nick Fenton. With: George MacKay, Essie Davis, Nicholas Hoult. 124 minutes.

Vitalina Varela (Portugal, 2019). Directed by: Pedro Costa. Script: Pedro Costa, Vitalina Varela. Cinematography: Leonardo Simões. Editing: Vitor Carvalho, João Dias. With: Vitalina Varela, Ventura, Manuel Tavares Almeida. 124 minutes.

Notes

- 1 Günther Anders, "Reflections on the H-Bomb", *Dissent* 3, 2 (1956): 146.
- 2 Jennifer Fay, "Cinema's Hot Chronology (5:29:21 Mountain War Time, July 16, 1945)", *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58, 2 (2019): 149.
- 3 Matthias De Groof, "Anticolonial Aesthetics: Towards Eco-Cinema", *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 24, 7 (2022): 1155; Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), xiii.
- 4 Paul Virilio, *Guerre et cinéma I: Loqistique de la perception* (Paris: Éditions Cahiers du Cinéma, 1991), 119-20.
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the traditional genres and instruments of the islands, mainly that of Santiago – *batuque*, *funaná* and *tabanka*, highly percussive forms associated with the *badius*, descendants of the maroons who had taken refuge in the island's interior – as well as the better-known *mornas* and *koladeiras*, more closely related to Portuguese and Caribbean music, with the use of synthesizers and electric guitars and bass, attesting to the artists' fascination with the Beatles and with the first generation of Brazilian rock, mainly Roberto and Erasmo Carlos. On Os Tubarões, see their entry in the “Museu Virtual Cabo Verde e a Música”: <https://www.caboverdeamusica.online/tubaroes/> (accessed March 2026); on the complex intertwining between global and local tendencies in Cape Verdean music and their (cultural) politics, see Fernando Arenas, “Cesária Évora and the Globalization of Cape Verdean Music”, in *Lusophone Africa: Beyond Independence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 45-102.

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Mundus Immundus asks how cinema becomes a mode of thinking where words fail us. Immundus is what ensues on the collapse of networks of reciprocity that make up the “world” as extended semiosis and as habitable environment. At the same time, this book argues, it also describes certain forms of withdrawal of cinematic worldmaking, forcing us to experience and inhabit the space and time of disaster’s afterlife. In dialogue with films by Pedro Costa, Lucrecia Martel, Kléber Mendonça Filho, Laura Citarella, Flora Gomes, Lisandro Alonso, and Adirley Queirós, among others, *Mundus Immundus* inquires about disaster by invoking some of its most illustrious names: Capitalocene (the relationship of mutual devastation that subsumes bodies and environments), Negrocene (the racialized denial of world that has sustained capitalism since its origins), and Thanatocene (the imbrication between technologies of war and extraction, and of these with forms of spectacle and enjoyment founded on destructiveness). But it also explores the poetics and politics of afterlife – of survivance, re-existence, re-becoming Indigenous – and their manifestations in contemporary cinemas of re-enactment and re-performance.

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