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CINEMA 14 ABSTRACTS

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ABSTRACTS

THE REAL AND THE IMAGINARY: REWORKING THE BOUNDARIES IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT CHINESE-LANGUAGE CINEMA

Yun-hua Chen
Clemens von Haselberg (University of Cologne, Germany)

ABSTRACT   This paper studies the boundaries between the Real and the Imaginary in contemporary Chinese-language and related films by bringing conceptualizations deriving from Buddhism, Daoism, and Chinese literary and aesthetic traditions to the discussion. It aims to initiate a dialogue between these non-Western epistemologies, ontologies and philosophies, and those from the Western world. Predominantly Western dichotomies such as actuality and virtuality, or reality and imagination, seem to be naturally blurred and nuanced in Daoism-Buddhism.

By reflecting upon the relationship between the Real and the Imaginary on screen, their relation to each other and mutual permeation, the paper seeks to expand film theory in general, and the theory of realism in particular, without forcing an integration of and ignoring the incompatibilities between these Western and Chinese approaches. When alternative perspectives from non-Western cultures are brought to the discourse on the representation of the photographic image in films, the theory of realism can be expanded, and scholarship around the relationship between the Real and the Imaginary on screen can be furthered.

The concept of the "Real" in Western film theories will be discussed first. In the West, the concept is often rooted in theorization around "realism", and especially the thinking of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer when it comes to the field of audio-visual media. In contrast, the approach to the "Real" is more fluid in the framework of Chinese literary, visual, and aesthetic ideas as well as Daoist and Buddhist philosophies, which can in turn be understood in parallel to the Western philosophies of thinkers including Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze. We then zoom in on the interplay between the Real and the Imaginary in contemporary Chinese-language and related cinema, using two examples: Crosscurrent (Changjiang tu 长江图, Yang Chao, 2016) as a place of dialogue between Zhuangzi 庄子 and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, and Kaili Blues (Lubian yecan 路边野餐, Bi Gan, 2016) informed by the Buddhist idea of impermanence and the concepts of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

KEYWORDS   Chinese Cinema, Realism, Imaginary, French Philosophy, Daoism-Buddhism.

LIVING TIME:

RE-EVALUATING CINEMATIC EMPATHY THROUGH LI ZEHOU

James Batcho (Independent Scholar)

ABSTRACT   Empathy is commonly conceived as "understanding" and more particularly to cinema as a representative affectivity, a body-relation that comes through the screen to viewer. This essay considers a concept of empathy that elevates the sensory in any such relation, a feeling *within* the film's own immanent relations. This "sensory empathy" pulls the emphasis away from classic Greek necessities of distance and later Enlightenment concepts of perspective, which depend on a cognitive understanding. Instead, it invites us to consider a more Asian gathering of a *living time*. This will be explored through Chinese scholar Li Zehou, who marks an aesthetic differentiation between Kantian and Confucian time. In the former is a general, objective and spatialized time, while in the latter is found an entanglement of sensuous emotions. Key to this is Li's writing on "the fusion of feeling and scene" (*qing jing jiao rong*) taken from Confucian aesthetics. This emphasizes a decoupling from signs, symbols, ideologies and mimetic representations of image and subject to explore how sensuous emotions of nostalgia, yearning, imagination, and human existence become entangled. This essay picks up from these concepts to distinguish Greek *mimesis* from Chinese expression and spirit to propose a cinema of sensory empathy.

Directors under study include Abbas Kiarostami, Salomé Lamas, Chloe Zhao, and in particular, Terrence Malick and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Exploring Li's concepts through these works requires an emphasis on the audible and temporal aspects of cinema more than the visual. Through "audible expressions," time unfolds as a coexistence of durations, weaving the present and the past as a process of thought and memory vital to a sensory empathy. Through audible coexistence, a tether forms between subjects within and the audioviewer who feels rather than gazes or "reads" what is underway. Li's ideas are the focus, and his work is supported through readings by recent Li scholars. His work is also situated through writings by Bachelard, Baggini, Bergson, Deleuze, Yuhui Jiang, Cecile Chu-chin Sun, and others. The aim of this essay is to provide a non-Western way into the concept of cinematic empathy outside familiar terms such as "sound design," "representation," "analysis" and "*mise-en-scène*," and to introduce scholars to the work of Li, who has been ignored in cinema studies.

KEYWORDS: Asian cinema, Confucianism, Emotion, Sensation, Sound

DAOISM AS A CURE FOR THE EXCESSES OF WESTERN MODERN SCIENCE IN *PI* (D. ARONOFSKY, 1998)

Enric Burgos (University of Valencia)

ABSTRACT   *Pi* tells us the story of Maximilian Cohen, a young mathematician who tries to find a pattern within the decimals of number pi. Max assumes that Mathematics is the language of nature and believes everything can be rationally explained, predicted and controlled. His investigations arouse the interest of a Wall Street businesswoman who wants Max to help her forecast stock market movements. Moreover, a group of Jews try to convince him into re-purposing his research to the quest of the revelation of God's real name. Throughout the film, the protagonist seems to be split in different ways. He is disconnected from the external world, as he replaces it with a mathematical and perfect *image of* it and avoids social interaction with its inhabitants. Besides, he is at odds with himself since he pretends to be a *pure mind* and neglects his body and its needs. *Pi* not only exhibits the Western modern desire to transcend human limitations but it also contrasts this worldview with several non-Western traditions of thought. Among them, Chinese culture and philosophy (and more specifically, Daoism) play an important part in *Pi*.

Our aim is to reveal the ways in which Daoism impregnates the film and to investigate the dialogue it opens between Western modern science imagery and the Daoist outlook. To do so, we analyse some special scenes from a thematic and a formal point of view, at the same time we recur to the main fonts of Daoism and to the writings of contemporary scholars. Firstly, we show how the excesses of Western modern science affect Max, focusing on his disconnection from the world and from himself. Thus, this section comments on Max's hyper rational attitude, the external point of view on the world he pursues and the negation of his body. Secondly, we evaluate the ways in which Daoism is presented as a means of overcoming Max's split by referring to human's integration in nature as a saner way of relating to the world whilst also underlining the importance of body and self-care to Daoism. In this sense, we deal with the central notion of *Dào*, as well as with the concepts of *xīn* and *wúwéi*. Thirdly, we point at the dichotomies the film presents and pay a special attention to the way they progressively blur throughout the course of the movie and lead us to the *Yīn-Yáng* approach. Lastly, the conclusions wrap up our essay by reiterating its main points and offering a final evaluation of the dialogue *Pi* displays between Western modern imagery and the Daoist worldview.

The logic of pain in talking bodies:
An approach to *han* in the films of Hong Sang-soo and Lee Chang-dong

Teresita Francomano, Antonio Loriguillo-López, José Antonio Palao-Errando
(Universitat Jaume I, Spain)

ABSTRACT   This paper's focus is to explore the representation of grief in two contemporary South Korean films: *On the Beach at Night Alone* (Hong Sang-soo, 2017) and *Burning* (Lee Chang-dong, 2018). The article revolves around the concept of *han*, an inherent element of the modes of representation in Korean cinema. A legacy of the colonialist era, *han* takes us from the individual to the collective, on an endless search for recognition by the Other. The loss of the object of desire in an unwanted separation for the protagonists of both films can only be understood within a framework that considers the historical precedents involved in the consolidation of *han*. To explore the poetics of the cross-cultural nature of *han*, this study connects an analysis of the mise-en-scène and narratives of both films with the psychoanalytic model of melancholia.

KEYWORDS: South Korea, Hong Sang-Soo, Lee Chang-Dong, Melancholy, Contemporary Cinema, Identity.

THE SUFI LITERARY SUBTEXT IN KAPLANOĞLU'S *GRAIN* (*BUĞDAY*)

Zeynep Demircan Şöner (Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul)

ABSTRACT   Sufism is remarkably embedded in most of the Muslim cinemas of the world. In films, it functions as a manifestation of a response towards the existent global social and political patterns. Each country's cinema exhibits very different symbolic codes of Sufism in films. These codes can describe the narrative structure or aesthetic strategies in a film by using lyric themes, music or even philosophical approaches borrowed from the Sufi culture.

Sufism has a language that is not based on a certain method, but based on the subjective interpretations of Sufis and symbolically formed against various historical pressures. As of this reason, this article basically departs from the idea that these Sufi codes, which are basically ingrained in movies, need to be deciphered. The method adopted in this article is to examine these constructions in Semih Kaplanoğlu's science fiction movie Buğday (2017) in particular. By treating the film as a cultural text, the

applications of Sufism that are inherent in Turkish cinema and, more generally, Sufism, which is inherent in global Muslim cinema, are also investigated.

KEYWORDS: Sufism, Turkish Cinema, Dream Cinema, Muslim Cinema, Post-colonial

THE PORTRAYAL OF DIGNIFIED DEATH, EUTHANASIA, AND OTHER RITUALS OF PASSAGE IN JAPANESE CINEMA. END-OF-LIFE PRACTICES AND BEREAVEMENT IN "THE BALLAD OF NARAYAMA" (1983)

CRINGUTA IRINA PELEA (Titu Maiorescu University, Faculty of Communication Sciences and International Relations, Romania)

ABSTRACT   The present essay aims to explore narratives of dignified death, euthanasia, and infanticide in *The Ballad of Narayama*, one of the masterpieces of renowned Japanese director Shōhei Imamura. The film depicts a morally and ethically complex experiment of projecting a virtual cinematic world, where euthanizing the elders is one of the basic social conventions, and deeds such as matricide, patricide, or infanticide are by no means uncommon. Drawing upon the mythic and literary narratives of the *obasute* legend, *The Ballad of Narayama* follows the development of the psychological and emotional conflict of the main character, Orin Neko, together with exploring the ethical and moral dynamics of this rural, alternative world associated with intricate rituals of passing. The contextual analysis will refer to several significant narrative modes (birth, abortion, dying, death, bereavement, and memorialization), analyzed from the perspectives of the village, Orin, and, finally, Tatsuhei, her first son. The innovation of the present study lies in drawing attention to the linguistic aspect, more specifically the nuances provided by the Japanese language spoken by the characters. Likewise, we have incorporated many untranslated Japanese language academic resources, in an attempt to balance the Western-centric perspective and the wide array of English–language research papers available on this topic.

KEYWORDS: Japanese cinema, euthanasia, infanticide, Narayama, Imamura Shōhei

FRONTERA VERDE: TOWARDS ECOCRITICAL-DECOLONIAL IMAGE/CINEMA

Miljana 'Manja' Podovac (University of Applied Arts Vienna, Austria) and Taida
Kusturica (Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna)

ABSTRACT   This paper considers the television series *Frontera Verde* (2019) as an
essential decolonial-ecocritical production of the 21st century. We are not focusing on the
formal aesthetic analysis of cinematic images/production as such; rather, we are
approaching the analysis from the historical and geopolitical perspective. Historical facts
of European colonisation and missionaries' expeditions in the Amazon are central to the
decolonial visual production that articulates a critical understanding of the historical and
geopolitical background of crimes against Indigenous and black peoples and a threat
against biodiversity, plurality, freedom of movement and cultural representation. The first
feature that advocates decolonial-ecocritical aesthetics is locality: *Frontera Verde* is filmed
on the tripoint of the Colombian-Brazilian-Peru border, which was geopolitically a
territory of settler colonisation. The second feature is the question of epistemicide:
appropriation of knowledge and natural resources from Indigenous culture, which rejects
life based on the Eurocentric worldview. The third feature is the question of
femicide/genocide over the Indigenous bodies. Thus, *Frontera Verde* brings into close
relation the legacy of European colonisation of the Amazon region and points to the urgent
problem of the environmental destruction of the Amazon forest and the Indigenous way
of life. Therefore, we think about how the neo-colonial grammar of racial and extractive
capitalism is indivisible from the media/cinema and environmental representation.

INTRODUCTION:

CROSSING BORDERS, ESTABLISHING DIALOGUES

Patrícia Castello Branco (IFILNOVA)

The 14th issue of *Cinema – Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Ima*ge is dedicated to the theme of *Film and Non-western thought*. Non-Western thought is a term that has been used in the last decade, mainly in the field of political thought and international relations, aiming to convey traditions of thought that do not belong to Western and European philosophical canons. More than a geographical delimitation, non-Western thought aims at describing structures of thought born outside the European philosophical context. With this issue, we intend to integrate these traditions within the field of film and philosophy, broadening the very term 'philosophy' to incorporate non-Western rooted forms of thinking. These include the rich thought traditions of Asia, Africa, and Native America, as well as the rest of the world. The way these traditions produce and are embedded in specific films or film theories can help us overcome the hegemony of Western worldviews, integrating the rich diversity of human thought in the field of cinema. The main aim was to enable an encounter between different systems of thought and cinema, deepening and exploring the way in which ideas, connections, and visions of the world outside of western philosophy are embodied in specific films, either through their devices and aesthetic options, or in terms of content. Ideas can take many forms, moving images being one of them. The way ideas coming from non-Western tradition are embedded in films is also a way of contributing to giving voice to worldviews outside of Western philosophy, bringing to light new and rich approaches of great relevance in this era in which we need to build bridges, establish dialogues, and open the doors to world views outside the Western canon.

The essays comprised in this volume give voice precisely to this claim, offering alternative views on broader themes, such as the relationship between art and thought, image and word, humans and nature, empathy in film, the Anthropocene, post-colonialism, as well as more specific matters, such as the question of temporality, the idea of 'realism', the question of euthanasia, infanticide, melancholy, and identity, 'epistemicide', femicide, drawing on perspectives that encompass Eastern systems of thought such as Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, passing through Islamic views incorporated in Sufism, or new approaches to the issue of colonialism and ecocriticism taking an amerindian perspective. These issues appear in films and works from different geographies and traditions such as China, Japan, South Korea, Turkey, Iran, Colombia, Thailand, but also Portugal and the United States of America, which somehow incorporate and reflect non-western thoughts and approaches.

Yun-hua Chen and Clemens von Haselberg's "The Real and The Imaginary: Reworking the Boundaries in the Light of Recent Chinese-language Cinema" takes contemporary Chinese-language and related cinema to discuss the Western dichotomies, such as actuality and virtuality, or reality and imagination on screen, by bringing into play concepts derived from Buddhism, Daoism, and Chinese literary and aesthetic traditions. Within this framework Yun-hua Chen and Clemens von Haselberg establish a dialogue between Western and non-Western traditions of though, by discuss the limitations of Bazin's and Kracauer's notion of realism in the light of Buddhistic and Daoist more nuance approaches, and specifically, by opening a dialogue, thought specific films, between Zhuangzi's ideas and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, on the one hand, and the Buddhist idea of impermanence with the concepts of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, on the other.

Continuing within Chinese thinking "Living Time: Re-evaluating Cinematic Empathy Through Li Zehou" by James Batcho provides a non-Western insight into the concept of cinematic empathy, by drawing mainly on the theories of Chinese scholar Li Zehou. Batcho takes Li's writings to propose a cinema of 'sensory empathy' with an emphasis on the audible and temporal, more than the visual, opposing the Western dependence on 'transcendence and immortality' with the Chinese 'sensuous human world', 'immanent and undivided'. Key to this conception of 'empathetic cinema' is Li's sense of 'emotionalized time' as a 'historical accumulation of emotion and experience, which is a fundamental characteristic of Chinese art and Confucian aesthetics. To further develop Li's notions as expressed in cinema, Batcho analyses films from Abbas Kiarostami, Salomé Lamas, Chloe Zhao, João Salaviza, Terrence Malick and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, that, according to the author embody, at different levels, these notions of 'sensory empathy' and 'emotionalized time'.

In "Daoism as a Cure for the Excesses of Western Modern Science in *Pi* (D. Aronofsky, 1998)" Enric Burgos considers Aronofsky's film in the light of Daoist worldviews, which are here contrasted with Western modern science conceptions and assumptions. Burgos takes Aronofsky film as the starting point to establish a dialogue between a hyper rational attitude, with all the disconnection from the living world and the body it entails, and key notions of Daoism, including the central notion of *Dào*, as well as the ideas of *xīn* and *wúwéi*. The author maintains that the dialogue entailed in the film give rise to a progressive blurring of the initial dichotomies, in a process that also embodies a '*Yīn-Yáng* approach', another pivotal concept in Daoism.

Francomano, Loriguillo-López and Palao-Errando's "The logic of pain in talking bodies: An approach to *han* in the films of Hong Sang-soo and Lee Chang-dong" focuses on two South Korean films to explore the concept of *han*. Pivotal to the authours is the way *han* works as a representation of grief and loss, related to the psychoanalytic notion of melancholia that, at the

same time, incorporates both a sense of individual and collective loss that draws upon a colonial legacy.

In "The Sufi Literary Subtext in Kaplanoğlu's Grain (Buğday)" Zeynep Demircan Şöner investigates on the paramount Sufi influences on Muslim cinema worldwide and, particularly, in the Turkish science fiction movie Buğday (2017) by Semih Kaplanoğlu. Kaplanoğlu's film is taken here as 'cultural text', i.e., as an example of the cultural appropriations of Sufism to respond to contemporary cultural challenges and demands, in which post-colonial and political discourses are questioned.

Cringuta Irina Pelea's "The Portrayal of Dignified Death, Euthanasia, and Other Rituals of Passage in Japanese Cinema. End-Of-Life Practices and Bereavement in "The Ballad Of Narayama" (1983)*"* addresses Shōhei Imamura's *The Ballad of Narayama* to discuss narratives of dignified death, euthanasia, and infanticide, from a Japanese point of view. Drawing on Imamura's film, Pelea focuses on the Japanese conceptions of infantice (the (ritualized practice of "*mabiki*" or "*kosute*") and euthanasia (here in the form of *obasute)*, that incorporate specific cultural values and worldviews, stressing how the practices shape and give voice to a conception of the self, personal autonomy, dignity, human and non-human life and death that are totally foreign to Westerners, framing them in a context in which Buddhist and Shinto perspectives combine with extreme living conditions. The low value of human life, its relationship to culture and nature, the place of humans in the grand scheme of life, violence and the hardship of survival are brought to light in this essay, where deep ethical and philosophical issues are also raised and questioned.

Podovac and Kusturica's "Frontera Verde: Towards Ecocritical-Decolonial Image/Cinema" considers television series *Frontera Verde* (2019) from a decolonial-ecocritical perspective to discuss questions of 'epistemicide', femicide and genocide over the Indigenous population of the Amazon region, stressing and discussing, amongst others, the importance of decolonisation of visual/symbolic representation and imagination', as well as of worldviews and conceptions on the humans-nature relationship, wealth, exploitation of nature and '*Buen Vivir',* taking the perspective of the Indigenous population.

Crossing the globe, from Japan to the Amazon rainforest, passing through traditions of thought as distinct as Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Sufism and the 'Animist' perspectives of the Amerindians, the set of essays in this volume, constitutes a valuable contribution to balancing the hegemony of Western approaches and perspectives. Furthermore, it opens doors to a dialogue between visual forms and thought, on the one hand, and political and social issues on the other, encouraging a fruitful discussion between different traditions, in their relationship with specific visual forms and practices.

ARTICLES | ARTIGOS

**THE REAL AND THE IMAGINARY: REWORKING THE BOUNDARIES IN THE
LIGHT OF RECENT CHINESE-LANGUAGE CINEMA**

Yun-hua Chen
Clemens von Haselberg (University of Cologne, Germany)

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the inception of cinema and other mechanized visual images, but given renewed sharpness since the advent of the digital image, the question of representation with regard to the photographic image and subsequent developments is a highly disputed one. The conventionalized boundaries between the Real and the Imaginary, in the fields of film production, reception and filmic text, be it fiction or non-fiction, is innately blurred and contested. In this paper we intend to explore the possibilities of bringing ideas and conceptualizations deriving from Buddhism, Daoism, and Chinese literary and aesthetic traditions into the discussion about Chinese-language films in order to initiate a dialogue between epistemologies, ontologies and philosophies from different sides of the world. While extensive scholarship has been conducted on the questions of the Real and realism, it seems to be skewed towards a Eurocentric perspective in terms of theorization. We are therefore interested in exploring this area from a non-Western perspective, drawing on film theories from cultures outside of Europe and North America to inform us of alternative ways to define films and digital images, especially when such – predominantly Western – dichotomies as actuality and virtuality, or reality and imagination, seem to be naturally blurred and nuanced in Daoism-Buddhism.[1] There is a level of conversation as well as echoes between these systems of thought and specific Western philosophies that may prove fruitful for further investigations. For example, the resonances between the philosophy of Deleuze and Buddhist concepts have been documented by Tony See and Jay Garfield in terms of immanence, impermanence and the *Lotus Sutra*,[2] as well as in terms of reincarnation and Deleuze and Spinoza.[3] Thus, without claiming a one-to-one connection between Deleuze and Buddhism, or similar dialogues between schools of thoughts with diverse historical and cultural backgrounds, we aim for a productive conversation that will expand into film theory in general and the theory of realism in particular. Through reflections and mirroring, we attempt to gain insights into the relationship between

the Real and the Imaginary on screen, their relation to each other and mutual permeation, without intending to forcefully fuse different schools of thoughts together in ignorance of their incompatibilities.

We will first discuss different Western film theories and Chinese literary, visual and philosophical ideas on the Real. In the 'West', the concept of 'the Real' is deeply grounded in discussions around 'realism', and in the field of audio-visual media, it stems from the theories of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, which have been challenged and revived in the past century. The Imaginary is often referred to as the opposite of the Real under multiple variations. [4] On the other hand, traditional Chinese literary, visual and philosophical investigations, and Daoist and Buddhist philosophies, offer a more fluid way of looking at this conceptual pair, and they can be understood in parallel to the Western philosophies of thinkers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze, for example. Subsequently, we will zoom in for a close-up of the specific interplays between the Real and the Imaginary in contemporary Chinese-language and related cinema using two examples: *Crosscurrent* (*Changjiang tu* 长江

图, Yang Chao, 2016), with its echoes of poetic and visual traditions and its world in which senses are multiplied, which we analyze through a dialogue between the philosophical text *Zhuangzi* 庄子 and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body; and *Kaili Blues* (*Lubian yecan* 路边野餐, Bi Gan, 2016) with its not necessarily true pasts and incompossible presents, informed by the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari and the Buddhist concept of impermanence.

1.THE 'REAL' IN WESTERN THEORIES, DAOISM-BUDDHISM AND THE AESTHETICS OF CHINESE PAINTING[5]

The aesthetic program of realism is firmly grounded in a European tradition that includes the arts but has its roots in ontology and epistemology. The development of film as a mimetic art is hard to conceive outside of this tradition and its paradigmatic expressions, from the Cartesian body-mind split to Newton's mechanic worldview to the ocularcentrism of renaissance art. When it comes to cinema and film theory, the advent of realism proper is usually associated with André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer. Bazin revived the question of realism by defining photography as an art form that directly imprints the photographed onto the film emulsion without human mediation, as a "mechanical reproduction";[6] this attribute has been discussed by Peter Wollen as "indexical character of the photographic image", [7] a term that is controversially debated in the contemporary crisis of the image, a crisis that has been initiated

by the digital image's perceived lack of it. Kracauer, on the other hand, theorized realism as the cinema's ability to "promote the redemption of physical reality" and "assist us in discovering the material world with its psychophysical correspondences", as, in his words, "[w]e literally redeem this world from its dormant state, its state of virtual nonexistence, by endeavoring to experience it through the camera".[8] This position has been developed prominently into film phenomenology by Vivian Sobchak and other scholars, linking this strain of film theory to realism, in spite of the fact that it does not explicitly address it.

However, after a period of proliferation, realism came under severe attack with the rise of structuralism and Marxism in film scholarship. In the French film magazine *Cahier du Cinéma* and the British film studies journal *Screen,* realism was discredited as being representative of bourgeois ideology disguising contextual discourses and thus naturalizing the bourgeois order. Yet, at the same time, several innovative waves in the history of cinema emerged as new ways of tackling realism in cinema: new realisms in England and Italy, the French Nouvelle Vague, New German Cinema, Brazilian Cinema Novo, Third Cinemas, and New Hollywood among others. Therefore, the question of mimesis, representation, and, ultimately, realism has remained highly relevant to Western film theory. Recent decades have indeed seen a rediscovery and revisitation of early realist theorists, particularly André Bazin. Significantly, arguments have been made that the aforementioned theorists were misunderstood (in parts, perhaps, purposefully) as adhering to a naive belief in the camera as a direct window onto reality while being oblivious to the fundamentally ideological nature of this reality and the corresponding aesthetics of realism. Thomas Elsaesser argued that the refutation of Bazin's realism distorts Bazin's premises and neglects its intricacies,[9] while in Tiago De Luca's analysis, Kracauer's and Bazin's photographic realism "enabled a sensuous and experiential rapport with the physical world, which facilitates the focus on cinematic modes of production and address".[10] George Kouvaros claimed that "The common strand of this tradition is not a naive belief in the impartiality of cinematic representation, but rather a concern with cinema's ability to reveal underlying aspects, things hidden from view or unavailable otherwise".[11]

Generally speaking, film theory related to realism has seen a proliferation and pluralization over the last couple of decades. Searle's 'representational' realism or representationalism posits a 'pure' mental representation as a conscious and perceived experience coded by the brain, whereas 'phenomenal' realism emphasizes the way that representation is shaped by the material reality that is being represented.[12] Hermann Kappelhoff uses the term "cinematic realism" to refer to the dynamism between poetics and politics in cinema.[13] Noël Burch distinguishes between 'representational' cinema that attempts to reproduce impressions of reality and 'presentational' cinema that foregrounds its own artifice.[14]

In light of these strains of discussion, one could pointedly argue that realism remains the point of reference for both its defenders and its detractors. This shows in the fact that realism has terminologically remained anchored while that which it is opposed to has taken on various shapes including formalism, constructivism, modernism, structuralism, or psychoanalysis. The Imaginary – or the dream, the virtual and so on – takes in a secondary position in relation to the primacy of the Real. Consequently, theories opposing, or deconstructing realism cannot help but refer back to realism, thus testifying to its centrality in the discourse. This, in turn, is intrinsically related to the fundamental assumption of the mimetic and indexical nature of the photographic image. While the redemption realism has experienced over the last few decades certainly adds to our understanding of aesthetic and narrative strategies, it also binds us to the very binary view of realism and its other that has accompanied it since its inception, a binary that seems to be thrown off balance once the idea of indexicality started being challenged by the digital image.

With the emergence of digital technology transforming cinema's relationship with the Real by disentangling 'indexicality', this dominant mode of understanding reality has been challenged and threatened. For example, since the early 1990s, film studies have attempted to overcome the Cartesian division of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, subject and object, through theories including Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, Steven Shaviro's critique of psychoanalytic film theory,[15] Laura U. Marks' 'haptic visuality',[16] and Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome.[17] Notwithstanding the emergence of new voices and new perspectives, film theory has been surprisingly slow in opening itself up to voices outside the predominant Eurocentric tradition. While Western theories have been widely used in discussions about films produced outside of these theories' geopolitical territories, the reverse is virtually non-existent. This is all the more perplexing when one considers some existent affinities between contemporary Western and traditional Chinese literary, visual and philosophical investigations into the nature of reality. The lack of reception for non-Western thinking in the scholarship of film theory can arguably be attributed in part to the lack of translations as well as the difficulties surrounding their reception. There is indeed sufficient material on traditional Chinese aesthetics, but this academic field is largely disregarded by Western scholars outside of Chinese studies. The dual challenge of engaging traditions of thought unfamiliar to European and North American scholarship and of adapting them to a media environment and technology that they were not written for poses a serious problem fraught with pitfalls such as essentialism or dehistoricization (in the same way that Western theories inform non-Western works). These gaps in geopolitical power, technological advancement and sociocultural environments can sometimes be difficult to negotiate and bridge. Consequently, translations of and engagements with, for example, studies in Chinese on audio-visual media that analyze through the lens of

Daoism-Buddhism are very limited, and it is not yet clear how our understanding of cinema could profit from scholarly works not published in or translated into English or other European languages.

However, changes could be observed in recent years which suggest that engaging with premodern Chinese aesthetics in the context of film can inform, enrich, challenge, and open up a new discussion on, or enter a debate with, the aesthetic, epistemological and ontological preconceptions that have dominated the field of film scholarship in the first decades of cinema. Victor Fan's work is particularly illuminating in this respect. Fan bridges Western film theories and Buddhist thinking by revisiting cinematic identification in the framework of Buddhism, which has informed Chinese film theories since the late nineteenth century.[18][19]*bizhen* 逼真, translated by Fan as "approaching reality," which is concerned with how the spectator perceives film as real or in relation to the real. Referencing art historian Wen C. Fong, Fan points to the difference between *bizhen* and the European idea of mimesis, an ontological concept of vital importance to the film medium, a difference which implies the specific contribution that *bizhen* may offer to our understanding of film's relationship with reality: "*bizhen* does not necessarily imply a proximity between the appearance of the painted image and the reality it represents; rather, it refers to an affective state that the painting is capable of producing in the sensorium of the beholders, one that either recalls their affective state when they apprehended the image-consciousness in their lived reality before, or insert such affective state into them as though they had been there".[20]*bizhen* itself. However, *bizhen* is not a general philosophical term, but a concept directly related to the reception of art. As Fan shows, Gu Kenfu 顾肯夫, a filmmaker and critic active in the 1920s, conceptualizes *bizhen* as a human tendency for the gradual improvement of the feeling of 'real-ness' in the development of (theatrical) art forms, defined as the spectator's affective identification with the performance.[21]*bizhen* – is utilized to explain the new cinematic medium with respect to the Real. In this process, however, the concept itself mutates as it is integrated into a narrative of teleological evolution characteristic of modernity. Consequently, a culturally specific approach emerges, and at the same time, the concept of *bizhen* is appropriated to a new media context and transformed by a different worldview.

These observations demonstrate what is to be gained for contemporary film theory from the engagement of non-European and premodern conceptions: to perhaps arrive at a different understanding of reality itself that engulfs or engages the Imaginary rather than stands in opposition to it. *Bizhen* is also frequently engaged in Chinese mountain-water painting,[22] which gradually superseded figure painting as the most highly regarded painting subject around the 10th century C.E. This genre of painting developed into a distinctly non-realist form once outer appearance was sufficiently mastered.[23] From the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279)

onwards, painting natural scenery became a way of expressing the inner life of the painter, and so landscape became a medium for sentimental expression. At the same time, the painting of landscapes never completely departed from referencing an outward appearance. Since no clear distinction between subject and object, between inner and outer nature, or between mind and matter, had been postulated in Chinese philosophical thought, Chinese painting neither developed complete realism nor complete abstraction.[24] Instead, it provided a vivid imaginative space in which painter, painting, subject and viewer were united. In this context, the concept of *yijing* 意境, often translated as mindscape, might provide interesting points of convergence with film theory. *Yijing* was first mentioned in the literary criticism of Wang Changling 王昌龄, a poet of the Tang dynasty (618-907). *Jing* 境 is a Buddhist term denoting an inner world or state of consciousness, and *yi* 意 can be rendered as idea, or intent of the mind.[25] However, as a compositum, the two-character word *yijing* only gained wider use in modernity, in the writings of Wang Guowei 王国维, a poet and historian who lived during the end of the last dynasty, Qing (1644-1911), and the Republican period (1911-1949).[26] Since then, it has been developed and theorized by other intellectuals, most notably Deng Yizhe 邓以蛰, Zong Baihua 宗白华, one of the founders of modern Chinese aesthetics, and Li Zehou 李泽厚, one of the most influential philosophers and aestheticians of the post-Mao period. In contrast to most other traditional categories of artistic evaluation, or categories building on traditional aesthetics for that matter, *yijing* has enjoyed continuous popularity among Chinese academics and has been defined and transformed into many different shapes, not least in engaging imported ideas such as the aesthetics of German idealism, and often with the aim of proposing a universal nature of *yijing*.[27] It has migrated into cinema, where Zhang Yimou has cited it as a major inspiration for his film *Hero* (*Yingxiong* 英雄, Zhang Yimou, 2002).[28] Despite its modern genesis, *yijing* remains notoriously hard to define and thus somewhat resistant to academic engagement. For the argument of this paper, we might use Peng Feng's characterization that "*yijing* can be translated as 'world,' but not every world is *yijing*. Only a world that has something 'beyond' or 'otherworldly' can be translated as *yijing*. Therefore, *yijing* is not a world limited by this world, but a world beyond or open to other worlds".[29] While *yijing* is explicitly referring only to the paintings and poems that interfuse the lyrical with the imagistic and not the narrative or historical ones, the way it bridges the Real and the Virtual may nonetheless provide new perspectives on the study of film.

Other famous examples from Chinese philosophical and aesthetic traditions addressing the porous borders between the Real and the Imaginary include the butterfly dream narrated in the

philosophical book *Zhuangzi* and the Qing dynasty novel *Hongloumeng* 红楼梦 (*Dream of Red Chambers*). In the *Qiwulun* 齐物论 (*On the Equality of Things*) chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, the eponymous philosopher dreams of being a butterfly, but when he wakes, he muses whether he can be sure that it was not the butterfly dreaming about being Zhuangzi.[30] While on the surface this story appears to express a naive juxtaposition of dream and reality, in the context of the book, and this chapter in particular, it is only one of the more accessible of a great number of allegorical stories that all deal with reality's dependency on perspective and the unreliability of a perceptual understanding of reality. In a similar vein, a couplet from chapter 5 of *Hongloumeng* reads, "Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true; Real becomes not-real where the unreal's real".[31] 'Truth' and 'fiction', the 'real' and the 'not-real' enter a relationship reminiscent of the primal forces, *yin* 阴 and *yang* 阳: each is ingrained into the other and thus they can merge into each other in myriad ways. Instead of being synthesized in a dialectical fashion, the two forces rather remain in a constant interchange and mutual transformation.

2. AN INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE REAL AND THE IMAGINARY

Having laid the background to contextualize our argument in the theoretical framework and culture-specific context related to Chinese-speaking regions, we now zoom in to examine different manifestations of the interplay between the Real and the Imaginary, and culturally diverse ways of looking at them, in two case studies. The interplay between the Real, ingrained in Western theories as foregrounded above, and the Imaginary, or all the world beyond the Real, that can be observed in Chinese-language films and films otherwise related with Chinese-speaking areas is multifaceted and nuanced, with porous differentiation.

Sometimes the interplay between the Real and the Imaginary can be traced back to literary and fine arts traditions in China. The magical-realist *Crosscurrent*, for example, heavily and consistently uses the aesthetics of mountain-water paintings and Chinese literary tropes to create a world of multiplication, reincarnation, and parallel and not necessarily true realities. The core of it is *yijing*, the world that has something beyond, something magical and imagistic in addition to the socio-realist level. The film is a boat trip down the Yangtze River, an area embedded with Chinese cultural heritage since the Spring and Autumn period in ancient China (770 – 476 BC) which has been submerged since the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. With its 35-mm film stock quality under the camera of Ping Bin Lee, who has made his name since the New Taiwan Cinema (also a new way of tackling realism in cinema), *Crosscurrent* portrays the Yangtze like a Chinese mountain-water painting; as discussed above, the inner

nature is reflected through the outer world, and the appearances are the embodiment of the mind. Downstream on misty days and from a farther perspective, the mountains are dark silhouettes against expansive whiteness, approximating *xieyi* 写意 (same '*yi*' as in '*yijing*'), the style of painting spontaneously and intuitively capturing a certain mood. When the camera takes the perspective of the cargo captain Gao Chun (Qin Hao) in the boat upstream characterized by towering cliffs, mountains seen from gorges are colossal and the details of trees and rocks registered on film stock are reminiscent of the *gongbi* 工笔 style often opposed to *xieyi*, with meticulous brush strokes that strive for the Real.

Crosscurrent's understanding of bodies and characters embodies both the visible and the invisible of Merleau-Ponty, and the form (*xingti* 形体) and energy (*qi* 气) of Zhuangzi. The captain's different lovers at each port are in fact the multiplication of one woman and one body; the bodies, the form, and the externally visible are discardable and surpassed. The "four limbs and a body", in Zhuangzi's words, are not forgotten by the character herself, but rather by the narrative device. While Gao Chun sleeps with a different woman at every port, all the women are played by the same actress (Xin Zhilei) and share the same name, An Lu; the 'flesh' and 'body' of the multiplication of the same woman in *Crosscurrent*, who is both real as in real flesh and blood and imaginary like a ghostly figure, is in line with Zhuangzi's concept of *zuowang* 坐忘, literally 'sitting and forgetting', a fluid understanding of body as "await[ing] things emptily"[32] and the state of "forget[ing] that [one has] four limbs and a body".[33] The *Da zongshi* 大宗师 (*The Great Ancestral Teacher*) chapter of the *Zhuangzi* emphasizes that nature and human, matter and spirit, body and mind can be one. Confined by limbs and body parts, bodies are limitations that can be surpassed. Chan Wing-cheuk 陈荣灼, building on the observations of Chiang Nian-feng 蒋年丰, researches on the parallelism between Daoist and later Merleau-Ponty's views on the flesh and furthers the dialogue between "Eastern and Western phenomenology"[34] in terms of the philosophy of the body. As Merleau-Ponty wrote in *The Visible and The Invisible*, "prior to and independently of other people, the thing achieves that miracle of expression: an inner reality which reveals itself externally, a significance which descends into the world and begins its existence there, and which can be fully understood only when the eyes seek it in its own location".[35] Bodies for Merleau-Ponty are the combination of the visible and the invisible, which are *xingti* and *qi* in the *Zhuangzi*, and for Merleau-Ponty, "[the body] is neither tangible nor visible in so far as it is that which sees and touches. The body therefore is not one more among external objects, with the peculiarity of always being there".[36]

In the case of *Crosscurrent*, the encounter between Gao Chun, who sails upstream from Shanghai to Tibet where the Yangtze River originates, and An Lu, whose timeline goes in reverse and who grows younger as the film progresses, is the cinematic journey of *zuowang,*

almost like a temporalization of space. It is through Gao Chun's stopover in different cities along the river that the life of An Lu is externalized, and it is through the carnal relationship with An Lu that the mind of Gao Chun is awakened. A lot of imageries in the film illustrate the merging of the visible and the invisible as in Merleau-Ponty and *xingti* and *qi* as in *Zhuangzi*. When Gao Chun looks for An Lu in a Buddhist tower in Dicheng, An Lu's voice echoes from the top of the tower whereas a Buddhist debate between An Lu and a monk takes place in a room on the ground floor; the disembodied voice and body of An Lu are actually one. When we finally see the hand-drawn map of the Yangtze River in full, an appendix to the poetry book hidden under the boat's engine, it looks like the silhouette of a female body; the main poster visual of the film when it was released in China was a blurred ink painting of a rather abstract female body, the spine of which is a white stripe on which a boat sails upstream. Like what An Lu says in fury when Gao Chun sails through without boarding: "This is my Yangtze River," one can also understand An Lu as the embodiment of the Yangtze, with her life journey as the opposite poles of past and future of the river.

The Yangtze, the most important character in the film, is also the combination of *qi* and all the different outer forms, at times flooded because of the Three Gorges Dam, at times misty, and at times cruel. In one of the most striking moments in the entire film, Gao Chun's boat is transported one level at a time in a ship lift. When it reaches the Three Gorges Dam, we look at the lift's metal gates in low angle shots, foregrounded like a gigantic cyborg. The dam's lighting above has a green hue that makes the walls of two sides enshrouded in dark green, like a space of imprisonment. The existence of the dam marks the abrupt transformation of the Yangtze River because of the need to produce electricity in the rapidly developing country, as well as Gao Chun's awakening from the entangled causes and consequences in his relationship with An Lu. In Chan's analysis, the "decrease" in Laozi's saying, "The pursuit of Dao is to decrease day after day (*weidao risun* 为道日损)" implies the "letting-be" and the rapprochement to nature, whereas Heidegger's "non-essence" is intrinsic to Being: "the non-essence remains always in its own way essential to the essence and never becomes inessential in the sense of irrelevant."[37] From the moment that the gigantic mechanical gate swallows Gao Chun's rusty boat, he enters the state of decrease, *ziran* 自然 (traditionally translated as "nature" and "it is so by virtue of its own")[38], and non-essence, a kind of self-concealing understood as a moment of the Truth of Being by Chan,[39] that leads to his shredding of the poetry book and putting an end to An Lu's endless cycle of trajectory, not dissimilar to how the dam puts an end to the Yangtze's flow.

Appearing at different ages and stages of life, An Lu's multiple bodies and forms and her *qi* are one. As in the concept of *zuowang*, cinematic bodies here are fluid and all-encompassing, which in turn enable the fluidity of the film. That is how An Lu, despite her different forms,

has an externalized tangible presence; as a wife who has an extramarital affair, a person who devoutly pursues spirituality, a Good Samaritan prostitute, and a student. In a way reminiscent of Elsaesser's analysis of *Bin-jip* (2004), the pure *durée* takes over in *Crosscurrent* although "suspended in the dead-ends of someone else's absence, and thus it is a neo-realism 'virtualized'".[40] Whereas Elsaesser thinks that in *Bin-jip*, "Space is the medium of the real only in the sense that it can trap and thus index time, when the camera (or the body) no longer indexes space"[41], in *Crosscurrent* it works in the opposite direction; the camera indexes space and no longer indexes time, and the real is the space while the apparition of An Lu punctuates spatial markers along the river like stanzas.

At other times, the interplay between the Real and the Imaginary can be embedded in a non-linear time framework reminiscent of both Buddhist philosophy and Deleuzian time-images. Bi Gan's 毕赣 *Kaili Blues* lends itself particularly well as an example: As the main character Chen Sheng, a small-town doctor in Kaili in China's Guizhou Province, embarks upon a road trip to locate his nephew who has been abandoned by his brother, the film meanders through subtropical and foggy mountain areas while Chen encounters a mix of people; some seem to be people from his past but in the setting of the present time. While the half-crumbling family house next to a waterfall, the zigzagging mountain roads, and the non-professional actors who play the roles of billiard players and motorcyclists are authentic and real, the narrative forks into different versions of itself and non-linear timelines, and the characters are not necessarily who they seem to be. With the film credits appearing as the credits of a film-within-a-film broadcast on TV towards the beginning of the film, the diegesis forms a *mise-en-abyme* where the Real is not necessarily true and is ingrained in the Imaginary while the Imaginary insinuates the Real.

These images are Gilles Deleuze's time-images, working both as the crystal of a present that is not necessarily true and a past that keeps being recalled: "This is Borges' reply to Leibniz: the straight line as force of time, as labyrinth of time, is also the line which forks and keeps on forking, passing through incompossible presents, returning to not-necessarily true pasts".[42] As we see in Deleuze's citation of Federico Fellini's Bergsonian sentence, "We are constructed in memory. We are simultaneously childhood, adolescence, old age, and maturity."[43] We do not know if Bi Gan is familiar with Deleuze, but from his own cultural background, Buddhism is an important source of reference, and he makes it clear at the beginning of the film. Before the film credits appear, Bi Gan quotes the *Diamond Sutra* (*Jingang jing* 金刚经): "As the Buddha says, the living beings in all these world systems have many different minds which are all known to the Tathagata. Why? Because the minds the Tathagata speaks of are not minds, but are (expediently) called minds. And why? Because,

Subhuti, neither the past, the present nor the future mind can be found."[44] *Diamond Sutra* was also the title of a short film directed by Bi Gan in 2012. Although the *Diamond Sutra* and Deleuze have different focuses, they both free the concept of time from linearity and causality to embrace its fluidity, allowing mutual infusion and overlaps.

When we talk about Buddhist philosophy, we usually have a generalized picture of 'a Buddhist view.' Within the scope of such a 'generalized view,' basic tenets such as "all phenomena are impermanent (anitya), interdependent (partitya-samutpada) and have no intrinsic nature (sunya)"[45] were discussed, with respective variations in each Buddhist school. Impermanence is one of the key concepts that are shared by all Buddhist philosophy: all phenomena are impermanent, and all things are transitory and changing over time.[46] As Garfield says, "because of these kinds of change, all identity over time, from a Buddhist point of view, is a fiction, albeit often a very useful fiction."[47] This Buddhist concept is shared by Deleuzians; the concept of transcendence and transcendent truth are refused. Both posit the self-generating capacity of a universe without cause. "Univocity" in *Difference and Repetition*, and "univocality" in *A Thousand Plateaus* can be understood in the framework of *The Heart Sutra*; our feelings, perceptions and concepts are "all manifestations of an ever-self-differentiating totality" which are not coming from the perspective as 'I'.[48] In terms of interdependence, all events in time "occur in dependence on prior causes and conditions, and all states of affairs cease when the causes and conditions that are necessary for their occurrence cease.[49]

The Buddhist idea of time expressed in the *Diamond Sutra* was elaborated on by Buddhist thinkers from diverse historical and cultural backgrounds. Buddhist time can thus be negatively deconstructed by showing how past, present, and future are mutually dependent and therefore devoid of substance as in the writings of the Indian Nāgārjuna (ca. 150-ca. 250),[50] or it can be positively deconstructed by emphasizing the absolute relationality between the three as in the work of Fazang 法藏 (643-712), the third patriarch of the Chinese Huayan 华严 school,[51] to name just two prominent examples. From such an understanding of time and temporality, the world according to Buddhist philosophy can be understood as a "rhizome" that extends and multiplies, as in Deleuze's *A Thousand Plateaus*, without fixed causal relationships; causes and conditions are not this or that, but rather this *and* that; and *Kaili Blues* is a film of "univocity" and "univocality". Prior causes determine subsequent events in a logic of their own, and the consequences also seem to be the causes of what is happening. On the surface, the film seems to be narrated from the perspective of Chen Sheng, but this 'I' is constructed in such a way that it is unreliable and yet consistent in its own way. Chen Sheng promises to bring a shirt and a tape to the ex-boyfriend of the elderly doctor in whose clinic he works but ends up wearing the shirt himself and giving the tape to a woman who looks exactly like his deceased wife. The

young motorcyclist, bullied by his peers, who takes Chen Sheng to Dangmai in order to catch a train to search for his nephew, is also Chen Sheng's nephew in the future; meanwhile, Bi Gan is the nephew of the amateur actor who plays the role of Chen Sheng. In the much-acclaimed long take of more than 40 minutes in Dangmai, the camera does not follow the main protagonist Chen Sheng, who stays at a noodle stand to eat, but rather wanders off freely when it passes by the window of Yang Yang, a girl whom the motorcyclist admires. It drifts to the other side of the river by boat with Yang Yang and walks across the bridge to complete the full circle; the camera joins Chen Sheng again in the hairdresser's. Chen Sheng's road trip is a time travel journey of circularity along the threads of memory and time, where events are inter-dependent and where all happenings are impermanent; the camera moves with its self-generating capacity without cause and effect, and the moments captured are transitory and fluid, whereas the present of Chen Sheng is not necessarily true and his past is constantly evoked or interwoven with the present. The question of time finds a quintessential image in a series of clocks painted on the wall of a train tunnel: when Chen Sheng looks out of the window of the moving train, the hands of the clock seem to be turning backwards. This seems to echo Victor Fan's suggestion with respect to the changing perspectives instigated by the digital that "if the photographic image was once considered able to mummify time, we may consider it now as *time undead*."[52] The terms that Fan uses to describe this understanding of time – "transposition, transference, reflection, inflection, inversion, reversion, shuffling, recomposition, counterpoint, and resequencing"[53] – could be used equally well to describe *Kaili Blues*' treatment of time, inspired by Buddhism. Fan, in turn, has moved on to reinterpret film theory through the eyes of Buddhism.[54]

3. CONCLUSION

In a globalizing world transformed by technological change as well as political, economic, and cultural entanglements and interdependencies, the dominant Eurocentric conception of reality has been justifiably questioned. The examples above show a renewed and sharpened reshuffling of the conventionalized boundaries of the Real and the Imaginary in the areas of the filmic text, its production as well as its reception. While the cinema as an institution may be on the decline, the importance of moving images in shaping our conception of the Real is still growing. The advent of the digital image has called into question the ontological status of the photographic image and has rendered the border between the Real and the Imaginary porous. Film theory and philosophy in the West have long recognized and elaborated on this problem, but so far without a broader engagement with non-Western philosophies and aesthetics, in spite of the

fact that these philosophies and aesthetics have a lot to say about the inextricable entanglement of the Real and the Imaginary. With examples ranging from Daoist-Buddhist philosophies to aesthetic concepts deriving from literature and the visual arts, we have given a preliminary overview of possible ways to engage with such non-European worldviews and of what is to be gained from such a dialogue. The criss-crossing between 'Eastern' philosophy, such as Daoism and Buddhism, and 'Western' philosophy, such as Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, and between 'Eastern' and 'Western' aesthetics, still largely under-researched, has the potential of shedding more light on how we see the Real and the Imaginary in Chinese audio-visual media. A concept like *yijing* can open up new directions in the phenomenological exploration of art and the spectator; a film like *Kaili Blues*, with its incorporation of Buddhist concepts and shifting notions of time, strikes a fresh chord, updating the more consciously artificial aesthetic strategies of films like *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), *Nostalghia* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1983), *Stalker* (*Сталкер*, Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979), or *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997) as explorations of time and reality by expressing their theme in an aesthetic that subtly alters and enhances realist conventions. A further engagement with these and other concepts, schools of thought, films, and also contexts of production and reception promises a deeper and more balanced understanding of the Real, the Imaginary, and the complicated relationship between them.

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[1] While Daoism and Buddhism are conventionally treated as two separate philosophies, religions, and traditions, it is commonly accepted that Buddhism was 'sinicized' through translation into Daoist terminology. Therefore, there is significant overlap between the two. For the sake of the arguments pursued here and to avoid both the indiscriminate use of 'Chinese' or 'Eastern' and the unnecessary burdening of this article with terminological differentiations not directly relevant to film studies, we have decided for this hyphenated combination where general remarks are made.

[2] Tony See, "Deleuze and the Lotus Sūtra: Toward an Ethics of Immanence," in *Deleuze and Buddhism*, ed. Tony See, Joff Bradley (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 11—32; Jay L. Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 40—48.

[3] Simon Duffy, "Deleuze, Spinoza and the Question of Reincarnation in the Mahāyāna Tradition," in *Deleuze and Buddhism*, ed. Tony See, Joff Bradley (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 33—50.

[4] To avoid confusion, it is important to note that our use of the Real and the Imaginary are oriented towards their conventional usage, not understood in Lacanian terms.

[5] Similar summaries of Realist theories have been put forth in the introductions to Cecília Mello and Lúcia Nagib, ed., *Realism and the Audiovisual* Medium (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and Lúcia Nagib, *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* (New York: Continuum 2011).

[6] André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 14.

[7] Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2013), 116.

[8] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 300.

[9] Thomas Elsaesser, "A Bazinian Half-Century," in *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife*, ed. Dudley Andrew with Hervé Joubert-Laurencin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10.

[10] Tiago De Luca, *Realism of the Senses in World Cinema: The Experience of Physical Reality* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 8.

[11] George Kouvaros, "'We Do Not Die Twice': Realism and Cinema," in *Handbook of Film Studies*, ed. James Donald, Michael Renov (London: Sage Publications, 2008), 377.

[12] Ian Aitken, *Cinematic Realism: Lukács, Kracauer and Theories of the Filmic Real* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 2—3.

[13] Hermann Kappelhoff, *The Politics and Poetics of Cinematic Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 59.

[14] Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, trans. and ed. Ben Brewster (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 241; Lúcia Nagib, *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism*, 4.

[15] Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 13.

[16] Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and The Senses* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2000), xii.

[17] Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. Brian Massumi (London, New York: Continuum 2004), 11—12.

[18] Victor Fan, "Cinema Illuminating Reality: Cinematic Identification Revisited in the Eyes of Buddhist Philosophies," in *The Structures of the Film Experience by Jean-Pierre Meunier: Historical Assessments and Phenomenological Expansions*, ed. Julian Hanich, Daniel Fairfax (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 245.

[19] Victor Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

[20] Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality*, 49—50.

[21] Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality*, 47—49.

[22] While *shanhui hua* 山水画 has often been translated as landscape painting for the sake of convenience, this term suggests a misleading similarity with landscape painting in the European tradition. The two elements *shan*, mountain, and *shui*, water, in fact have far-reaching cosmological, metaphysical and psychological implications that are not reflected in the term landscape. Therefore, we stick to a direct translation of the Chinese term.

[23] Cf. Michael Sullivan, *Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), ch. III.

[24] Wang Caiyong 王才勇, *Shijue xiandaixing daoyin* 视觉现代性导引 (An Introduction to Visual Modernity) (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2018), 134.

[25] Karl-Heinz Pohl, *Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie in China: Von der Tradition bis zur Moderne* (München: K.G. Saur, 2007), 165—166.

[26] Pohl, *Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie in China*, 166.

[27] Peng Feng, "Defining Mindscape (意境): Extension, Intension, and Beyond," in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Chinese Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art*, ed. Marcello Ghilardi, Hans-Georg Moeller (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 106.

[28] Gary G. Xu, *Sinascape: Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 36—37, 40—42.

[29] Peng, "Defining Mindscape," 112.

[30] Zhuangzi 庄子, *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*, trans., introd. and comment. Victor H. Mair (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), 24.

[31] Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, *The Story of the Stone: Volume 1*, trans. David Hawkes (London: Penguin, 1973), 130. The couplet's famous blurring of the boundaries between the Real and the Imaginary has also been featured in Cecília Mello's presentation "Phantasmagorical Realism in Bi Gan's Long Day's Journey into Night", available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YxteIOC954> (last accessed 12/28/2022).

[32] Zhuangzi, *Wandering on the Way*, 32. The expression in the original is *qi ye zhe, xu er dai wu zhe ye* 气也者，虚而待物者也. In this and the following quote, Mair's translation are altered; Mair uses an 'I' as the subject of the phrase as it is part of a dialogue in the original text. However, since there is no such pronoun in the Chinese, so taken away it makes sense to omit it in the context of its citation here.

[33] Zhuangzi, *Wandering on the Way*, 183; Chan Wing-cheuk 陈荣灼, "Daojia yu wanqi Meilu Pangdi shenti xianxiangxue zhi huitong 道家與晚期梅露•龐蒂身體現象學之匯通" (On Daoist and Later Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Body), *Ehu xuezhi* 鵝湖學志 66 (2021): 40—41. The expression in the original is *zheran wang wu you sizhi xingti ye* 辄然忘吴有四肢形体也. See note 32 for additional information on the citation.

[34] Chan, *Daojia yu wanqi Meilu Pangdi shenti xianxiangxue zhi huitong*, 36.

[35] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 373.

[36] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 105.

[37] Chan Wing-Cheuk, "On Heidegger's Interpretation of Aristotle: A Chinese Perspective," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 32, no. 4 (December 2005): 548.

[38] Chan, "On Heidegger's Interpretation of Aristotle," 542.

[39] Chan, "On Heidegger's Interpretation of Aristotle," 553.

[40] Thomas Elsaesser, "World Cinema: Realism, Evidence, Presence," in *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*, ed. Lúcia Nagib, Cecília Mello (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 16.

[41] Elsaesser, "World Cinema," 16.

[42] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 1989), 98.

[43] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 96.

[44] The original text reads: *Fo gao Xuputi/er suo guotu zhong/suoyou zhong sheng/ruo gan zhong xin/Rulai xi zhi/he yi gu/Rulai shuo/zhu xin jie wei fei xin/shi ming wei xin/suoyi zhe he/Xuputi/guoqu xin bu ke de/xianzai xin bu ke de/weilai xin bu ke de* 佛告须菩提/尔所国土中/所有众生/若干种心/如来悉知/何以故/如来说/诸心皆为非心/是名为心/所以者何/须菩提/过去心不可得/现在心不可得/未来心不可得

[45] Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, 2.

[46] Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, 40.

[47] Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, 41.

[48] Ian Cook, "On Not Mistaking Deleuze (With the Help of Some Buddhists)," in *Deleuze and Buddhism*, ed. Tony See, Joff Bradley (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 103.

[49] Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, 26—27.

[50] Rolf Elberfeld, *Phänomenologie der Zeit im Buddhismus: Methoden interkulturellen Philosophierens* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog 2004), 178.

[51] Elberfeld, *Phänomenologie der Zeit im Buddhismus*, 212.

[52] Fan, *Approaching Reality*, 42.

[53] Fan, *Approaching Reality*, 42.

[54] Victor Fan, *Cinema Illuminating Reality: Media Philosophy through Buddhism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2022).

LIVING TIME:

RE-EVALUATING CINEMATIC EMPATHY THROUGH LI ZEHOU

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1.   INTRODUCTION

It is said that empathy requires understanding.[1] But if we pause to consider the two key words of such a requirement—understanding and empathy—a question arises. What is it to understand at the level of empathy? And if one has indeed "understood," have we not slipped away from the Greek *em-patheia* or "in-feeling" relation and entered instead into something more akin to sympathy—a "with-feeling"? In the latter case, *I am with you and through that I realize your situation; I feel for what you are going through because I have attained some understanding of it*. This does not describe an empathetic relation. In empathy, the tether is not *known* but comes through being *in* the feeling. It is born of an experience, of having sensed and felt, of having *been affected* as the other. It has no reason. It lies outside of what we name as morality or ethics. Its relation has no prior law, code, or base of information. Empathy is the abandonment of understanding. More accurate is the common saying that empathy is being in a feeling *as* another or *as* a situation, a feeling not born of the language of knowing but a gathering of another kind. It is not only what we feel, but something we ourselves create from what is underway.

What does this mean for the possibilities of conceiving a "cinematic empathy"? Affect theory suggests that the cite of discourse is the body. Post-semiotic and post-psychoanalytic film theory call for re-corporalizing the body, bringing the eye back from its detachment to rejoin the body.[2] But what is to be said of this body? Elsaesser and Hagener argue that psychoanalytic and psycho-semiotic theories of cinema were faulted for placing all their emphasis on the sensing eye, ignoring that it is the body that not only sees but hears and feels.[3] While a valid claim, this props up a merely receptive, immobile body. It presumes another kind of detached subject formation, this one set off *against* the "scape" of the film's "land"—constructing, as the meaning of the word "landscape" suggests, a position from which to watch?[4]

A sensory empathy must be conceived as something else, one of integration rather than the separation brought about by the distance of a gaze. This of course threatens the crux of Enlightenment and Modern

thought, which proposes a free subject capable of transcending the demands of external reality and its objects and dogmas. But it also suggests another kind of ethics. The ethics proposed here depends not on the body, but on a consciousness that *creates* cinema. In cinema we do not entirely lose the body, but willfully abandon it by choice, enough to enter into a deep state of reverie. In the conjoining of the *recollective* and the *imaginative*, one's fixed positioning renders a fluid consciousness. We do not feel a film because our body sits and receives it; we feel it because it allows us to move thought and create time from within the relational experience that cinema evokes. The aim of this essay is to work through such cinematic relations to propose an empathy aligned with listening and the movement of time. Rather than a cinema of divisions, we find an empathetic interplay that is sensory, imaginative, expressive and experiential, one which evokes a harmonious relation of feeling what resides within the reality of the film's fiction.

Specifically, we look to the aesthetics philosophy of Chinese scholar Li Zehou. His work brings Western philosophy, particularly Kant and Marx, in partnership and in comparison with the historical traditions of ancient Chinese aesthetics. Through his work, the writings of others sympathetic to these themes, and films and filmmakers who express such empathy, we are able to draw out a different psychology of cinema and a different set of questions as to what it is doing.

2. EXPERIENTIAL CINEMA: OVERCOMING DISTANCES

Experience places the emphasis on immanence. This runs counter to "seeing" cinema as *transcendent to*, or in its reverse, as *projected to*, a viewer and a body: In both of the latter, the audience is separated from events that are watched. Empathy comes to the fore when such *frontality* is overcome, both conceptually and experientially. A sensory empathy pulls away from classic Greek epistemological necessities of distance, and later Renaissance concepts of perspective, which situate a knowing subject. It instead impels us to emphasize time over space. Emphasizing the former, Li draws us closer to a more Asian gathering of *living time*. He differentiates Confucian and Kantian time as a "difference between time as an inner human sense and the idea of a general, objective, and spatialized time. Time becomes deeply entangled in the sensuous emotions of nostalgia, yearning for life, and attachment to existence."[5] Li highlights the concept of "*qing jing jiao rong*," or "the fusion of feeling and scene."[6] This concept has a deep tradition in ancient Chinese poetry. The *fusion* aspect becomes established by scholars in the late 13th Century, but as an artistic expression, it reached its peak in the Tang era of poetry.[7]

Li asserts that the fusion of feeling-and-scene is what the West names "'empathy.'"[8] Taking note that there are many definitions of aesthetic empathy, he offers the following:

"In general, empathy can be said to consist of the melding of the appreciating (or creating) self with the appreciated (or created) object. The appearance or action of the object calls forth my mental and emotional activity, which is subsequently dissolved in the full concentration of my faculties in the process of appreciation or creation, so that it is eventually replaced by the features and actions of the object, resulting in the unity of my own subjective emotions with the objective form. This is the fusion of feeling and scene, the unity of self and object, which is so sought after in Chinese art and literature."[9]

Li, through his translator, offers the elements "self" and "object" here. It's important to parse through all the key terms at play. Cecile Chu-chin Sun's book *Pearl from the Dragon's Mouth* works through the historical developments of *feeling-and-scene* and offers the following pre-Tang era terms:[10]

1. Feeling (*ch'ing* or *ching*): inner world: thoughts/feelings.

2. Object (*wu*): physical world: external reality. There is also *hsiang* which is used for "outward phenomenon."

"Object" (*wu*) is the focus in this early period; "scene" has yet to arrive. Instead of "scene" or "scenery," *ching* is something like "light" or "the shadow cast by light." In the Tang era, Li and Sun both mention how Daoism and Buddhism affected poetry. Here, "scene" emerges as an element "that surrounds the experience."[11] "Object" is de-emphasized as "the physical world itself comes alive through its association with emotion." With the influence of Zhuangzi, the concept of "realm" (*ching*) comes to indicate a state of being. Through Buddhism it becomes a "*suprasensory* realm that represents the ultimate, purely spiritual goal of Buddhism" and "the *sense* realm in which man operates."[12] Herein lies the fusion—a "mutually enriching interchange," in which "the two otherwise unrelated worlds become fused into one."[13] *Realm* is the "fusion of the poet's perception and the object of contemplation."[14] This helps to understand how the Chinese emphasis on "landscape" and "language" become a poetic site of mutual interchange and how the environment is relationally bound with spirit and the mind.

Crucial to Tang-era poetry and painting, the work of art reaches out beyond the poet and the painter in a fusion that includes the reader and viewer. Critic Yin Fan (8th Century) writes of the de-emphasis on form or substance in Tang poetry. It develops instead the capacity to "'evoke phenomena'" through the writing and in doing so to affect the *reader*.[15] Realm is the aspect of poetry that cannot be comprehended literally— we might add in a cinematic sense *cannot be seen or read*—it "can only be sensed by the reader."[16] Li writes that music, poetry and painting are not so separated from each other; all express a musical "flow of emotion-filled time," a relationship of inside and outside.[17] Chinese landscape painting carries the notion that one is not looking at something but is invited to live inside the realm depicted. Through the influence of Buddhism, landscape painting is "always in intimate communication and relationship with human life and emotion."[18]

With realm as the focus, we approach a feeling-and-scene that Li describes as empathy. Li writes that with empathy as the emphasis," there is no need whatsoever for conceptual signs or symbols, nor for the mediation of any kind of ideology. ... Instead, all that the ear hears, and the eye sees is available to become the emotional form of the imagination's free play."[19] Through such an artistic aim, "reason dissolves completely into the emotions and imagination, and loses its independent character to become a sort of unconscious or nonconscious player."[20]

Such an open, involving, and imaginative empathy presumes no distance, nor does it depend on the more European understandings born of images, language, symbols, references or textuality. Through its necessary division, the framework of psychoanalysis requires the mediation of *listening as reading*, which itself involves the material existence—even if only as analogical—of a text or *statement*. A sensory empathy instead loosens the polarity that separates, or the dialectics of mediation, through a de-emphasis of gaze, text and analysis. Consider again the aesthetics of Tang-era landscape painting. Frances Wood describes the common theme of a natural setting with a towering mountain and a small, lone figure at the very bottom. She mentions how the poetry of the time through Li Bai and Du Fu was the "sound equivalent of a painting."[21] Poetry and painting are harmonious expressions of the processes and sounds of nature. She argues as well that the poetry expressed is untranslatable to English and that it retains its rhythm and sound only in Chinese. Cinema needs no translation, which allows it to express itself differently and without language. This is true both in the literal sense of there needing to be no words, but also in that there is no need to translate to a European syntagmatic form. Such distances are overcome in Asian cinema, which expresses a different sensory awareness and a different sense of empathy.

Further, there is no need to assume representational or ontological identity. We, the audience, never become a character, but never live outside of character either. As engaged experiencers of the film, we do not exist within any structure or film language; rather, we find ourselves as empathetic beings who fall into a duration that unfolds. The engaged participant is one who carries lived experience into alignment with the conditions, environments and situations presented in the story. We cannot cry out to them or warn them or advise them, but we do sense and feel *as* them, becoming the one who senses and feels. This is because sensation and time are the only channels of cinema that are necessary. Indeed, sensation-in-time is the only aspect of cinema that is shared. Although the circuit is unidirectional, we stretch ourselves along this thread through an act of opening up *their* world and enfolding it into our own time. We anticipate what is to come and, in a sense, *live* the time of what is at stake.

This connection is even stronger in the audible sense than the visible. The audible is more than simply listening *to* the voice, as psychoanalysis emphasizes. We instead hear within, as we engage in another gathering. We feel the scene, to use Li's term, in listening to their world for them as us. "We are not in the world, we become with the world; we become by contemplating it."[22] We are pulled along this thread

through the film's development. But as empathetic, we begin to pull *ourselves* along with it. We become the film through its becoming.

3. EMPATHY AND PSYCHE IN LI ZEHOU

Writing about Li's concept of empathy, Marthe Chandler writes that it arises out of the ancient "shamanistic dances in the collective psychological formations created by primitive sedimentation."[23] This concept of "sedimentation" (*jidian* 積淀) is key to Li's philosophy, not only in aesthetics but in cultural/historical formations of the psyche. Roger T. Ames and Jinhua Jia describe it as "the form of the human cultural psychology (*wenhua xinli jiegou* 文化心理結構)—that is synchronic, diachronic, and evolutionary."[24] One might compare it to Freud's concept of the super ego or Jung's collective unconscious;[25] but the concept is more dynamic, while also grounded in a psychological binding of cultural practices with nature. It is not "biologically 'inherited,'" as Téa Sernelj describes, rather "a dynamic, ever-changing process of psychocultural development."[26]

Li has three levels of sedimentation:[27] 1) primitive (emotio-rational) sedimentation grants subjectivity, a sense of order and rhythm, and the use of body and vocal language in the emergence of reason and beauty; 2) cultural-psychological sedimentation, including differences in human relations, values, patterns, emotional expressions, etc. which produce distinct cultural psychologies; 3) individuality arising out of the previous two, offering the potential for personal creativity and a change in the overall sediment.

The connection of sedimentation to empathy comes in how the former emerges through cultural practices and artistic works. Consider the early Chinese rites and rituals, shamanistic music and dance practices, through which a cultural-psychological empathy forms. This led to the development of works of expressive art that reflect such practices. Li describes how music and dance enabled the cohesion of people into early civilized societies. This is what he means by the shaping of "a 'cultural-psychological formation'" through ancient rites of musical expression.[28] Such ancient ritual and symbolic cultural activities are acted out through music and song, words, and rhythms. They are, as Li describes, playful, practical, and conceptual, producing products of the imagination. Biological communities became civilized societies that transcended biology. Community came through hearing, listening, music, dance, and ritual. At heart is an "instinct for play" that becomes a "sociocultural consciousness."[29]

When we turn to cinema, we find a similar kind of connection through a time-based expressive art that encourages a sense of empathy. Cinema is an *involvement* that envelops an audience into the imaginative ritual being performed in the cinema of the mind. In particular kinds of expressive cinema, we do not so

much "watch" a film or listen to its dialogue; we experience the ritual enveloping us. We can think of this as a form of aesthetic becoming—a folding and unfolding relationship. Rather than a gaze/gazed-upon relation of eye to bodies through a medium of the screen, we can consider instead an *expressive resonance* that encompasses self and world, or to again adopt Li's term, feeling-and-scene.

Here we can turn to Gilles Deleuze and his concept of upper and lower floors of a Baroque structure in his writings on Leibniz. He describes the relation between as a "resonating as if it were a musical salon translating the visible movements below into sound above."[30] The aim is not to produce a dualism—a visible world of things below and a sonic world above—nor to suggest that the upper level of soul marks a transcendent division. Rather, the whole architectural structure *folds* what is both independent *and* inseparable. The soul resonates what the eyes accept, together composing a process of inclusion. It is interesting that Deleuze uses a musical metaphor since in cinema, the audible is the more permeable and resonant membrane. It is thus more prone to empathetic connectivity. Yuhui Jiang draws Deleuze's concept of "the Fold" into Daoist philosophy to describe a sonic-audible experience that is "always *in-between*."[31] Here the audible produces a void that allows one to leave the determination of place in favor of a relation more aligned with the rhythms of breathing and pulsation that are so vital in Daoist thinking.

Cinema has the ability to compose such folding relations, which function through fleeting and fragmented durations of experience. Time unfolds as a multiplicity, moving through fluid states that are both simultaneous and coexisting, channeled from character to audience. In *multiplicity* we traverse an infinite array possible times and places, present, imagined or recalled. In *simultaneity*, we find multiple expressions within a *single* shared time. In *coexistence*, by contrast, we feel the sharing of *multiple* times, in which a sonic event is freed from visual verisimilitude. This pushes a listener to attend to differences in time—that is, a hearing of the past in an imagining of the future.[32] Such weavings are the expressive essence from which we feel what is underway. In a film lies an experiential unfolding that is capable of an ineffable empathetic bond. Life expresses its essence through its movement. Such expression is the "about" that precedes concept and discourse through the act of living. This is how a particular kind of cinema produces an empathetic relation as a life that is lived in its unfolding. This is emphasized highly in Daoism and in earlier and later movements in Chinese aesthetics.

4. LI ZEHOU: THE AESTHETICS OF EXPRESSION AND TIME

Li's aesthetics emerges through his writings beginning in the 1980s, which Tsuyoshi Ishii describes as a "New Enlightenment movement" in Mainland China.[33] Scholars were fusing a Kantian-informed "Hong Kong-Taiwanese New Confucianism on the one hand, and Mainland Chinese Marxism and historical

materialism on the other." Li's book *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (*Huaxia meixue*) was first published in 1988. In it, he moves through periods of, in historical order, ancient rites and music, Confucianism, Daoism, and Chan Buddhism. Through his process, he integrates Kantian and Marxist philosophy to build original concepts of sedimentation, empathy, and expression.

One area to draw out in Li's comparative philosophy is his contention that while Western aesthetics is grounded on *mimesis* (representation, imitation), the Chinese tradition emphasizes expression. While we may think of the former as an outer relation and the latter an inner one, Li writes that this does not mean Chinese aesthetics is about inner feelings. Rather, Chinese Art—Li focuses on the influence of music here—is about a harmony of universal, natural laws in accordance with drawing out emotions. "The goal of music was an ordered universe and harmony in the human world, while at the same time it provided form, order, and logic to human emotions."[34] Chinese art is also representational, but not in the showing of things, events and phenomena or individual emotions; rather it is "'expressive.'" What it aims to express are "universalized emotions that must be able to objectively 'harmonize with heaven and earth'."[35] The mimesis/expression divide is less important for Li; more important is his observation that the goal of ancient Chinese art, literature and aesthetics was "the molding of the emotions as its goal, having its origins in the ancient tradition founded on the standard that 'music entails harmony'."[36]

In describing a universal molding of the emotions, Li is writing of the pre-Confucian rites period of Chinese aesthetic sedimentation. As the arts develop over history, empathy, the fusion of feeling-and-scene, becomes more prominent. By the Tang era, emotions are liberated but they retain the element of "scene" to the expression. This era of poetry exhibits "the poet's ability to capture human emotion in all its concrete vividness through both the apparent genuineness of the emotion and the convincing *'scene' that surrounds* the experience" (96-97, emphasis added).

By both Li's and Sun's account, Confucianism in embedded throughout what followed in Chinese aesthetics history. Rather than the oppositions and counter-moves of European philosophy, Confucianism remains the constant thread in the rise of Daoism and Chan Buddhism. Through every shift, expression and emotion remain at the core. Zhuangzi and Laozi for example "emphasized the expression of human imagination, emotions, and intuition in perceiving the world."[37] Venerable "Warring States" poet Qu Yuan rejected Confucian obedience and moderation but "he integrated Daoist concepts of the free expression of individual feelings and imagination."[38] Through Chan aesthetics comes "the expression of the conscious inner life and the introspection of the subject."[39] In all, we find expression, feeling and imagination at the core. As Sun writes, the line of Confucianism that runs through Daoism and Buddhism brought an engagement of a "mutually reflecting interaction with the viewer of the scene" (p. 98). The poet sensitive to its reader in this period produced "an unprecedented emphasis on using the mind to intuit this aesthetic dimension of poetry" (108). Through this relationship, the mind *understands* the boundlessness of spirit.

Li situates the Western dependence on transcendence and immortality against a Chinese "sensuous human world" that is immanent and undivided.[40] We find a *Western sedimentation* at work in film theory's dualism, a tendency to regard a divided world of film and spectator and of gaze and analysis. Li points to Kant's *epistemological* subject compared with a Confucian *aesthetic* subject. Again, concepts of time play a critical role. Through Kant, we have an inner consciousness trying to come to terms with finitude and infinity. The Confucian consciousness is also an inner process, but Li argues that a subjective sense of time is a historical accumulation of emotion and experience. "Emotionalized time is a fundamental characteristic of Chinese art and Confucian aesthetics. It constitutes the highest level of internalization of the world."[41]

This element of emotionalized time as the coursing of history is key to an empathetic cinema. It is less about the images and more the movement that comes about through sound and hearing as the passing of a time that incorporates all that has been into any moment that we call cinematic. Through time, a *listening to the movement of images and sounds*, empathy forms. In Li's description of Zhuangzi's Daoism, the aesthetic experience of beauty is a cognitive act, but one that actively aims to move outside of language. As Iishi describes Li's reading of Zhuangzhi, aesthetic experience is grounded on "concrete existence" rather than "linguistic categories."[42] His Daoism is social practice through a cognition that "pierces through the language stratum to the very reality" of existence.

This piercing of the veil of language also works to describe our relation to a screen and speakers in our empathetic engagement of cinema. As experiencers of cinema, we *understand* the separation of self-to-screen/speakers in the same way that we can fragment our consciousness. Sitting in a restaurant, with the sounds and images of the present environment, my consciousness is also remembering yesterday's hike up a mountain. Yet with cinema, the emphasis is reversed: A film endures as a *dwelling reverie* of movement and action while the inert body sitting in the theater fades from conscious attention. In reverie, as Gaston Bachelard reminds us, time relaxes without the necessity to produce linkages or associations. It is a different kind of consciousness. Such "poetic reveries" become "hypothetical lives which enlarge our lives by letting us in on the secrets of the universe. A world takes form in our reverie and this world is ours."[43]

5. EMPATHY IN FILM: REVERIE, MEMORY, AND LISTENING

There are many filmmakers who invite empathy through such reverie. We can think of luminaries such as Tarkovsky, Kubrick and Bergman on up to more recent "slow cinema" or "transcendental cinema" directors like Chantal Akerman, Tsai Ming-liang, and Claire Denis. But slow cinema and empathy are not the same. Indeed, despite the moniker, slow cinema is often regarded on visible and spatial terms that de-emphasize the element of time and the listening it brings. "Observation is key," as Nadin Mai writes about the

movement's common characterization.[44] It is more accurate to say that slowness opens to the *possibility* of empathy by offering of the *time of* empathy, not in its formal construction of time but as a means of gathering time. For there to be empathy, time must not only be given, as in its slowing pace or a lingering shot; there must be a felt sharing of duration in an accumulation of thought and feeling. Borrowing from Li, empathy is also defined by expressing a harmony of consciousness, sensation, and memory as a relationship with nature in its temporal unfolding. At issue is not form but the expression of such a relationship. Even fragmentary and rapidly cutting montage can produce such a connection. Here we find a style underway, but one that empathetically evokes a temporal multiplicity folding and unfolding—a coexistence of durations.

We can turn to a film like *El Dorado XXI* by Salomé Lamas (2017) to illustrate the distinction. The film opens with a couple of long still shots before giving way to a nearly hour-long fixed shot of a literally endless stream of miners ascending and descending a mine. One could argue a sense of empathy is exhibited here in holding a fixed viewpoint to express the endless repetition that we cohabitate as viewers. This would be empathy as a means of being present to events, but we are strangers and observers to a state of otherness that is inescapable. This is because it is entirely visual. Lamas overlaps a layer of sonic elements, but it is of an entirely other location and reality. The sonic element works to replace—that is *re-place*—what is underway visually. This heightens the sense that the space of struggle is merely gazed upon—a site (and sight) of fascination rather than feeling. While the fragmentation of sound and image time can evoke an empathetic bond, here it does not because it lacks a *hearer*. It is rather a sonic and visual construction, an overlap of phenomena rather than a fusion of feeling-and-scene.

Terrence Malick's films work differently with the juxtaposition of image and sound by instead producing hearing, presence, and memory. His films express a coexistence of living in present time while producing the occasional durations of reverie that fragment time. But it is done so inwardly rather than simply through appearances. Here empathy comes in a gathering—an experiential and expressive actuality of time that emerges *as* images through reverie. The body-relation in affect theory, which splits the anchored spectator into a duality,[45] is reversed in an empathetic cinema as described here. An empathetic relation eliminates the need to render the spectator anywhere. An active film-body spectator relation is a distraction, a logical and rational interruption, of that which is empathetic. An empathetic participant instead feels the pull of the actuality of *experience*.

Whereas the body awareness of affectivity breaks empathy in the position of receptivity, *formal* constructions break empathy through reflexive methods. Reflexivity produces a visual statement, a demand to be understood at the level of style and form. Empathy is the opposite of this. All cinema is fragmentary through montage, but empathy comes when the film expresses fragmentation within *itself* in a way that encourages harmony with the fragmentation of the time that exists in every filmgoer. Walter Murch wrote

that film cuts work because we blink in our field of view.[46] An empathetic cinema takes this idea to the whole of consciousness in a relationship with time, memory, and our engagements with the sensory environment.

Over the course of his artistic development, Malick's films increasingly fragment that which we ourselves experience in cinema. *The Thin Red Line* (1998) is a film of presence that becomes occasionally broken by reverie. Given more attention, this reverie might overtake the presence of war. But the demands of war require a true being-within. Malick's pioneering stylistic element is how he increasingly fragmented his films into multiple durations, times, and locations that defy the concept of flashback.[47] This was accomplished through a fragmentation of the expectations of sound in relation to the progression of images, as *hearing* overtakes what we think of as sound design. With each film, reverie increasingly becomes the prevailing expression underway, and this is its empathetic bond. By *Knight of Cups* (2016), experience has reversed: reverie is the dominant stream, occasionally fragmented by the distractions of presence. While the war of *The Thin Red Line* required present attention, *Knight of Cups* finds a consciousness adrift in repetitions of aesthetic fragmentation. Christian Bale's Rick is Kierkegaard's aesthete struggling to attain some Zen-like presence, or a sense of faith in the infinite-within-finitude.[48] As a result, we feel lost with him, *as* him. They are different manifestations of empathy because they are different mindsets, different experiences of lived time. In both are manifestation of feeling-and-scene, but the unity sought after in Confucianism has become adrift in the later film.

Chloé Zhao is sometimes compared with Malick in her cinematographic style and natural staging. Films like *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015) and *Nomadland* (2020) feature characters in open, natural, "golden hour" locations. This element is stylistically comparable to Malick's pre-*Thin Red Line* era films such as *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*. Zhao's films compose total presence and a devotion to realism. This devotion compromises empathy with an adherence to the actual space of events. Her mix of skilled and unskilled actors in actual settings, depicted dramatically, produces a mimetic-ethnographic/docudrama hybridization. The problem with this approach is that the commitment to realism—employing actual people for whom this dramatic situation is real as characters—simulates an actual situation while breaking the empathetic bond that drama evokes.

We find this as well in the film The Dead and the Others by João Salaviza and Renée Nader Messora (2018), which is a more faithful ethnographic docudrama. The filmmakers offer a sense of empathy through a close relationship of camera to character and character to nature. (The camera is extremely tight on bodies moving through nature.) However, as with Zhao's films, being authentic to real life sacrifices the drama, becoming inauthentic *drama*. Untrained actors give flat performances that expose the cinematic artifice and continually threaten to undercut empathy and expression in service to the factual real. While this film is evocative in other ways and "true" ethnographically, it becomes "false" as dramatic fiction. Deleuze writes

in Cinema 2 that a character becomes real by making fiction, which is different from a fiction made from reality. As Claire Colebrook describes Deleuze's concept: The "power of fiction" is "not making a claim about what the world is, but about the imagination of a possible world."49 Deleuze's fiction expresses "not so much the cognitive and the intellectual as affective (to do with feeling and sensible experience)."

The empathy of feeling-and-scene in Li and others complementary to this concept is one in which the impact upon the psyche comes in the means of expression. Li does not detail the significance of hearing and listening as a binding force, but in an expressive, experiential cinema, it is the primary empathetic channel. The audible binds us to what is otherwise a succession of images and sounds. Consider again the still image with overlapping sounds as in *El Dorado XXI*, which gazes and associates and presents a stream of sound that reflexively divides us from what we see. An audible coexistence of durations and reveries by contrast evokes the empathy of feeling-and-scene.

We can turn to other filmmakers to help define cinematic empathy as proposed here. Abbas Kiarostami works in a linear fashion of purely present visual activity. As with Zhao, his films aim for realism. It often seems that his camera has stumbled upon a real-life situation already underway. In a film such as *A Taste of Cherry* (1997), it feels as if all of Tehran is his *mise-en-scène* and all of its inhabitants are players in his drama. It pushes a viewer to wonder if his actors are improvising around the actual chaos of the environment or if he has meticulously orchestrated dramatic "accidents." Further, Kiarostami frames his actions in medium shots, MCUs, and POV shots that establish characters in full view. We are always looking tightly at a dominant person in a tracking shot or through a car window as the world becomes a secondary aspect that passes by. His linear approach is further exhibited in landscapes shot through long lenses, showing paths and roads flattened out upon hillsides like lines drawn upon nature. While remaining real to the setting, empathy is lost as we find ourselves gazing at or through a substantial character conducting routine, often absurd repetitions, as in a film such as *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999).

By contrast, Apichatpong Weerasethakul evokes a sensory empathy closer to Li's aesthetics of a temporal and harmonious feeling-and-scene. Rather than producing a linear progression of individuals against nature (Kiarostami) or submitting to ethnographic realism (Zhao), Weerasethakul works in emergences of memory and temporal multiplicities in a manner completely different from Malick. Both filmmakers reveal a dedication to the sensuous and experiential realities of nature and time-consciousness through a dramatic, fictional unfolding that creates a real empathetic bond. They are different in their spirituality, evocative of the different "sediment" of their learning, to again borrow Li's concept. Malick offers the immanence of nature with the "perhaps" of a divine transcendence through fragmentations of recollection, repetition, reverie and forgetting. Weerasethakul's films evoke a purely immanent coexistence of nature, spirit and imagination in a gathering of what time has forgotten—a transcendence of another kind. One comes from an aesthetic sediment of Christianity, the other of Buddhism. "Transcendence and

immortality are not achieved in heaven or in a future life, nor are they to be found in an infinite substance that has shed sensuosity. Rather, they are achieved within this sensuous human world."[50]

In his *Cemetery of Splendor* (2015), Laotian goddesses emerge and share fruit with protagonist Jenjira. The three speak in a casual, natural manner about what is happening at the clinic where people have inexplicably fallen into a deep sleep. Evoking Buddhist and Zhuangzi poetics of dreams and memory, Weerasethakul's films blur the lines between dream and reality, the present and the past, through his characters who *move through* the multiplicities of spaces and times. In an extraordinary scene in the aforementioned film, two characters move through ruins overgrown with leaves and roots as Keng channels a spirit of the past through Itt's sleeping consciousness, speaking to Jenjira. Keng-Itt moves through the opulence of a palace that once resided on the land. There are two bodies, Jenjira and Keng walking through the crunch of dried leaves; but there are at least five "spirits" moving through spaces felt rather than known.

Weerasethakul's more recent *Memoria* (2021) continues these themes. Here, empathy is introduced through a single sound. We hear it as Tilda Swinton's Jessica does. To her and to us it is a disturbing mystery coming in sudden shocks of violence to the senses. A simple restaurant conversation scene is punctuated with an unknown and unseen violence that we and Jessica feel in the same moment. It is not until she meets a fish scaler named Hernán in the Columbian countryside that she is able to tease out the meaning of what haunts her. He falls into a deep sleep-trance, and we are with both of them, hearing nature, as he dreams for her. Later in his house, the two share audible memories in an extraordinary long take in which they sit at a table without speaking a word. All of us together hear the hearings of other places and times as they unfold.

The empathetic bond composed through such experiential filmmaking constructs the continuance of presence, memory, trauma, and reverie. In Weerasethakul, as with many contemporary Thai filmmakers,[51] we find fragmentations of collective memory that are expressed in distinctly Asian and Buddhist ways. Rather than simply personal moments, these films become allegories for political violence or the struggles of migrant workers. In films that express audible experience over images, we live the imprecision of such durations. We move through what has been and imagine what is to come within this moment of finite time. There is, for us, no audience, sound design, image capture, profilmic construction, text, or *mise-en-scène*. There is memory, reverie and imagination, an experience we feel because we ourselves live the time of recollecting and imagining. This does not produce a special transcendent (divided) status of the viewer brought about by the apparatus of cinema. First, because an empathetic cinema is not constructed on the distance of viewership; second, because the audioviewer *as empathetic* gains no privileged transcendent position.

The ritual of cinema does not have to take place in the space of the theater to be communal. We again may think not of place but of consciousness that is by its nature multiple. We unconsciously integrate the

idea that none of this is limited to a personal experience, but that others are engaging with this film and with cinema as a whole. We are together in the ritual of imagination that allows us to have an experience that is real. As a relationship with the film in its unfolding, we both pull back and go within at the same time. One is aware that the screen and speakers are given. But empathy comes from knowing and discarding that the body element has found its place in the seat in which one sits. The *audible* mind in particular becomes free to move within the depths of what unfolds. We lose "audience" and become the consciousness that moves and dwells in a continuing state of unfolding. One finds empathy by moving *through* a cinematic memory-imagining that is not altogether one's own. Recollection and imagination are not passive reveries. I choose to live the life that unfolds.

6. CONCLUSION: AN ETHICS OF EMPATHY

Empathy in cinema, as proposed here, is not exclusive to Li or to Chinese aesthetics. Rather, Li and the tradition of Chinese aesthetics offer a conceptual means of thinking a particular kind of cinematic empathy that emphasizes audibility, imagination, coexistence, and expression as a sensory relationship with nature and time. Such cinema can be thought through two complementary concepts: Heraclitus' *logos* and Zhuangzi's *dao*. In its pre-religious meaning, *logos* describes a gathering and an account *in listening*; in Zhuangzi, the *dao* is unspeakable and unspoken but rendered in attunement. Both constitute a willing release of oneself into the reality of the cosmos undergoing its process of life. Each film produces its particular expression of *logos* or its particular expression of the *dao* through an empathetic and mobile process of becoming. Neither points to reasoning or an *a priori* truth of categories or forms, rather an opening to possibilities of understanding only as an *outcome*.

A final, concluding question brings us back to the possibility of an ethics derived from such a concept of empathy. Is there a danger here in becoming *impressed* by the ideologies and biases of the filmmaker? This is surely the case. Film is dangerous because its experience borders the religious. But this is where the guided aspect of the director as sage becomes important, as in the Chinese tradition Li chronicles. We may also think of a team of filmmakers as a collective tribe, building an aesthetic experience of virtue. An ethics or morality is not a set of standards or codes preceding the film; the film makes its ethics. This is the responsibility of its creators. *The film* is prior to any analysis of it. It is a time of learning and experience, a process akin to that of ancient times, both in the East and the West. It should come as no surprise that in both the Greek and the Chinese traditions, ancient storytelling used melody and "the chorus" as the music of civil harmony. Learning came not only in a story but was given in a melody that is communally heard, evoking such harmony. There is plenty of time later for talk.

Empathetic cinema is cinema as the ancient myths would have it. Old dogmas are necessarily being challenged in today's hypermediated reckoning of all images and statements through facts and information; at the same time, we cannot forget the importance of myth and imagination. Aesthetic courage is the courage to be affected. For Li this is expressed most predominantly in history through ancient rites of music and dance that become culture and civilization through their affective power. Oral cultures conjured stories that were told to be *imagined* through the creative act. Through the aesthetics of expression and empathy, they become remembered in a way that allows them to be retold. Poetry, *poiesis*, the making of time, the making of experience, the making of memory—all gather into what we name as a *story* in the production of culture. It is the old, long forgotten mind, producing a *logos* that one carries, a *dao* that is attended. The creative ethics comes in its production as a reinvention of the oral *ethos*—the making of time as an expression of shared experience.

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[1] An example of this is found in Julien Baggini, "Serious Men: The Films of the Coen Brothers as Ethics," in *New Takes in Film Philosophy*, ed. Havi Carel and Greg Tuck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). We find "empathy" mentioned in film theory but too often bound to a concept of "sympathy." It perhaps does not help that Deleuze calls empathy a "subjective sympathy" in Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, tr. Hugh Tomlinson & Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota 1989), 6.

[2] See Elsaesser and Hagener, whose critique here is addressed further ahead in this essay, in Thomas Elsaesser and Malta Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (2nd ed., New York: Routledge, 2015).

[3] Ibid.

[4] For more on this concept of landscape, see Francois Jullien, *From Being to Living: A Euro-Chinese Lexicon of Thought*, tr. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (Los Angles: Sage, 2020).

[5] Zehou Li, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, tr. Maija Bell Samei (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 55.

[6] Ibid, 152.

[7] Cecile Chu-chin Sun, *Pearl From the Dragon's Mouth* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). The Tang or T'ang era is commonly identified as the dynastic period from 618-907.

[8] Zehou Li, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, tr. Maija Bell Samei (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 152.

[9] Ibid, 152-153.

[10] Cecile Chu-chin Sun, *Pearl From the Dragon's Mouth* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 64-65.

[11] Ibid., 97.

[12] Ibid., 112.

[13] Ibid., 97.

[14] Ibid., 113.

[15] Ibid., 109-110.

[16] Ibid, 118.

[17] Zehou Li, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, tr. Maija Bell Samei (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 57.

[18] Ibid, 97.

[19] Ibid, 153.

[20] Ibid, 153.

[21] Frances Wood, June 9, 2022. In Our Time. Podcast audio. Tang Era Poetry. Simon Tillotson. WAV. June 10, 2022. https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/in-our-time/id73330895?i=1000565758213.

²² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, tr. Hugh Tomlinson & Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University, 1991), 169.

²³ 2018, p. 295.

²⁴ Roger T. Ames and Jinhua Jia, "Introduction," In *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018) 8.

²⁵ See Téa Sernelj, "Modern Chinese Aesthetics and Its Traditional Backgrounds: A Critical Comparison of Li Zehou's Sedimentation and Jung's Archetypes," in *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018) regarding the connections of Li's sedimentation and Jung's archetypes.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 350.

²⁷ Li, Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, tr. Sean Hand (London: Athlone, 1993), 4.

³¹ Yuhui Jiang, "Sacred Listening in a Folding Space: *Le Pli* and Ancient Chinese Philosophy of Listening," in *Deleuze and Asia*, eds. Roland Bogue, Hanping Chiu and Yu-lin Lee (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 73-98, 86.

³² James Batcho, "Simultaneity and Coexistence: Audible Overlaps in Cinematic Time," in *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, 15:1, 2021.

³³ Tsuyoshi Ishii, "Li Zehou's Aesthetics and the Confucian 'Body 'of Chinese Cultural Sedimentation: An Inquiry into Alternative Interpretations of Confucianism," in *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 316-317.

³⁴ Zehou Li, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, tr. Maija Bell Samei (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 28.

³⁵ Ibid., 28.

³⁶ Ibid., 29.

³⁷ Téa Sernelj, "Modern Chinese Aesthetics and Its Traditional Backgrounds: A Critical Comparison of Li Zehou's Sedimentation and Jung's Archetypes," 341.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Zehou Li, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 55.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Tsuyoshi Ishii "Li Zehou's Aesthetics and the Confucian 'Body 'of Chinese Cultural Sedimentation: An Inquiry into Alternative Interpretations of Confucianism," 363.

⁴³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*, tr. D. Russell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), 8.

⁴⁴ Nadin Mai, "Third (Slow) Cinema," in *The Arts of Slow Cinema*, 2013. Accessed June 20, 2020. https://theartsofslowcinema.com/2013/10/27/third-slow-cinema/.

⁴⁵ Elsaesser and Hagener write that "sound" is especially useful for this, in *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*.

⁴⁶ Walter Murch, *In The Blink of an Eye* (2nd Edition), 2001. Los Angeles: Silman-James Press.

⁴⁷ James Batcho, *Terrence Malick's Unseeing Cinema*, 2018. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Colebrook, Claire. *Gilles Deleuze*. (London: Routledge, 2002), 12.

⁵⁰ Zehou Li, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 55.

⁵¹ This is evident as well in his Thai contemporaries such as Phuttiphong Aroonpheng (*Manta Ray*, 2018) and Jakrawal Nilthamrong (*Anatomy of the Past*, 2022) who deal with similar narrative themes and empathetic approaches to cinema. These two filmmakers also collaborate on each other's works. The latter was a producer for the former's *Manta Ray* and *Ferris Wheel* (2015). Aroonpheng in turn was cinematographer for Nilthamrong's *Anatomy of the Past* (2022).

DAOISM AS A CURE FOR THE EXCESSES OF WESTERN MODERN SCIENCE IN
PI (D. ARONOFSKY, 1998)[*]

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1. INTRODUCTION

> *There is a limit to our life, but to knowledge there is no limit.*
> *With what is limited to pursue what is unlimited is a perilous*
> *thing.*
> *When knowing this, we still seek to increase our knowledge,*
> *the peril cannot be averted.*
> — *Zhuāngzǐ*, Chapter 3

Darren Aronofsky's *Pi* (1998) presents us with a mathematician's obsessive search for a pattern within the endless decimals of number pi. In a Galilean fashion, main character Maximilian Cohen (Sean Gullete) assumes that Mathematics is the language of nature and believes his investigations will be able to predict stock market movements and ultimately lead to a rational explanation of everything and the control of nature. His research awakens the interest of both Marcey Dawson (Pamela Hart), a Wall Street businesswoman and Lenny Mayer (Ben Shenkman), a Hasidic Jew who thinks Max can help his religious group reveal the true name of God. In the course of his work, Max keeps periodical contact with his old mentor Sol Robeson (Mark Margolis) who researched into the nature of pi years previously but gave it up after a stroke. Conscious of the dangers of Max's attempt, the professor urges his former pupil to slow down and take a break, but Max dismisses Sol's concerns as cowardice.

Throughout the film, Max appears to be split in different ways. On the one hand, he has lost connection to the world by supplanting it with a perfect *image of* it and he hardly shows any link to its inhabitants (he locks himself up in his apartment and avoids social contact). On the other, he is disconnected from himself (he seems to conceive himself as a *pure mind*, showing no care about his body and its needs).

Pi, as well as exhibiting Western modern imagery's desire to transcend the constitutive limitations of the human condition, also contrasts this worldview with Eastern traditions of thought. Among them, Chinese heritage and philosophy (and more specifically, Daoism) play a substantial role in the film. In some instances, the references to Chinese culture are more visible (with the location of Max's apartment being in New York City's Chinatown, the

appearance of a group of people practising Tai Chi in a park or the narrative and symbolic part the game of Go[1] plays in the film). In other cases, the allusions are less literal, but they equally encourage a reading of *Pi* in Daoist fashion.

Our objective will be to comment on the different ways in which Daoism permeates *Pi* and to explore the kind of dialogue the film establishes between Western modern science imagery and the Daoist worldview. In doing so, we will analyse some special scenes and refer to thematic and formal aspects of the film as a whole, at the same time as we will recur to the main fonts of Daoism—the *Dàodéjīng* and the *Zhuāngzǐ*[2]—and to the work of some contemporary scholars. The structure of our essay will be as follows: first, we will show how the excesses of Western modern science affect Max, focusing on his disconnection from the world and from himself. Secondly, we will evaluate the ways in which Daoism is served as a means of overcoming Max's split by referring to human's integration in nature as a saner way of relating to the world whilst also underlining the importance of body and self-care for Daoism. Thirdly, we will point out the dichotomies the film displays, paying a special attention to the way they progressively blur in the course of the movie and lead us to the *Yīn-Yáng* approach. We will conclude by summarizing the most important points of our article.

2. THE ILLNESS: MAX AND THE EXCESSES OF WESTERN MODERN SCIENCE IMAGERY

> *Why do you come to worry me*
> *with the problem of setting the world in order?*
> — *Zhuāngzǐ,* Chapter 7
>
> *They compete restlessly for empty fame in their time,*
> *counting on continuing glory after death (...)*
> *Missing out on the supreme happiness of the present,*
> *they cannot be free for even an hour.*
> *How is that different from being imprisoned and shackled?*
> — *Liè zǐ,* Chapter 7

At the beginning of the film (scene 5), Max's voice-over presents the premises of his work devoted to finding a pattern within the decimals of pi. Sometime later (scene 23) he repeats exactly the same words, as if they constituted a sort of mantra in his obsessive search: "Restate my assumptions. One: Mathematics is the language of nature. Two: Everything around us can be represented and understood through numbers. Three: If you graph the numbers of any system, patterns emerge. Therefore: There are patterns everywhere in nature." Apart from

linking to Pythagorean postulates, Max's assumptions connect with a prevailing line of modern thought that tries to understand nature through theoretical, systematic and quantitative analysis of its alleged underlying mathematical structure. This way, the protagonist's research is aligned with the works of many of the 16th and 17th century greatest scientists—such as Galileo, Kepler, Huygens or Newton—but also with some more contemporary approaches that update the same overarching mission: "For the founding fathers of Western science, such as Leibniz and Descartes, the goal they set themselves was certainty. And it is still the ambition of the great contemporary physicists, Einstein or Hawking, to achieve certainty through a unified theory, a geometrical description of the universe. Once this goal has been reached, we would be able to deduce from our model all the various aspects of nature."[3]

Max's research is, thus, marked by the worry about being, reality and truth that historically characterises Western thought and specially influenced by the pursuit of objectivity, certainty, predictability, and control assumed by the rationalist modern enterprise. The pattern he seeks implies a mathematisation of nature and aspires to a perfect *image* of the world which—as Heidegger[4] or Cavell[5] would maintain—can only be obtained after treating the world as a mere *object* and at the price of excluding the subject from the knowledge of its ordinary reality. And this is precisely what we observe in Max. As if he were the Descartes of the *Meditations*, he tries to formulate his theory of everything from his solipsist confinement—from the confines of his small apartment with a five-lock door and blacked out windows. For him, nature seems to be reduced to an inorganic dwelling with only screens, circuit boards and cables between its concrete walls. And, what is more important, in Max's day-to-day life the world seems to have been replaced by its image: he conceives and grasps nature as a mathematical picture and he feels more comfortable and safe dealing with this fixed image rather than facing the actual and chaotic reality.

What we see while Max let us know his assumptions for the first time contributes to our reading. A subjective shot shows Max's point of view as he walks through a busy street. The framing is extremely shaky and the images convey the chaos Max wants to set in order. A cut to a new shot is accompanied by Max's voice-over starting to enunciate his first premise. The image then depicts the protagonist occupying the centre of the frame. Although Max walks, his figure barely alters position, whilst the background allow us to appreciate the movement. The filming with Snorricam helps to portray a subject fixed in the middle of a world that seems to vanish in its flow behind him. The scene goes on alternating between Max's subjective shots of a tremendously agitated, unfocused and menacing world and the steadier Snorricam shots that appear every time he introduces a new assumption. Several film techniques will stress Max's position towards the world throughout the movie, such as, for example, the short planning that often abstracts Max from his environment and insists on his self-absorption or the arc shots that express Max's anxiety and emphasize his being out of place.

The main character's attitude disconnects him from the world as well as from its inhabitants. As Skorin-Kapov puts it, "[t]he strong intellect, driven to uncover hidden abstract relations supporting the visible world, is unable to connect emotionally with the outside world because that would pollute the clarity of his thoughts."[6] In fact, Max locks himself up in his place with his homemade supercomputer, Euclid, and refuses any social contact that is not useful for his research. His consuming logical pursuit leaves no room for the others, for empathy or diversion. This can be detected since the beginning of the film (scene 9) when his sensual Eastern-origin neighbour Devi, (Samia Shoaib), tries to pat down his hair and gives him the samosas in the hallway. Devi's attempts to take care of Max are fruitless since he not only rejects social interaction but also physical self-care. We easily notice his sloppy appearance; we never see him eating or drinking anything but coffee or ginseng soda and we witness his continuous intake of drugs that mitigate his attacks and keep him focused. It can be said that Max hardly pays any attention to his body and its needs and, what is more, that he mainly thinks of his body as an obstacle—or more properly, as a limitation, as an interference—to his purposes. This last idea is suggested in both scenes 23 and 53 in which Max tries to obtain the string of 216 numbers that can lead him to the discovery of the pattern. When he is about to press the "return" key of his computer, Max hears Devi and Farrouhk (Ajay Naidu) making love. Their gentle sounds drift through the wall, distracting and distressing him for a moment. In the first of those scenes, we can even appreciate how a tight shot of Devi's mouth fades in over the image of the wall Max is looking at and dissolves shortly after, as if the main character's repressed physical needs returned when he is close to the edge.

Max's extremely rational outlook implies two intertwined consequences for the subject that are characteristic of Western modern science. In the quest for objectivity, the individual's intervention in the world she or he is examining is to be erased. And that desired external (and *divine*) point of view results in the negation of what best denotes the individual's belonging to the world, that is to say, her or his body. Both the denial of subjectivity and the repudiation of the body make Max a divided man, someone disconnected from himself who manifests the dangers of the mind/body dualism taken to extremes. Indeed, we could maintain that *Pi* depicts Max as a mind separated from its body, as *res cogitans* that seems to dispense with *res extensa*, as a paradigmatic product of the rationalist approach.

The delusional episode in the subway (scene 40) is especially graphic in this regard. Max watches a young Hasidic man—the same one he had seen before (scene 28)—standing on the other side of the platform. Max looks at the man's face and sees for an instant his own face staring back. The *doppelgänger* effect illustrates Max's splitting and adds a sinister and surreal layer to the scene. The protagonist rushes to where the man is, but when he gets there, he finds only a trail of blood. Max follows the trail until he sees a naked brain on the stairs. He prods it with his pen and directly feels the result himself, as we infer from his gestures and from what

we can consider internal auricularisations.[7] Max's hallucination seems to point towards a kind of impossible external mastery of oneself, or if we prefer, towards an attainment of self-control through exclusively brain operations that would satisfy the rationalist fantasy of the disembodied mind.

Max's double (or even triple) split we have been commenting in this section—his disconnection from the world (as from the others) and his disconnection from himself—has led us to evaluate the excesses of a modern Western imagery that succumbs to hyper reflexivity and diminished self-affection. According to L. Sass and J. Parnas,[8] these are the two complementary distortions of the act of awareness that characterize schizophrenia, the disease that arises with the emergence of scientific discourse and that closely relates to modern consciousness and western(ized) societies. Thus, Max's mental disorder is not just a personal one, but it is an illness that affects Western culture since modern times and an illness which, we could say, is linked to a *sin*. We are referring to what many thinkers—as diverse as M. Heidegger, G. Ryle, H. Dreyfus or R. Rorty—consider the *original sin of modernity*, that is to say, the completely abstract Cartesian concept of the individual from which arose a radical schism in our self-understanding.

At the same time, we are pointing to other *sins* dealing with the wish of transcending human limitations that go further into the dawn of our civilization and are alluded in the film: the Biblical original sin which is hinted at within the passages that recall Max's mother's warning about staring into the sun (scenes 1, 48, 81) and the reprehensible behaviour of Icarus that Sol sets side by side with Max's ambition (scene 19).

3. THE CURE: ACCEPTING THE BODY, INTEGRATING IN NATURE, FINDING THE WAY

> *Hear what is heard by your ears; see what is seen by your eyes.*
> *Let your knowledge stop at what you do not know;*
> *let your ability stop at what you cannot do.*
> *Use what is naturally useful; do what you spontaneously can do.*
> *Act according to your will within the limit of your nature, but have nothing to do with what is beyond it.*
> *This is the most easy matter of nonaction.*
>
> — Guō Xiàng, *Commentaries on the Zhuāngzǐ*

In the first shot that shows Max outdoors (scene 5) he is walking down a street in New York City's Chinatown. A left to right dolly movement follows him as he marches straight ahead. We see Max through the tall fence of a park, as if he were imprisoned behind the bars. Suddenly,

various human figures are interposed between the protagonist and us. It is a group of Asian-origin people that are practising Tai Chi in the park. As Max is far from the camera and the dolly shot tracks him, his displacement is relativized. On the contrary, since those doing Tai Chi are in foreground, their slow gestures seem paradoxically faster. The whole shot is accompanied by a brief Asian-influenced piece of music that fades-out some seconds later in the following shot, just before we hear Max's above-mentioned assumptions.

The location of Max's apartment in Chinatown—where the West meets the East—and, above all, the reference to the practise of Tai Chi are the two first clues we are given to the role Chinese culture and Daoism are to play throughout the film. Tai Chi and Daoism are linked since the former is a physical representation of the latter's ideals. In other words, Tai Chi's physical principles mirrors the motion of the *Dào* itself. The close bond between the martial and health promoting art and the Chinese religious-philosophical tradition is easier to understand if we consider that mental and physical development are intimately associated in ancient China: the body cannot be transformed without the mind and the mind cannot be transformed without the body.

Addressing the concept of *xīn* is crucial for comprehending this approach. Though *xīn* refers to the physical heart, it has usually been translated as *heartmind*, as the ancient Chinese believed that the heart was the centre of human cognition and moreover that emotion and reason could not be disengaged from one another: "[The heartmind] denotes the source of both emoting and thinking. Thus, the human person is not broken down into separate reasoning and emoting capacities. The person is also not divided into one immutable soul and an impermanent body."[9] The coextension between feeling and thinking is such that it can even be affirmed that for Daoism the heartmind "behaves like the senses and seems to be considered a sense function."[10] This integration with the other senses eliminates any privileged position of the heartmind over them. As A. C. Graham wonders while commenting on the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s ideas on this topic: "Why do we trust the heart, the organ of thought, and allow it to take charge of the body? Isn't it merely one of many organs each with its own function within an order which comes from outside us, that Way to be walked which it vainly tries to fix in rules of conduct?"[11]

Max's hyperrational attitude, exposed in the previous section, has nothing to do with this approach. But Sol's advice to him does concur with this view. During Max's second visit to his mentor (scene 27), Sol remembers the story of Archimedes and the golden crown problem, emphasizing the role of the Greek mathematician's wife: "Finally, his equally exhausted wife, she's forced to share a bed with this genius, convinces him to take a bath, to relax." After telling the anecdote, Sol asks Max what the moral of the story is and he answers: "That a breakthrough will come..." Enervated, Sol adds: "Wrong. The point of the story is the wife. You listen to your wife, she will give you perspective. Meaning, you need a break, you have to take a bath, or you will get nowhere. There will be no order, only chaos. Go home, Max, and you take a

bath." The next time they meet (scenes 36-38) the old professor further insists: "What you need to do is take a break from your research. You need it. You deserve it. Here's a hundred dollars, I want you to take it (…) Spend it however you like as long as it falls in the category of vacation. Real world stuff, OK. No math." Notwithstanding, the main character disregards Sol's guide and, as we are about to see, he will only be able to take that break involuntarily.

After having one of his frequent attacks, Max falls asleep in the subway car and accidentally arrives at Coney Island beach (scene 43). The passage represents a turning point in the story and contrasts with the rest of the film at different levels. The exterior location allows Max (and us) to move away from the claustrophobic environment of his apartment and the oppression of the big city to encounter nature. The photography of the film also sets a new tone. The high contrast black and white that prevails throughout the movie gives way to a rich greyscale and harmonious photography. There is no trace of the hyperactive framing of other scenes and the passage includes carefully composed and evocative images. Calm reigns in the fragment thanks to long duration shots and a sound atmosphere that diverges from what we hear in most of the scenes. The sound of the gulls and the soft waves of the sea mix with the quiet beginning of the musical theme "Anthem". The rhythmic emphasis fades temporarily, and the soundtrack shows its kinder face as Max contemplates the reflection of the sunlight in the sea and refreshes his face on the shore. At least for a few moments, Max unleashes his senses and seems to open himself to the placid acceptance of the world that he will end up embracing at the end of the movie.

There is certainly a line of thought in Daoism (especially visible in the *Dàodéjīng*) that advises about the dangers of the senses. Nevertheless, "the motivation for restricting the senses is grounded in an attempt to avoid desire, because desire leads to excess and exhaustion."[12] As previously remarked upon, this does not seem to be Max's case, since his excess and exhaustion is not a consequence of any physical or material desire but an outcome of his hyperrational approach (or, perhaps, a result of his irrational desire for a purely rational explanation of everything[13]). So, Max's timid opening at the beach fits better with the *Zhuāngzǐ* view of the senses as nodal point-holes or openings of the person[14] that are decisive to define what a human is and to establish its limits and functions.[15] In the *Zhuāngzǐ* the senses are not to be blocked but open for circulation to let things go through us, to avoid isolation from the world. In other words, opening the senses helps us to find the rhythm of nature inside ourselves, to be faithful to what nature suggests. This is congruent with the fact that for both the *Dàodéjīng* and the *Zhuāngzǐ*, the human body is regarded as a microcosm of the universe, as something that inexorably belongs to the world and that must follow nature's order.

This conception is at odds with Western schism between subject (individual) and object (world) and contests the external point of view that claims for objective knowledge. For Daoism, we are part of the whole we aspire to know and our belonging to it subjectivizes that

knowledge.[16] Thus, the *Dào* is deeply marked by the interfusion and identification of the subjectivity of man and the objectivity of things[17]: "It is precisely the *Dào* which makes the epistemic relation possible: if the subject (man) can know the object (reality) from his own inner nature, it is because the *Dào* binds them together."[18] Hence, Daoism's goal is neither objectivity nor certainty. We could even affirm that the goal itself is blurred in Daoism since the stress lies on *the way* (one of the most habitual translations of the slippery notion of *Dào*). This way is not something transcending the world; it is in the world, it is everywhere, it is the whole—the whole of the spontaneity or naturalness of the world.[19] The spontaneous order of the world (including its chaotic aspect[20]) is superior to any artificial object we can create to explain reality—as for example, Max's pattern. Daoism is about how to act and live in the world, a practical learning that has nothing to do with study or erudition,[21] that advocates for the reduction of thought[22] and mistrusts logical thinking. As Graham maintains while comparing the positions of the *Dàodéjīng* and the *Zhuāngzǐ*: "They do share one basic insight, that while other things move spontaneously on the course proper to them, man has separated himself from the Way by reflecting, posing alternatives, and formulating principles of action."[23]

We can appreciate the crash between Max's rational reflection and Sol's spontaneity when they are playing Go (scene 19). Max is hesitant and his former professor advises him: "Stop thinking, Max, just feel. Use your intuition." Just like the Daoist art of living, the game of Go calls for "a supremely intelligent responsiveness which would be undermined by analysing and choosing."[24] Apart from contrasting reflection and spontaneity, Go acts as a plot device that connects with several topics, themes and subthemes of the film including pattern recognition and the importance of Mathematics in such a task, the thin line between genius and insanity, the quest for self-improvement or even the struggle between life and death. Among them, the most central purposes of Go's appearance in *Pi* are to present the non-Western worldview it displays, to pose an alternative to Max's attitude and to set the conflict between Max's and Sol's perspectives on knowledge. This can be especially noticed when Sol explains to his pupil why the ancient Asian cultures considered the Go board to be a microcosm of the universe (scene 38): "Although when it is empty it appears to be simple and ordered, the possibilities of gameplay are endless. They say that no two Go games have ever been alike. Just like snowflakes. So, the Go board actually represents an extremely complex and chaotic universe. That is the truth of our world, Max."

Sol's words bring us closer to the Daoist insight on knowledge: the way is not to control nature but to respect it. Things are subject to change and have many aspects, so Daoism recommends perceiving and responding to every situation as new[25] instead of establishing a strategic plan. After all, the way is "not that which the sage desires, but the course on which he inevitably finds himself in his illuminated state."[26] Contrary to Max's intentions, we cannot fix things that are in flux by naming them, they cannot be reduced to *logos*. Daoism does not name

the unnameable since the *Dào* cannot be determined. The *Dào* is nameless and if we try to express what enables the harmony between being and not-being—between *yīn* and *yáng*—we break that equilibrium. As the first lines of the *Dàodéjīng* assert: "The Tao [*Dào*] that can be spoken of is not the Tao itself. / The name that can be given is not the name itself. / The unnameable is the source of the universe."[27] This approach links to the moral Max learns by the end of the film: you cannot fix the infinite decimals of pi, you cannot *rationalise* that irrational number, you cannot find the pattern that leads to a logical explanation of everything in the same way as you cannot tell the true name of the unnameable Yahweh. But you can act according to your will within the limit of your nature and deepen the mystery.

The very beginning of the *Dàodéjīng* evidences Daoism's mystical perspective. After maintaining that *Dào*'s wonder and *Dào*'s manifestations are one and the same it goes on by proclaiming: "Their identity is called the mystery. / From mystery to further mystery: / The entry of all wonders!"[28] As we are about to see in more detail, reaching the *Dào* is getting to the origin where the opposites are harmonized. This does not mean undoing the mystery, but participating in it—living the mystery without reasoning it.[29] The approach to this mystery— to this identity between *Dào*'s wonder and *Dào*'s manifestations—is through *wúwéi*[30]. This concept—which has been translated as *non-willing* or *non-intention*—refers to action of non-action (to attainment through non-attainment) and can be tracked throughout the *Dàodéjīng*. Maybe the most clarifying passage on *wúwéi* is the following: "Tao is real and free from action, yet nothing is not acted upon. / If rulers abide with it, all things transmute by themselves. / If, in the process of transmutation, intention emerges, it must be overcome by the original non-differentiation of the nameless. / To experience the original non-differentiation of the nameless, one should also be free from intending to have no-intention. / To be free from intending to have no-intention is to be quiescent. / Thereby, the world is naturally led to tranquillity."[31]

It is apparent that *wúwéi* is linked with the returning to the state of original non-differentiation, that is to say, to the achievement of the balance of opposites[32] which "is not a rational affair, nor is it a matter of will, but a psychic process of development."[33] The balance of opposites includes the identity of some contraries we have been dealing with as the union of subject and object—human and universe—and the unification of the two aspects of the soul— *hún* and *pò* or, in other words, the spiritual soul (*yáng*) and the corporeal one (*yīn*). Apart from these, there are some more pairs of contraries that are meaningful in *Pi*. This fact encourages us to dedicate the following section to explain the *Yīn-Yáng* approach and its diverse expressions in the film.

4. THE ILLNESS IS THE CURE: FROM OPPOSITION TO COMPLEMENTARITY

A yīn aspect, a yáng aspect—that is the Dào
— Hsi Tz'u

We could maintain *Pi* is articulated around a series of intertwined dichotomies, many of which have already made an appearance in our essay with greater or less explicitness. It is the case of the pairs mind/body, reason/faith, divine/human, genius/insanity, artificial/natural, goal/way or masculine/feminine. Anyhow, all of them are related in the film to the polarity between Western and Eastern we are exploring through the specific contrast of Western modern science imagery and the principles of Daoism. If we consider the first part of *Pi*, we can observe this main opposition—as well as the others that are linked to it—is accentuated. It is as if the initial purpose of the film was to bring us into Max's mindset, which is marked by the Western tendency towards absolute and well-defined dichotomies. But it is not just a matter of treating opposites as conflicting. Furthermore, before the disjunction, Max's choice always points at the *strong* (*yáng*) element of the pair. Not in vain, the West has aspired throughout a wide range of oppositions (reality/appearance, good/evil, life/death…) to dissolve the second term of the dichotomy in the pure being, to reach the full presence of the first.[34]

However, as the movie unfolds these antitheses vanish progressively and it is more and more difficult for the spectator to face the movie from a simplistic binary position. *Pi* encourages the viewer to embrace complexity and one means for achieving that purpose is blurring the dichotomies it has previously suggested. In this sense, the film seems to follow the Daoist spirit according to which contradictions are simply temporary manifestations and the underlying harmony of *Dào* is fundamental endurance.[35] In other words, *Pi* gradually shifts towards the coexistence and balance of opposites that the principle of *Yīn-Yáng* propounds: "From the Tao, one is created; / From one, two; / From two, three; / From three, ten thousand things. All of them achieve harmony through the unification of affirmation and negation / Which is embraced by everything."[36] This move is more visible in the last third of the film, especially if we take into account both Sol's and Max's respective changes of mind. Before dealing with this example we will add a few considerations about the basal concept of *Yīn-Yáng*.

According to this view, contraries are regarded as mutually dependent and complementary. In our natural changing world, opposite forces may give rise to each other as they are interrelated: "When beauty is universally affirmed as beauty, therein is ugliness. / When goodness is universally affirmed as goodness, therein is evil. / Therefore: being and non-being are mutually posited in their emergence."[37] It is convenient to remark on at least three important differences between the *Yīn-Yáng* theory and the usual Western treatment of contraries. First,

the Eastern principle assumes neither side of a dichotomy is completely true. Keeping balance is what matters and we need both sides to do so: "the worthless serves as the foundation of the worthy. / The inferior serves as the basis of the superior."[38] Secondly, Lǎozǐ advocates for "the reversal of priorities in chains of oppositions",[39] put another way, he emphasizes the importance of the second term of the dichotomy—the *weak* (*yīn*) element of the pair. In third place, the comparison between Lǎozǐ's and Hegel's dialectics reveals that in the former's dialectical process there is no higher synthesis, no elevating moment towards a fixed goal, no progression towards a comprehensive, rational absolute beyond all contradictions.[40]

If we take the two terms of the *Yīn-Yáng* separately, *yáng* alludes to the masculine/active/positive principle of nature while *yīn* refers to the female/passive/negative one. Many other opposite terms are divided into *yīn* and *yáng*, including the seasons of the year or degrees of kinship.[41] Among them, we find the pair light/dark, which is thought to be at the origin of the expression *Yīn-Yáng* since the Chinese traditional characters of *yīn* and *yáng* are translated respectively as "the shady, dark side" and "the sunny, light side" (of the mountain). Working at different levels, the opposition light/dark (as well as the parallel pair white/black) plays an important role in *Pi*. Let us investigate this.

Both thematically and formally, light is linked to knowledge in the film. At first sight, this matches the Western tradition in which knowledge is light as it gives vision. And, in a sense, we could even think this also fits Daoist principles since the active and controlling attitude are with light in the *yáng* side. From this perspective, we might understand why Max's approximations to the elucidation of the pattern are wrapped in light by the fades to white that close several scenes. But we must also consider that these moments are not only related to the attainment of knowledge but especially to the recurring attacks Max suffers whenever he is close to the edge—whenever he is reaching the limits of his investigation, whenever he is experiencing his human limits. Thus, *Pi* uses the association between light and knowledge but mostly pointing to the dangers of the excess. As Max tells at the opening of the film (scenes 1 and 2) and recalls several times later: "When I was a little kid my mother told me not to stare into the sun. So once, when I was six, I did. The doctors didn't know if my eyes would ever heal. I was terrified. Alone in that darkness." We cannot see in total darkness, but we cannot either see in absolute light and so, maybe Max is not so much an enlightened person but a dazzled one. In accordance with the *Yīn-Yáng* view, the excesses blind us and one thing can easily be transformed into its contrary, so it is better for us to leave behind conflicting dichotomies and try to keep balance: "Because the natures of things vary, one acts, another copies; / One breathes lightly, another breathes heavily; / One is vigorous, one is meek; / One carries on, another fails. / Thus, the wise is not excessive, overindulgent, or extreme."[42]

These last considerations also find their way through a formal approach to the film. In the previous section we introduced the high contrast black and white photography that

characterised a great part of *Pi* and more recently we have referred to Max's Western tendency towards a dichotomous outlook. Now we can read both things together and understand this extreme photography as another way of depicting Max's inclinations: his all-or-nothing attitude matches perfectly with the contrast between shiny white and completely dark black in the frame. Nevertheless, the photography of the film also sets an alternative in some scenes. This is the case of the passage at the beach we mentioned previously in which Max opened himself to nature and glimpsed a new grasp. And that is also what happens in the epilogue of the film (scene 82) which confirms Max's turnabout. Natural lighting results in grainless and softer images of the playground; the little girl, Jenna (Kristyn Mae-Anne Lao) and the leaves Max stares at. The hues of greyscale bring us closer to the protagonist's new state of harmony and peace and suggest that in *Pi* (brought-to-its-limits) knowledge can be bright white but wisdom is grey (or black and white at the same time).

The allusion to the end of the movie takes us back to the opposition between Max's and Sol's views on knowledge we have dealt with in the previous section. Now we are ready to return to the issue and watch it under the light of the *Yīn-Yáng* principles. As we said before, Max and Sol's encounters sketch the two perspectives the film sets in dialogue. On the one hand, Max's Western modern view on knowledge; on the other, Sol's Eastern approach we have read in Daoist fashion. Our exposition on this has certainly been quite dichotomous. Indeed, while Max's standpoint was presented as an illness Sol's advices were regarded as the cure. In our defence we must say that we were trying to reflect the same conflict the film displays. But as we said some paragraphs above, *Pi* draws several strong dichotomies at the beginning of the film and proceeds to blur them as the story unfolds. That is what we can notice if we look at the disparity between Max and Sol more carefully.

Once we have come to be aware of Max's mental disorder and anguish, our hopes are redirected towards Sol since we expect him to save Max from falling. We can even be tempted to consider him a sort of incarnation of Daoism that can enlighten Max and lead him to the (b)right way—not in vain his name refers to the main source of natural light and he uses the white stones while playing Go. However, as the final part of the film shows, it is not as simple as Sol being the good one embodying the rightness. On Max's last visit to Sol's apartment (scene 73) he is told his former professor has suffered a second stroke. Max rushes into Sol's study to find it covered with pi research books. The black and white Go stones are arranged in a giant spiral across the game board. A piece of paper with Sol's handwriting on it is at the centre of the spiral and contains the sequence of numbers Max is desperately looking for. The old mathematician has succumbed to the fatal temptation he was trying to prevent Max from while the brilliant pupil is about to welcome a new way of thinking—a new way of being, a new way of living. To sum up, Sol and Max switch positions: light has turned into dark and dark will soon turn into light.

The following shots show Max in his apartment staring at Sol's handwritten string of numbers (scene 74). His thumb is twitching; he is starting to suffer a new seizure. He drops Sol's note and throws the pills he usually takes. Max's pain transforms into violence, and he smashes his computer while reciting the numbers with rage in his voice. The short and dark shots, the extremely agitated framing and the shrill soundtrack transmit the protagonist's distress to the viewer. Then, Max yanks the entire window open. Sunlight floods the room and throws the main character into a blinding white void (scene 75). All dressed in black, Max stands in the middle of that bright metaphysical space. Everything is silent and calm. A sort of white fog is progressively dissolving Max's figure. The screenplay of the film describes the scene as follows: "The pain is gone. Everything is new to Max (…). The stress releases from his brow and his shoulders sag. Max continues to recite the number. His voice becomes tender and peaceful. As he starts to become part of the void, his voice turns into a whisper and his eyes start to close."[43] Before the passage, we wonder: Has he reached his ultimate *goal*, i.e., the total knowledge that his Western rational enterprise pursued[44]? Has he otherwise found the *way* and entered the supreme void that enables a direct experience of the *Dào*? Is he seeing things *in the light of Heaven*,[45] from a higher point of view? The fact that these differently oriented questions make sense altogether lead us to think that the two opposite views on knowledge we have been dealing with reconcile somehow in this scene.

The next shot brings us back to the protagonist's apartment. Devi grabs Max's palm and his fingers wrap around her hand. They are both fused in a hug. He sobs and holds on to her for dear life. Max finally seems to be taking notice of Sol's warnings. He is embracing the woman –the *yīn* aspect that helps him keep balance—and, at the same time, he may be embracing a new, healthier way of relating to the others, to the world and to himself. Max's following action reinforces this idea: in front of the bath's broken mirror, the young mathematician lights a match and burns Sol's note. Shortly after, Max holds a drill. He places the bit against his scalp, applies pressure and drills into his brain. This time there is no fade to white but a quick cut to black that sets us thinking: Is what we have just watched another of Max's recurring hallucinations? Has he committed suicide? Should we understand this as a metaphorical death?

The final scene shows a renewed, reborn Max. He watches a tree branch gently blowing in the wind with peaceful, understanding eyes. Jenna approaches him and hands Max a leaf. We see him smiling for the very first time in the film. Once more, the little child challenges him to calculate in his head a difficult mathematical operation. But Max is no longer the one who provides the answer, the one who wants to speak the truth. In a *wúwéi* fashion, he is completely quiet and free from any intention. Similarly to Jenna, he is someone *not-knowing*, he is not calculating but playing. He smiles to the girl again, as if he were sharing the happiness of being in accordance with his—human and not divine—nature. He has learned how to preserve life and avoid harm and danger, that is to say, he has reached a final resolution of the original

problem of the early Daoists[46] and he has achieved it, as the *Zhuāngzǐ*, by abolishing the problem: "The universe is the unity of all things. If we attain this unity and identify ourselves with it, then the members of our body are but so much dust and dirt, while life and death, beginning and end, are but as the succession of day and night, which cannot disturb our inner peace. How much less shall we be troubled by worldly gain and loss, good luck and bad luck!"[47] Max looks skyward. A subjective shot shows the tree branch again. The image is almost identical to the one we saw before (scene 7), when Max watched the branch with analytical eyes and his voice-over talked about patterns. However, his gaze and his insight are completely different now[48]. At last, Max has dismissed his former *goal* and seems to have found the *way* that enables to live the mystery without reasoning it.

5. CONCLUSIONS

> *Do not be the owner of fame. Do not be full of plans.*
> *Do not be busy with work. Do not be the master of knowledge.*
> *Identify yourself with the infinite. Make excursion into the void.*
> *Exercise fully what you have received from nature, but gain nothing besides. In one word, be empty.*
>
> — *Zhuāngzǐ, Chapter 7*

In this article we try to explore the dialogue that *Pi* proposes to establish between Western and Eastern worldviews by specifically contrasting Western modern imagery and the Daoist outlook. First, we have dealt with the excesses of Max's standpoint on knowledge. We have related his search for a pattern with Western modern science— with its obsession with certainty and the achievement of a unified theory, with its replacement of the world by an image and with its repression of body and subjectivity. Then, we have tried to show the way the film presents Chinese tradition and Daoism as a means to overcome Max's distorted perspective. Departing from the reference to Tai Chi, we have considered the term *xīn* and its relation to the senses. We have highlighted the importance of the body for Daoism and presented it as fundamental for the link between individual and nature. Furthermore, by examining the role Go plays in the movie we have been able to underscore the Daoist preference of spontaneity over reflection, to establish the opposition between Max and Sol, to introduce the concept of *wúwéi* and, ultimately, to shed some light on the very notion of *Dào*. The last section has been devoted to analysing the main dichotomies the film displays. By focusing principally on the pairs light/dark, Max/Sol and Western/Eastern we have appreciated how contraries are transformed and oppositions are dissolved throughout the course of the film following the *Yīn-Yáng* spirit.

Last of all, we have analysed under this viewpoint the final scenes that substantiate Max's switch.

Having reached this point, we discuss the film's position regarding the dialogue between West and East. On the one hand, it can be maintained the movie advocates for the balance and complementarity of Western and Eastern worldviews and for the mutual enrichment this interchange may lead to. After all, *Pi* can reasonably be considered a philosophical film that explores human condition, a crucial subject in all philosophical traditions. Furthermore, the film's storytelling supports this balance between traditions by adopting a spiral narrative[49] form that joins Western taste for linear models to Chinese tendency to the circular ones. On the other hand, but without denying at all everything we have just said, we can affirm *Pi* decidedly aligns itself with the Eastern alternative and adheres to the Daoist point of view. At least two intertwined arguments would bear-out this claim over the previous one. Firstly, as we have seen on approaching *Yīn-Yáng*, the balance and complementarity, themselves, constitute a Daoist trait. Secondly, for balance and enrichment to happen it is necessary to observe Lǎozǐ's reversal and deconstruct chains in which *yáng* is traditionally preferred to *yīn*—or, we might say, in which the Western is preferred to the Eastern. Consequently, both opinions on the film's message are not so different as they are complementary—they can mutually be held simultaneously—and, more importantly, the second position happens to be the fundamental one.

Thus, *Pi* stands up for Eastern traditions and, as we have tried to show, presents Daoism as a cure for the excesses of Western modern science. In a similar way to Lǎozǐ's aphorisms, the cryptic movie renders it impossible to reach a closed and ultimate analysis of it and its mystical approach invites the viewers to learn without being taught, to discover for themselves. As it happens in Daoism, the film impels the spectators to a hermeneutic commitment—to a departing point from which they may enter the mystery since there is no *pattern* that could explain the whole of *Pi*, no one-and-only truth we can name in the film. In other words, before the spiral *Pi* displays for us, we are pushed to open our senses and mind to find our own *way*.

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[1] We will use the official romanisation system for Standard Chinese (*Hànyǔ pīnyīn*) when transcribing. This will not apply when dealing with expressions such as Tai Chi or Go which are used in common English.

[2] We will use the translation of the *Dàodéjīng* contained in Chung-yuan Chang, *Tao. A New Way of Thinking* (London and Philadelphia: Singing Dragon, 2014) and the translation of the *Zhuāngzǐ* offered by Fung Yu-Ian, *Chuang-Tzu. A New Selected Translation with an Exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang* (Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht and London: Springer, 2016).

[3] Ilya Prigogine, "What we do not know?," *Philosophy Forum - UNESCO*, March 14, 1995.

[4] Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, ed, and trans. William Lovitt (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1977), 122.

[5] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed. Reflections on the Ontology of Film. Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 39, 102.

[6] Jadranka Skorin-Kapov, *Darren Aronofsky's Films and the Fragility of Hope* (New York, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 5.

[7] André Gaudreault and François Jost, *El relato cinematográfico*, trans. Núria Pujol (Barcelona: Paidós, 1995), 146.

[8] Louis Sass and Josef Parnas, "Schizophrenia, Consciousness, and the Self," *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 29, no. 3 (2003): 427-444.

[9] Jane Geaney, *On the Epistemology of the Senses in Early Chinese Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 12.

[10] Jane Geaney, *On the Epistemology of the Senses...*, 13.

[11] Angus Charles Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle: Open Court, 1989), 182.

[12] Jane Geaney, *On the Epistemology of the Senses...*, 164.

[13] Our view on Max's desire relates to what is maintained in Skorin-Kapov, *Darren Aronofsky's Films…*, 11: "We cannot say that Max is emotionally dead; on the contrary, his emotions run very high when working on his hypotheses and trying to understand the underlying pattern to achieve perfection. But he is caught up in his emotional cage when dealing with people, especially the woman he is attracted to."

[14] Cf. *Zhuāngzǐ*, Chapter 7.

[15] Gabriel Terol, "La epistemología subjetiva del daoísmo primitivo" (PhD diss., Universitat de València, 2015), 517.

[16] Gabriel Terol, "La epistemología subjetiva...", 495.

[17] Chung-yuan Chang, *Tao. A New Way of Thinking*, 15.

[18] Gabriel Terol, "La epistemología subjetiva...", 553.

[19] Fung Yu-Ian, *Chuang-Tzu*, xi.

[20] Cf. *Dàodéjīng*, Chapter 25.

[21] Cf. *Dàodéjīng*, Chapter 65.

[22] Cf. *Dàodéjīng*, Chapter 48.

[23] Angus Charles Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 172.

[24] Angus Charles Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 186.

[25] Cf. *Zhuāngzǐ*, Chapter 33.

[26] Angus Charles Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 191.

[27] *Dàodéjīng*, Chapter 1.

[28] *Dàodéjīng*, Chapter 1.

[29] Gabriel Terol, "La epistemología subjetiva...", 500.

[30] Chung-yuan Chang, *Tao. A New Way of Thinking*, 35.

[31] *Dàodéjīng*, Chapter 37.

[32] Cf. *Dàodéjīng*, Chapter 28.

[33] Carl Jung, *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life* (London: Routledge, 1999), 99.

[34] Angus Charles Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 227.

[35] Chung-yuan Chang, *Tao. A New Way of Thinking*, 189.

[36] *Dàodéjīng*, Chapter 42.

[37] *Dàodéjīng*, Chapter 2.

[38] *Dàodéjīng*, Chapter 39.

[39] Angus Charles Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 223.

[40] Chung-yuan Chang, *Tao. A New Way of Thinking*, 41.

[41] For a complete list of opposites vid. Angus Charles Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 330-331.

[42] *Dàodéjīng*, Chapter 29.

[43] Darren Aronofsky, *Pi Screenplay & The Guerilla Diaries* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 150.

[44] This would constitute the "depiction of the paradoxical and harrowing nature of the fully fledged psychotic break, in which the subject is completely engulfed by the jouissance of the Other" as we can read in Paul Eisenstein, "Visions and Numbers; Aronofsky's Π and the Primordial Signifier," in *Lacan and Contemporary Film*, ed. Tod McGowan and Sheila Kunkle (New York: Other Press, 2004), 11.

[45] Cf. *Zhuāngzǐ*, Chapter 2.

[46] Cf. Fung Yu-Ian, *Chuang-Tzu*, 73.

[47] *Zhuāngzǐ*, Chapter 21.

[48] We find similar commentaries on the film's last scene in Eisenstein, "Visions and Numbers", 26: "This decision in favor of non-knowledge is captured cinematically as well in the frames with which the film closes—reverse zoom point-of-view shots that complete the arc established in the film's opening in which Max gains some much-needed distance from Nature. Shot at the normal frame rate, Max gazes at leaves blowing in the wind in a way that no longer regards them as the bearer of a hidden and/or sinister pattern or meaning."

[49] This spiral narrative or "regular pattern of repetitive events" in the film is also observed in Elizabeth Klaver, "'Proof, π, and Happy Days': The Performance of Mathematics," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 38, no 1 (Spring 2005): 14.

THE LOGIC OF PAIN IN TALKING BODIES:
AN APPROACH TO *HAN* IN THE FILMS OF HONG SANG-SOO AND LEE C
HANG-DONG

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1. INTRODUCTION

The awarding of the 2020 Oscar for Best Picture to *Parasite* (Bong Joon-ho, 2019) was one of the biggest milestones in the global circulation of South Korean audiovisual productions, a phenomenon that has emerged as a singular object of study both for the aesthetic representations it has disseminated and for the multiple narrative forms and structures it has articulated. The global impact of South Korean audiovisual culture in the context of *Hallyu*—also known as the Korean Wave—has attracted considerable attention in film studies. Examples of *Hallyu* range from the widely popular aesthetics of K-pop music videos to the massive audiences generated by South Korean TV series (from niche K-drama to mainstream successes such as *Squid Game*) on SVoD platforms. However, while these fashionable cultural products have often overshadowed South Korea's substantial production on the art-film circuit, South Korean film auteurs offer some of the most insightful explorations of the malaise of contemporary South Korean society.

The purpose of this article is to explore the representation of grief and its translation into stories that tell us about the internalized past of individuals in a state of perpetual sorrow in two contemporary Korean films: *On the Beach at Night Alone* (Bamui haebyun-eoseo honja, Hong Sang-soo, 2017; hereinafter, *OBNA*) and *Burning* (Lee Chang-dong, 2018). The article focuses on the concept of *han* (恨) in the cinematic universes of two *auteurs* of the 386 Generation: Hong Sang-soo and Lee Chang-dong. The concept of *han* is an inherent element of the modes of representation in South Korean cinema and considered to be an essential feature of Korean culture. A legacy of the colonialist era, *han* takes us from the individual to the collective, on an endless search for recognition by the Other. The loss of the object of desire in an unwanted separation for the protagonists of both films—Young-hee in *OBNA* and Jong-su in *Burning*— can only be understood within a framework that considers the historical precedents involved in the consolidation of *han*. In this article, this framework is applied to support an analysis of the

mise-en-scène and narratives of both films, to explore how the poetics of their discourse constitutes a dialogic event in which the known and the different engender each other.

To explore the cross-cultural nature of the concept of *han*, this study correlates it with the psychoanalytic model of melancholia, an emotion with which it is intrinsically related. Like melancholia, *han* reflects a loss of identity and inhibition of the self. The findings of this analysis reveal that the existential pain of the main characters of both films establishes a dialectic between *han* and empty spaces. Through this dialectic, the narration in *OBNA* creates labyrinths where repetition will give rise to a pain contained on the threshold between the spaces of its empty world. Similarly, through a series of POV shots, the narration in *Burning* conveys the idea of an absence.

The characters in these films verbally express their ability to dialogue with memory and access the trauma caused by their loss of self. As spectators, we have access to their past through their memories: in *Burning*, those memories remain lost and reduced to oblivion, while in *OBNA*, they can only be found in lines in the sand on the seashore—where Korean poets write. This is where pain is born: out of the inability to fulfil the unconscious desire—or, in itself, the inability to accept the absence of a loved one.

2. GENEALOGY OF *HAN* AND SOUTH KOREAN CINEMA

2.1. Colonialism, Independence, and Censorship

Han could be translated as pain, grief, anguish, or the longing experienced on the Korean peninsula in the course of a history of repression and censorship:

> The concept of *han* emerged in an attempt to reflect the oppression experienced during the colonial period due to political governmental authoritarianism, as well as Western imperialism; this shows that the agency of Koreans is still subject to Japanese colonial discourse and has been shaped by it[1].

The arrival of cinema in Korea dates back to 1918. At that moment, the colonization of the consciousnesses of subjects subjugated to the order of the political elites began. This process would lead to a constant quest to reconstruct Korean tradition in the search for symbols of national identity:

> Today, while the infiltration of Western ways and ideas into almost every sphere of Korean life is undeniable, the need to preserve some corner of national identity that resists this penetration is often keenly felt[2].

The idea of desire as an illusion doomed to dissolve gave rise to a fantasy to be constructed: a national identity based on anti-Japanese sentiment and drawing on imaginaries of Western philosophy, religion, and literature "that had long been captivated by narratives of penetration, in which a hero overcomes a formidable obstacle"[3]. In an attempt to challenge the repression of colonialism, Korea thus found an escape, a form of resistance. Lee's and Hong's films both express this resistance, establishing a correlation between memory, remembrance, and the stanzas of a poem. Spectators are drawn into the game of memory by means of the resemblance between *han* and melancholia: "*han* is the ghostly excess remains of trauma that cannot be assimilated"[4]. With this in mind, this study attempts to focus on how the memories of the characters traversed by the grief permeate the representation.

South Korean cinema, distinguished by its solid narrative components and meaningful settings, makes use of the stories it tells to explore separation, in an effort to delve into different forms of pain. The rift on the Korean peninsula could only be understood through an approach to the historical precedents involved in the consolidation of a very specific form of pain. The projection of an image of an identity that the world seemed unaware of required the recreation of virtual images of the past. These images would ultimately become a metonymic vehicle used for the purpose of representing Koreans' ongoing search for modernity and a post-authoritarian identity[5]. The abundance of South Korean productions on SVoD platforms highlights the need to attempt a reading of its discourses and the scenarios they propose, as the cross-cultural quality of *han* allows us to view it as something that is "transcultural, intercultural and extant in all human communities […] it is not the uniqueness of *han* that makes it untranslatable, but the unique experience of suffering that in and of itself is always untranslatable and that melancholia marks any colonial and postcolonial context"[6].

2.2. *Han* and Melancholia

The loss of a sense of collective identity is key to the transculturality of *han* and the melancholic condition implicit in it:

> Melancholy is not unknown in the world of colonialism and postcolonialism. The concept of *han*, therefore, has to be understood in this context of intercultural, transcultural, intertextual movement, with the blending as well as crossing-over of ideas, beliefs, and meanings of other cultural works and ideas[7].

The beginnings of Korean cinema were marked by the lack of a voice, whereby repression and separation were established as signifiers, laying the foundations that would later turn Korean cinema into a tool for empowerment. Early Korean film productions sought to compensate for the deficiencies of national identity that could not be overcome by the heavily

censored cinema of the liberation period [8]. The first relations between the subject of domination—the subjugated—and the colonial master were thus articulated. This dialectic would become one of the main features of contemporary South Korean narratives. From Hegel's perspective, the master is expressed in the colonizer, who projects himself onto the slave; the slave, in turn, is the only active subject of history and therefore the one on whom the development of history depends[9]. Lacanian psychoanalytic theory conceptualizes the master's discourse based on the relationship between the master (Japan, the United States) and the slave (Korea): the hidden truth of the master is that he is castrated, a desiring subject whose lack cannot be satisfied by what the slave produces, as like the slave, the master is also subject to symbolic law. From this it follows that the master's interest is that all things should be equal for everyone; as the master has no interest in knowledge, the master's discourse is a discourse of unknowing, and thus a discourse of the unconscious[10].

The first of the analogies between *han* and melancholia can be found in the loss of a loved one or of an abstraction, such as the homeland, freedom, or an ideal[11]. The melancholic condition thus produces a peculiarly phantasmal formation of the self, retaining the loss of the love object by identifying with the phantasm of the Other, the lost love object. Melancholia therefore implies a loss of self-identity: "the central aspect of *han* is not emotions, but loss of identity. What unites Koreans is that they lack a collective identity"[12]. This specific sense of *han* particularly affected the generations after the Civil War (1950-1953), who grew up in a divided country.

2.3. A Matter Of Identity: The 386 Generation

After the assassination of dictator Park Chung-hee in 1979, attempts to establish democracy were marked by the turmoil caused by successive *coups d'état* and the struggle for independence. A revolutionary younger generation provided the perfect context for the rise of a new politically active group of artists, the so-called 386 Generation, who led the left-leaning anti-dictatorship student movement in the 1980s[13]. The 386 Generation took shape around the Eden of memory, of absence, and of the loss resulting from the massacres of this tumultuous period:

> The *386 Generation*, also known as the generation of the collective auteur, began to explore new ways of converting memory to the screen, of generating and reversing its virtuality, in the never-ending mutability of the display of pain. It is this generation to which directors such as Bong Joon-ho, Lee Chang-dong, Hong Sang-soo, Kim Ki-duk or Im Kwon-taek belong: "all made work that featured similar visions of Seoul as a place of nomads, dislocation, and extraterritoriality"[14].

The purpose of this collective was not to delve into the past to explore ordinary life, but to explore the painful transition from the realm of the public into the private. It is here, where the movable condition of pain uses the narcissistic condition of the self as a channel, where a disconnection is established between the jouissance of the self and the suffering of the Other. The ideas of decolonization, cultural independence, and sovereignty would effectively challenge the hegemony of Hollywood, and it was in this way that South Korean cinema created its own audience in the late 1990s.

Globalization began to have an impact on South Korea in the late 1980s. After 1988, when film directors were no longer required to submit their scripts to censors for approval, a certain degree of social critique began to emerge[15]. The changes to film production policies thus created a new scenario where independent producers were able to enter the industry. Each movement of upheaval and political turmoil created a new opportunity for a cultural renaissance. In this context, *Hallyu* came to bridge the gap between the individual and the collective[16]. The liberal policies that allowed the influx of foreign cultural influences shaped *Hallyu* with its narratives defined by state policies and socio-economic factors[17]. This latter influence marked the development of an identity understood in mimesis with the Other. Cinema would eventually become a cultural medium through which Korea established itself as a new power sustained by its own audiovisual production[18].

Thus, the cultural phenomenon of *Hallyu* constituted an interweaving of two elements: an aesthetic *auteurist* revolt against both the waning forces of Korean nationalism (*minjok-juui*) and the legacy of the authoritarianism (*kwonui-juui*) that had characterized South Korea throughout much of the latter part of the 20th century; and postmodernism, typified by lavishly produced, standardized multi-genre blockbusters targeting a pan-Asian audience[19].

Based on the above considerations, it is clear that Hong and Lee explore literary forms in film as starting points for the exploration of suffering and the representation of *han*. The presence of poetry in *OBNA*, and the Japanese heritage of Haruki Murakami's writings in *Burning* reflect the consolidation of Korean identity as a result of an influx of foreign cultures[20]. It is in the empty worlds these filmmakers create that *han* will ultimately lead to tragedy in two ways: the negation of the master's discourse, and the use of repetition. The existence of these empty worlds defines both *OBNA* and *Burning*, and in both films the traumatic event is linked to loss. On the border between a desolate space and a cosmopolitan fantasy realm, we witness the tale of a death foretold (Hae-Mi, played by Jeon Jong-seo in *Burning*) and the burial of a memory beneath the suffering of the present (Young-hee, played by Kim Min-hee in *OBNA*). Both are "Antigonesque" characters in a permanent state of transition, on a journey toward foreign spaces where they will seek an identity distinct from the one that has been attributed to them through *han*.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study offers a textual analysis of *OBNA* and *Burning* with the aim of identifying analogies between the main object of study, *han*, and the concept of melancholia. As a starting point to the analysis of the pain embodied in the plotlines of separation and the symptom of social abjection, it is necessary to identify the narcissistic vision of the self. To this end, the methodology for this study is based on the approach proposed by Marzal Felici and Gómez Tarín: to break down the most important sequence of each film into its constituent elements, and to establish relationships between these elements in order to explain the mechanisms that unite them as a "signifying whole"[21].

The logics of *han* are to be found in language, which serves as a symbolic space where the speaker anticipates the tragedy: language now indicates the direction of a force, and the spectator needs to be able to recognize forces and traumatic actions directed by signs[22]. *Han* emerges in the dominant themes of the two stories, somewhere between abjection and mimesis, in the essence of the tragedy, and in the connections between the characters.

3. *ON THE BEACH ALONE AT NIGHT*

Hong's cinematographic world unfolds in the spaces of everyday life with a soft, attenuated tone. In Hong's films, ordinary spaces are populated by intellectual subjects expelled from their conventional lives on a quest to find authenticity in a foreign setting. This conception explains Hong's interest in disrupting the events in his films by playing with repetition and altering the chronological order of the narrative. At the level of the character'' discourse, the questioning of a profound crisis of language constitutes the main theme. Misunderstandings of language constitute a spiral that main characters cannot escape. The inadequacy of language is the organizing principle of the everyday life represented in his films. This is one of the keys to Hong's cinema: "since two can no longer speak to each other, the only way to communicate is by going outside the domain of language"[23].

Hong alludes to the capacity of literature for expressing suffering by naming his film using the title to a poem by the American author Walt Whitman: "On the Beach at Night Alone." Indeed, Whitman's poem contains what could be the definition of the spaces inhabited by the

characters in Hong's film, as "the beach represents standing on the shore of eternity or afterlife"[24]. The distances between bodies, identities, and their souls are contained in the lines of the poem, and they will all be combined together with this narrative in order to explore its branching pathways and construct the story out of possibilities, imagining, rewriting, and repeating the search for that which has disappeared.

4.1. Otherness in the Mise-En-Scène

The protagonist in *OBNA*, an actress named Young-hee, is in Hamburg visiting her friend, Jee-young (Seo Yeong-hwa). Young-hee's decision to go abroad in a quest for desire will trigger a tragedy: the loss of her beloved, the filmmaker Sang-won (Moon Sung-Keun), who made her a promise he cannot keep: to go in search of her. The film's narrative poses a question about grief in a cosmopolitan world: What is left when language is not enough?

At the beginning of the second part of the film, Young-hee has returned to Seoul. It is here that she will return to the beach, the space of eternity, and where the story will split into two fragments: the dreamlike encounter with her beloved, and the real space where the fantasy dissolves and the heartbreak heals. Hong's characters assume the role of *flâneurs*, traveling paths where repetition serves to construct those spaces that can only be created in the form of the dream-image.

The use of repetition here offers a way of revealing the character's grief over an unwanted separation and the implicit loss of the love object. The resulting structure of the film reveals how the autobiographical elements implicit in Hong's films (in the characters' thoughts and actions) and his use of the rhetoric of confession (testimony, poetry) consolidate the relationships between the characters and the different points of view existing in the filmic space.

4.2. Empty Spaces and Idle Times

In her pursuit of desire and her search for identity, Young-hee escapes into the foreign setting. The film's narrative portrays strangeness and the search for identity through the foreign, in the long walks where the camera remains static, tracking the movement of bodies through the threshold into the unknown. The awakening of Young-hee's memory, her confession of the reason for her flight abroad, is also the confession of the reason for her pain. Desire is outside, in the exterior world, where the first of the differences between the spaces is established: while the world beyond is alluded to in the composition through the depth of field, the interior spaces are expressed through the word. In this way, Hong constructs the space that the tragedy will occupy, playing with zoom-in and -out and introducing pan shots to establish a dialogue with the world beyond, where desire will be laid to rest and tragedy will be unleashed.

It is in this way that the narration in *OBNA* articulates the spaces outside the present story. As in other films by Hong, an ode to memory is intoned by a riverbank. The frozen river in *Hotel by the River* (*Gangbyeon hotel*, Hong-Sang Soo, 2018; figure 1) renders explicit the same act of rewriting over a past that has been frozen or drowned under a rising tide, through the traced lines of recollection that awaken Young-hee's memory in *OBNA* (figure 2).

Figure 1. Hong Sang-soo illustrates the landscape of the memory on the riverbank of *Hotel by the River*, (Sang-soo, 2018)

Figure 2. Young-Hee formulates the desire to reunite with her beloved in *On the Beach at Night Alone* (Sang-soo, 2019)

The space between the real and the oneiric can only be crossed by the Unkwown Man as a stranger (figure 3). The exchange of glances with the stranger, who seems to be able to transgress the limits of the frame and the limits of time, reveals the intricacies of Young-hee's memory. It is here that we are given a clue about the protagonist, who, as she wanders, crosses the threshold into the unknown: whoever crosses this threshold undergoes a transformation[25] . In crossing the threshold, Young-hee experiences the pain resulting from the denial of her loss. It is on the threshold between these two spaces that the fantasy of the arrival of the Other is sustained[26]. Her love object, Sang-won, is always present between her words, exposing the narcissistic wound of her attachment to an idealized Other.

Finally, we witness the space where she lays down her desire. Unable to assimilate the failure of her beloved to arrive at the meeting point, Young-hee ends up drawing his face in the sand. In her recreation of Sang-won's appearance, Young-hee leaves an imprint, as if she were trying to revive the memory of the Other between the shores of Hamburg and Seoul. The absence of the love object compels her to give her body to the sea, as she is incapable of ridding herself of her pain, a pain by which she defines herself at every moment: The *han* consists in the absence of her beloved. It is on that horizon where, perhaps, her voice will be answered, on a far shore where she will meet the absent lover.

The first episode of this film ends in a peculiar way. The one to whom we could not assign an identity, qualifying him as the Unknown Man, is now a familiar character. The Unknown Man who makes the impossible crossing (figure 3) over the temporal space is the one who ends up carrying Young-hee's body (figure 4) after her encounter with her beloved among the traces of memory.

Figure 3. The first appearance of the Unknown Man and the evidence of the first fracture of time in the plot of *OBNA*

Figure 4. The fall of Young-Hee facing the impossibility of her desire

4.3. The narration on the shore of the absent lover

We return to the shores, but not the same ones. Crossing different thresholds, doors that lead us from one place to another, we meet the Unknown Man again (figure 5). He remains trapped in Young-hee's dream, as no one has any notion of his existence. Now he finds himself cleaning the glass that separates us from the other shore, the space where the implicit dream will take place, a dream of the encounter with the lost love object. The Unkwown Man is thus no more than a sleepwalker who traces the boundary between the implicit dream and the space of reality. His presence contains something of Deleuze's concept of the crystal-image:

> The crystal is expression. Expression moves from the mirror to the seed. It is the same circuit which passes through three figures, the actual and the virtual, the limpid and the opaque, the seed and the environment[27].

The seed whose silhouette we can see behind the glass introduces us to a game of reflections, where the past converges with the reflection of the present: a virtual image. It is an image that only the spectators witness and that no longer forms part of the present; it is no longer trapped in the space of the virtual but in the dream-image of the protagonist, outside the frame of perception of the characters. It is here that the present is broken, open to make room for a world beyond, which only the spectator can see. And it is here that the specifics of the tragedy will occur, and where the power of its horrifying and moving effect resides[28].

Figure 5. The Unknown Man tracing the limit between the oneiric and the real

This crystal will give way to the experience of the oneiric. The dream expands to become the threshold between the two absences: the loss of the love object with the arrival of the idealized subject (the filmmaker, Sang-won) in Hamburg, and the consequent loss of the self, Young-hee, in the Other. It is here that desire crumbles (figure 6). When she wakes up, an assistant to Sang-won immediately recognizes her from the sketch of the filmmaker's face that she has traced in the sand. Young-hee, yielding once again to the pain of an ill-fated love, surrenders herself to the sea.

Figure 6. Young-Hee returns to the shore in another attempt to reimagine her desire daydreaming

Hong's use of editing juxtaposes fragmented memories out of chronological order. Repetition is used as the only clue for reordering the memories belonging to different timeframes: that of a continuous present and an unassimilated past. In this context, *han* emerges as a bridge between geographical settings where the narrative responds to the need to dialogue with memory, a legacy of the narratives of the 386 Generation. In the film's next sequence, poetry is used to express the pain from which Young-Hee wants to escape. Young-hee decides she does not wish to be identified with her wound, with what the Other has marked on her body.

The banquet scene (figure 7) features the first appearance of the beloved, the director Sang-won, who recites poetry. This is the language that pain adopts; what cannot be expressed with the characters' own voices is left to the voice of poetry, to the words of an anonymous writer. Once again, desire is established between close-ups, inserted between pan shots where the silence of the other characters gives way to Young-hee asking herself: "is he in pain?". The beloved, in pain, has arrived at the wrong time. He is not even capable of expressing his love with his own words, and so he must search for the words of others to which he can lend his voice. In this substitution of the gaze of words for the unrequited gaze of Young-hee, Sang-won recites his pain between verses, connecting memory to the logic of *memento mori*.

Figure 7. Sang-wong and the reconciliation that only occurs in the dream-image

The poem, which is addressed to Young-hee, belongs to a past time, to something lost. Young-hee, like Antigone, is swept away by passion. In her reverie of the reunion with her beloved we see the melancholic component: she holds onto the image, the face of that idealized Other, but reconciliation will only be possible in the dream-image. The "emptying self"[29] surrenders to the reason of the empty world, as Sang-won's fragment of poetry fails to sustain their love.

Once again, we return to the shore, the setting where the story will end. As the camera glides to the right, a panning movement reveals the final destination of desire (figure 8). It is a desire that warns of the danger of the sea, of the rising tide. The voice that interrupts the noises of nature manifests itself in a virtual-image, as the same Unknown Man—who in the dream-image is identified with the director's assistant—wakes Young-hee up. This is the moment when we witness the only testimony of reality: it was all a dream; she was fast asleep. It is at this moment that all poetry is lost at sea (figure 9). We have witnessed a love which, like that sleepwalker wandering around the crystal-image, is trapped in reality, a reality we will never be privy to because it cannot be recreated.

Figure 8. Young-Hee's desire banishes and she collapses into the realm of reality

Figure 9. Is in the impossibility of Young-Hee's desire where *han* is revealed again

5. *BURNING*

In postmodernist thought, trauma and the mutability of its symptomatology place the advent of the tragic between the time of the self and the personalization of pain, where there is no room for considering the demands of others. These are the articulating motifs of Lee Chang-dong's most recent narratives. *Burning*, an adaptation of the Japanese short story *Naya wo yaku* (Haruki Murakami, 1983), explores the question of memory, inviting viewers on a journey through cityscapes of Seoul where memory is revealed amidst the flashes of neon lights, and the darkness that rises between rural villages, to the rhythm of voices between borders.

      A disoriented young writer crosses the pavements of Seoul in a cloud of cigarette smoke. Hiding his face behind the goods he has to deliver, Jong-su (Yoo Ah-in) is recognized by a young woman in disguise, dressed up as a dancing flight attendant at the doors of a shopping mall: It is Hae-mi (Jeon Jong-seo), a former classmate and neighbor from his hometown of Paju, who is working there as a hostess in a street raffle. This is how the story of *Burning* begins, as time stands still after the protagonist's reunion with the one who will become the trigger for his melancholia. After a series of encounters, Hae-Mi leaves to Africa in order to find her identity in the territory of the foreign, just like the protagonist in *OBNA*. However, after her overseas search of her lost self, Hae-mi returns accompanied by Ben (Steve Yeun), a Westernized stranger who reveals something of the order of the sinister—*Unheimlich*—when he confesses to a penchant for burning barns. For Jong-su, Ben's confession will eventually awaken the memory of his mother's abandonment, and it will also arouse his suspicions of Ben's involvement in Hae-mi's subsequent disappearance. Throughout the story, as he struggles to deal with the loss of Hae-mi, Jong-su hunts for clues as to her whereabouts, leading him again and again to a topography of absence in his quest for the truth. The desire to express his love for Hae-mi in words will ultimately lead him to pursue Ben.

5.1. Pursuing the impossible: mise-en-scène in *Burning*

The first allusion to the film's title in *Burning* is the smoke that wafts through empty space in the opening sequence. This is when we are introduced to the protagonist, Jong-su, who passes through various sets of doors as the scene progresses. In this setting on the outskirts of Seoul, he meets Hae-mi, a friend from his childhood, whom he does not remember. This is the first of the knots that the spectator will have to untie: Jong-su is unable to remember his past, and the narration will not reveal anything about it in images. The spectators will only be privy to his past and the pain implicit in it through words, portraits and objects in a rural village on the border between North and South. The film's narration charts the loss and subsequent

disappearance of the love object that will constitute the triggering element of Jong-su's melancholia, or *han*, and the state of abjection that it produces.

An unrecognizable Seoul is the first of the spaces presented in the film, lost in the overabundance of dynamic space and expressive depth. Jong-su crosses the avenue at a rhythm marked by a tracking shot that underscores the close dependence between what the spectator sees and what the spectator knows. This sets the pace for his first encounter with Hae-mi. The diegetic sound stops, and we enter a world of naturalistic sound: the hustle and bustle of a city. We hear a female voice. It is Hae-mi's voice, which will guide us through the expressive topography. In this encounter, Jong-su is reunited with his past.

She gives him his prize in the raffle—a pink watch—while they stand under a sign bearing the slogan "Time for everyone" (figure 10). He then gives it back to her as a gift, and from this moment Hae-mi will carry it with her. The motif of the watch will mark every event in her story, punctuating the timeline of her appearance, absence, and disappearance. In this way, it stands as a metaphor for the time limit set on Hae-mi's life. She has never had a watch before, has never been given time, but now that she has one it only serves to count out the time she has left until the execution of her death sentence.

Figure 10. The first encounter between Jong-su with Hae-mi

As we move through the world of *Burning*, we are introduced to the order of the protagonists' inner worlds in an empty world. In the third sequence, we enter Hae-mi's inner world. Between the greasy plastic awnings of a bar, we are shown the signifier for her identity: the rhetoric of mimesis. Hae-mi accompanies her speech with mimetic gestures to express her desire, locating her identity in a field of the symbolic. Even now that she has removed her performer's disguise, she wants to become someone else; she inhabits the limbo of the imaginary of what is no longer there, of absence. Her pantomime style of theatrical gestures, performed in the absence of stage, costume or props, is her way of expressing her pain, and

thus her identity. Hae-mi's inner world is presented in this way through two motifs: the time remaining on her pink wristwatch, and her desire to find her own identity in the Other. The use of mimesis is what Lee offers us in the construction of his thread of narratives where redemption and reconciliation represent the ongoing search for a post-authoritarian identity in Korean society.

5.2. The symptomatology of the word of love

This section outlines the relationships between the characters in relation to the discourse of the master and the causes of Jong-su's melancholia: the arrival of the complete Other (Ben) and the loss of the love object (Hae-mi).

Hae-mi's journey to the Kalahari Desert leaves Jong-su shaken. When she returns, she is accompanied by Ben, who sets himself up as the master to Jong-su's slave, the one who will rob Jong-su of the only thing he values in his life. Ben's status as the Westernized Other that Jong-su himself aspires to be is revealed from the outset in his European name. This Other of the melancholic is a perfect, whole, self-sufficient, Other: the non-castrated Other[30]. As the Korean subject who has managed to mimic the West, Ben will present himself as the master: he wishes to be recognized as master, but he is confronted with someone dependent and not free, therefore, his request directed towards the slave will always remain unsatisfied no matter how many gifts the latter offers him[31].

Ben is revealed to be the subject of the gaze, the one who will ultimately show each of the other characters their place in the world. For Jong-su, it is unbearable to see himself reflected in the reality of a completely different gaze[32]. The wound is reopened. Hae-mi abandons Jong-su. She is now absent, just like his estranged mother and his imprisoned father. Jong-su denies the rupture and with it the possibility of reconciliation with his past through a person from that past. It is here that the narcissistic wound[33] comes into play, as the narration plays with a series of external focalizations that reveal to the spectators the gesture of pain, the manifestation of the body bearing the *han*. Jong-su, as a tragic hero, enters a phase of mourning.

The last time Jong-Su sees Hae-Mi is during an informal dinner at his rural retreat, where she dances into the sunset. Empty chairs on the porch invite Jong-Su and Ben to attend her performance. Jong-su sets the stage to accept the pain that has taken hold of him. As spectators, we witness a sound outside the diegesis, after the day has fallen, where, in the shadows, the melody of *Génerique* by Milles Davis creeps in. To the rhythm of this piece, Hae-mi (figure 11) dances under the South Korean flag in the wind in the territory to which her childhood belongs, a place that holds her past, and therefore her memory.

Figure 11. *The body of the dancer never lies.* Hae-mi's farewell will take place in the movement between the borders of her past, announcing her will to disappear.

The young woman sways with undulating movements in the wind, in a tribute to Pina Bausch's dance *Café Müller*. This dance is her farewell to Jong-su. Hae-mi's disappearance is represented between blurred shots, a dramatic device used by Lee to represent the moments when the absence emerges. She already belongs to another world, a world that Jong-su will not be able to locate on the map. It is in the moments of rupture with our assumptions that we witness the destabilization, hinted at in circular crosscuts and out-of-focus shots. At this point in the story, a key element is introduced, when Ben expresses his desire in the territory of Hae-mi and Jong-su. He confesses his liking for burning barns. For Ben, the barns are empty spaces that deserve to be eliminated.

5.3. Unbearable lightness

When Jong-su meets Ben, the dissonance of their gazes in the elevator, the correspondence of the reflections evoked in the mirror (crystal-image), and the time preserved in the drawer of lost objects all foreshadow the tragic outcome. The analogy between the point-of-view shots denotes one of this Korean filmmaker's key concerns: to question the subjectivity of the audience, undermining their ability to maintain a constant opinion of their own throughout the film[34]

Figure 14. Jong-su finds Hae-mi's watch locked away in a drawer at Ben's home

Her desire to disappear seems to have been fulfilled. Her soul, like Antigone's, now belongs to the world of the dead. It is here in the interweaving of shots that the analogous condition of the two protagonists is revealed to us. The aesthetic of the "games of pain"[35] is articulated in the dialectic of the shots of the two interdependent subjects (figures 15 and 16), whereby the metamorphosis of Jong-su, who sentences the master of his pain to death, is thus reflected in the mirror.

Figure 15. The mirror of Ben's apartment sets the space where to stablish a mimic between him and Jong-su

Figure 16. Jong-su will now occupy the space of the master's discourse

In the final denouement we witness Ben's murder at the hands of Jong-su, bringing a definitive end to the master's discourse. The pan shots are all that bear witness to the end of this game of pain. Jong-su has ultimately become a "lost being"[36]. Through the opaque glass of the windscreen, all we can see is Jong-su weeping for the first time in his life. We return to the beginning: We do not recognize his face, as we only see it illuminated in the fire in which Ben's body is burning. Like his father did before him, he decides to burn the memory of the absence of his love object, as well as the representation of one of his memories in his dreams (figures 17 and 18). Murder is the only way for him to attain his identity, to free himself from melancholia. Jong-su is reborn, once again, in another empty world condemned to the tension of the tragic.

Figure 17 and 18. The first traumatic experience of Jong-su is materialized in his dreams

6. CONCLUSIONS

The narrative resources and the mise-en-scène of *OBNA* and *Burning* offer an opportunity to explore the forms taken by the logic of pain in South Korean *auteur* cinema. Its images serve as a nexus between *han* and the psychoanalytic model of melancholia. With this in mind, the following conclusions can be drawn in relation to the forms of *han* that exist in the spaces described in this study.

1) The logic of pain can be found in Young-hee's and Jong-su's journeys through empty worlds. Both characters are subjects in permanent flight, fleeing from grief. Unable to assimilate their loss, they eliminate the emptiness it causes in different ways. In *OBNA*, Young-hee flees from her lack; she is caught between two shores, exterior spaces where her desire lies, a desire that can only be accessed through a fantasy, a dream, inserted into the order of reality. In this way, Hong creates labyrinths where repetition will give rise to a contained pain on the threshold between spaces of the film's empty world. Similarly, in *Burning* a series of point-of-view shots reveals signs of absence. Jong-su exposes a contrast between the desire implicit in a daydream and the reality in which that desire fades. The pain that inhabits the empty worlds of both stories ultimately suppresses the advent of desire. The encounter with the absent love object takes place in a fantasy. Ultimately, repetition and fantasy scenarios are the spaces where the relationship with pain can be represented. Jong-su and Young-hee both move through these spaces from a state of ignorance to a special knowledge that is the "knowledge of the soul," an experiential knowledge that cannot be expressed in words[37]. In this way, the games of pain facilitate a dialectic between *han* and the empty spaces.

2) *Han* is expressed in the bodies of Hae-mi and Young-hee, bodies caught between two absences. In its original conception, *han* generally takes the woman's body as a carrier body, thereby identifying the condition of women as subjects doomed to tragedy. Michael Shin points

out how the *pansori* genre of musical storytelling traditionally attributes pain to women's bodies[38], associating the beauty of pain with the feminine. *Pansori* stories, expressed through chanting, use the soloists' voices to determine the tone of the narrator's pain. In this way, the pain attributed to *han* would be borne by the souls of the soloists. The sound of *han* is expressed in the presence of Hae-Mi's and Young-hee's voices, both of which are trapped between two absences: between the loss of the object of desire and the loss of self. Both characters escape to the space of the foreigner: one faces her loss in the frozen silence of Hamburg and the other confronts it in the emptiness of the Kalahari Desert, so that each character reconstructs her identity in absence. Indeed, absence is key to understanding the concept of *han* in relation to the psychoanalytical model of melancholia. Consequently, both protagonists will be overwhelmed; unable to fulfill their desire, taken over by pain, both will give in to the death drive. Yong-hee and Hae-mi disappear due to the impossibility of eliminating the emptiness again.

3) *Han* engages in a dialogue with memory, while also offering a glimpse of the pain between words. The literary influences of both films studied here are undeniable. The presence of poetry in Hong's film and Murakami's prose in Lee's remind us that literature may sometimes offer us the only way to understand pain. The use of a poetry recital to express the loss of a love (in *OBNA*) or the adaptation of a short story for the screen (*Burning*) points to the fact that the quality of language is intrinsically linked to the experience of *han*. A dialogue with memory and access to the trauma caused by the loss of self is put into words by the characters of these narratives, whose past is conveyed to us through their memories. In *Burning*, those memories are lost, repressed, and reduced to oblivion. In *OBNA*, they can only be found in lines in the sand on the seashore, where all Korean poets write. This is where pain is born: out of the inability to fulfil the unconscious desire, or in itself the inability to accept the absence of a loved one.

As noted above, the arrival of modernity in South Korea was marked by a series of upheavals. The first of these occurred during the Japanese colonial era, but it was after the dissolution of the colonial order that the pace of modernization became frenetic. This study has explored the establishment of *han* and the variability of its signifiers in two South Korean films: *OBNA* and *Burning*. Future research could expand the analysis to include other titles, in the interests of further exploring Eastern spaces and their emptiness; empty spaces, yet filled with pain, where the voices of absence remain trapped.

[1] Moon, "Genealogy of the Modern Theological Understanding of Han," 426.
[2] Killick, "Jockeying for Tradition," 59.
[3] Killick, "Jockeying for Tradition," 58.
[4] Kim, "Korean Han and the Postcolonial Afterlives of 'The Beauty of Sorrow'," 269.
[5] Villarino, "Leap into the Void."
[6] Kim, "Korean Han and the Postcolonial Afterlives of 'The Beauty of Sorrow'," 217)
[7] Moon, "Genealogy of the Modern Theological Understanding of Han," 432.
[8] Marcos Molano & Pérez Matesanz, "Censura en el cine coreano," 334.
[9] Han, *The Scent of Time*.
[10] Palao Errando, *La profecía de la imagen mundo*, 68.
[11] Freud, "Duelo y melancolía," 58.
[12] Shin, "A Brief History of Han"
[13] Jeong, "A generational spectrum of global Korean auteurs," 361.
[14] Kim, *Virtual Hallyu*, 31.
[15] Paquet, *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the waves*, 22.
[16] Kim, *The Korean Wave*.
[17] Deltell Escolar and Folgar Arias, "Hallyu (한류) in Spain, audience, fanbases and new ways of consuming audio-visual media."
[18] Chung and Diffrient, *Movie Migrations: Transnational Genre Flows and South Korean Cinema*.
[19] Chua and Iwabuchi, "Introduction: East Asian TV Dramas: Identifications, Sentiments and Effects," 4.
[20] Moon, "Genealogy of the Modern Theological Understanding of Han," 432.
[21] Marzal Felici and Gómez Tarín, "Interpretar un film," 35.
[22] Romano, *La cuestión del deseo según Hegel y Lacan*, 137.
[23] Kim, *Virtual Hallyu*, 126.
[24] Willow, "Walt Whitman's On the Beach at Night Alone."
[25] Han, *The Expulsion of the Other*, 57.
[26] Recalcati, *Entre depresión y melancolía*, 44.
[27] Deleuze, ""The crystals of time," 71.
[28] Alomo and Muraro, *Antígona entre dos muertes*, 41.
[29] Recalcati, *Entre depresión y melancolía*, 36.
[30] Recalcati, *Entre depresión y melancolía*, 42.
[31] Romano, *La cuestión del deseo según Hegel y Lacan*, 136.
[32] Han, *The Expulsion of the Other*, 73.
[33] Recalcati, *Entre depresión y melancolía*, 42.
[34] Villarino, "Leap into the Void."
[35] Alomo and Muraro, *Antígona entre dos muertes*, 48.
[36] Recalcati, *Entre depresión y melancolía*, 37.
[37] Bodner, "Ficción y comprensión de la literatura y el psicoanálisis."
[38] Shin, "A Brief History of Han."

THE SUFI LITERARY SUBTEXT IN KAPLANOĞLU'S *GRAIN* (*BUĞDAY*)

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sufism notably affects filmmaking in global Muslim cinema. It cultivates Muslim cinema, film narratives and production to a significant extent. The cinematic renderings of Sufism are manifold in national cinemas and can be seen in the films of Muslim countries in diverse range of forms and styles. These forms have different versions that serve different purposes at different times. For this reason, it is difficult to identify their specific cultural characteristics. However, the shared undertone in the employment of Sufism is well figured as "a cinematic third space in which (neo/post) colonial, patriarchal, and political discourses can be interrogated."[1] Along these lines, films involving Sufism intend to foster a global dialogue from a Muslim perspective through the representation of Sufism in cinema. With these in the background, this article aims to make a content analysis of Semih Kaplanoğlu's science fiction movie *Grain* (*Buğday*, 2017) in order to understand how these debates are deployed through its Sufi literary subtext. Eventually, the employment of Sufism in the filmic text provides a reflection of a culture's imagery and semantic content, which turns it into a valued cultural text. Since, Sufism constitutes a rich system of thought for Muslim cinema, I will begin by introducing how the Sufi worldview dominates most art-house films in the Muslim cinemas of the world. After a section where I follow the course of Sufism in Turkish cinema, I will try to present a content analysis of the Sufi narrative in the film, *Grain,* in order to examine the relationship between Sufism and the film. Finally, after comparing and studying the prominent and apparent manifestations of Sufism and the scenes in the film, the comparative findings related with Sufi literature and the scenes will be thought of together in order to make a reading from the perspective of Sufi worldview.

2. SUFISM IN MUSLIM CINEMA

Sufism, also described as esoteric Islam, mystical Islam or spiritual Islam, derives its name from the Greek word *sophos,* which translates as wise or omniscient, or a sage. The history of Sufism began in the second half of the 7th Century and Sufism is very much alive today. Sufi thought developed a unique vocabulary, which has had an immense influence on the arts and the literature of Muslim nations. The underlying quality of Sufism lied in its choice to use

symbolic expressions to hide their knowledge. The ultimate goal was to separate its thoughts from theoretical sciences such as the Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh* or the Islamic normative science approach, *kalam*; and also to generate a language that can escape the oppression coming from the political power. The applications of the Sufi language in arts still share similar objectives today. Although, it is impossible to give a full definition of Sufism without diminishing its reality, it can be briefly described as a form of spirituality and mystical practice among Muslim societies, which aims at the perfection of the human morality. Sufism has a widespread presence in the cinemas of Islamic countries. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to fill this gap and provide a framework of the employment of Sufism in the cinemas of the Muslim countries of the world, a cursory examination of Sufism's presence in some of the major Muslim cinemas will be given.[2] Each country's cinema reflects distinctive aspects of Sufism, meaning that different films present contrasting traits. These traits vary according to the essential qualities of each culture and can be discerned within the narrative structure, thematic focus or aesthetic strategies of the film. For instance, Persian culture is characterized by lyric poetic themes and stylish motifs with strong impacts from the pioneers of Sufi poetry such as Hafez or Attar of Nishapur. In contrast, India reflects Sufism mostly through the musical influence of *qawwalli*[3] furthered with pop culture in Bollywood films. In African countries such as Senegal, Sufism fills in an adaptable cultural space for the syncretic translations of animist religions to Islam, and this is reflected in cinema. Sufism also features in Turkish cinema through its epic and romantic narratives.

Despite this diversity, the displays of Sufism in cinema have some common themes. Among these, the most dominant are the themes of journey and dreams. The importance of the spiritual quest—a concept central to Sufism—commonly translates into travelogues on screen. Similarly, the understandings of the Real, the imaginary and the imaginal in Sufi theory engender poetic and dreamlike visions of the world. The conceptual elements of Sufism are also broadly used for contemplating the individual, modernity, tradition, religion, faith, death, and life, exile, nostalgia, love, identity, rationalism, positivism, capitalism, and even social problems.

Hamid Naficy describes Iranian culture as being suffused and shaped by Sufi poetry, with citations of poets such as Ferdowsi, Sa'adi, Hafez, Rumi, and Khayyam a part of daily life. Naficy attests that for Iranian culture, this mystical poetry provides a paradigmatic worldview and language of exile, embodying a variety of journeys, returns and unifications.[4] Considering that the first feature film in Iranian cinema was shot in 1930, it is possible to see the earliest impacts of mystic culture entering rapidly in the movies with love stories inspired by the famous Sufi-influenced poet Nizami Ganjavi. Among these are the *Shirin and Farhad* (Abdolhossein Sepanta, 1934) and *Layla and Majnun* (Abdolhossein Sepanta, 1937). After the 1979 Islamic revolution, the New Wave of Iranian cinema evolved from the poetic heritage of its culture.

Iranian filmmakers brought ancient Persian poetry to life in their works through painterly images and poetic dialogue.[5] This began with film director Dariush Mehrjui's works such as *The Cow* (1969), and the vision can also be seen in his other films such as *Leila* (1998) and *Pari* (1995). Majid Majidi's films can also be cited as alluding to this lineage; in particular, his film *Children of Heaven* (1997) reflects a theme of spiritual poverty from the work of Rumi.[6]

In the early 90s, Sufi journeys were very popular in Iranian cinema.[7] We find the emphasis of Sufism in the many movies of Abbas Kiarostami, which are mostly travelogues that illustrate elements of Sufism through the presence of an omniscient guide and the closeness of man to nature and to the present.[8] Kiarostami also uses direct quotes from Persian Sufi poets such as Khayyam, Rumi, and Hafez in titles such as *Where Is the Friend's House?* (1987)*; Life, and Nothing More* (1992); *Taste of Cherry* (1997); and *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999).[9] Another Iranian influential director, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, one of the founders of the new wave of Iranian cinema, also takes his inspiration from Persian poets committed to Sufism.[10] Sufism is evident in his films such as *A Moment of Innocence* (1996), *The Silence* (1998), and *Time of Love* (1990).

Since its emergence, Indian cinema has used elements of Sufism. As mentioned in the previous section, early Bollywood films reflected Sufism in the form of *qawwali* mixed with pop influences.[11] Almost every film in contemporary Indian cinema today includes Sufi-influenced songs (Chaturverdi, Ghanshyam, 2015). The tradition has created Sufi rock, pop, trance, and even EDM, and includes Oscar-winner film composers such as Dileep Kumar. The Indian directors influenced by Sufism in their films are numerous—evidence indeed that "Sufism is in the DNA of the Indian sub-continent," (cited in Chaturverdi, Ghanshyam, 2015). Among the contemporary directors, Bollywood filmmaker-poet Muzaffar Ali can be regarded as one of the pioneers in promoting Sufism in his films. Muzaffar Ali began his profession mentored by Satyajit Ray and established a cinematic perspective which conceives cinema as a visual poetry. His feature films like *Gaman* (1978), *Zooni* (1989) and *Jaanisaar* (2015) all include Sufi elements. Ashutosh Gowariker is also another director using aspects of Sufism in his films; he places a special emphasis on Sufism in his film *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008). The younger director Imtiaz Ali followed this lineage in his films *Rockstar* (2011) and *Jab Harry Met Sejal* (2017), which touch upon the poetry of the 13th-century Persian Sufi Jalal al-Din. This list can be extended.

In Senegal, the complex processes of "translation" of animist religions to Islam give raise to syncretic interpretations. Sufi mysticism also determines the Islamic perspective in Senegal. Senegalese directors are very attracted to these syncretic forms of cultural interactions.[12] Some Senegalese filmmakers have contributed to this with movies that incorporate Sufism at a narrative and thematic level, such as in Djibril Diop Mambéty's avant-garde movie *Journey of the Hyena* (1973). The film is a travelogue through the streets of Dakar, in which the director's

cinematic vision of life in Senegal becomes manifest through the Sufi Islamic imagination. Some other African filmmakers, such as Mauritanian director Abderrahmane Sissako, have followed in the footsteps of Mambéty and reflected a poetic and dreamlike vision of Sufism in their films.[13]

Obviously, Sufism in cinema is not limited to the films of Iran, India and Senegal. One can also find its influencess in the Soviet and Tunisian cinemas. For instance, the last film of the legendary Armenian film director Sergei Paradjanov, *Ashik Kerib* (1988), engages with Persian Sufism through the story of a journey of an Azeri minstrel. Sufism is also still strong in Tunisia, notably in the films of Nacer Khemir. Khemir's famous film *Bab'Aziz* (2005) is an odyssey in the desert that directs the characters to divine love. The film "draws extensively on the thirteenth-century mystical Iranian poets, Attar (author of the celebrated *Conference of the Birds*) and Rumi (founder of the Sufi 'whirling dervish' order), and the contemporaneous Arab-Andalusian Sufi poets Ibn al-Arabi and Ibn al- Farid."[14]

While it is possible to add to these examples, I believe a sufficient framework has now been provided. I believe these examples will be sufficient to provide a broad, panoramic of the influence of Sufism in Muslim cinema worldwide. Let us now focus on Kaplanoğlu's film Grain in order to deepen our enquire into the influences of Sufism in Turkish Cinema.

3.   SUFISM IN TURKISH CINEMA

Sufism has played an important role in Turkey since the earliest period of Islam's arrival in the Middle East. As a segmented society, the Ottoman state empowered the widespread dervish lodges to be representatives of the voices and protests of different groups that expressed themselves through the religious ideologies.[15] After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the new Turkish state banned Sufi activity in public by enforcing strict laws that closed down the dervish lodges in 1925. The use of titles and clothing related to Sufism was prohibited, as were Sufi ceremonies. Nevertheless, most leaders of Sufi lodges—namely the Sheikhs—did not oppose the state, and some even supported the reforms and accepted official positions.[16] Many educated Sheikhs produced literary works. These involved philosophy, poetry, literature, and reflections on the changing Muslim spirituality of the new century.[17]

On screen, we find the earliest easing of restrictions regarding Sufism in television, which began to broadcast in Turkey in 1968. Broadcasts involved mostly Sufi music concerts, re-enactments, and documentaries about Sufis. At the time, Turkish cinema, known as "Yeşilçam Cinema,"[18] was very popular and one of the most productive film industries in the world.[19] Islamists criticized Yeşilçam for its dominant cosmopolitan outlook that they saw as overwhelming Turkish culture, and for imitating the narratives of Hollywood and Western

cinema, which are not those of Turkish-Islamic identity.[20] This criticism triggered discussions for a new project for Islamic cinema in the early 1970s, which gave rise to a movement called "National Cinema." (Ulusal Sinema) Among the earliest examples of a pioneering director's films is *Birleşen Yollar* (Yücel Çakmaklı, 1971), which is a love story between a rich heroine belonging to a westernized and degenerated lifestyle and a poor boy who advocates the noble values of a traditional identity. These Islamist films mostly highlighted the evident contrasts between secularism and Islamism by revolving around "the misled westernized portions of the population and the true, proper path of Islamic Enlightenment."[21] After the coup on 12 September 1980, Islamic National Cinema productions became less prominent. In the late 90s, these films began to be replaced with narratives, which involved the stories of people living between secularists and Islamists (e.g. *The Imam*, dir. İsmail Güneş, 2005). Despite an attempted ideological critique, National Cinema was criticized for relying on the inverted vocabulary of secular nationalism.[22] Additionally, these films were mostly concerned with "conveying a religious message rather than engaging in in-depth and critical investigation of Muslim subjectivity."[23]

The problems mentioned above led to a questioning of new idioms in Turkish cinema. Some Muslim intellectuals rejected the adaptations of Islamic culture in these films and argued that the Islamic perspective had not yet been completely reflected in cinema.[24] In the 90s, these intellectuals triggered the creation of a new movement, known as Dream Cinema (Rüya Sineması), which was an attempt to theorize Sufi cinema in order to find a new visual language to reflect the reality of the spiritual in Muslim identity. The thinkers and filmmakers of the Dream Cinema movement mainly treat the notions of Sufism as *denied knowledge* (Homi Bhabha), i.e. knowledge that is rejected as irrational and irrelevant by the dominant secular cultural script. In this sense, they were reacting against economic rationalism and progressivism.

The basis of Dream Cinema's argument lay in the belief of a highly sensory world that can be perceived through imagination and given visual life through cinema.[25] Ayşe Saşa, a former leftist and later a Sufi, was one of the pioneer thinkers of the Dream Cinema movement. By interpreting Ibn Arabi's conceptions of dream, she distinguished between the concepts of "dream as imaginary" (*muhayyel*) and "dream as imaginal" (*tahayyül*). Saşa portrays the "dream as imaginary" as a fictitious dimension of the delimited mental images of the individual, nourished by the fantasies of the Ego.[26] In other words, the state of "dream as imaginary" is attained in the realm of sensory experience, and in this realm, "the image tends to be reduced simply to the level of sensory perceptions and thus to be degraded."[27] For Saşa, the Western or Westernized secular cinema of today mostly reflects this understanding of dream in films—the state of "dream as imaginary" as the fantastic, the horrible, the monstrous, the macabre, the miserable or the absurd. In contrast, Sasa presents to us the "dream as imaginal": an

intermediary space between the sensory world and the intelligible world.[28] Henry Corbin explains that the "dream as imaginal" appears as *mundus imaginalis,* or "the imaginal world" in Islamic spirituality. Furthermore, this dream is a cognitive power: an organ of true knowledge that helps us to understand the link between pure spirit and the material body. Corbin emphasizes that this *mundus imaginalis,* which many Sufi writers mention as a lived experience in their works, should not be considered as imagination as we understand it in our present-day language. Instead, it is a cognitive function of imagination whose standards and rules we have gradually lost touch with.[29] The thinkers of the Dream Cinema movement asserted that cinema is a rich media for reflecting the *mundus imaginalis*. They exemplified what they have meant with many films, which have tried to approach the super-sensory world of the *mundus imaginalis*.

Ayşe Saşa and other writers associated Dream Cinema with the films of directors such as Robert Bresson, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Alexander Sokurov, Jean-Luc Godard, Satyajid Ray, Akira Kurosawa and foremost Andrei Tarkovsky. Within Turkish cinema, these writers identify with films such as *Sevmek Zamanı* (*Time to Love*, dir. Metin Erksan, 1965, which communicates the Sufi theme of falling in love with the image of the lover using a filmic language reminiscent of Alain Resnais.[30] Another noteworthy film, *Gökçeçiçek* (Lütfü Akad, 1972) narrates a love story set against the backdrop of a nomadic Turkmen tribe's struggle to survive in the early period of the consciousness of land property during the establishment of the Ottoman Empire. The film uses rather feminist language that is ahead of its time. It draws upon a powerful story of a woman's spiritual journey towards wisdom reminiscent of Sufi themes, but also interestingly with some shamanistic elements in the background. Halit Refiğ, another important director in this category, also worked with female Sufi scriptwriter Nezihe Araz in his three films. Ayşe Saşa refers to one of these films, *Hanım* (*Madame*, 1989), as an example of Dream Cinema. *Hanım* draws upon the story of a graceful and lonely old lady in her last days and elaborates on the dimensions of the spiritual and beyond death themes within the background of a cruel and selfish modern society. Additionally, *A Ay* (Reha Erdem, 1988) tells the story of a girl's psychic life and the transcendent reality that she craves to reach through her insightful visions.[31] *Kosmos* (Reha Erdem, 2010) is another remarkable example in which the main character portrays a dervish who is totally disconnected with the material world, turns into a healer.

These examples, although brief and cursory, are evidence that Sufi cinema also exists in Turkey. In modern-day Turkey, Semih Kaplanoğlu stands out as a director who is exploring the spiritual elements of Sufism. As I will try to demonstrate, Semih Kaplanoğlu's *Yusuf's Trilogy* films are a continuum of the Dream Cinema lineage of the 2000s. Kaplanoğlu directed several earlier films such as *Herkes Kendi Evinde* (*Away from Home*, 2001) and *Meleğin*

Düşüşü (*Angel's Fall*, 2005), but it is with *Yusuf's Trilogy* that his religious tendency became evident.

Born in 1963, Semih Kaplanoğlu spent his childhood in Izmir, a city in the west of Turkey known for its secularist stance. He grew up in an educated family that was highly interested in cinema. His father was a religious intellectual and a professor who studied medicine in France. His family was a synthesis of conservatism and modernism, and his father described his social position as "a modern Ottoman." When speaking about his childhood, Kaplanoğlu introduces a magical and dreamlike world mixed with stories and miracles told by his grandmother or memories of the Muslim Feast of Sacrifice.[32] In contrast, his memories of Republican primary schools are like a nightmare, which he later portrayed in his film *Honey*.

Kaplanoğlu's university years fell during the worst days of the left- and right-wing student clashes before the 1980 military coup. Unable to affiliate himself with either side, the director had the good fortune to study in the Cinema Department in his university, which happened to be an oasis detached from the political agenda. After school, he worked as a writer in various advertising companies. In his writing career, he published numerous articles on art and cinema in newspapers and magazines. He also worked as a writer and director on the famous TV series *Şehnaz Tango* in 1994. Kaplanoğlu's international recognition as an art-house director came with his second film, *Meleğin Düşüşü* (*Angel's Fall*, 2005). Afterwards, experiencing a deepening in his spiritual life, he began to focus on a cinema rooted in Islamic spirituality. In parallel to the director's understanding of spirituality in Islam, Kaplanoğlu's cinema attempts to portray spirituality in reality. Therefore, Kaplanoğlu describes his films as "spiritual realism."

The movies *Egg*, *Milk,* and *Honey* of *Yusuf's Trilogy* focus on a character's life going backwards in time. *Egg* narrates a phase of adultery of Yusuf (Nejat İşler), an unsuccessful poet who returns to his hometown for his mother's funeral. *Milk* is the story of Yusuf's (Melih Selçuk) coming of age and detachment from his mother, while *Honey* tells the story of a particular phase of Yusuf's (Bora Atlas) childhood at the time of his father's death. Kaplanoğlu wrote the scripts of all three films in two years, creating relations and connections between their stories.[33] The films are autobiographical in the sense that they consist of many of the director's personal memories. All three films explore the theme of death through dreamlike sequences, which signal an ontological status of the "dream as imaginal."

Kaplanoğlu's cinematic style centers on using visual and audio elements to evoke feelings in the viewer.[34] In this context, he does not value closing down the narrative but rather reveals the passing of time.[35] Another important aspect of the trilogy is Kaplanoğlu's focus on the temporal element of cinema, in which he leads the spectator away from the rapid perception of capitalist time towards a sense of "cosmic time," which can be found in nature.[36] Kaplanoğlu

uses the medium of cinema to represent the concept of time in Sufism as an organic element which can extend or shrink and become heavier or lighter.[37]

Grain was shot in the USA, Germany, and Turkey over a period of five years. The shootings were combined to create an entire new world and temporality. The film occupies a distinct place in Kaplanoğlu's oeuvre, in the sense that the director's previous films were mostly inspired by his personal and spiritual life merged with the aesthetical and historical memory of Turkey. In contrast, Grain reflects the director's mystical worldview and asks an international and thinking audience to consider the implications of going beyond our conventional way of cognition.

4.   GRAIN

Grain is based on a parable from the surah Al-Kahf ("The Cave") of the Quran. Although a religious tendency was already evident in the director's previous movies known as Yusuf's Trilogy, these movies (Egg (2007), Milk (2008), and Honey (2010)) were domestic productions that attracted a mostly Turkish audience. In contrast, Kaplanoğlu's Grain has a more international outlook with its international casts and production. Furthermore, it has a thematic focus of great interest to a worldwide audience, namely a pessimistic future view of the Earth left without agriculture and nutrition. What makes the film unique is the depiction of an ancient parable played out in everyday life in a science fiction context. Additionally, shots from diverse landscapes are edited in such a way that the spatial distribution in the narrative creates a new world. These interpenetrations of spatial and temporal dimensions in the film vividly reflect elements of Sufism.

In a parable in the Quranic surah Al-Kahf, Allah instructs the prophet Moses to reach the junction of the two seas and meet the One (Al-Khidr), who is more learned than him. The prophet finds Khidr and obtains permission to travel with him, on condition that Moses promises to be patient and not question his actions. Thereby, Moses and Khidr embark upon a journey in which their companionship evolves into a master-apprentice relationship that allows Moses to apprehend the real nature of knowledge. Grain takes this parable and replaces Moses with a scientist, Erol Erin (Jean-Marc Barr), and Khidr with an ex-scientist, Cemil Akman (Ermin Bravo), against the backdrop of an agricultural disaster in the near future.

The story begins in a city protected from immigrant raids by electromagnetic walls along its borders. The city appears to be governed by a corporation, Novus Vita, which also controls agriculture through the cultivation of genetically modified crops. When the agricultural production of grain seeds is hit by an unknown genetic problem, Erol Erin comes across Cemil Akman's thesis, which predicts the coming genetic crisis. Similar to the odyssey of Moses and

Khidr, Erol finds Cemil and persuades Cemil to let him accompany him. Erol's journey becomes a quest for self, informed by Sufism. At the end of the film, Erol succeeds in finding the natural seed, but appears to remain bewildered by the ontological questions concerning knowledge.

a.   Names of the Characters

A first hint of the film's Sufi influences lies in the names of the main characters, beginning with Erol Erin. As a proper noun, Erol comes from the old Turkish *er* and *ol*, meaning respectively "man" or "individual" and "ability." The word *er* evokes many meanings; most importantly, it means "private soldier," "a soldier without ranks," "individual," "hero," or "man." *Er* is an important concept in Sufism, and is mostly conceived not as a gender identity, but as a state of being that one can reach after a difficult struggle of the education of the Ego (*nafs*). The surname Erin also refers to a verb from old Turkish, *erinmek,* which means "to spend time aimlessly" or "to lack the desire or energy to do something." When combined, the name Erol Erin carries the meaning of "not having the desire or energy to become a man/individual." In Sufism, only the mature individual is conceived as a real human. Ibn Arabi interprets different levels of creation with hierarchies and categories in his writings. According to him, the idea of return to God means the progression of the soul through a complex series of gradually ascending spiritual stations. In order to move from the stage of potentiality towards an actual realization of the matured human, the believer needs to realize the totality of the descriptions of God's attributes (the divine names of Allah).[38] One should also keep in mind that the character Erol Erin, in the film represents a prophet, namely Moses. In Sufism, the prophets that came before Prophet Muhammad describe incomplete earlier stages of his perfected state. Sufis justify this narrative by basing it on some hadiths. [39]

The name Cemil is derived from one of the attributes of Allah, *al jameel*, which carries the meaning of "the beautiful," or "the source of all beauty in creation" in Islam. The character's last name, Akman, comes from Turkish *ak,* meaning simply "white,"[40] and *man*, which comes from English or French +*ark* and is used mostly as an ending to add the meaning of "guide or leader" in Turkish. When combined, the name Cemil Akman carries the meaning of "the illuminated leader/guide who totals all the beauties." This description brings us back to an important term from Ibn Arabi. William Chittick writes that the Sufi path is all about the "ethics" or "character traits of God," meaning the divine names:

> The divine names must be actualized in the proper relationships, the names of beauty preceding those of wrath, generosity dominating over justice, humility taking precedence over magnificence, and so on. The perfect equilibrium of the names is actualized by the perfect assumption of every trait in the form of which human beings were created. In a word, perfect equilibrium is to be the outward form of the name "Allah," the Divine Presence. The person who achieves such a realization is known as perfect man *(al-insan al-kamil),* one of

the most famous of Ibn al-'Arabi's technical terms.[41]

Thus the names of the main characters in the film constitute a link to the understanding of disciple and master in Sufism. Semih Kaplanoğlu describes his film as the story of an aspirant who longs to find the answers to the questions of existence.[42] In these contexts, Erol Erin becomes an aspirant to elevate his morality and knowledge. Cemil Akman, on the other hand, becomes someone who has already walked a distance along this path. The perfect human being, who is a guide in Sufism, is generally described with the metaphor of a mirror. The master is the one who shows only what is visible to the disciple like a mirror.[43] When viewed within this framework drawn by Sufism, Erol actually sees himself in all his experiences with Cemil. Along these lines, the story of Erol (Moses) and Cemil (Khidr) becomes a story of confronting/not confronting oneself in search of meaning.

In the parable of his journey with Moses, Khidr damages a ship full of people in it in order to make it sink, kills a small child, and restores a wall which is about to collapse. In each of these incidents, Moses loses his patience and breaks his promise to Khidr by questioning his actions. After the third broken promise, Khidr tells Moses that they must part ways and explains the reasons for his actions. Accordingly, none of Khidr's actions were of his own accord but were the instructions of Allah. Khidr caused the ship to sink in order to save the people from a tyrant king; he killed the child because he was destined to be a wicked one for his family; and he restored the wall because there was a treasure hidden under it that belonged to two orphan boys. The treasure was intended to be safeguarded until the boys reached maturity. The adaptation of the parable in the film begins after Erol and Andrei cross the magnetic walls to find Cemil in the dead lands. Each event in the parable also takes place in the film.

The method of Sufi hermeneutics is to produce meaning evolving out of language. It is designated as going against the literal perceptions of conventional Islamic theology. Ibn Arabi's works belong to a well-developed tradition of Islamic Neoplatonism and "manifests itself in a vast, complicated system of ranked entities, stations and sub-realities."[44] With the same method, Ibn Arabi begins explaining the parable with the etymology of the name Moses. According to Ibn Arabi, the name Moses comes from the Coptic words *mu* and *sa,* meaning "water" and "tree." Subsequently, he places emphasis on Moses' relationship with the basket. Moses, when he was a baby, was put and left in the river. Ibn Arabi interprets the boat as the corporeality of Moses. Moses himself is the Ego (*nafs*) thrown into a river of knowledge, which resulted in the disembodiment of his perception. In Sufism, the ego is perceived as the personal truth of the self. According to Ibn Arabi, each thing knows and sees only itself. Therefore, the imaginary and the real, the inside and the outside are different. Each action is endogenous to love but might possibly be perceived to the direct contrary, whence it indicates the image, not the reality. If each thing knows and sees only itself, Moses actually sees himself in all that

happens in the parable. In this way, Sufi hermeneutics introduces Moses as representing the image/knowledge and Khidr as representing the meaning/insight. Whatever is experienced in between these characters refer to the past events in Moses' life, which are projected back to him with their meaning by Khidr (Cemil Akman in the film). In this context, whenever Erol reacts to Cemil's actions, he is in effect confronting his own experiences.

b.   Breath or Wheat?

Throughout the film, the audience is confronted with a question: "Breath or wheat?" (*Nefes mi? Buğday mı?*) For conscious viewers, this is an obvious allusion to an anonymous Sufi parable. The parable features two famous Turkish Sufis, Yunus Emre and Hacı Bektaş Veli (Haji Bektash Veli).[45][46] Yunus Emre, who is at the time a simple peasant, goes to the Sufi lodge of Haji Bektash Veli to ask for some wheat because of a season of scarcity in his village. Haji Bektash Veli answers him with a question that he repeats several times: "Would you like breath or wheat?"[47] Yunus Emre insists on the wheat. In the end, Haji Bektash Veli orders his students to fill Yunus Emre's carriage with wheat and send him back to his village. On his way back, Yunus Emre grasps that he has made the wrong choice and goes back to express his regret. Nevertheless, Haji Bektash Veli does not accept him as his student and sends him to another teacher for his spiritual nourishment.[48] Sufi hermeneutics consider this parable as a symbolic text. Accordingly, wheat symbolizes Yunus' will to gain mundane, rational knowledge, while instead; Haji Bektash Veli offers him the path to wisdom.[49]

We encounter the question "Breath or wheat?" several times in the film. The first time is in a scene where Erol finds Cemil's daughter Tara in their house. Tara is working on a high-tech computer, writing words in an unknown language. She remains silent to Erol's questions, but as he gets up to leave, she turns and asks him, "Breath or wheat?" He answers, "Wheat!" She smiles and silently returns to her work. The scene jump cuts to Erol sleeping in a fetal position in the wheat fields. The second time, the question comes from Cemil, when Erol insists on following him. The third time is in the Sufi lodge, when the question comes from Cemil again. And the fourth time, Erol repeats "Breath!" to himself in the final scene where he realizes that he asked for mundane instead of spiritual knowledge.

What emerges when we relate the frame presented to us by the Sufi parable and the scenes in the film, is about the choice that Erol desperately makes on his own journey. Throughout all the scenes, when Erol is confronted with the question, he is left with desperation, resourcefulness, and weakness. Wheat and breath is closely linked with the split Turkish identity of Erol which is pro-Enlightenment rationalist and secular on the one side and implicitly Eastern on the other side. In the final scene, Erol finds the promised wheat, which

was what he asked for. Erol may prove his point and reach his limit rationally when he finds the wheat but his words reveal his pain of being without a narrative.

c. The unity of being and the m particle

Kaplanoğlu uses extreme wide shots of the landscapes that make us perceive human figures as small and lonely. These shots mostly present Erol as if he is confronting the cosmos. The cosmos is an important concept both in Kaplanoğlu's cinema and Ibn Arabi's notion of the Unity of Being. Ian Almond explains the notion of the Unity of Being as an attempt by Ibn Arabi to re-ascribe the origins and ontic status of all things to God whilst at the same time preserving their ontological individuality.[50] Chittick explains the concept as being fundamental to Ibn Arabi's view of the world as "the renewal of creation at each instant" (*tajdid al khalq ma'al-anat*). According to Chittick, human beings are faced with two different basic realities:

There is the Real Being (*al-wujud al haqq*), called 'God' in theological language, and, on the other, the self-disclosure *(tajalli)* of that Being. Everything other than God (i.e., the cosmos in its infinity) is that Being's disclosure of its own characteristics and qualities.[51]

Throughout the film, we are constantly confronted with the theory of the "M particle" that exists in everything in nature. The first time we hear about the particle is when Erol participates in a meeting in at the company Novus Vita. The meeting is about genetic chaos brought about by genetically modified seeds. We understand that after each two or three harvests, GMO seeds become corrupted. In this meeting, Erol Erin learns about a fellow scientist, Cemil Akman, who was fired because of his metaphysical, ethical and theoretical thesis titled *Genetic Chaos and the M Particle*. The thesis predicts the coming genetic crisis and speculates about the existence of an M particle, which is only present in naturally bred crops. Erol becomes fascinated by Cemil's thesis and begins to search for Cemil Akman. We receive more details of the M particle when Erol discovers the records of Cemil Akman's defense at his trial. In his speech, Cemil states that the M particle is present in everything in the cosmos apart from seeds cultivated by humans. "We are unable to create the first of anything. We cannot create a seed. Even if we do, it deteriorates because the property that exists in the air, in the soil does not exist in this seed. Thus, the seeds we produce cannot be a part of the cycle that makes life possible. They do not carry the M particle, and because of this insufficiency they cannot be the part of the common memory. Every genetic intervention carries the risk of breaking the cycle of millions of years as in the bond between the first and the last rice. The results of my research have shown me that there is nothing in this universe that does not carry the M particle."

One can easily assume that the M particle represents the Divine Essence. In Ibn Arabi's thought, Essence is a more complex notion than traditional understandings of the concept, since for Ibn Arabi, to predicate his Essence is to constrain Him."[52] Within this framework, Ibn Arabi

openly states that for Sufis, "there is no disputing the fact that the Essence is unknown."[53] Ian Almond explains the idea of the Real or Essence as something that

> "... can be so easily dismissed as just another one of the "infinitist theologies" which Derrida regards as a closet logocentrism. There are certainly moments in the *Fusus* where Ibn Arabi's description of God resembles Derrida's description of the text as a constant play of forces, "producing a force of dislocation that spreads itself . . . fissuring [the text] in every direction and thoroughly delimiting it."[54]

Perhaps the most important aspect of Ibn Arabi's system is his definition of God, which cannot fit within any descriptions of God that we could make. It is always *deferred*, as in Derrida. Given this perspective, one has to think twice before considering the conveyed message of the film as essentialist in the traditional sense. It is also possible to find the decentering Subject in many Sufist works. Once again, one can ask what the M particle represents in the movie. The M particle is not the center of things; it is unknown. It is only possible to perceive it's meaning, but this meaning also constantly changes or is *deferred.*

5. CONCLUSION

So far, except for Emily Jane O'Dell's article in 2020, I have not come across a study that focuses on Sufism in cinema "as a cultural repertoire of practices, dispositions, symbols, and spiritual results."[55] O'Dell explores that the use of Sufism in Muslim cinema functions "as a floating signifier to organize social, political, or religious meanings."[56] Although it is beyond the scope of this article to fill this gap and describe a framework of Sufi cinema among the many predominantly Muslim countries of the world, a cursory examination of Sufism has been tried to be attempted. In most Muslim cinemas around the world, Sufism is reflected in both popular and art-house films. Muslim filmmakers clearly find Sufism to be a rich means of reflecting their native spiritual perspective. While the cinematic rendering of Sufism varies according to its adaptation in each culture, the themes of journey and dream are the most common elements of Sufism in Muslim films. We can also see this very same dream theme being explored in the works of Turkish cinema. Turkey's Dream Cinema movement, emerged in the 1990s, visualizes Muslim spirituality through the notion of "dream as imaginal" borrowed from the thought of Ibn Arabi. The employment of "Dream as imaginal" in cinema indicates a different sensory and cognitive way of recognition. It is possible to see this idea that is pivotal in the films of Semih Kaplanoğlu, as we tried to demonstrate.

Kaplanoğlu's film *Grain* is an explicit attempt to portray the spiritual perspective of a Muslim towards the contemporary world and the world of the near future. While the classical Islamic version of the parable and the storyline are connected, *Grain* is actually informed by two different interpretations of the parable. The first interpretation is from thematic

engagements from the thirteenth-century Sufi hermeneutic scholar Ibn Arabi, and the second interpretation is from Turkish Sufism with traces of narrative values. This article argues that these two interpretations are distinctly present in the movie *Grain*. From this perspective, *Grain* constitutes an example of the kaleidoscopic diversity of practices, ideas and beliefs presented in Islam; it also presents Sufism as not simply a metaphysical phenomenon but also a conception of the world or a human response. These cinematic texts can namely be considered as genuine efforts in order to tackle with the dreads and dualities produced by the post-colonial legacy of the international system as well as ahistorical metaphysical tensions. What the movie *Grain* offers us is to see the world from the eyes of a dervish/believer. A Sufi sees the world in a reciprocal relationship between God and the people. This is a world in communication with inner and outer worlds at the same time. In this world, the dualities melt into each other to reach a meaning/narrative. Even though, Erol is in this chaotic moment of swaying between these dichotomies, he has no power or resource to be able to reach a meaning or a narrative yet.

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[1] Emily Jane O'Dell, "Mystics in the Movies" in *New Approaches to Islam in Film*, ed. Kristian Petersen (New York: Routledge, 2021): 112

[2] See Kristian Petersen, "Reframing the study of Muslims and Islam in film" in *New Approaches to Islam in Film*, ed. Kristian Petersen (New York: Routledge, 2021): 112 In her introduction article, Petersen identifies the few studies that exists in this area.

[3] A style of Muslim music associated with Sufis.

[4] Hamid Naficy, "The Poetics and Practice of Iranian Nostalgia in Exile," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 3 (1991): 286.

[5] Khatereh Sheibani, *The Poetics of Iranian Cinema Aesthetics, Modernity and Film after the Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

[6] Michael Pittman, "Majid Majidi and Baran: Iranian Cinematic Poetics and the Spiritual Poverty of Rumi," *Journal of Religion & Film* 15, issue 2 (2012).

[7] Blake Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

[8] Alberto Elena and Belinda Coombes, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami* (London: Saqi, 2005).

[9] Sheibani, *The Poetics of Iranian Cinema.*

[10] Lloyd V. J. Ridgeon, "Makhmalbaf's broken mirror: The sociopolitical significance of modern Iranian cinema," *Durham Middle East Papers* 1357-7522 no. 64 (2000).

[11] Debarati S Sen, "Bollywood is soaking in the Sufi Spirit," Times of India, January 7, 2017, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/music/news/Bollywood-is-soaking-in-the-Sufi-spirit/articleshow/55354195.cms.

[12] David Murphy, "Between Socialism and Sufism: Islam in the Films of Ousmane Sembene and Djibril Diop Mambety" *Third Text Journal* 24, issue 1 (January, 2010): 56.

[13] David Murphy, "Between Socialism and Sufism," 67.

[14] Roy Armes, "The Poetic Vision of Nacer Khemir," *Cinema in Muslim Societies* (New York: Routledge, 2010): 77.

[15] Halil İnalcık, "Tarihsel Bağlamda Sivil Toplum ve Tarikatlar," in *Bursa'da Dünden Bugüne Tasavvuf Kültürü 2*, (Bursa: Bursa Kültür Sanat ve Turizm Vakfı Yayınları Bursa Kitaplığı, November 2003).

[16] Başkan Berol, *From Religious Empires to Secular State: Secularization in Turkey* (New York: Routledge, 2014): 62.

[17] Mustafa Kara, *Metinlerle Günümüz Tasavvuf Hareketleri* (Istanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2013): 163.

[18] The name *Yeşilçam* translates as "Pine Tree Cinema," and refers to the name of the street in Istanbul in which film companies were located.

[19] Asuman Suner, "The New Aesthetics of Muslim Spirituality in Turkey: Yusuf's Trilogy by Semih Kaplanoğlu" in *Religion in Contemporary European Cinema: The Postsecular Constellation*, ed. Costica Bradatan and Camil Ungureanu (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[20] Savaş Arslan, *Cinema in Turkey: A New Critical History* (Oxford University Press, 2011): 128.

[21] Savaş Arslan, *Cinema in Turkey*, 257.

[22] ibid.

[23] Asuman Suner, "The New Aesthetics," 21.

[24] The Muslim intellectuals associated with this movement are Ayşe Saşa, Sadık Yalsızuçanlar, İhsan Kabil, and İsmet Özel.

[25] Henry Corbin, "Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal," *Cahiers internationaux* 6 (1972): 11.

[26] Ayşe Saşa, *Yeşilçam Günlükleri* (Istanbul: Gelenek Yayıncılık, 2002): 94.

[27] Although not stated in her book, Ayşe Saşa paraphrases Henry Corbin in order to explain the dream: Henry Corbin, "Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal," *Cahiers internationaux* 6 (1972): 12.

[28] Henry Corbin, "Mundus Imaginalis," 11.

[29] ibid.

[30] Savaş Arslan, *Cinema in Turkey*, 175.

[31] Ayşe Saşa, *Yeşilçam Günlükleri*, 95.

[32] Semih Kaplanoğlu, *Yusuf'un Rüyası, Söyleşi: Uygar Şirin* (Istanbul: H Yayınları, 2017).

[33] Semih Kaplanoğlu, *Yusuf'un Rüyası*, 137.

[34] Semih Kaplanoğlu, *Yusuf'un Rüyası*, 146.

[35] Asuman Suner, "The New Aesthetics," 24.

[36] Semih Kaplanoğlu, *Yusuf'un Rüyası*, 164.

[37] Semih Kaplanoğlu, *Yusuf'un Rüyası*, 163.

[38] Ian Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 2005)

[39] These are some well-known hadiths such as: "I was in Adam's dough." "I was sent only to complete good morals."

[40] The word *ak* mostly carries the meaning of "heavenly light" or "illumination" in Islam.

[41] William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2009): 27.

[42] "Semih Kaplanoğlu: Buğday Filmi Bir Talip Olma Hikayesi," Dünya Bizim, accessed April 1, 2022, http://www.dunyabizim.com/soylesi/27486/semih-kaplanoglu-bugday-filmi-bir-talip-olma-hikayesi.

[43] https://arsiv.nefesyayinevi.com/etiket/mursid/

[44] Ian Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction*: 13.

[45] Haji Bektash Veli is a mystic saint who lived and taught from approximately 1209 to 1271 CE in Anatolia.

[46] "Not much is known about Yunus Emre's life. He is mostly told to have been grown up in the circles of Turkish Sufis that had slowly emerged after the Seljukid conquest of eastern and central Anatolia (i.e., after 1071)." Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2011): 329.

[47] *Breath* is a word used for "spiritual blessings" (*himmet)* or "the inspiration of the saints" in Sufism.

[48] John Renard, *Tales of God's Friends: Islamic Hagiography in Translation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009): 150-160.

[49] Mustafa Özçelik, *Bizim Yunus* (Eskişehir: Odunpazarı Belediyesi Yayınları, 2010).

[50] Ibn Arabi is widely named "the Great Shaykh." The citation is from Ian Almond, ibid.: 14.

[51] William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*: 45.

[52] Ian Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction*: 18.

[53] Ian Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction*: 15.

[54] Ian Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction*: 21.

[55] Kristian Petersen, "Reframing the study of Muslims in film" in *New Approaches to Islam in Film*, ed. Kristian Petersen (New York: Routledge, 2021): 5

[56] Ibid.

THE PORTRAYAL OF DIGNIFIED DEATH, EUTHANASIA, AND OTHER RITUALS OF PASSAGE IN JAPANESE CINEMA. END-OF-LIFE PRACTICES AND BEREAVEMENT IN „THE BALLAD OF NARAYAMA" (1983)

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1. INTRODUCTION. PAYING HOMAGE TO THE GOD OF NARAYAMA

> *"It's your family's turn to make a coffin. A
> nd make one for my mother."* (min. 11)

The present essay seeks to explore the Japanese cinematic representations of "euthanasia," "dignified death," "mercy killing," and other rituals of passage, with a focus on a classical film sample, *The Ballad of Narayama* (楢山節考, 1983), a masterpiece directed by Imamura Shōhei (今村 昌平).

While the movie reflects on various Japanese cultural and ritualistic practices associated with death, it also plays a significant role in connecting its audience's historical consciousness to the narratives of "dying with dignity" and to Japanese contextual expressions of bereavement. As the first scenes of the film unfold, this masterful cinematic endeavor which aims to influence the audience both emotionally and cognitively, thus enhancing and deepening our moral imagination, reveals the dark yet strikingly realistic scenery of a remote and primitive village where food scarcity and hunger call for the desperate and ultimate measure of human sacrifice. In this alternative spatiotemporal universe seemingly indifferent to moral values, regardless of one's excellent health condition, every villager who has reached their seventieth year of life must be carried by one family member to Narayama Mountain and abandoned there to die of starvation.

Whereas in contemporary Japan, the concept of suicide is justified and intimately related to a centuries-old culturally-rooted education of living without representing the slightest menace to others and dying while conserving one's dignity[1], *The Ballad of Narayama* explores the transience of life and the eternally controversial and notoriously nebulous concepts of "euthanasia" and "mercy killing" through the lenses of the ancient practice of *obasute* (姥捨て, literally translated as "abandoning an old hag").[2] On a similar note, Jason Danely notes how

the narrative of *obasute* "addresses the moral questions surrounding the fear of abandonment in old age, its multiple artistic interpretations also provide older adults with different, and sometimes contradictory cultural models to understand and cope with this fear."[3] Moreover, it is important to state that this ritual of *obasute* is related to the already historically documented custom of "*kirou*," (棄老[4], a legendary Japanese tradition of abandoning old people, usually one's elder parents, in the mountains) as a method of preventing rapid population growth. Thus, late age was mainly associated with one's uselessness, and *obasute* emphasizes this particular idea by "painting a clear picture of elderly women as useless and costly members of traditional Japanese society."[5]A solid cultural explanation localizes the cinematic and literary narratives of *obasute* in the context of modern Japan:[6]

Variations on the obasuteyama legend have since appeared for centuries in Japanese literature and more recently film, each one focusing on a different aspect of the basic ethical problems posed by old age in a society where adult dependence is considered shameful and where succession by younger generations is both valued and yet emotionally difficult.[7]

Fig. 1: The official posters' imagery encapsulates the narrative expressiveness and heartbreaking visual aesthetics of the "*obasute*" custom.

As a 70-year-old widow, Orin, brilliantly interpreted by Kinuyo Tanaka, accepts her fate with resilience, detachment, and unglorified dignity, embarking on a spiritual journey serving as one's final rite of passage. Putting aside for now any aspects related to the historical veracity[8] of the long-disputed tradition of "*obasute*," the central character of Orin seems to escape any form of mortality anxiety by embracing the traditional Japanese cultural narrative to meet her death with dignity willingly. Of equal importance in exhibiting a lower-than-expected level of death anxiety is the character's adherence to Shinto, Buddhist, animism, and folk ideologies,

all converging to support the belief of "hereafter." By possessing the qualities of a mother goddess, Orin inspires compassion through at least three fundamental elements originating from the Buddhit ideology and doctrine: egolessness, emptiness, and communication. [9]

Particular attention will be given to the contextual analysis of *several narrative modes* (birth, abortion, dying, death, bereavement, and memorialization), analyzed from the perspectives of the *village*, *Orin*, and, finally, *Tatsuhei*, her first-born while highlighting how various Japanese cultural and socio-philosophical concepts interweave into the movie's rich and intricate thanatological semiotics. Moreover, to conduct the present film analysis, we have referred strictly to the original script, adding the English translation only to enhance the essay's readability. We aim to overpass the limits of translation and capture linguistic and semantic fundamental aspects concerning both the narratives and the characters' development.

Therefore, this particular approach of paying attention to the linguistic aspect also brings novelty to the present film analysis, given that the previously published studies on the topic tended to ignore the nuances provided by the language spoken by the characters. Albeit the original sound and image remain unaltered by the presence of the English subtitles, we must take into account the peculiar traits of the Japanese language, features which might otherwise have escaped our reading and remain nevertheless lost in translation: the dialect diversity, the usage of specific particles to emphasize emotions, the levels of politeness and the Japanese honorific system, all revealing the social status, age, gender, hierarchies or ongoing interpersonal conflicts. Finally, another contribution of this study is that it relies not only on English-language academic resources but also draws on relevant untranslated Japanese-language research papers, thus balancing the Western-centric approach prevailing in academia nowadays.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: ACADEMIC DISCOURSE ON IMAMURA SHŌHEI AND "THE BALLAD OF NARAYAMA"

The film, which was awarded the Palme D'Or in 1983, represents an adaptation of the short novel *The Ballad of Narayama* written by Shichirō Fukazawa (深沢七郎) in 1956. The literary work served as the basis for two other cinematic productions as well: *The Ballad of Narayama* (1958), directed by Keisuke Kinoshita (木下惠介), and *Goryeojang* (1963), under the supervision of the Korean director Kim Ki-Young. Likewise, a modern and dystopian approach to the narrative "dying with dignity" is illustrated by the film "Plan 75" (2022), directed by Japanese filmmaker Chie Hayakawa (早川千絵). In the context of contemporary Japan, marked by the "highest level of aging at an unprecedented rate,"[10] this latest production invites an

imaginary experiment where the Japanese government would encourage elderly citizens over the age of 75 to be voluntarily euthanized to remedy the severe aging problem of the population.[11] Needless to say, this is one of the similarities between the narrative lines of *The Ballad of Narayama* and *Plan 75*.

Before diving into the film analysis, it is important to examine the cinematic style of Imamura Shōhei. Usually associated with the Japanese New Wave, he is considered "one of the most internationally renowned directors of his generation, with two Palme d'Or Awards at Cannes Film Festival,"[12] one for the present film. As the director himself stated:

In my work . . . I want to enter a character's heart. I want to capture the smallest action, the finest nuance, the most intimate psychological expression because filmmakers must concern themselves with much more than facades.[13]

This pattern of thinking is accurately reflected by *The Ballad of Narayama* as well, which can be considered "one of the masterpieces of traditional cinema,"[14] depicting a universe where "animals, nature, and humans are closely interconnected."[15] Many of his characters struggle with extreme poverty, and the way Orin, the protagonist, is depicted, mirrors not only his overall perception regarding Japanese women but also his feminist legacy as it is reflected by the filming process:[16] "My heroines are true to life-just look around you at Japanese women. They are strong, and they outlive men."[17]

Among the already existing comprehensive scholarship on Imamura's film practices and themes, several auteurist approaches stand apart. One belongs to Alain Cassebier, who employs a series of oppositions to characterize Imamura's cinematic style, and notices the existence of "a certain unique Japaneseness rooted in *irrationality*, through which the Japanese should live:[18]

While Imamura's exploration of the irrational has a specific meaning for his Japanese audiences, it nevertheless has significance for Westerners as well. Raised as we are to value the rational above all other qualities, we have come to equate, all too willingly and somewhat naively, rationality with reality. Imamura challenges this comfortable notion. In so doing, he is really addressing one single audience, Japanese and Western alike.[19]

In this regard, David Desser develops Cassebier's earlier analysis exploring the theme of "irrationality" among other "series of oppositions" and highlights the interweaving of documentary with Imamura's cinema:

Casebier has isolated a series of oppositions which characterize Imamura's work: irrational vs. rational; primitive vs. civilized; spontaneous vs. conventional; the lower classes vs. the upper classes; authentic vs. contrived. To these we might add documentary vs. fiction.[20]

We can assume thus that one of Imamura's most striking and distinctive features, easily noticeable in this case study as well, is his "almost documentary style of filming, typically focused on the lower orders of Japanese society, with a strong emphasis on women," focused

on the "vibrant and instinctive, premodern traditions of Japan."[21] The cinematic style is similar to an extended anthropological and ethnographical analysis of Japanese society and culture, a fact also stated by other researchers:

Imamura's conception of filmmaking resembles an anthropological study of Japanese society. Most of his films deal with a particular culture or subculture that is often both embedded in and hidden by Japanese society. For this reason, even though it is based on a novel, the movie reflects to Imamura's own vision.[22]

Comanducci points out another merit of Imamura:

By refusing to take an essential and idealised notion of humanity as the universal ground of equality and social institutions, Imamura compels us to acknowledge the contingency and indeterminacy of the human and the inhuman, and the hegemonic struggles that characterize their very distinction.[23]

For this particular reason, *The Ballad of Narayama* "provides an example of this fundamental and irresoluble ambiguity of humanity and inhumanity, as it presents a prototypical rural community in nineteenth-century Japan in which the boundaries between the human and the animal, social aggregation and isolation, compassion and cruelty, death and plenty, are hard to draw."[24]

Another remarkable theoretical contribution relevant to the present literature review belongs to Lee Wood Hung who introduces the concept of "natural culturalism," which represents "the natural characteristics of the Japanese culture, as portrayed by Imamura." Hung asserts, "Imamura uses a broad brush to paint his vision of Japanese culture, using points of symbolic detail to clearly demonstrate structural features of Japanese culture."[25] For these reasons, his films, thus *The Ballad of Narayama* as well, can be interpreted as an attempt "to recover what is essential to being originally Japanese,"[26] and to reflect "the real" and authentic Japan.

A final relevant issue we should highlight before concluding the theoretical section is the culturally dissimilar nuances and consistent differences encompassed by the concept of "euthanasia," in Western versus Japanese society.

On one hand, in Western societies, this particular concept is more likely to be associated with distinguished contexts (diseases, terminal illness), entities (doctors and patients) and the notion of assistance/assisted death. Furthermore, as Patel and Rushefsky have pointed out:

Most Western cultures tend to be very individualistic and thus place considerable emphasis on individual rights. As a result, debate over euthanasia in Western societies has tended to focus on individual rights, personal autonomy, and state or public interest.[27]

On the other hand, Japanese culture places emphasis on the importance of social connections and thus has a different approach regarding "the right to die":

The influence of Buddhist tradition helps explain the Japanese approach to death. One of the central tenets of Buddhism is centered on the word "mujou" (無常), which mean

impermeance, and as such death is simply one of many endings in the cosmic scheme of things. Thus, the Japanese attitude elevates "songenshi" (尊厳死)or beautiful death with dignity.[28]

Therefore, it would be "difficult for the Japanese to apply the Western concept of "autonomy" in an issue such as euthanasia, without sharing the Western sense of individuality."[29] Moreover, as Komatsu and Tateiwa have pointed out, the Japanese culture adopts a different perspective regarding basic ideas revolving around the Western concept of "self" and the building of social relations. [30] Otherwise said, the concept of "personal autonomy" is perceived differently. Based on these theoretical considerations, in the present analysis, we will make use of "euthanasia" according to the basic meaning encompassed by Japanese society, the one closest to "dying with dignity."

3. BIRTH AND INFANTICIDE IN THE VILLAGE. THE RITUALISED PRACTICE OF "MABIKI." A DEAD BABY ON THE RICE FIELD

> "Did you abandon your dead child on my field?" (min. 13)

The plot unfolds in an unnamed village, which we assume to be located somewhere in the Chūbu area of the Yamanashi Prefecture. Although it is not explicitly mentioned and with no geographical references being provided whatsoever, the characters speak in the Kōshū dialect[31], a linguistic aspect hinting thus this specific location. The usage of this dialect represents a pregnant linguistic feature noticeable in Fukazawa's short novel as well, confirmed by the author himself:

My humble work is based on the legend of obasute, the reason why one might think the location is the Obasute Mountain, in Shinano but the settings and the characters of the novel are related to Yamano prefecture. Of course, it is not a nowadays custom, but the novel was inspired by the pure and candid humanity of this place (Yamano, n.t). Therefore, in *The Ballad of Narayama*, the dialect to be used is Kōshū, and not Shinshū.[32]

While evoking the hustle and bustle of everyday life in this mysterious village, the opening sequences show an elder woman weaving, men singing traditional folk songs, hunting rabbits, and fixing the yarn, all panoramic images of the traditional Japanese community that would have otherwise fulfilled the expectations of the audience. Nevertheless, the raw violence of the language seems to predict that within a short time, the enchantment of this idyllic foray into the life of the village will reveal a strikingly different and dark reality: a dead baby abandoned on the rice field.

This scene where one of the characters discovers the dead body of an infant effectively displays the film's constructed narratives around several interweaved questionable and taboo

subjects such as abortion, infanticide, and child abandonment, all representing an accurate description of this profoundly alienating and picturesque world where violence has been naturalized. In this grotesque universe rendering the dystopic image of traditional Japaneseness – landscape, the architecture of the houses, specific cuisine, all the characters have relinquished their humanity, perhaps except for Orin.

> "- You're going too far, abandoning a dead child in our paddy field.
> - Dead child?
> - Your wife was pregnant not long ago, right?
> - No, on the contrary. I arranged for a grave to be dug and buried my in-law's dead child.
> - When?
> - Ten days ago, I saw to it personally.
> - Risuke, that dead child, maybe it's from the Nakayas' place.(Min. 11)
> - Did you abandon your dead child on my field?
> - That's right! You stink so much, it'll rot faster on your field. That's why I brought it here. You should thank me! (…) If it's a boy again, I 'll throw it...on your stinking field again!"[33] (min. 12-14)

Fig. 2: Screenshot from *The Ballad of Narayama*. Disposed body of an infant. The *mabiki* practice.

Striking about this dialogue is that the origin of the conflict lies in where the remains of the dead baby were disposed of, while aborting in one's last months of pregnancy, abandoning, or killing one's child are narrative motives visually depicted in lurid and fascinating detail, naturalized and integrated without no complaint whatsoever in the realm of normality. Furthermore, the usage of low-key lighting and the subdued colors discloses the malformed sense of morality incubated in the villagers' minds. What the audience witnesses here is the ritualized practice of "*mabiki*" (間引き) often encountered in Japan's feudal Edo era[34] (which unsurprisingly overlaps with the film's temporal setting), in translation meaning "thinning out."

Fig. 3: Rare depiction of *mabiki* on a wooden tablet. Mother suffocating her newborn.
Tokuman Temple, Tonemachi, Japan.

With a long-established history of more than 1000 years, the killing of one's babies functioned in Japan[35] as means of birth control[36], where farmers used to kill their second or third sons immediately after birth by strangling them while sparing the daughters for selling them as servants, prostitutes, entertainers or geisha apprentices, in case the family was facing financial difficulties[37].

Fig. 4: Another wooden tablet portraying *mabiki*. Seirenji Temple, Osaka, Japan.

It is estimated that "in northern Japan alone, between 60,000 and 70,000 cases of *mabiki* were recorded each year."[38] On a side note, we should not ignore or overlook how the film narrative dwells on the troubling practice of "*kosute*" (子捨て), a distinctive cultural custom confined to pre-war Japan, which can be defined as the abandoning or selling of one's child if the family was in a dire situation[39].

> - You were expecting a baby girl but you got a boy!
> - You idiot!
> - You were left abandoned in the valley as a baby.
> - Weren't you too? Who wasn't in this village?
> - You stink! If it's a boy again, I'll throw it...on your stinking field again![40] (min 12)

Trading one's child for some salt (as Orin had done many years before with her daughter) or abandoning one's newborn baby in the forests appear normative in this particular societal setting and not something to feel guilt over or frown upon. However, Orin's expression of regret toward her past actions and her vivid remorse are capable of eliciting sympathy and invite to further ethical reflection, targeting not only the character's behavior and decisions but also the repressive socio-historical background and the implacable norms of her world.

"You were 15, and Risuke was five then. It was a bad harvest that year. We sold our newborn daughter to the salt merchant. Also, your dad's mother had reached 69, my age now. She had to go to Narayama. Because of the continuous hardship and Rihei's weakened spirit, he refused to let his mother go up the mountain. But the law is the law. In life, we can't rely solely on our emotions. But he couldn't accept the law, so he ran away."[41] (Orin, min 18)

This barbaric custom perceived as serving the family's interests reveals, nonetheless, the following central theme that is interconnected to the critical analysis of the village: the social status of the pregnant and unmarried women in the community. The breathtaking cruelty on display takes the audience to the next significant scene, which one cannot watch with mindless ease: the killing of the Ameyan family, including heavily pregnant Matsu, the prospective spouse of Kesakichi, Orin's grandchild.

The joyful carnival of death offers villagers great pleasure in burying alive every member of the Ameyan and becomes a legitimate societal vengeance, providing a shared feeling of fulfilling justice and protecting the integrity of the existing norms. The crime of food theft must be punished accordingly, and no member shall be exempted, under no circumstances whatsoever, as one of the punishers adds: "If we decide to kill the Ameyan family, we cannot exclude Matsu." Not even Kesakichi manages to save his lover and their unborn child: "Wait, you bastards! Matsuyan's carrying my baby!"[42] 1h 6min

The execution scene of the Ameyan family for stealing a sack of beans endows the audience with a challenging ethical experience that outside the cinematic context might otherwise be problematic to comprehend or even difficult to imagine.

The viewers are instantly plunged into a dark and brutal world of raw violence and then jerked abruptly into Orin's meditative and disturbingly silent mind. Therefore, the violence of the execution scene is punctuated by short periods of stasis and monotony to allow interludes for the development of the main character. The grotesqueness of the villagers' actions conjoined with the highly graphic and lengthy depiction of the victims' death reveals a highly disturbing existentialist acknowledgment of a universe where humanity has been utterly destroyed[43], a statement reconfirmed by the next section of this essay.

4. EUTHANASIA, DIGNIFIED DEATH AND MERCY KILLING: ORIN MEETS THE GOD OF NARAYAMA

> "I 'm going up to the mountain this winter. My own mother went up the mountain, as did
> my mother-in-law. And I too must go up."
> (Orin, 1h:10 min)

On a first account, it is worth briefly noticing the existing balance between the unfolding of the human tragedy on the bridge of moral collapse and the images of nature remaining seemingly indifferent to man's destiny yet capable of functioning as an independent semantic element in the film.

However, the role attributed to nature should be read contextually and interconnected to the universal order's Japanese philosophical and religious perspective. As spirits of the nature, the mountain, the river, and the rice field, imbued with godlike traits, are everlasting, life-giving, yet at the same time, life-threatening, determining the length of the human life and the precise moment of death, whereas the elders have no power of decision whatsoever. Among these, the mountain imagined as the home of "Kami," "the God of Narayama," functions as a locus nurturing the symbiosis between death, Japanese cultural customs, and human identity. The sacredness and ambivalence attributed to nature, in particular to this mountain which has become a central and indisputable object of worship, has its origins in Shinto, also recognized as the Japanese traditional religion, otherwise firmly rooted in animism and ancestor worship[44].

From the theological perspective, the cult of the God of Narayama can be at least partially connected to "Sangaku Shinko" (山岳信仰), one of Japan's oldest cults, according to which mountains, in particular, are highly respected and believed to be "the residence of spirits, principally spirits of the dead who watched over and assisted the living. Mountains themselves were often considered to be kami and were accorded special reverence."[45]

Therefore, the elders' journey can be interpreted as a religious act of purification and realigns their identity according to the dynamics of Japanese asceticism, given that "the essential role of mountains in Shinto in particular, and in Japanese religion in general, also has

lent a distinctive character to the style of Japanese asceticism."[46] To some extent, their death place becomes the sinister imagining of the classical Shinto and Buddhist temples mainly located on the peaks of mountains.

The presence of the mountain, the sea, the plants, the animals, and the birds mark the interweaving of animism as the next central religious theme in the narrative tapestry of the film. Imamura dwells in astonishing detail on trees, nesting birds, and flowers, all vibrant with life, making nature the epitome of the supreme beauty and the only one not to conspire in the abominable law of "*obasute*." As a culturally specific detail, wholeness with nature has been, for many centuries, part of the Japanese culture and religion (animism), the reason why the ever-changing seasons can stand as a metaphor for the frailty of human destiny. Under the influence of Shintoism ideology, every natural element – stones, water, leaves – are inhabited by gods, which indicates nature's connections with the mystical realm, and sacred dimension. This mysticism derived from the connection with the nature is shared by the protagonist as well.

Having begun by briefly outlining the nature-related visual setting with its theological and philosophical implications intimately related to exploring Orin's philosophical quest about meeting the God of Narayama, it is essential to emphasize the sacred dimension of the lead character's name: Orin Neko. In translation, "neko" (猫) means "cat," which would be an extraordinary atypical Japanese family name, regardless of the period. For this reason, we will connect the heroine's name to Japan's rich symbolism of the cat, an animal whose presence becomes overly abundant in art, national literature, folk tales or legends, and in a large variety of Buddhist anecdotes, also known as "setsuwa" (説話)[47]. Particularly in the Edo era, which corresponds to the film's setting, the cat was a symbol of death.[48]

This village (村), home of the matriarch Orin, is portrayed as a ruthless place of strict social codes of behavior, viciously raw and primitive masculinity, in contrast with her continuously exhibited self-sacrifice. Only embracing and respecting the rigid codes of the village guarantees the long-term survival not only of one's honor and legacy, acknowledged according to this particular context as the Japanese cultural concept of „taimen"(体面), but also the image and reputation of one's family in the community's social memory. Thus the ultimate purpose shared by everyone is to protect the harmony of the village, interpreted here as wa" (和). If one does not obey the autocratic code of this rural universe, one's life becomes shameful and no longer worth living, for continuing living becomes nothing else but a social failure and source of disgrace, supposedly unmasking a form of selfishness toward the younger members of the community.

Furthermore, not only the role of nature but also euthanasia and dignified death should be considered within the context of Japanese society and culture. Albeit both topics remain taboo until nowadays and death in any form is typically referred to in Japanese language

conversations with the use of euphemisms to deflect the sensitivity of the acts[49], we should distance ourselves from the Christian (and not only) perspective, which tends to frame euthanasia and also suicide as unforgivable sins[50].

Nonetheless, this is not necessarily the case with the Japanese religion(s), accurately described by H. Byron as a "variegated tapestry created by the interweaving of at least five major strands: Shinto, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and folk religion."[51] Consequently, an amalgam of intricately interwoven religious symbolism blends into the film's narrative. As Roy W. Perrett[52] has exquisitely pointed out, "there are Buddhist traditions sympathetic to both voluntary and non-voluntary euthanasia, under certain conditions," and in particular Japanese Buddhist attitudes regarding assisted suicide[53], abortion, and euthanasia have always been more tolerant[54] than Christian ones.

From this perspective, the production plays with the dichotomous relations: humanity and non-humanity, natural and supernatural, which become further complex given that Japanese culture seems to reject the distinction between "nature" and "culture." This intertwinement is perceived through a rather anthropological camera that frames the copulation between animals and then the sexual intercourse between human beings. Therefore, the human characters are included in the same net connecting every being in nature. The village and its members follow the same course as every other living entity in nature thus, facing the inevitable death in nature/ through nature/for nature. The protagonist, Orin, does not escape the mysticism and Shinto's substantial influences and connection with mystical laws, a fact also reflected by her dual dimension: "oni" and "neko."

By smashing her front teeth against the river stone without hesitation, Orin does not refrain from inscribing self-harm on her body as a vivid analogy for the shame incurred by having surprisingly healthy teeth. Fittingly, then, upon seeing Orin bleeding, the other characters, mostly enthusiastic drunks, continue their dancing festival, singing and hurling invectives at her, some among the following lines which incite the viewers' sympathetic responses:

"You'll be eaten by the Demon Hag! The demon has 33 teeth (…)."[55] (min. 37)

On this particular occasion, it is revealed that Orin Neko was perceived as an "oni" (鬼, monster, demon) by the children, especially for having good teeth despite her old age. Thus, this uncommon situation hints that the character Orin might not be a human character, but a supernatural being, a fact also conveyed by showing no death anxiety.

From self-harm to purposely starving herself, she takes every possible measure to hasten her journey up to the mountain to die in order to save her beloved ones from misery, and subservience, in a shell, from the fate of being ostracized by their neighbours, for losing one's

honor means a fate worse than death. All her actions are, thus, justified in this absurd socio-cultural setting.

Orin and every other elder reaching his 70th year of life must be carried to the Narayama Mountain and left to die there, otherwise euphemistically expressed as meeting the God of Narayama. The journey, which occasionally might even be carried out against the elder's wishes, can be interpreted as a form of passive euthanasia, given that it implies the deliberate and premeditated hastening of death by withholding food and water. The elder's family usually calculates the time of this ritual of passing, which is sometimes accepted by both parties, although, in most cases, there are no signs of bodily suffering and physical decay.

Through every action and word, Orin constantly expresses her wish to go and meet the God of Narayama. Nevertheless, it is a journey she cannot embark on alone and needs her firstborn's assistance in accomplishing the final purpose. Albeit words such as "dying" or "death" (as in their Japanese equivalent) are not explicitly mentioned in the film, the euphemistic expression "encountering the god of the mountain" serves as a conceptual metaphor in reference to death, and it is used not only by Orin but by every villager as well.

Exercising her right of autonomy and self-determination is not contested by anyone but Tatsuhei, who is greatly distressed by his mother's decision not to postpone the traveling day and half- heartedly agrees to carry her there. As the narrative clarifies, the heroine is by no means suffering from a terminal illness or in extreme physical pain. However, she feels that prolonging her life would only represent a significant burden on her family. In this film context, death is indubitably presented as what the protagonist should choose, as obeying the custom and committing a voluntary martyrdom by sacrificing herself for the sake of her family.

However, the central question is whether Orin's evolution as the main character is to be read as a story of passive euthanasia through autonomous choice or as one of self-sacrifice, thus disguised as a form of a dignified death[56]. The basic narrative of euthanasia can be extrapolated to the instance of "dignified death," considering that Orin refuses to continue her life in order to serve a much "higher" and honorable purpose: to protect her son, her family, and the artificiality of their peaceful future in the village. Nevertheless, it should be noticed here the constraining impact of the linguistic aspect over the philosophical approach of "dying with dignity": in the Japanese language, unlike English and many other languages, there is only one specific word to express this idea, and serves as an independent concept, that being "songenshi," (尊厳死). Accordingly, particularly in the Japanese literature, with a focus on the literary periods Meiji, Taisho, and Showa, writers and poets have frequently employed "songenshi" or even adopted it as a fascinating and overarching human theme[57].

Especially in the second part of the film, the narrative line traces Orin's preparation for the ritual journey she will soon undertake, accompanied by Tatsuhei, whose help and assistance

are needed to ensure the successful outcome of this final rite of passage. The character's attitude of inner peace and detachment can be noticed when she and her son, Tatsuhei, are instructed by the council members regarding the ritual of preparing before one is leaving to meet the God of Narayama.

"You must abide by the rules when going up the mountain. Firstly, you may utter no words while ascending. You must leave your home unnoticed by any other person. The route up to Narayama starts at the foothills behind here. Pass beneath the trees and ascend the third mountain to a pond. Circle the pond three times, then climb the steps. Passing over one mountain, you'll come to a deep valley. Go around the mountain for two and a half leagues, along a winding path called the Seven Valleys. Through the Seven Valleys to the Horse's Back. From there, you will find the path to Narayama. The path up Narayama is not a clear path, simply climb upwards and upwards, to where the god awaits you. When coming down from Narayama, you must never look back."[58] (1h:27 min)

In fact, this narrative approach accurately reflects Imamura's words and vision of the village:

No one puts up a fight against the harsh code (of the village). One and all must live out their lives in obedience to and harmony with the unforgiving world of nature, patient and unresisting in the face of adversity.[59]

Close-ups are abundantly used to study the raw emotions of the characters, with a focus on the members of the Neko family. This unsophisticated, legible device adds emotional power to the narrative, for example, in the sequence where Orin teaches her daughter-in-law how to catch fish with her bare hands, symbolically suggesting the passing of knowledge to the next generation. In this rural universe imbued in depravity, sharing food is the only element yielding the feeling of togetherness, compassion, and intimacy.

Not only the death but also the reincarnation process, as it is depicted here and perceived by the leading character, is pervaded by the Japanese Buddhist doctrine of the afterlife, "innen" (因縁), which incorporates not only the fate, destiny, karma but also the predestination, transmigration, reincarnation[60]. According to the philosophy embedded in this concept, "suffering and hardship must be accepted with resignation"[61], which is precisely what Orin does regarding the fatalism of her destiny.

"It'll be hard having another great-grandchild, but I sense it could be my own reincarnation."[62] (Orin, min 52)

Furthermore, the picturesque diversity of aesthetic elements and cinematic devices contributes to enhancing the audience's moral imagination and emotional connection with the lead character's tragic destiny. For instance, the ritualistic scene of Orin cooking rice stands apart: the food becomes a metaphor for life and living, and sharing a meal represents the only occasion to nurture solidarity and kinship with her family.

5.   TATSUHEI: BEREAVEMENT, GRIEF AND MOURNING.

"After killing my father, now I 'm killing my mother."
(Orin's son, Tatsuhei, 1h:52min)

Putting aside, for now, the film's cultural complexities and ethical controversies, which pervade social and theological discussions about the concepts of "mabiki," "euthanasia," or "mercy killing," one thing is quite sure: the nonconventional narrative line strives and succeeds to achieve a creative expression of the decadent humanity. Nevertheless, we dive into a world where sons like Tatsuhei kill their aging parents by taking them to the summit of Narayama Mountain and then wait for their sons to do the same.

On their way up on the mountain, in a melodramatic moment of moral retribution and remorse, Tatsuhei confesses to his mother that he murdered his father many years ago. The father-son conflict escalated then from arguing about the rightfulness of the "*obasute*" tradition. The confession scene of murdering his father is emotionally overwhelming and serves as a cathartic experience, revealing how Tatsuhei must simultaneously face the constricting and absurd social order and his contradictory emotional state of mind.

"- When I was 15, I went hunting bears with father. On the return journey, I killed him here. I'd told father...to bring grandmother up to the mountain. He suddenly got angry and shouted at me, "What do you know?" We started to fight. I fired my gun at him...and I buried him there.
- Tatsuhei... I loved Rihei a lot, but he's the laughing stock of the village. It wasn't you who killed him, it was the god of the mountain. Don't breathe a word about this, you hear me?"[63]
(1h:22min)

Hence, Tatsuhei's internal conflict is construed around an alternative interpretation of the cultural conflict between "giri" (儀理) and "ninjou" (人情)[64] - one's duty versus one's emotions. In contrast, his social obligation of taking his elderly mother to the Narayama Mountain is being repressed or concealed from him. In this morally-charged dramatic dilemma, the internal tension and the incredibly dense emotional struggle the character exhibits in the last scenes where he abandons Orin in the mountains reveal an ambiguity that discourages the viewing public from interpreting the cinematic narrative merely as a cruel and inhuman treatment toward his elder mother. Caught between the immutable norms of the village and his conflicting filial emotions, Tatsuhei undergoes an existential crisis: he cannot act, yet must act, as the epitome of human cruelty by consciously committing matricide.

Fig. 5: Screenshots from *The Ballad of Narayama*.
Tatsuhei carrying his mother to meet the God of Narayama.

Along their journey, the peak of Narayama Mountain is depicted as a frightful space where the borders of death and nature map over each other.

Indeed, one of the most striking and emotionally turbulent aspects is how the winter, candidly depicted in the opening and closing scenes, connects death's aesthetic manifestation to the grotesque imagery of the rotting corpses, and unburied human bones, and skulls scattered all over the path.

Fig. 6: Screenshots from *The Ballad of Narayama*. The truth behind the "*obasute*" custom.

The vivid rendering of viscerally shocking and disturbingly graphic images instantiates the fear of one's dissolution and awareness of near death.

Fig. 7: Screenshot from *The Ballad of Narayama*. Human bones scattered on the ground.

Fig. 8: Screenshots from *The Ballad of Narayama*. Mother and son hugging before departing forever.

The long-take shot frames mother and son embracing for the last time and weeping in silence before saying the final goodbye. The iconic final scene, in which Orin silently waits for her death, exemplifies the calm, self-detachment, and poise of the typical cinematic Japanese characters who resign themselves to fate. Orin's impending death is depicted as a solitary affair: she breaks free not only from the shame and fear of failing to fulfill the immutable codes of the village but also from the misery of her existence. It is all the more significant that her death arrives by starvation, in the utmost solitude and acquiescing silence, freezing, surrounded by impatient vultures, yet sinisterly awaiting with dignity for the final departure. Especially in this context, the shots of nature are more likely to express the character's emotional and psychological state of mind than to provide a picturesque landscape of the winter in rural Japan.

Fig. 9: Screenshot from *The Ballad of Narayama*. Orin's final prayer, awaiting for her death.

The final lines of the film are imbued with disenfranchised grief. To some extent, the following reflection of Tatsuhei can be decoded as an attempt to fundamentally question from a religious and spiritual perspective the existence of the God of Narayama, as more likely to doubt it and less related to one's identity belonging to one's family and the village.

 "I heard the god of the mountain waits at the top. Is that true? If there is really a god, it should snow like the song says." (1h:50min)

Finally, As Tatsuhei recollects, in this dazzling monologue designed with the explicit intention of diving into the character's psychological realm:

"For many hundred years, our ancestors have passed this path. Many hundreds of them.., thousands of them. Maybe more. After 25 years, I'll be here too, Kesakichi carrying me. And 25 years after that… Kesakichi's turn. No other way."[65] (1h:50min)

Furthermore, Orin's passing remains unseen and unassisted, just like every other elder's. Dying becomes an act that one must pursue alone, with no close relatives gathering for the final ceremony, while the bereavement is a relatively simple one, carried out in solitude by her son on his way back home, with no words of consolation or possibility to indulge in loud lamentation.

"Ma... you must be very cold. Ma, you're lucky it's snowing on the day you came up the mountain. Ma... The snow falls on her way up Narayama... You must be frozen. It snowed just perfect. That's good. You must be hungry. What happened to you? Granny's so blessed. It snowed just like in the song. (…) No matter how cold it is, you cannot wear padded clothes. It's not allowed, when ascending Narayama, no matter how hard life is here on Narayama… When the snow begins to fall, she'll be released from pain..."[66] (2h:05min)

6. CONCLUSION

The Ballad of Narayama offers thus an exhaustive account of the morally decaying human condition and painstakingly illustrates the tragic vision of humanity as a quintessence of immoral cruelty and depravation while juxtaposing Japanese culturally resonant leitmotivs and historical specifics against a particular philosophical and religious background. The film seems to harness the theme of "honorable death," ensuring that sickness, heroic self-sacrifice, resilience, and numerous other themes, including child abandonment, humility through poverty, and suicide, always interpenetrate the central conceit of dignity.

By employing a significant number of wordless scenes, Imamura's film seeks to highlight the existence of a new sense of morality, different from the typical Western media construction of Japan's history and reality. Therefore, it ultimately aspires to depict an alternative yet unflattering representation of the Japanese traditional culture and customs.

Whereas the moral and existential drama reveals the dignity of the lead character undergoing a spiritual endeavor in awaiting death, the film narrative nonetheless cultivates in the audience a significant emotional response, together with delivering a powerful ethical experiment.

Despite all its controversial staple themes, the film stands out as a remarkable case study, considering that it forces us to adventure into an intercultural conversation and makes us reflect on how we should reconsider concepts such as euthanasia perceived as mercy killing, and dignified death from the perspective of Japanese cinema in the light of ethical debates.

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[1] Hitoshi Arima, *About The Value Of Life And The Pros And Cons Of Assisted Suicide, Dignified Death And Euthanasia. Do We Have The Right To Die? (Original Title: "死ぬ権利はあるか――安楽死、尊厳死、自殺幇助の是非と命の価値"* (Yokohama: Shumpusha Publishing, 2019).

² For a wider perspective on the obasute folktale, please see Wood-hung Lee and Yomei Shaw, "Revisiting the Tale of Obasute in the Japanese Imagination," *Asian Cinema* 20, no. 1 (August 2009): pp. 98-126, https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.20.1.98_1.

³ Jason A. Danely, "Art, Aging, and Abandonment in Japan," *Journal of Aging, Humanities, and the Arts* 4, no. 1 (2010): pp. 4-17, https://doi.org/10.1080/19325610903419350.

⁴ Noboru Yamada, "Problems Of The Elderly In Modern Society And The Legend Of Abandonment. (Original Title: "現代社会の老人問題と棄老伝説")," *Bulletin Of Sano College* 30 (2019): 4, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/229690543.pdf.

⁵ Laurel Cornell, "The Deaths of Old Women: Folklore and Differential Mortality in Nineteenth-Century Japan," in *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*, ed. Gail Lee Bernstein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 71-87, 73.

⁶ For more information, please see Max Tessier, "Visions of Japan through Modern Films," in *Rethinking Japan*, ed. Franco Gatti, Massimo Raveri, and Adriana Boscaro (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 81-86.

⁷ Jason A. Danely, "Art, Aging, and Abandonment in Japan," *Journal of Aging, Humanities, and the Arts* 4, no. 1 (2010): pp. 4-17, https://doi.org/10.1080/19325610903419350, 6.

⁸ In Japan, Nagano prefecture, at the border of the city of Chikuma, there is a mountain called Obasute, which is believed to be connected to this centuries-old custom. There is even a railway station named Obasute Station in the same city.

⁹ Linda C. Ehrlich, "Kannon-Sama and the Spirit of Compassion in Japanese Cinema," in *Dialectics of the Goddess in Japanese Audiovisual Culture*, ed. Lorenzo J. Torres Hortelano (Lanham, MD, UK: Lexington Books, 2018).

¹⁰ Naohiro Ogawa and Rikiya Matsukura, "Ageing In Japan: The Health And Wealth Of Older Persons ," United Nations, 2007, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/egm-mex-ogawa.pdf.

¹¹ Idem.

¹² Jasper Sharp, *Historical Dictionary Of Japanese Cinema* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 93.

¹³ Stephane Erviel and Mark Cousins, "My Approach to Filmmaking - Imamura, Shohei ," in *Shohei Imamura* (Toronto, Canada: Toronto International Film Festival Group, 1999), pp. 125-128.

¹⁴ Rıza Sam, "Requiem for the Ones Experiencing the Tragedy of Farewells: The Ballad of Narayama," *Kaygı. Uludağ Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Felsefe Dergisi*, no. 27 (2016): pp. 1-1, https://doi.org/10.20981/kaygi.283273.

¹⁵ Yann Lardeau, "The Ballad of Narayama: Ascent to the Beyond," in *Shohei Imamura (*Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival Group, 1997), pp. 157-158.

¹⁶ Rayna Denison, "Promotional Discourses and the Meanings of The Ballad of Narayama," in *Killers, Clients and Kindred Spirits: The Taboo Cinema of Shohei Imamura*, ed. Lindsay Coleman and David Desser (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 257.

¹⁷Audie Bock, in *Japanese Film Directors* (Tokyo: Kodansha Internat., 1978).

¹⁸ Allan Casebier, " Images of Irrationality in Modern Japan: The Films Of Shohei Imamura," in *Shohei Imamura* (Toronto: Toronto International Film Festival Group, 1997), p. 89.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p.90.

²⁰ David Desser, *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

²¹ Jasper Sharp, *Historical Dictionary Of Japanese Cinema* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 93.

²² Steve Corbeil, "Imamura Shohei's Adaptation of Nosaka Akiyuki's The Pornographers : Ethical Representations of Translating the Unwritten," *The Culture of Translation* 10 (2015): pp. 155-165, https://doi.org/10.14945/00008216.

²³ Carlo Comanducci, "The Human and the Inhuman in Shohei Imamura's The Ballad of Narayama," in *Monstrous Reflection* (Brill, 2014), pp. 101-108.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Lee Wood Hung, "Natural Culturalism in 'The Ballad of Narayama': A Study of Shohei Imamura's Thematic Concerns," *Asian Cinema* 14, no. 1 (January 2003): pp. 146-166, https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.14.1.146_1.

²⁶ Allan Casebier, "Images of Irrationality In Modern Japan: The Films of Shohei Imamura," *Film Criticism - Japanese Cinema* 8, no. 1 (1983): pp. 42-49.

²⁷ Kant Patel and Mark E. Rushefsky, *Health Care Policy in an Age of New Technologies* (Armonk (NY): Sharpe, 2003).

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ *Civil Sphere in East Asia* (S.l.: Cambridge Univ Press, 2020), p. 231.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 232.

³¹ Kutou Shigeru, "The Genealogy Of Obasute In Modern Literature. The Ballad Of Narayama, By Fukuzawa Shichirou. (Original Title "現代文学における姨捨の系譜. 深沢七郎「楢山節考」")," *Bulletin Of Beppu University, The Faculty Of Japanese Literature And National Language* 32 (1990): 6.

³² The Ballad Of Narayama, Obasute And Hakucho-En. (Original Title "「楢山節考」と姨捨と白鳥園 ")," *Sarashinado Nekkusu*, 2011, https://www.sarashinado.com/2011/07/16/narayama/. Original quote: "拙作「楢山節考」は姥捨の伝説から題材を得たので信州の姥捨山が舞台だと思われているようだが、あの小説の人情や地形などは、ここ山梨県東八代郡境川村大黒坂なのである。もちろん現在のここの風習ではなく、もっと以前のこの土地の純粋な人情から想像してあの小説はできたのだった。だから「楢山節考」に出てくる言葉—方言は信州ではなく甲州弁である。"

³³ Shōhei Imamura, *The Ballad Of Narayama (平城山節考)*, film (Japan: Imamura Production, 1983).

³⁴ Yoshie Itō, "The Lives Of Children And The Conditions Of Abortion And Infanticide In The Late Edo Period." (Original Title: "江戸時代後期の堕胎・間引きについての実状と子ども観(生命観)")," *The Bulletin Of Ryotokuji University* 10 (2016): 81, https://ryotokuji-u.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository_action_common_download&item_id=284&item_no=1&attribute_id=22&file_no=1.

³⁵ Fumie Kumagai and Masako Ishii-Kuntz, *Family Violence In Japan: A Life Course Perspective* (London: Springer, 2016).

³⁶ "The practice of mabiki can be traced back in the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki, published in Nara period (710-794)," and it is intimately connected to the Japanese mythology and historical legends. Probably the first instance of mabiki is mentioned in the legend of the creation of Japan, in the Kojiki. Hiruko, the first baby of Izanagi and Izanami, the creator gods of the land of Japan, was abandoned immediately after the birth and left to die, as he was born with a severe deformity."

³⁷ Fabian Franz Drixler, *Mabiki Infanticide And Population Growth In Eastern Japan, 1660-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

³⁸ The New York Times, "Infanticide In Japan: Sign Of The Times?", 1973, https://www.nytimes.com/1973/12/08/archives/infanticide-in-japan-sign-of-the-times-daughters-spared.html.

³⁹ Kumagai et. all, *Family Violence in Japan: A Life Course Perspective*, 57.

⁴⁰ Imamura, 1983.

⁴¹ Imamura, 1983.

⁴² Imamura, 1983.

⁴³ We would underline that explicitly displaying instances of sexual and moral perversity emphasize the immorality of the characters (please see the representations of zoophilia in the character's development of Risuke, the second son of Orin.)

⁴⁴ Kazuyuki Yano, "Sacred Mountains Where Being Of "Kami" Is Found," *Icomos.Org*, 2008, https://www.icomos.org/quebec2008/cd/toindex/77_pdf/77-Epvp-23.pdf

⁴⁵ Stuart D. B Picken, *Essentials Of Shinto* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), 197.

⁴⁶ Picken, *Essentials Of Shinto*, 198.

⁴⁷ The Monk Keikai, Toshiaki Harada and Mitsugu Takahashi, *Nihon Ryōiki (*Original title: "*日本霊異記*") (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2000).

⁴⁸ Diego Cucinelli, "Feline Shadows In The Rising Sun: Cultural Values Of Cat In Pre-Modern Japan," *Ming Qing Studies*, 2013,
https://www.academia.edu/5495089/_Feline_shadows_in_the_Rising_Sun_cultural_values_of_cat_in_pre_modern_Japan.

⁴⁹ Norichika Horie, "Expressions Related To "Death." A Comparison Between The Vocabulary Of Japanese And Foreign Languages. (Original Title: "死に関する表現──日本語と外国語の語彙の比較から ")," *Journal Of Death And Life Studies And Practical Ethics Of The Tokyo University*, https://www.academia.edu/32327592/_死に関する表現_日本語と外国語の語彙の比較から_.pdf.

⁵⁰Ian Robert Dowbiggin, *A Concise History Of Euthanasia* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

⁵¹ H. Byron Earhart, *Japanese Religion: Unity And Diversity* (Victoria, Australia: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004), 2.

⁵² R W Perrett, "Buddhism, Euthanasia And The Sanctity Of Life," *Journal Of Medical Ethics* 22, no. 5 (1996): 309-313, doi:10.1136/jme.22.5.309.

[53] We will mention as a relevant example the ritual suicide of "seppuku" or "harakiri," considered an honourable practice under certain circumstances, and the role of "kaishakunin," a person assisting the one committing suicide to perform completed decapitation, in order to spare him of the excruciating pain following the ritual disembowelment. Usually, the kaishakunin was appointed by the warrior himself to shorten one's agony of dying. Please see: Jack Seward, *Hara-Kiri: Japanese Ritual Suicide* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1968); Fumio Kakubayashi, "An Historical Study Of Harakiri," *Australian Journal Of Politics & History* 39, no. 2 (1993): 217-225, doi:10.1111/j.1467-8497.1993.tb00059.x; Maurice Pinguet and Rosemary Morris, *Voluntary Death In Japan* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

[54] Hideshi Kishi, "Japanese People's Perspective Of Life And Death Based On Their Religious Conscience. (Original Title "日本人の死生観 -その宗教意識から")," *Japanese Journal Of Head And Neck Cancer* 21, no. 3 (1995): 489-492, https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/jjhnc1974/21/3/21_3_489/_pdf/-char/ja.

[55] Imamura, 1983.

[56] Jiyudai Junjou, "The Ballad Of Narayama: A Story Of Death With Dignity. (Original Title "尊厳死の物語として読む「楢山節考」")," *Waseda Review Of Socio-Science* 25 (2019): 3, https://waseda.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository_action_common_download&item_id=46359&item_no=1&attribute_id=162&file_no=1.

[57] The most relevant examples of Japanese literary works that have tackled instances of euthanasia and mercy killing are "Takasebune" ("The Boat on the Takase River") by Mori Ogai, and the portrayal of "death with dignity" can be found in "Patriotism" by Yukio Mishima. Please see as references: Junsei Judai, "Euthanasia As "Resignation": The View Of Euthanasia By Ogai Mori. (Original Title: "「諦め」としての安楽死 －森鷗外の安楽死観 －")," *Waseda Journal Of Human Sciences* 26, no. 1 (2016), https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/jabedit/26/1/26_15/_pdf; Hiroya Yanagisawa, "A Hidden Story Of "TAKASE-BUNE": Did The Brother Really Speak With His Broken Vocal Code? (Original Title: "『高瀬舟』の真相 －小説史上，最も読者を欺いた殺人犯")," *Bulletin Of The Department Of Teaching Japanese As A Second Language, Hiroshima University*, no. 20 (2010), https://ir.lib.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/files/public/3/33784/20141016195055760747/HiroshimaUniv-NihongoKyoikuKenkyu_20_9.pdf.

[58] Imamura, 1983.

[59] Lee Wood Hung, "Natural Culturalism in 'The Ballad of Narayama': A Study of Shohei Imamura's Thematic Concerns," *Asian Cinema* 14, no. 1 (January 2003): pp. 146-166, https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.14.1.146_1.

[60] Jørn Borup, *Japanese Rinzai Zen Buddhism* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), https://terebess.hu/zen/Myoshinji.pdf.

[61] Takie Sugiyama Lebra, *Japanese Patterns Of Behavior* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1976), 165.

[62] Imamura, 1983.

[63] Imamura, 1983.

[64] Hiroshi Minami, "Human Relations In The Japanese Society," *Revista Mexicana De Sociología* 16, no. 3 (1954): 520, doi:10.2307/3537695, https://hermes-ir.lib.hit-u.ac.jp/hermes/ir/re/11825/annals0040201480.pdf.

[65] Imamura, 1983.

[66] Imamura, 1983.

FRONTERA VERDE:
TOWARDS ECOCRITICAL-DECOLONIAL IMAGE/CINEMA

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Colombian television series *Frontera Verde* is set in the Amazon Rainforest on the tripoint of the Colombian, Brazilian, and Peru border, in the *Tres Fronteras* area. Even though it is represented on the mainstream Netflix platform and by its genre as combining crime thriller and fiction, *Frontera Verde* draws attention to critical observation between colonial history and the present appropriation and deterioration of the Amazon region. In contemporary society, colonial agendas are often disguised under the concept of globalisation, ecological crisis, and the narrative of the Anthropocene. Ecological/green projects and the colonial hegemony of land and resources are two sides of the same coin. It is necessary to raise the question and awareness of the material means of production that serve colonial hegemony by visual means. Visual coloniality cannot be understood outside the legacies of colonial racial extractive capitalism and the expropriation of resources of the so-called New World. We approach the analysis of the series *Frontera Verde* by discussing the importance of decolonisation of visual/symbolic representation and imagination in the sense of having a collective refusal of the whole status quo of history, art, cinema, and other parts of the socio-cultural heritage based on the colonial order and its grammar. We are opposed here to writing on the 'cosmology' of Indigenous people, often narrated from the romanticised and exotic narrative, by which it is easy to perpetuate the colonial grammar of representation of Third-World spaces.

Not all communities conform to Western constructs of wealth, its notions of under/un/development, and the accumulation of material goods. Alberto Acosta explains how Indigenous communities presuppose a distinct worldview from the Western one, based on communitarian and not capitalist roots. He notes that *Buen Vivir's* life philosophy rejects anthropocentrism and the dominance of capitalism, entailing the process of depatriarchalisation and decolonisation.[1] Rita Laura Segato argues that in Latin America, the concept of *Buen Vivir* has always been a way of life of human and natural environment relations.[2] As an essential segment of the philosophy of many non-Western societies, *Buen Vivir* is a pluralistic view, which considers different ways of living well in harmony together within a community as well as between different communities, and living well with nature, in a harmonious relation of

humans and nature.[3] *Buen Vivir* could be translated from Spanish as 'good living', or 'good life'. However, Unai Villalba-Eguiluz and Iker Etxano oppose the meaningless translated term. Instead, they advocate prioritization of *Buen Vivir* as a general term, in line with Indigenous and original terms *Sumak Kawsay* (in Ecuador/Kichwa lang.) and *Suma Qamaña* (in Bolivia/Aymara lang.), or *Ñande Reko* or *Tekó Porã* (Guaraní lang.). Not exclusively related to South America, but concepts in many diverse cultures and regions, such as the Indian term *Swaraj* (radical ecological democracy) and the African term *Ubuntu* (sense of community) depict the same notion.[4] Both in Ecuador and Bolivia, the *Buen Vivir* principle has had constitutional status since 2008 and 2009 due to the struggles of Indigenous communities. The Amazon rainforest faces immense impacts of extractivism on its biodiversity. The Ecuadorian Amazon, with the highest rate of biodiversity per square km, notably the *Yasuní National Park*, is harshly affected by oil extraction. The Indigenous population suffers disastrous consequences, triggering increasing resistance. In view of the fact that nature cannot defend itself before any court or administration of human creation, under the Ecuadorian Constitution art. 73 it is declared that "every person, community, people or nationality can demand that the public authority should fulfill the rights of nature."[5]

In the series, the Amazon forest represents the cosmology of *Buen Vivir* life, narrated through the Indigenous vision of life-Mother Earth, which is personified through the characters of Ushë and Yua – the eternal beings, guardians of the jungle and keepers of its sacred knowledge. The danger of the jungle, ecocide, genocides, and exploitation of nature is represented by the character of Joseph Schultz, the Nazi doctor who wants to master the ancestral knowledge of the jungle in order to bring power to the white man and the ideology of racial supremacy.

Through the four thematic units (*Racial Extractive Capitalism*, *White Anthropocene*, *Cinematic 'Color-Line'* and *Decolonising: Ecocritical Image-Cinema*), the article will bring in close relation the means of colonisation: dispossession, genocides, ecocides, cultural appropriation, and subjection of the Indigenous culture of the Amazon basin within the formation of the colonial Eurocentric worldview. We argue that *Frontera Verde* represents action toward decolonial thinking and opens crucial questions in that process: What is the relation between visual and colonial/Anthropocene order? How can we collectively refuse the knowledge of imposed 'Christian humanism'/modernism (Wynter, Segato) in visual culture? What is the connection between the materiality of media and extractive capitalism? How do epistemological/cultural knowledge and its production persist in being made on the same colonial order that we here are calling a whitewashing cinematic/visual machine? And finally, how can we bring about Silvia Wynter's legacy that urged for a new humanist revolution?! Our aim is not to advocate for a neoliberal narrative of green/ecological cinema (as much as it occurs

to be the way of engaging with ecological world problems) but to expose instruments and ideology behind the appropriation of land and resources of the so-called Third World spaces.

2. RACIAL EXTRACTIVE CAPITALISM

With the historical juxtaposition of the colonial past and neocolonial present, the series *Frontera Verde* leads the viewer to a critical urge to understand how the Amazon region has been the main resource of extractive capitalism. As Cajetan Iheka states, in the context of African media, we need to understand and "turn to the socioecological implications of resource extraction on the continent in order to begin the work of imagining an eco-conscious future."[6] The central point to note here is that the neocolonial grammar of scientific practice is hidden under the concept of sustainability, climate changes/crisis, ecology, green cinema, bio food, and similar programs. Thus, ecological degradation, on a global scale, serves the same aim of maintaining the White Anthropocene.[7] Western ecological science is represented as an abstract process (or better to say, dehistoricised, depoliticised and deracialised) based on a scientific calculation of CO_2 emissions, or GDP statistics, material flow analysis (MFA), ecological footprints, and other instrumental parameters/narratives which are to avoid considering the century of colonisation, wars, genocides, extractions, slavery and other forms of violence. Scientific ecological projects serve as means of preservation of colonial capital, and knowledge underpinned by the western system of education. Kathryn Yusoff explains:

> Contemporaneously, the effects of ecoimperialist measures such as REDD in the Amazon that evicted Indigenous peoples of their land in attempts to offset carbon emissions created elsewhere and the location of waste sites in low-income and predominately black neighbourhoods continue this disproportionate legacy of harm. The imperative is to recognize the regime of offsetting—of carbon, ecosystems, deforestation, pollution, forced migration, land grabs, climate change—as a neocolonial enterprise that continues extraction through displacement of waste and the ongoing legacy of colonial "experiments." [8]

Andrea Smith has shown that white supremacy is constituted by three separate, distinct, but still interrelated, pillars/logics: Slavery/Capitalism, Genocide/Capitalism, and Orientalism/War. Neoliberal capitalism enveloped in democracy is nothing but what Cedric J. Robinson termed *racial capitalism*. Robinson argued that racial capitalism is based on racism and nationalism, in which Western feudal society is a key tool within the ideology of Christendom. He asserts further that capitalism cannot be seen just as displacement from feudal modes to capitalist ones, but as the means of agrarian production through the slave labour force of non-Europeans that created the white European bourgeoisie/capitalists. The appropriation of land through the system of slavery and colonial racial order is what makes it possible today to

have the accumulation of wealth concentrated in post-imperial and colonial Western European lands. Along this, Yusoff writes, "As land is made into a tabula rasa for European inscription of its militant maps, so too do Indigenes and Africans become rendered as a writ or ledger of flesh scribed in colonial grammars."[9] The present ordering of the world with the centralized power of Western European Union countries established on the same colonial ideology, where all those methods are serving the same goal of resource exploitation, labour, and cultural wealth appropriation into white Western capital. Denise Ferreira da Silva argues that the total extraction of value from slavery and violence is what made possible Western culture, civilization, humanism, and expropriation to be "authorized by modern juridical forms, colonial domination (conquest, displacement, and settlement) and property (enslavement)."[10] Thus, the racial colonial capitalism feeds itself on necropolitical[11] practices: wars, sadism, genocides, and refugee 'crisis' that enable the management of human populations through their exposure to death.

Historically, colonization of the Amazon region started under the patronage of imperial churches, which sent missionaries from Western Europe to South America to spread Christian humanistic ideology by "evangelizing the people of the so-called New World and converting them to Christianity." Among the first imperial missionaries sent was cartographer Samuel Fritz, a Bohemian Jesuit in charge of the Spanish missions on the upper Amazon.[12] Camila Loureiro Dias notes:

> Samuel Fritz presents the natural and human geography of the river and the status of the Society of Jesus missions in the territory. In the first part, he describes the Amazon and the geographical features that are important for its navigation. He also identifies some of the river's natural resources that could be amenable to economic exploitation, and he describes fish, beasts, poisonous animals, crocodiles, and anacondas, highlighting the savage and inhospitable aspects of the territory.[13]

He created a detailed cartography[14] from 12 years of missionary experience and mapped the whole of the Amazon basin in detail. Fritz occupied the territory for his parish large as Europe, around 30,000 miles, "most of Brazil, Columbia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia."[15] He and all the missionaries sent by imperial state churches established so-called 'Jesuit reductions,'[16] the space for a concentration of Indigenous peoples which served as a camp for converting native tribes to Christianity. José Alejandro Restrepo writes that Jesuit Missionaries,[17] coming to South America in the 18th century, not only colonized the spaces but served as space-time experiments of the subjection of Guarani Indigenous people by isolating them in orthogonal sites around the plaza and church, where time is regulated by the bells.[18]

> The Society of Jesus extended its branches from Rome to every corner of the known world where the Jesuits had founded provinces and vice-provinces as basic units of the order's network. The provinces were brought together into five broad administrative divisions called assistancies, which corresponded to the major European states and their imperial possessions.[19]

Following this assertion from America's geopolitical context, Yusoff writes that when Europeans invaded the Caribbean in 1492 "[…] they began to use the islands as an experimental archipelago in terms of both the social organization of categories of human and the ecological arrangements of flora and fauna."[20] We introduce the book *Travels in Brazil, in the Years 1817-1820: Undertaken by Command of His Majesty the King of Bavaria* as the central source of insight into a detailed project of colonization of South America by Austrians and Germans:

> Accordingly the Emperor of Austria sent several learned men, well skilled in the various departments of natural history and natural philosophy, in the suite of the Archduchess his daughter, and His Majesty the King of Bavaria embraced this favourable opportunity to send two members of the Academy of Sciences at Munich, who would thus be under the protection of the Austrian embassy, and enjoy the best recommendation to the Court of Rio de Janeiro.[21]

Among missionary members of the Academy of science were zoologists Johann Baptist Ritter von Spix and Johann Natterer, and botanist Karl Friedrich von Martius, who explore the 'vegetable kingdom':

> But besides the observations and researches in the departments peculiar to each professor, in which reciprocal assistance and support were presupposed, they were particularly enjoined to complete, as far as possible, the collections of the academy, by sending specimens of all the natural productions of the several kingdoms, as the best certificate of the observations made. [22]

On the website *Brasiliana Iconográfica* can be seen detailed illustrations by landscape painter Thomas Ender, who came to Brasil with the Austrian Mission in 1817, together with Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius (1794-1868) and Johann Baptist von Spix (1781-1826).

> Another scientist who benefited from Thomas Ender's talent for drawing landscapes was Austrian physician, geologist and botanist Johann Baptist Emanuel Pohl (1782-1834), who came to Brazil in charge of mineralogy in the same mission as the painter. Pohl turned off the expedition and traveled for four years in the interior of Brazil, passing through Minas Gerais, Goiás, Tocantins, until reaching the border with Maranhão. In 1821, Pohl returned to Rio de Janeiro and from there he embarked for Vienna, taking about 200 live animals and more than 1,500 plant species.[23]

In those excerpt paragraphs, it is evident how the logic of colonial extractive capitalism operates under a scientific system of measurement and data collection, applying it as the legitimised toll of "colonial hierarchy that allowed 'whites,' later called 'Europeans,' to control labor—functions as the fulcrum for the system as a whole."[24] Until today, the *Weltmuseum Wien* in Austria displays a collection from imperial/colonial conquests of Brazil, called Austrian "scientific expedition." The museum also possesses an extensive collection from Brazil, titled *An Austrian Mosaic of Brazil*,[25] dating back to the 19th-century marriage between Maria Leopoldina of Austria and Pedro I of Brazil. Among the artefacts are watercolours depicting black slaves by Thomas Ender, created during the Austrian-Bavarian mission to Brazil in 1817. The collection of watercolours is made for the imperial gaze and today is housed

in the *Kupferstichkabinett* (Graphic Collection) of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna.[26] Segato, via Aníbal Quijano, argues that the source of value and hierarchies are always Eurocentric:

> They refer to unequal, unrooted, and distant relations between a subject who observes and administers, and an object or nature reduced to the status of a thing and epistemologically reified. They refer to anthropocentrism rather than cosmocentrism, and they are thus a form of epistemic racism that forms nothing less than the relational dimension of the Eurocentric world. Eurocentrism and epistemic racism are thus nothing other than two names for one and the same colonial gesture.[27]

Shifting to the 20th century, Stefania Barca and Felipe Milanez elaborated that through an Indian Emancipation statute in 1973 (the integration plan of Indigenous peoples), there was a grouping of Indigenous populations of Brazil into categories "depending on their relationship with white settler society: (1) isolated, (2) in the process of integration and (3) integrated."[28] The Neo-colonial grammar of extractive capitalism today rests on the same colonial basis of racial extractive capitalism. The present example of occupying territory can be seen in the so-called scientific project of the *Amazon Tall Tower Observatory*,[29] and appropriation (colonization) of land behind the narratives of ecological/preservation and care, led by forester Christoph Jaster, a native German who is serving as director of *Tumucumaque National Park*: the largest rainforest reserve in the world, bordering with French Guiana and the former Dutch colony of Suriname.

3. WHITE ANTHROPOCENE

In the series episode *The light*, the shaman (eternal man) of the jungle speaks that the white man wants to get into the depths of the jungle, and if he conceives the knowledge of the earth of humanity it shall be his.[30] In *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Kathryn Yusoff (2018), brings racial exclusion and violence towards Indigenous people in close relation with the formation of the geopolitical concept of White Anthropocene. According to Yusoff, it is essential to rethink the empirics of science and epistemically stop reproducing the constructions of power in the telling.[31] Da Silva argues that racial knowledge transforms centuries-long colonial expropriation into efficient reasons, such as laws of nature, which function through forms of bodies and societies.[32] Colonial hegemony of the Global South from the 15th century was firstly done by scientific "earth expedition geography," conducted according to medieval Christian geographers, in finding the so-called boundary "marker between the habitable temperate zone of Europe and the inhabitable torrid zones."[33] The second mode of colonisation was done by employing classical Christian doctrines of the education system and science. For example, the study of philosophy in most schools in Brazil was taught according to the system founded upon Johann Jakob Brucker's institutions and Kantian philosophy.[34] The central point

to note here is that the system of feudal Christian Europeanisation is what constructed and governs cultural representation and human perception – the worldview, which is based on 'Christian feudal geography and astronomy' that "bring into being our present single world order and single world history."[35]

The creation of the Anthropocene is based on "Whiteness as the colour of universality,"[36] a colour that "became established as a right to geography, to take place, to traverse the globe and to extract from cultural, corporeal, and material registers."[37] Barca considers the world as kept alive by the very agencies of "racialized, feminized, waged and unwaged, human and non-human labours" that deny the Anthropocene master's narrative.[38] Racial extractive capitalism conducted through over 500 years of slavery enables the power and imperial hegemony of the White Anthropocene until the very present day:[39]

> The very "matter" of territorial impulse that materially comprised the Anthropocene is anti-Blackness; it is racialized matter that delivers the Anthropocene as a geologic event into the world, through mining, plantations, railroads, labor, and energy. While Blackness is the energy and flesh of the Anthropocene, it is excluded from the wealth of its accumulation. Rather, Blackness must absorb the excess of that surplus as toxicity, pollution, and intensification of storms. Again, and again.[40]

In Wynter's seminal work, *1492: A New World-View* (1995), she showed that conquest, invasion, environmental crisis, and native-genocide by White Western Christians started in 1492 where so-called Columbus voyage "was the prelude to a mode of exchange in which 'genocide and ecocide' were traded off for 'the benefits of horses, cutglass beads, pickup trucks and microwave ovens.'"[41] Wynter explains that exploration of the 'New World' by Columbus, under the Spanish crown, legitimized colonization of the island and taking Indigenous people as slave trade exchange value, just on the basis that they were idolaters. With juro-theological legitimation of the slave-trade system out of Africa, established by the Portuguese in 1441, the enslaved people were used as a substitute for a labouring force in founding the new societies and economic development of America.

Exploration of nature goes in direct line with colonisation. Alexander von Humboldt's exploration of nature called *Naturgemälde*[42] and his famous *Chimborazo Map from* the 19th century depict the triumph of Western science instrumentalization and European exploration.

> Though humanity, in Kant's formulation, already refers only to Europeans, the closing of humanity's ethical boundaries occurs in the nineteenth century, both in Hegel's revision of the Kantian program and in the deployment by scientists of man and society of the tools of scientific reason to account for human difference.[43]

The glory of Humboldt is based upon the numerous praiseful literature depicting the "history of science that is patronizingly colonial"[44] and "relentless in its prejudices," as Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra describes the narratives as being always the same:

> Humboldt brought the larvae of Kantian, Goethean, and Forsterian ideas with him. Once exposed to the tropics, these ideas metamorphosed into beautiful butterflies in Humboldt's mind and cabinets.[45]

Going further into the 20th century, during Nazism and the Third Reich, Germans (Hans Krieg, Gustav Giemsa, Ernst Nauck, Adolf Schneider and Helmut Sick) organized many expeditions to Brazil from the southern state of Paraná to the northern state of Amazonia. According to Jens Glüsing, in 1935 Nazi Schulz-Kampfhenkel was in charge of the *German Amazon-Jary-Expedition*, with the mission to map the whole region and to look for signs of Aryans in South America and on behalf of the *Kaiser Wilhelm Institute* to discover new rivers, and visit isolated Indian tribes, and also to hunt and collect rare jungle animals for Berlin museums.[46] For seventeen months, in the period from 1935 to 1937, under the guidance of Otto Schulz-Kampfhenkel, Nazi explorers went through forests around Brazil's border with French Guiana. They collected animal skulls, and Indigenous jewellery, and studied topography along the Jari River, a 491-mile tributary of the Amazon. A more horrifying fact is that after the war, Schulz-Kampfhenkel dedicated himself to film productions and documentaries for teaching in schools. In 1962, he founded the *Institut für Weltkunde in Bildung und Forschung* (WBF - Institute for World Studies in Education and Research),[47] which even provides audiovisual teaching materials to regular schools. He also made nature films about the Wadden Sea and documentaries about the struggle for independence in West Africa.

Frontera Verde directly refers to the German colonization of the Amazon. In one of the episodes, Helena (a detective) encounters a monument with an engraved Nazi swastika in the forest. The series directly references the recently discovered Nazi grave cross deep in the Amazon Jungle, on Jari River island near Laranjal do Jari. On the wooden cross, about three meters high, with an engraved swastika, stands a text in the German language saying that Joseph Greiner died of fever on January 2, 1936, in the service of German research work.[48] As Glüsing argued, the irony of history is that Schulz-Kampfhenkel's megalomaniac project with the expedition in the mid-1930s is now in German hands. Namely, the director of the *Tumucumaque Mountains National Park*, to which the river Jari belongs, is Christoph Jaster, who was born in Germany and studied forestry in Göttingen. *Frontera Verde* points out the contemporary racial and colonial problems in the Amazon region and the Global South by incorporating the historical references/facts of colonization of the Amazon. The series exposes the connection between Christian missionary orders and Austro-German Nazi ideology in South America, represented in the figure of Joseph, the Nazi doctor (who calls himself of the new race of Jungle), supported by a female religious missionary order of the Church of Eden. The fact that today exactly a German man lords and administers the *Tumucumaque Mountains National Park* - the largest rainforest reserve on the Earth, tells us how urgent it is to unveil the

past colonial relations, and its present neo-colonial continuation disguised under ecological agendas.

In 1911, the anthropologist Franz Boas published the study *The Mind of Primitive Man*. Many scholars consider this work pivotal, where Boas rejected the hierarchical evolutionary thinking/Darwinism, and his work persists in being recognized in anthropology. There are not many critics of Boas's legacy, and very few, such as da Silva, correctly point to Boas's concept of 'cultural difference' extended in the early 20th century into the neoliberal doctrine of 'cultural wars.' Da Silva has made clear that Boas "[…] performs major shift in the knowledge of the human condition with the claim that social, rather than biological aspects account for the variation of mental (moral and intellectual) contents."[49] She further argues: "[…] it names an expression of its diversity, in order to justify naming the mass killings genocide and crimes against humanity."[50] In a book from 1913,[51] Walter Hardenburg describes in detail how the Amazon valley ("a region nearly as large as the whole of Europe without Russia – was early divided between Spain and Portugal") was a place of horrible genocides and modern environmental disasters.

> The 1610 natal moment does, however, tie the origin of the Anthropocene to the death of 50 million Indigenous people (80 to 95 percent of the population), systematic violence, and chattel slavery. This spike of brutality, sadism, and death, coupled with the subsequent dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land and the beginnings of global industrial slavery, enacts a foundational spatial inscription of colonialism (and race) into a monument of global environmental change.[52]

According to Hardenburg:

> This has been done, not in single instances at the command of some savage potentate, but in tens of thousands under a republican Government, in a Christianised country, at the behest of the agents of a great joint-stock company with headquarters in London: the "crime" of these unfortunates being that they did not always bring in rubber sufficiently fast - work for which they practically received no payment - to satisfy their task-masters. In order to obtain rubber so that the luxurious -tyred motor-cars of civilisation might multiply in the cities of Christendom, the dismal forests of the Amazon have echoed with the cries of despairing and tortured Indian aborigines.[53]

Furthermore, relating to the German culture, Angela Last showed a direct line between the German fascist ideology of 'blood and soil' and genocides/colonisation of native lands, arguing:

> When Germans speak of the genocide they committed, they never think of Namibia and the other places where men, women, and children also died at their hands: gathering diamonds, building the railway, digging a harbour, levelling the ground for their own death camp. Women, raped and forced to scrape the skin off the skulls of their executed men for "science."[54]

4. CINEMATIC "COLOR-LINE"

In the fundamental work *The Souls of the Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois said, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line."[55] The color-line is not imposed just in geopolitical colonisation of the Earth, contemporary world order based on the racial, but in media as well. Wynter argues that the medieval habitable/inhabitable mapping of the world created a geographical color line between the white feudal Christian order and nonwhite torrid zones (today segregation policies between inside white Europe and outside nonwhite/subaltern Third World).[56] John Akomfrah states that racism inheres in the film apparatus "[…] was firstly about the inherent 'biases' of most film stocks and secondly on the way in which film processing laboratories, set up to process these stocks, worked with a 'correct exposure truth' which increasingly worked against appropriate black skin tones."[57]

The color line is the Western biopolitical (Foucault, Agamben) system central to racist-colonial white supremacy representation that shaped visual culture. From racist entertainment - minstrel shows of the Jim Crow Era or *The Birth of a Nation* (1915),[58] to contemporary American Hollywood TV series and movies[59] that use the yellow filter to represent the undeveloped-Third World/Global South. One of the most debated cases of yellow filtering is the film *Extraction* (2020), which takes place in Bangladesh. No matter its technological base, whether celluloid film or digital, the racial basis is indoctrinated into apparatus and aesthetics that affect perception and create a 'collective unconscious.'[60] Thus, yellow filtering serves as a geopolitical and biopolitical frontier between Western America and South America. In his capital book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said showed how the Western colonial narrative racialized the Arab culture through Orientalizing ideology, by representing non-Western cultures as an uncivilized, dangerous, and mysterious 'other.'[61] The mutual ideology of racial colonial capitalism, necropolitics, racialized aesthetics, and knowledge is striving to reduce the world outside the Western hemisphere (legitimized with the Christian Enlightenment project) to the space of racialized otherness. The atmospheric arrangement in representing the so-called Third Countries always inscribes the blurred/filtered scenes. For example, (not sufficiently critically examined) the greyscale color line for representation of the Balkan and Eastern Europe, underpinned with aesthetics of Magic Realism, is also an effective segregation line, alluding to the Cold War dichotomy between 'East' and 'West.' Likewise, in racial vocabulary and grammar, the Balkan is racialized through metaphoric narratives (the land of honey and blood, black lamb and grey falcon, etc.).[62] Thus, the present Eurocentric propaganda that stands on a representation system of 'cultural diversity' at its core is the hegemonizing toll of the Eurocentric worldview.

Following Stuart Hall, it is notable that every representation has its historical and ideological background that stands on the White Western colonial hegemony of knowledge.

Accordingly, during the centuries, as well as today, Hollywood normatized racial and segregating production, which underpins racialized narratives and representation of White and Black American culture. In its material (invisible) basis, the media culture was constructed on racial grounds and functions as a mode of production of third-world narratives. As Wynter said, aside from the geocolonial, colonization is "carried out within a system of symbolic representation." [63] A blatant example of the continuation of colonial modernity is the documentary film *Anaconda Wanted – in Search of the Giant Snake* (2006) by Rainer Bergomaz, a biologist, who changed his profession to (not surprisingly) exploration and research of 'exotic worlds,' just like Christoph Jaster the forester and director of Tumucumaque Mountains National Park. The film is shown at the *Green Screen International Wildlife Film Festival* in Germany, which declares itself as "the most popular festival for nature documentaries in Europe and an important international industry meeting place for professionals."[64] The description of Bergomaz's film is represented with the following words:

> A team of German filmmakers and biologists are seeking the truth behind the myth with the latest measure and observation technique. The plains of Gyanas with savannahs, marshes and impenetrable forests are the ideal habitat for a lot of animals. The team succeeds taking a look inside the life of the unexplored snake.[65]

As it was in the colonial past, the same matrix of representation of *White Innocence*[66] is used today in the narrative about the Amazon as an exotic and mysterious land that needs to be discovered and culturalized by heroic male white Western men. Another example is a website called *Rainforest cruises*, where Western European tourists can find packed information and a recommended compilation of the *Top 11 Movies About the Amazon Jungle* with an alluring slogan:

> Looking for movies about the Amazon Jungle? The largest rainforest in the world, at over 2.3 million miles squared, is home to over 5,000 species of known fish (including the infamous piranha!), over 1,800 species of known birds, and the largest river in the world. The unknown of this vast wilderness intrigues film directors and movie producers alike, often experimenting with stories about the mythical giant anaconda or the traditional healing powers of the Amazonian shaman. Browse through our list of films about the Amazon jungle and set a few aside for your next Netflix binge![67]

If we look at the list of those films,[68] except for *Embrace of the Serpent* (2015), each of them is conceptualized on colonial exotic/Orientalized narratives addressed to the white Western gaze and its pathologies in discovering other lands. *Embrace of the Serpent* is based on the expedition diaries of German ethnologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg (in 1909) and American biologist Richard Evans Schultes (in 1940). What differentiates this film from those produced for the white gaze is the witnessing of colonial atrocities against Indigenous populations and the devastation of natural resources by Western expedition missions. The most popular among the listed films from the site is Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), which we

are using here as an example of the realization of spectacle for the Western gaze. The man's dream of building an opera house in the Amazon jungle alludes to the German Faustian figure of a 'madman' (Klaus Kinski's madman character in the film). The figure of 'madman' shows the transcendent representation of European knowledge ruled by reason and "master morality," or "will to power," [69] which instituted white Western men at the centre of modern representation.[70] Behind the fictional film narrative occurs the factual appropriation of land and natural resources by Walter Saxer, none other than the producer of *Fitzcarraldo* and manager in finding 650 Ashaninka Amazonian natives[71] to participate in the film serving as a labour force for the difficult working scenes. Saxer generated extra profits from the film by opening a hotel called *La Casa Fitzcarraldo* for the white elite at the site of the film scene, offering visitors a 4-level treehouse on a cedro tree and views over a pool and garden, the Amazon River and the diverse world of birds.[72] One can find a similar case in the documentary film *The African Twin Towers* (2008), by German director Christoph Schlingensief. Obscenely, his project is to build a rotating ship-opera stage in the Namibian desert, in the land where the German colonial empire, or the Second Reich (1904-1908), committed genocide against the Indigenous Herero and Nama peoples after they rebelled against the settler-colonizers.[73] Just as Fitzcarraldo, Schlingensief's film is nothing more than the perverted colonial pathology of white-male genius in the creation of sublime artistic work. As Achille Mbembe reminds us, "the creation of modernity is complete in the colony."[74]

5. DECOLONIZING: ECOCRITICAL IMAGE-CINEMA

> "*The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*"[75]
> — Audre Lorde

To be aware that cinema has the color line is to deconstruct/decolonize the technological racialized production hidden behind racial representation ideology legitimized and incorporated into conventional forms of aesthetic/art and materiality of media. Moreover, the digital promise of a race-neutral era is rendered even more technologically racialized in software and coded media. An important decolonial agenda of the series *Frontera Verde* is the epistemological refusal of colonial narrative, in calling for awareness of what sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls "cognitive injustice" as a form of epistemicide imposing Western science as the only civilisation paradigm and that marginalised the knowledge and wisdom of the global South.[76] Furthermore, Zainab Amadahy in her article *Why Indigenous*

and Racialized Struggles will Always be Appendixed by the Left (2011) calls for moving beyond Marxism and other Eurocentric knowledge:

> You don't need Marxism to teach you about equity, social justice, and right relationship with the land when you have Patanjali or Yoruba masters or ubuntu or Laozi or Kemetic wisdom or Tich Nhat Hanh or Indigenous Elders from across the Americas, et cetera.[77]

She continues further about the concept of decolonisation, saying it is not compatible with Eurocentric philosophies and its strategy acts, as many Indigenous and racialised communities agree on the same.[78]

The first impetus of decolonial cinema was formed by anticolonial and anti-imperial struggles and the independence movement from colonial rule in the 20th century. Central to this struggle was the rise of the visual field of decolonisation, starting from *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), and the manifesto *Toward a Third Cinema*,[79] continuing with *Yugoslavian Partisan Films* during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the *Black Audio Film Collective* (1982-1998),[80] the *Smoking Dogs Films* (since 1997) production company,[81] The *Black Panther Party* (1966-1982), the *Black Power* movement, and the presently-active *Otolith Group* (since 2002). John Akomfarh pointed out that cinema is implicated in biopolitics and colonial film. He gives an example of Jean Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998) as privileged history based on availability that does not consider colonial/postcolonial diasporic identity into its historical axes. He asserts "As a series of film essays, Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* are ambitious, fantastic and very powerful but, equally, you could watch them without realizing that black people have been in the cinema."[82] Put clearly, eco-consciousness introduced via so-called green cinema is just colonial capitalism converted into green capital. It is not possible to talk about ethico-political challenges of the global present or ecological issues separated from the 500 years of slavery, native genocides, colonizing lands/extraction, and ongoing spreading of right-wing ideologies based on the same racial/colonial doctrines. Thus, decolonisation cannot be accomplished with the western "onto-epistemological arsenal" (da Silva) and its concept of humanism, which postulated white European man as the only historical subject, but persistently to articulate indigenous ethics, critiques of colonial worldview for alternative imaginings towards sustainable futures.

6. CONCLUSION

Following da Silva's critique of modern ontoepistemological grammar born out of the Western enlightenment project, it is crucial to develop a critique of the whole field of modern representation that is constituted as an institutionalized model of racial colonial order that positioned the white-western-European subject at the centre and nonwhite-others into Torrid

Zones of segregation. As Gloria Wekker asserts, decolonisation should start from the awareness that "modernity is coloniality"[83] just as Segato calls to dismiss colonial modernity as a powerful visual machine that directly constructs social and cultural understanding, way of living and symbolic production. Thus, the *Frontera Verde* is a welcomed cinematic production in the 21st century that speaks from a plural, Indigenous perspective and its philosophy of *Buen Vivir*, subordinated by the colonial and neocolonial-neoliberal ideology of fake multiculturalism and green-ecological agendas. We hope this small contribution will provoke further critical inquiries about genealogy and the relationship between visual and racial capitalism, heteropatriarchy, White Anthropocene, and white supremacy, rearranged today into the new grammar of the so-called sustainable projects that work on the future scenarios of colonial capitalist hegemony reproduction.

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[2] Rita Laura Segato, *The Critique of Coloniality: Eight Essays* (New York, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2022).

[3] Acosta, "Buen Vivir," 87-99.

[4] Acosta, "Buen Vivir," and see Unai Villalba-Eguiluz and Iker Etxano, "Buen Vivir vs Development (II): the limits of (Neo-) Extractivism," *Ecological Economics* 138 (2017): 1-11.

[5] Villalba-Eguiluz and Etxano, "Buen Vivir vs Development (II)," 7.

[6] Cajetan Iheka, "*African Ecomedia: Network Forms, Planetary Politics*" (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

[7] Kathryn Yusoff, *A billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

[8] Yusoff, *A billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 50.

[9] Yusoff, *A billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 33.

[10] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ − ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value," *e-flux Journal* 79 (February 2017): 8, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or-on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value/.

[11] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40.

[12] See more in detail John Hemming, *Red Gold: the Conquest of the Brazilian Indians, 1500-1760* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978).

[13] Regarding the relationship between cartography and missionary colonization by Samuel Fritz and other Christian orders, see Camila Loureiro Dias, "Jesuit Maps and Political Discourse: The Amazon River of Father Samuel Fritz," *Americas (Academy of American Franciscan History)* 69, no. 1 (July 2012): 95–116, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003161500001814.

[14] Samuel Fritz, Cartographer, *The Maraňon or Amazon River with the Mission of the Society of Jesus*, (Quito, Ecuador: Juan de Narvaes, 1707), Map, https://www.loc.gov/item/2021668377/.

[15] Derek Severn, "A Missionary on the Amazon, 1686-1724: Fr Samuel Fritz," *History Today* 25, no. 4, 1975, 279-286.

[16] See the movie *El abrazo de la serpiente* (Eng. *Embrace of the Serpent*), directed by Ciro Guerra (Buffalo Films, 2015), 125 min.

[17] "[...] toward the end of the seventeenth century the Jesuits began to map considerable areas of the provinces to which they were assigned. Many of these Jesuits came from the central European Habsburg possessions: Austria, Bavaria, Bohemia, Croatia, and so forth. They had generally followed the standard Jesuit curriculum, the ratio studiorum, which in its various versions stressed the natural sciences, particularly cosmography and cartography [...] the Jesuits were preeminently the order known for studies in the natural sciences. It is no exaggeration to say that many areas of the Americas were more closely mapped by the Jesuits than they would again be until the late nineteenth century, the time of the national governments." In David Buisseret, "Spanish Colonial Cartography, 1450-1700," in *The History of*

Cartography Volume Three, Part I: Cartography in the European Renaissance, ed. David Woodward (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007): 1148.
"Many of the Jesuits who came to Spanish America, including Fritz, were from the Hapsburg holdings in Central Europe like Austria, Bavaria, Bohemia, and Croatia. Once in their postings, these priests were the first to map various parts of the interior of South America." In "Barry Lawrence Ruderman Antique Maps Inc," n.d., "The First Printed Map of the Amazon from First-Hand Experience and the First Map Printed in South America," https://www.raremaps.com/gallery/print/56849hs.

[18] José Alejandro Restrepo, "Las islas de la utopía," in *Estéticas y opción decolonial*, ed. Walter Mignolo and Pedro Pablo Gómez (Bogotá: Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, 2012), 139. (authors' translation)

[19] Alexandre Coello de la Rosa, "Gathering Souls: Jesuit Missions and Missionaries in Oceania (1668–1945)," *Brill Research Perspectives in Jesuit Studies* 1, 2 (2019): 1-115, https://doi.org/10.1163/25897454-12340002.

[20] Yusoff, *A billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 31.

[21] Johann Baptist von Spix and Karl Friedrich Philipp von Martius, *Travels in Brazil, in the Years 1817-1820. Undertaken by Command of His Majesty the King of Bavaria, vol. 1* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1824), x, https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.85332.

[22] Spix and Martius, *Travels in Brazil, vol.1*, 5.

[23] Autor's translation from Spanish (Original text: "Outro cientista que se beneficiou do talento de Thomas Ender para desenhar paisagens foi o médico, geólogo e botânico austríaco Johann Baptist Emanuel Pohl (1782-1834), que veio ao Brasil encarregado da área de mineralogia na mesma missão do pintor. Pohl desligou-se da expedição e viajou durante quatro anos pelo interior do Brasil, passando por Minas Gerais, Goiás, Tocantins, até chegar à divisa com o Maranhão. Em 1821, Pohl voltou para o Rio de Janeiro e de lá embarcou para Viena, levando cerca de 200 animais vivos e mais de 1.500 espécies de plantas."), See Equipe Brasiliana Iconográfica, "As paisagens de Thomas Ender para os naturalistas," *Brasiliana Iconográfica*, April 20, 2021, https://www.brasilianaiconografica.art.br/artigos/20256/as-paisagens-de-thomas-ender-para-osnaturalistas.

[24] Segato, *The Critique of Coloniality*, 31.

[25] Wien, Weltmuseum. "Weltmuseum Wien: Permanent Exhibition." Weltmuseumwien.at, June 30, 2022, https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/permanent-exhibition/.

[26] Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien. "About the Graphic Collection." Accessed January 15, 2023, https://www.akbild.ac.at/en/museum-and-exhibitions/art-collections/graphic-collection/about-the-graphic-collection?set_language=en.

[27] Segato, *The Critique of Coloniality*, 32.

[28] Stefania Barca and Felipe Milanez, "Labouring the Commons: Amazonia's 'Extractive Reserves' and the Legacy of Chico Mendes," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Environmental Labour Studies*, ed. Nora Räthzel, Dimitris Stevis, and David Uzzell (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 325, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-71909-8_14.

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[31] Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 105.

[32] Da Silva, "On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value," 8.

[33] Sylvia Wynter, "1492: A New World View." in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington, London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 9.

[34] Spix and Martius, *Travels in Brazil, vol.2*, 9.

[35] Wynter, "1492: A New World View," 13.

[36] Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 51.

[37] Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 69.

[38] Stefania Barca, *Forces of Reproduction: Notes for a Counter-Hegemonic Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 18, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108878371.

[39] Yusoff, *A billion Black Anthropocenes or None*.

[40] Yusoff, *A billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 82.

[41] Wynter, "1492: A New World View," 7.

[42] Between 1799 and 1804, Humboldt and his team of naturalists were led by indigenous guides through present-day Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Cuba, and Mexico, concluding their trip in the United States of America. Caroline Schaumann argued that the oil painting by German

artist Friedrich Georg Weitsch *Alexander von Humboldt und Aimé Bonpland in der Ebene von Tapia am Fuße des Chimborazo* (1810) "depicts the Europeans with their respective scientific instruments before a backdrop of Indians, mules, cacti, and Chimborazo towering in the distance, maintaining a strict nature-culture and old new world divide." In Caroline Schaumann, "Who measures the world? Alexander von Humboldt's Chimborazo Climb in the Literary Imagination." *The German Quarterly* 82, no. 4 (2009): 454.

[43] Da Silva, "On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value," 7.

[44] Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, "Humboldt and Epistemological Colonialism: Alexandra Wulf's The Invention of Nature," in *Asymmetric Ecologies in Europe and South America around 1800*, ed. Susanne Schlünder and Rolando M. Carrasco (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 20, https://doi-org.uaccess.univie.ac.at/10.1515/9783110733211.

[45] Cañizares-Esguerra, "Humboldt and Epistemological Colonialism," 22.

[46] According to Glüsing, in May 1937, the young researcher returned to Germany with thousands of animal skulls, Indian jewellery and tools, and a rubber bag full of films. He exhibited his exhibits in several cities; a few monkey skulls from the *Schulz-Kampfhenkel Collection* can still be admired in the Natural History Museum of Berlin's Humboldt University. In Jens Glüsing, "Amazonas-Expedition 1935 Nazis im Dschungel-Camp," *Spiegel Geschichte*, October 2008, https://www.spiegel.de/geschichte/amazonas-expedition-1935-a-947979.html.

[47] Wbf-medien.de. "Wir über uns." Accessed January 15, 2023, https://www.wbf-medien.de/wir-ueber-uns.

[48] Jens Glüsing, "Amazonas-Expedition 1935 Nazis im Dschungel-Camp."

[49] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference Without Separability," *Catalogue of the 32a São Paulo Art Biennial, 'Incerteza viva' (Living Uncertainty)* (2016): 61-62.

[50] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Many Hundred Thousand Bodies Later: An Analysis of the 'Legacy'of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda," in *Events: The Force of International Law*, ed. Sundhya Pahuja, Fleur Johns, and Richard Joyce (New York: Routledge, 2010), 172.

[51] Walter Ernest Hardenburg, *The Putumayo: The Devil's Paradise, Travels in the Peruvian Amazon Region and an Account of the Atrocities Committed Upon the Indians Therein* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1913).

[52] Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 32.

[53] Hardenburg, *The Putumayo*, 12.

[54] Angela Last, "Geopoetics, via Germany 1," in *Geopoetics in Practice*, ed. Eric Magrane, Linda Russo, Sarah de Leeuw, Craig Santos Perez (London: Routledge, 2019), 315, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429032202.

[55] William E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903).

[56] See Wynter, "1492: A New World View."

[57] John Akomfrah, "Digitopia and the Spectres of Diaspora," *Journal of Media Practice* 11, no. 1 (2010): 23, https://doi.org/10.1386/jmpr.11.1.21/1.

[58] *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by David Wark Griffith (D. W. Griffith Inc. and Epoch Producing Corporation, 1915), 190 min.

[59] *Blade Runner* 2049 (2017), *Fauda* (2015), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), *Queen of Katwe* (2016), *Extraction* (2020), *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), *Red Sparrow* (2018).

[60] Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

[61] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

[62] Referring to Angelina Jolie's film *Land of Blood and Honey* (2011), and the travel book by Rebeca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941). Katarina Luketić gives an example of Peter Handke (a supporter of Serbian aggression and ethnic cleansing of the non-Serbian population, who travelled to Srebrenica in the time of genocides over the Bosnian Muslims), a writer who was inspired by the exoticism of the war amid the disintegration of Yugoslavia writes the novel *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia* (1997), see Katarina Luketić, *Balkan: od Geografije do Fantazije* (eng. *The Balkans: from geography to phantasy*) (Zagreb: Algoritam, 2013).

[63] Wynter, "1492: A New World View," 12.

[64] "Anaconda Wanted – In Search of the Giant Snake," Green Screen, https://www.greenscreen-festival.de/en/festival/films/d/show/anaconda-wanted-in-search-of-the-giant-snake/.

[65] "Anaconda Wanted – In Search of the Giant Snake."

[66] Term by Gloria Wekker as the pivotal problem of the Dutch culture of denial of racial discrimination and colonial violence. See Gloria Wekker, "White Innocence," in *White Innocence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822374565

[67] "Top 11 Movies about the Amazon Jungle," Rainforest Cruises, posted on March 30, 2016, https://www.rainforestcruises.com/guides/movies-about-the-amazon-jungle.

[68] The website proposed the following films: *Embrace of the Serpent* (2015), *Medicine Man* (1992), *The Emerald Forest* (1985), *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), *The Mission* (1986), *End of the Spear* (2005), *The Forest* (2002), *Anaconda* (1997), *Amazonia* (2013), *The Sacred Science* (2011), and *David Beckham into the Unknown* (2014).

[69] See Martin A. Ruehl's important work on demystifying Nietzsche as an apolitical spiritual philosopher. Ruehl argues that "Nietzsche scholars have either ignored his pro-slavery comments or urged us to read them metaphorically." "In The Gay Science, he significantly mentions 'subhumans' as the natural attendants of heroes and supermen." "There are more than 300 references to slaves, slavery and similar terms in Nietzsche's works. The vast majority of these affirm the necessity of human bondage." In Martin A. Ruehl, 2018, "In Defence of Slavery: Nietzsche's Dangerous Thinking." *Independent*, January 13, 2018, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/nietzsche-ideas-superman-slavery-nihilism-adolf-hitler-nazi-racism-white-supremacy-fascism-a8138396.html.

[70] Da Silva shows how the ontoepistemological construction of Eurocentric supremacy determines the racialized representations. She criticized the figure of a madman as a modern western Eurocentric concept, what she termed "transparent subjectivity" associated with self-determination that possesses the ontoepistemological primacy of interiority (mind-reason). See Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[71] See "Walter Saxer Room," n.d. La Casa Fitzcarraldo. Accessed January 7, 2023, http://www.casafitzcarraldo.com/en/walter-saxer-room/.

[72] "The Tree House," La Casa Fitzcarraldo, http://www.casafitzcarraldo.com/en/the-tree-house/.

[73] "It has been called the first genocide of the 20th century, the 'forgotten genocide." "Even today, many German tourists visit Namibia, especially Swakopmund, a city on Namibia's Atlantic coast, where the restaurant menus serve German food and beer, and where well-preserved colonial-era buildings line streets named after German chancellor Otto von Bismarck." In Onishi, Norimitsu, and Melissa Eddy, 2021, "A Forgotten Genocide: What Germany Did in Namibia, and What It's Saying Now," *The New York Times*, May 28, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/28/world/europe/germany-namibia-genocide.html.

[74] Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 36.

[75] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 110.

[76] On this matter, see: Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*. London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

[77] Zainab Amadahy, "Interview with Zainab Amadahy," interview by Feral Feminisms' Guest Editors, *Feral feminisms, Complicities, Connections, & Struggles: Critical Transnational Feminist Analysis of Settler Colonialism*, no. 4, summer 2015, https://feralfeminisms.com/zainab-amadahy/.

[78] Zainab Amadahy, "Why Indigenous and Racialized Struggles will Always be Appendixed by the Left," *Rabble.ca*, July 19, 2011, https://rabble.ca/anti-racism/why-indigenous-and-racialized-struggles-will-always-be-appendixed-left/.

[79] Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Toward a Third Cinema," *Cinéaste* 4, no. 3 (1970): 1-10, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41685716.

[80] John Akomfrah, "Black Independent Filmmaking: a Statement by the Black Audio Film Collective (UK, 1983)" In *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology* edited by Scott MacKenzie, 307-309. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014, https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520957411-086.

[81] Matthias De Groof and Stéphane Symons, "*Introduction*: The Muses of the Black Audio Film Collective and Smoking Dogs Films," *Black Camera* 6, no. 2 (2015): 52-57, muse.jhu.edu/article/583170.

[82] John Akomfrah, "Digitopia and the spectres of diaspora," *Journal of Media Practice* 11, no. 1 (2010): 28, https://doi.org/10.1386/jmpr.11.1.21/1.

[83] Gloria Wekker, "'Decolonisation is a Constant Struggle:' An Interview with Gloria Wekker," interview by Wasafiri Editor, *Wasafiri*, March 10, 2022, https://www.wasafiri.org/article/an-interview-with-gloria-wekker/.

BOOK REVIEWS | RECENSÕES DE LIVROS

SLOW PLACES IN BÉLA TARR'S FILMS:

THE INTERSECTION OF GEOGRAPHY, ECOLOGY, AND SLOW CINEMA

Paolo Stellino (IFILNOVA)

Clara Orban. London: Lexington Books, 2021. 209 p. ISBN: 9781793645647.

There are directors whose work has been so thoroughly analysed and studied that when writing about them one always runs the risk of repeating what has already been said. This cannot be said of Béla Tarr, on whose work only four books (including the one to which this review is devoted) have been written in English to date – more than ten years after he announced his definitive retirement.[1] This is why the publication of Clara Orban's *Slow Places in Béla Tarr's Films. The Intersection of Geography, Ecology, and Slow Cinema* will surely be welcomed by admirers of the Hungarian director.

As the title and subtitle of the book indicate, Orban's approach to Tarr's cinema is novel, differing from previous studies. Indeed, instead of taking a typical, chronological approach, Orban focuses her attention on the importance that places have for Tarr (as Tarr once stated, "every place has a face. Places are main characters"),[2] analysing them as a way to better understand not only Tarr's cinema and worldview but also the (mostly negative) impact that humans have on nature and other creatures (as emphasized by the term "Anthropocene", to which Orban makes explicit reference on several occasions). In this sense, Orban's main goal is to show the interconnectedness of geography, ecology, and Tarr's slow cinema (p. 4).

In the last two decades, "slow cinema" has been used to refer to the work of several filmmakers (such as Andrei Tarkovsky, Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Robert Bresson, Abbas Kiarostami, and more recently, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Tsai Ming-Liang, Carlos Reygadas, and Béla Tarr himself, among many others) who use techniques such as long takes, slow or static camerawork, an emphasis on time and duration, reduced plots, less or even no action, and a minimalist *mise en scène*, among others.[3] These are all aspects that can be found in what is usually known as the second phase of Tarr's filmography – that is, the phase beginning with *Damnation*. In reality, Tarr rejects this partition of his work into two different phases and instead tends to emphasize continuity. As he stated in an interview: "These are not separate films. It is a whole process and you have to understand that there is no break. In fact, there can be no break, because that would mean that I would go to sleep one night and the next morning I would wake up a new man. Unfortunately, this has not happened so far."[4]

Whereas it is a matter of philosophical debate whether the self should be thought of as a continuum (in his *The Book of Disquiet*, the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa wrote that "[t]o live is to be other. … What will be tomorrow will be something else, and what I see will be seen by reconstituted eyes, full of a new vision"),[5] the meaning of Tarr's words is clear: despite the several differences that can be found in relation to both content and form between his first films and the later ones, one should resist the temptation of thinking of *Damnation* as a turning point, as if there were a first and a second Tarr – just as there is a first and a second Wittgenstein. In this regard, Orban's study is particularly interesting in that it argues for continuity in Tarr's work not so much by focusing on formal aspects but rather by highlighting recurring patterns in physical spaces and locations, which reappear from film to film with different variations.

Loneliness and isolation constitute typical features of Tarr's filmography. As Orban argues, these constitutive aspects of the human condition are "exacerbated by the physical spaces the characters inhabit" (p. 12). In other words, Orban's claim is that in Tarr's films, places, which are so often neglected and ruined, are like a mirror of the human (moral) condition. Tarr's slow camera lingers on these places, allowing the viewer to contemplate them and to realize that "the natural world exists outside the human not only as an oppositional force to be nurtured, or tamed, or subjugated but also as a reflection of the human. Tarr's places manifest this dual exteriority and interiority. Tarr suggests that our geographic condition mirrors our human conditions …" (p. 6).

The central part of Orban's book is thus devoted to a thorough and detailed analysis of indoor and outdoor locations in Tarr's films, including a chapter on animals that are part of the landscape, fulfilling the same function as the latter: they constitute a mirror of the human condition while at the same time testifying to humanity's impact on the surrounding world.

Orban begins her analysis with indoor spaces (ch. 3), which are more commonly found in Tarr's first films, shot almost exclusively indoors (the short film *Hotel Magnézit* and *Almanac of Fall* are the only two films to be shot entirely indoors). Tarr's indoor spaces are usually uncomfortable, dreary, and claustrophobic, conveying a sense of entrapment (which will be later conveyed by circularity in films like *Satantango* and *The Turin Horse*), heightened by the use of extreme close-ups. As Orban points out, their shabbiness is "indicative of neglect of places that mirrors the neglect humans often have for one another" (p. 41). The main space is the tavern (*kocsma*), which constitutes a meeting place where people are supposed to interact or socialize. In Tarr's films, however, taverns are often dark, with dirty floors and walls, filled with drunks and dripping with a heavy atmosphere. Here, failures drown their sorrows, face disappointment, and lose themselves. Contact is often absent; people are lonely or silent. Thus, the tavern provides a bleak counterpoint to and continuation of the dreary apartments in which people live their solitary lives (p. 68).

Orban's phenomenology of Tarr's indoor and outdoor places is both rich and complete and can only be mentioned in passing in this review. Indoor spaces are divided into urban versus rural, private versus public, small (working-class) versus large (faded bourgeoisie), leisure spaces (taverns, a hair salon, a disco) versus workspaces (offices, hospitals, and factories). Particularly interesting is Orban's remark about hospitals (which appear in *The Outsider* and in the iconic scene from *Werckmeister Harmonies*, where the mob unloads its repressed anger on the helpless infirmed), which gives a clear example of Orban's methodology, which consists, as already mentioned, in showing how physical spaces are a mirror of the human condition in Tarr's films: "The hospital provides a warehouse for the infirmed but little opportunity for recovery. As with other aspects of Tarr's geographies, characters cannot affect change nor hope for improvement in their surroundings. The proximity of the infirmed to one another seems to close the walls in around them, echoing the impossibility of escape. Just as leisure spaces do not bring people together, hospitals do not allow for healing" (pp. 73-74).

Like indoor places, the mostly empty outdoors also reflects and mirrors the solitude of the human beings portrayed in Tarr's films. Here, solitude is not a symbol of peacefulness; nor is the outdoors like the idyllic landscapes that can be found in some of Werner Herzog's or Terrence Malick's films. On the contrary, as Orban points out, "outdoor spaces are deprived of joy and both create and mirror the emptiness of human lives. In outdoor locations, characters are often alone … Even when accompanied, characters usually walk in silence. This solitude of outdoor spaces is not a respite, but a continuation of the social isolation of characters from one another" (p. 105). Thus, for instance, the public square, Orban argues, has little to do with the ancient Greek concept of the *agora* as the centre of the *polis*, where citizens used to meet and exchange ideas. In Tarr's Hungary, the role of meeting point is played by the tavern (although it rarely also serves the social function of the *agora*, as interactions are reduced to a minimum), whereas the public square is usually empty – or teeming with menacing crowds, as in *Werckmeister Harmonies*. Open fields are equally desolate and, above all, unwelcoming. With very few exceptions (such as the short film *Journey on the Plain*), they are rainy, muddy, cold, and foggy – "iconic spaces of emptiness" (p. 94). This feeling of solitude and desolateness is accentuated by Tarr's use of black and white, which suggests a bleak picture of nature. As Orban points out, "any hint of optimism in landscapes must disappear" (p. 105).

As mentioned above, Orban extends her analysis of indoor and outdoor spaces to the animals that inhabit them. Animals appear in key moments or iconic scenes in Tarr's films: beyond the most obvious examples – such as the dogs in *Damnation*, the whale in *Werckmeister Harmonies*, and the horse in *The Turin Horse* (all considered by Tarr to be proper characters in their respective films; p. 123) – one can also think of *Satantango*'s cows (the famous almost ten-minute beginning shot), cat (tortured and killed by Estike), and owl (the long tracking shot in the abandoned villa). More generally, as Orban points out, Tarr's representation of animals

is analogous to that of indoor and outdoor spaces in that they "mirror or highlight the desolate plight of the humans" (p. 124). According to Orban, Tarr includes animals in key films and at important moments also "as a way to show how humans' largely destructive tendencies can filter from themselves to encompass the world" (p. 107).

The last chapter before the *Conclusion* is dedicated to a detailed analysis of Tarr's short films and segments, such as *Hotel Magnezit*, *Journey on the Plain*, *The Last Boat*, and *Prologue*, with the addition of a paragraph devoted to *Missing People*, Tarr's post-retirement work at the intersection of film, installation, and performance. This chapter is a particularly welcome contribution insofar as Tarr's short films have received considerably less critical attention than his features. Orban emphasizes the continuity between short and feature films, pointing out formal and thematic analogies between the former and the latter. After the analysis, Orban asks what we are supposed to make of these short films in the context of Tarr's career. She answers that "[t]hey represent extremely concentrated moments, like distilled representations of human emotion, suffering, alienation, and redemption. In the way that a short story provides the nucleus that longer novels expand, so too these short films contain in them elements of Tarr's worldview and map out his ecology that will be developed in his longer feature films" (p. 143).

Orban's study ends with a *Conclusion*, the significant subtitle of which is *Visions of Loneliness*. Spaces in Tarr's films are empty, lonely, dreary, and cold, embodying and visually representing our inability to connect to one another. Tarr's worldview is bleak – or maybe simply realistic. Thus, a key question emerges: "In the end, is there something onto which we can hold?" (p. 148). As Orban points out, Tarr's 2019 Vienna installation gives us a hint, indicating one of the main characteristics of the seventh art, namely that of being able to open the viewer's eyes (in this case, to humanity's condition). As Orban puts it, "Tarr demands that we see other people, that we recognize that they exist, as they bring their pain and their uneven ways of dealing with the world with them" (p. 147). Another hint may be given in the short film *Journey on the Plain*, with its romantic poetry and ruins. According to Orban's reading, ruins in particular "show us what was, what we inevitably always do: destroy, take advantage, neglect. But they also show that there was a time when beauty was possible, when we could band together and build … Where it would be possible to make slow spaces that could become our resting place" (p. 150).

Orban's study is enriched by two appendices: the first reproduces the sixteen Petőfi poems (both in the original Hungarian and in English) recited by Víg in *Journey on the Plain*, whereas the second is the transcript of an interview with Orban conducted by Béla Tarr on January 24, 2021. An explained filmography and an extended bibliography conclude Orban's insightful study, which contributes to better understanding and interpreting the work of one of the masters of slow cinema.

[1] These books include the English translation of Jacques Rancière's *Béla Tarr, The Time After* (Minneapolis: Univocal Press, 2013), András Bálint Kovács's *The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes* (New York: Columbia University Press), Thorsten Botz-Bornstein's *Organic Cinema: Film, Architecture, and the Work of Béla Tarr* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2017), and Clara Orban's book, to which this review is dedicated. Other books have been published in other languages, among them: Marco Grosoli's *Armonie contro il giorno: il cinema di Béla Tarr* (Bologna: Bébert, 2014), Corinne Maury and Sylvie Rollet eds., *Béla Tarr. De la colère au tourment* (Crisnée, Belgium: Editions Yellow Now, 2016) and Mariel Manrique ed., *Béla Tarr, ¿Qué hiciste mientras esperaba?* (Santander: Shangrila, 2016).

[2] See Corinne Maury and Olivier Zuchuat, "Tout lieu a un visage. Entretien avec Béla Tarr", in *Béla Tarr. De la colère au tourment*, op. cit., 14. Orban quotes this passage from the interview on p. 3.

[3] See Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, "Introduction: From Slow Cinema to Slow Cinemas", in *Slow Cinema*, Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 1-21.

[4] See Corinne Maury and Olivier Zuchuat, "Tout lieu a un visage. Entretien avec Béla Tarr", in *Béla Tarr. De la colère au tourment*, op. cit., 13.

[5] Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* (London: Penguin, 2001), 100.