

TOWARD AN AESTHETICS OF DEAD TIME  
IN CARLOS REYGADAS'S *JAPÓN*

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*E non è vero che Piero non ha  
messo niente dentro la scatoletta.  
Piero Manzoni ha messo  
una cosa importantissima.  
Ha messo un'idea.<sup>1</sup>*

Carlos Reygadas's film *Japón* (2002) centers on an unnamed, middle-aged man (played by the nonprofessional actor, Alejandro Ferretis) who travels to a small village in Hidalgo, Mexico to commit suicide.<sup>2</sup> The film never explains why the Man (as listed in the credits) wants to kill himself; nor does it offer any explicit reasons why he ultimately doesn't carry out this act. Few words are spoken in the film and there is almost no access to the inner-thoughts of its characters. We do learn some isolated facts from the narrative. We know, for example, that the protagonist paints, smokes marijuana, and is attracted to women. He finds a place to stay with a septuagenarian woman, Ascen (also played by a nonprofessional actor, Magdalena Flores)—short for Ascención—and they converse, form a bond, and later have sex. The film ends with Ascen's death, after a train hits the tractor transporting her. This is the plot in a nutshell. Like the plot, the performances of these non-professional actors are also rather straightforward, minimal and uncomplicated. In contrast to both, however, *Japón's* camera work is expansive, dynamic, and pronounced. From the opening scene, which presents the POV of the taxi that transports the Man from the city to the countryside, to the last shot, the camera is in constant motion even when, paradoxically, it is still. As it pans, pauses, turns, and stops, the camera traces the Hidalgo countryside, brushes across humans and animals alike, and paints the filmic world in which these characters live. Consider the last scene, a nearly six-minute long take, presented from the POV of the train itself, which captures the dreadful aftermath of the crash. First, it searches, then it frantically races along the train tracks, revealing stones and bodies that are strewn across the rails. The film ends as the camera finally crawls to a stop over Ascen's corpse. Freeze Frame. Fade to black.

This brief introduction of the primary tendencies of *Japón*—the skeleton plot, use of non-professional actors, camera work, and development of cinematic time—points to Reygadas’s desire to create what he calls “a whole, complete self-contained world” or what I will describe as the film’s desire to assert its aesthetic autonomy.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, *Japón* wants to impose a vision, present an angle, create a space; all of which, as we will see, makes it *meaningful*. Scholars and critics, however, have rejected Reygadas’s claim for this “self-contained world.” Instead, they have read *Japón* in relation to how the film resists representation or overcomes meaning; more specifically, they insist that the significance of the film is found in its commitment to capturing and documenting reality (even going beyond it). If the film succeeds, they argue, it is because it blurs the lines between reality and fiction or between documentary and fiction. For instance, William Rowlandson notes, *Japón* “fuses reality and artifice to a level that grants the film an impact beyond the immediacy of the screen. It is not so much mimetic, being the representation of reality, as reality itself, the spectator him/herself becoming integrally involved in the struggle of these people/characters.”<sup>4</sup> If it fails, others say, it does so for the same reason. Pointing to what he feels is the exploitation of non-professional actors in *Japón*, Paul Julian Smith, for example, declares that “Reygadas is not documenting the real here; he is intruding on it.”<sup>5</sup> Whether this commitment to documenting or even intruding on reality is understood as an achievement (Rowlandson) or a failure (Smith), both critics downplay the importance of the film’s form. They share, instead, an understanding that the virtues (or flaws) of the film rest on how it eliminates the distance between art and life, the difference between form and viewer.

Part of this misreading emerges precisely because of the camera itself, and the question of indexicality in particular. Indexicality is a phenomenon in which one object points to another, revealing the direct causal link between the existence of one and the other. For example, smoke is an index for a fire; a fossil is an index for a prehistoric shellfish; or a photo of a rock is an index for the rock itself. A long and contentious history within photography and film criticism sees indexicality as inherently political because it requires the incorporation of the outside world; that is, to include non-art. For instance, in his analysis of *Japón*, Craig Eppin declares that Reygadas “advances the notion that the task of contemporary aesthetics is to *index* a given reality,” and that this is political because, as it indexes time and space, the camera records the “immanence of capital’s colonization of the planet.”<sup>6</sup> Tiago de Luca similarly emphasizes the indexicality of the film when addressing the long takes and pans in *Japón*, which, he argues, “invite the unintended element into the image.”<sup>7</sup> Stressing not just the unintended but also the spontaneous, the contingent and the material, the film, for him, aligns itself with ecocriticism, revealing a more horizontal vision of society which would “relativize and diminish human presence in relation to the

nonhuman world” (224). In de Luca’s account, political critique begins with the assertion of indexicality. That is, by emphasizing how the film registers the material world, much like a footprint, or even better, like a fossil—an impression of the outside world left on celluloid—*Japón* levels hierarchies between animals and humans.

The model of the fossil is particularly appealing when considering the slowness that has defined Reygadas’s work, along with other Latin American “slow cinema” directors such as Lisandro Alonso and Natalia Almada. Characterized by uncomfortably long and static takes, slow cinema’s style stresses “silence, stillness, minimalism, and an emphasis on duration itself.”<sup>8</sup> The term slow cinema also embraces the unintended, indeterminacy and contingency, as these long takes capture objects or events outside a director’s control (30). Similar to a fossil, this emphasis on indexicality effectively renders questions about aesthetic form moot. The fossil does not believe, desire, or intend: it becomes. It doesn’t represent: it preserves. It does not have a point of view: it just is. Therefore, the force of the indexical account rests on the idea that the director plays a secondary role to the material process of registering what is in front of the camera.<sup>9</sup> This account is also meant to emphasize the more objective possibilities of photography and film. André Bazin, for example, argued that the primacy of the camera lens and the absence of subjectivity set film apart from other media such as painting or sculpture, declaring that “[f]or the first time the image of the world is formed *automatically*, without the creative intervention of man.”<sup>10</sup> If other art forms are defined by human presence, photography, in part, is defined by his or her absence. Or as Samuel Steinberg points out with regard to certain shots in Reygadas’s *Stellet Licht*, there seems to be “no directing” but rather “the camera happens upon scenes [...]”<sup>11</sup> The primacy of indexicality also carries a politics. Quoting Vivian Sobchack, de Luca argues that once film shifts to this indexical register, what emerges is a corresponding notion where “aesthetic values are suddenly diminished and ethical ones are greatly heightened.”<sup>12</sup>

By no means is de Luca unique in his general assumption that social or ethical engagement follows from a blurring of art and life, that is, from a work that suspends its status as art. In fact, within Latin Americanist theory and criticism, the prioritizing of politics over aesthetics—or that a work is political only to the degree that it abandons any pretense of aesthetics—has been the norm since at least the 1970s. Predicated on the belief that a commitment to aesthetic form reinforces authoritarianism, the commodification of life, elite culture, and with it, endorses inequality, oppression and discrimination (of race, gender, class, ability, and so on), scholars have sought to problematize intention, representation, meaning, and art more generally.<sup>13</sup> Scholars such as John Beverley, George Yúdice, Nelly Richard, Idelber Avelar, Jon Beasley-Murray and Patrick Dove, *all* share a tendency to treat

such concepts with suspicion. At the same time, their critique of aesthetics is matched only by their complete investment in the reader or the beholder, which, for them, serves as a critique of the injustices that art supposedly endorses. On their accounts, downplaying a work's artistic ambitions, while emphasizing the significance of the beholder's or viewer's experience, allows a more legitimate ethical project to become visible.

No doubt these scholars see themselves as oppositional critics contesting neoliberalism, and condemning the growing commodification of the social and cultural field. Nevertheless, I argue that ignoring such decisively artistic ambitions—what I understand as the work's investment in being something more than mere documentation—neglects an aesthetic opening that might afford a way of understanding contemporary capitalism. Pointing to the limits of indexicality and slow cinema in *Japón*, I suggest that the concern with the objecthood of film and the literalness of the passage of time in cinema fails to see the alternative at the heart of Reygadas's project. In what follows, I argue instead (vis-à-vis a reading of plot, actors, camera work, and cinematic time) that Reygadas insists on a creating a “self-contained world,” which offers a critique of neoliberalism today.

## II

To date, Reygadas has directed five feature length films, including *Japón* (2002), *Batalla en el cielo* (2005), *Stellet Licht* (2007), *Post Tenebras Lux* (2012), and *Nuestro tiempo* (2018). To be sure, Reygadas's experimental style has set him apart from New Mexican Cinema's best-known directors, Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro, and Alejandro González Iñárritu. But, as Reygadas himself claims, they are all part of the same debt crisis generation.<sup>14</sup> What he is referring to is the monumental collapse of the Mexican economy in 1982, when the IMF and World Bank pressured the Mexican state to undertake structural adjustments in return for assistance in paying off its debt. The crisis would be the final blow to Mexico's historical national modernization project, which had begun almost seventy years before with the 1910 Mexican Revolution. As one might expect, structural adjustment also impacted Mexican cinematic production. Ignacio Sánchez Prado has noted that before this economic collapse, Mexican cinema was primarily funded by state-run initiatives. After the collapse, production changed to a “semi-private” neoliberal model where “private enterprise competes with the State in the production of cultural commodities.”<sup>15</sup>

These structural changes also informed the content of films. Before the 1990s, film promoted the Mexican philosophy of *mexicanidad*, a more inclusive—although deeply problematic—search for Mexican identity, often aligned with the state ideology of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). More specifically, the term *mexicanidad* centered on the national myth

of the *mestizo* that becomes dominant in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution. The Revolution made significant changes that sought both to recognize and to incorporate the marginalized. Nevertheless, as Epplin points out, “[r]ecognition [...] is a double-edged sword.”<sup>16</sup> *Mexicanidad*, especially after the 1940s, increasingly worked on behalf of the market, as policies pushed aside more progressive projects, particularly land reform, that had emerged from the Revolution. *Mexicanidad*, along with issues of justice associated with it, turned out to be deeply intertwined with capitalism, where a politics of recognition reveals a desire not only to extend rights to other groups, but also to link their political inclusion or exclusion to the market. This is what Horacio Legrás means when he suggests that “recognition always turns out to be recognition of property.”<sup>17</sup> Or as Epplin additionally observes, “[r]ecognition, far from representing a straightforward expansion of rights, also implies subjection,” (296) and quoting Legrás, “thus the present recognition of recognition simply brings to the foreground one ideological kernel of modern capitalism.”<sup>18</sup> *Mexicanidad*, in short, becomes a mechanism to support capitalism.

While there was, until the early 1980s, still a general perception in film that *mexicanidad* carried some revolutionary potential, the aftermath of the debt crisis effectively ended that illusion. The end of *mexicanidad*, however, offers both a critique of identity politics and an opening to think through and beyond identity in relation to the national and the global. As Sánchez Prado contends, this new moment does not simply mean a move from the national toward the global, but rather “[an] intense negotiation of the national with the global.”<sup>19</sup> *Japón* dramatizes this negotiation, on the one hand, with its Mexican setting and cast of non-professional actors, and, on the other, with its indifference to recuperating *mexicanidad* as a political project. One need only reflect on the title, *Japón*, which can be considered more about creating a filmic impression, a narrative association with things from Japan—such as a sun that rises, hara-kiri, and samurais.<sup>20</sup> That is, for Reygadas, the Man’s middle-class identity or Ascen’s indigenous identity maintains little political significance outside of the story.<sup>21</sup> This does not mean that one cannot have an identitarian reading of *Japón*, but rather that *mexicanidad*, which was central to earlier Mexican cinema, is neither an aesthetic nor political concern in Reygadas’s film. As we have begun to see, Reygadas *is* interested in questions about the meaning, or what he calls “real cinema.”<sup>22</sup> And, as we will see shortly, he not only imagines this interest in “real cinema” as different from an interest in identity but also as a critique of it.

### III

But what exactly does it mean for Reygadas to be interested in “real cinema?” As noted in the introduction, scholars tend to downplay the importance

of Reygadas's interest in form, while stressing the unintended, the contingent and the spontaneous.<sup>23</sup> To support this reading, they highlight the lack of plot, the aimless camera shots, the use of non-professional actors, and the slowness of the film. In interviews, however, Reygadas offers a more complicated vision of his film, which, in many ways, problematizes the critical emphasis on the unintended and the contingent. A closer examination reveals a highly-formalized film that ultimately aims to assert the director's presence, control, and intention. Reygadas's interest in form is most explicit in conversations about making his films. He has suggested, for instance, that his films are already complete before the first scene is even shot, since he devotes a considerable amount of time during pre-production to planning, casting, framing, selecting film stock and lenses, and camera placement. He explains, "I've always painted so I'm very familiar with the frame, and for me it's very important. If you see my storyboard you see the film."<sup>24</sup> Obviously, film can never be reduced to a storyboard; nonetheless, his claim makes evident a calculated and deliberate process in creating his films. *Japón's* storyboards (fig. 1) show striking details about camera shots, angles, scene duration, character placement, and even soundtrack. Thus, the storyboard makes evident a series of aesthetic choices that are already determined before the camera is even turned on. Far from emphasizing spontaneity, the director maintains that there is nothing "accidental" in his films.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, insofar as contingency is captured in his film, it is completely intended.<sup>26</sup> Reygadas puts this point another way when noting that his aim is to record "in sound and images...complete experiences" which are used "to build a new world, a whole, complete self-contained world."<sup>27</sup> Rather than the attempt to blur the lines between reality and fiction or between fiction and documentary, what we begin to see in *Japón* is a deliberate attempt to create an aesthetic world.

Undoubtedly, indexicality (immediacy and contingency) must be considered in *Japón*. Reygadas himself has stressed the importance of indexicality, but always in connection to medium specificity and with an eye to creating "real cinema." For this reason, indexicality is often discussed in relation to other art forms. For example, addressing the idea of "real cinema," Reygadas provides the example of a four-minute long take of the sunrise in his film *Stellet Licht*. What is cinematic about it, he insists, is the light of the sun. This shot, for him, marks a difference from literature, as he makes clear when he observes that: "In literature, that does not exist. You can just write, 'The sun came up.' The beauty in my film is the sun itself. You don't have to create it."<sup>28</sup> To be sure, this scene highlights the indexical relationship between the image and the object captured, a relation that—at least until the advent of digital photography—is central to film. Nevertheless, Reygadas's primary point about the image is its difference from dialogue-driven plots. Dense plots, he explains, are less like

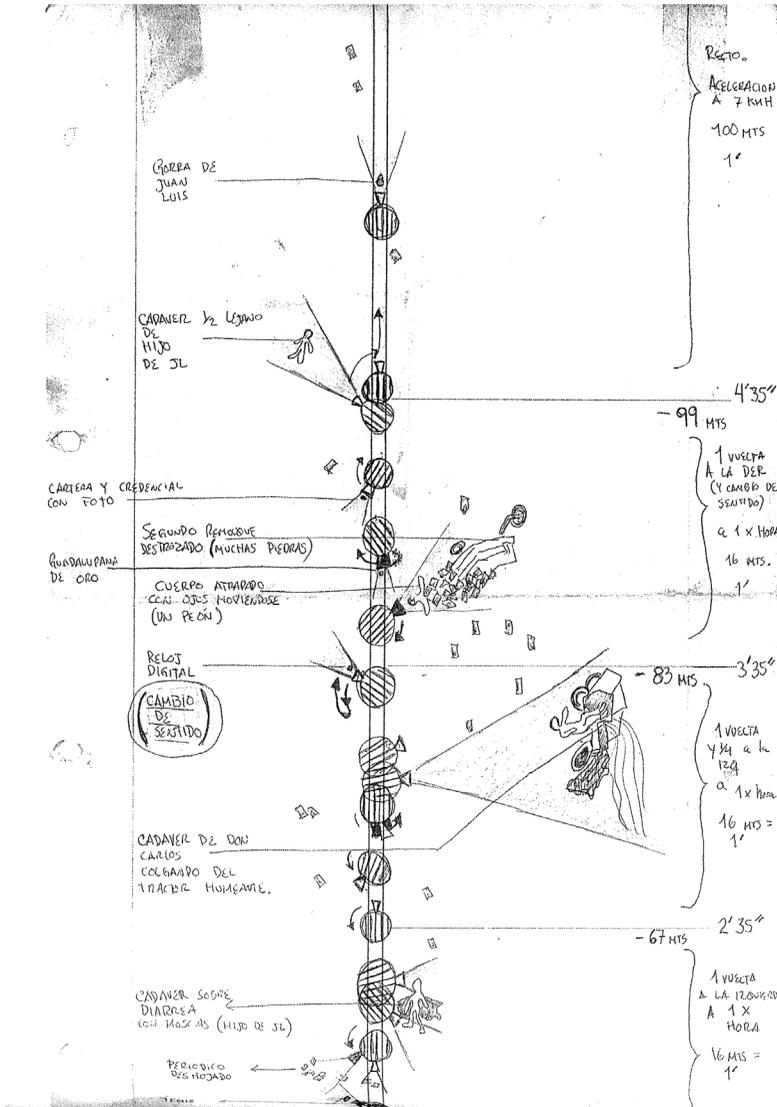


FIGURE 1. A portion of the storyboard for the final scene of *Japón*

cinema, and more like “film theater.”<sup>29</sup> According to Reygadas, most films today, especially Hollywood films are little more than “illustrated literature.”<sup>30</sup> Stories—even good stories—often result in bad films; good films, for Reygadas, are instead rooted in what words cannot capture.

This does not mean that *Japón* lacks a plot. On the contrary, *Japón* has a rather straightforward, conventional narrative arc with a clear beginning, middle and end. And yet, that narrative arc is primarily advanced through the image. Reygadas explains:

Some people think that my films lack plots—they don't, it's just that for me the plot is a skeleton from which things are hung, and not the whole point of a film. When people talk about a film being 'a good story' they don't get it. The story is there so everything else can be structured around it. *The Surrender of Breda* by Velásquez is famous not because of the story; it's much more interesting to read about it in a history book. It's about how it's painted.<sup>31</sup>

What Reygadas calls "real cinema," in other words, has more to do with image and sound than with "a good story". Indeed, some of the most memorable scenes in *Japón* are marked by the near or complete absence of dialogue. For example, there is a three-minute scene of a stallion copulating with a mare. In another scene, the camera records what seems to be a never-ending procession of the town's children who walk past the Man. These scenes have minimal camera movement and last a considerable amount of time but they also register the everyday—events that normally occur in this small village: children laughing, animals copulating, people farming. Yet, while the film registers scenes that could be found in just about any small village, they nonetheless function "to build a new world, a whole, complete self-contained world."

One begins to see the form of this "self-contained world" when these still, ostensibly objective shots are read in relation to other shots in the film. Along with the aforementioned opening and closing scenes, there is at the midway mark of the film a stunning 360-degree pan taken from the air above the Man after he decides not to commit suicide. These long takes and pans combine and contrast with extreme close-up shots of birds, meat, skin, dirt, and paint on canvas. Capturing these minute details often comes at the expense of seeing the object itself, but these shots foreground *Japón's* status as an art of montage, and signal an intention to go deeper than the surface and insist on creating aesthetic world that goes beyond simply documenting reality.

This last point is relevant for understanding one additional shot: the shaky hand-held POV shot that at first glance seems to be shot from the perspective of the Man. As Susan Antebi correctly notes, "The camera creates a momentary identification between viewer and disabled man, but at once insists—through use of a delayed reaction, and a pulling back from the protagonist's perspective—on our separation from both the protagonist and the landscape he traverses."<sup>32</sup> The "separation" from character's point-of-view not only introduces a kind of "impossible vision" on screen, but also underscores a distinction between the filmic world and the outside world.<sup>33</sup> For this reason, Antebi continues that this "pulling back from the protagonist's perspective" marks the viewer's "separation from both the protagonist and the landscape he traverses" (74). All these shots *in toto* seem to suggest

that, for Reygadas, “real cinema” is about creating an aesthetic vision—an impossible vision—that does not seek to render art and life indistinguishable but rather asserts a certain irreducibility of one to the other.

From this position, the foregrounding of montage becomes especially relevant insofar as it further complicates the idea of unmediated fantasy of contingency and spontaneity. In fact, montage plays a crucial role in *Japón* as it actively undermines the sense that there is “no directing” but rather a “camera [that] happens upon scenes [...]”<sup>34</sup> The point is best captured when considering a scene in which a visibly drunk man (“El Gordo” Bernabé Pérez, one of the non-professional actors mentioned above) mutters that “the people from the film don’t give us much,” a scene which leads Paul Julian Smith to claim that “Reygadas is not documenting the real here; he is intruding on it.”<sup>35</sup> But if it is true that the scene appears to embrace the spontaneous and contingent statement during the shooting of the scene, it is just as true that Reygadas does not edit the statement but instead decides to leave it in, underscoring the director’s control of this contingency and spontaneity. What is more, it is important to recognize that what the drunken man says signals the status of *Japón* as film and that the contingent and spontaneous is ultimately controlled by “the people from the film.” Which is to say that the mistake appears in the movie for a reason, and thus raises the interpretive question of why. Rather than “intruding on [the real],” this scene stresses that both the film and these actors’ mistakes should be read as the effort to create a “self-contained world” that makes choices like these meaningful. The strong parallel in *mise-en-scène* between this scene (fig.2) and Velázquez’s *Los borrachos* (fig.3)—a parallel that recalls the director’s comments above—reiterates the desire to create an aesthetic world.

This last scene, however, does raise the question of the unpredictability of *Japón*’s non-professional actors, who not only struggle to say their lines, but sometimes acknowledge the camera. Some scholars have suggested that since these non-professional actors lack the skills of the craft they end up ultimately affirming the notion of indexicality, contingency, and spontaneity. So much so that according to Rowlandson, “throughout both the film and the filming, the distribution of roles between actors and characters, reality and art appears to be dismantled.”<sup>36</sup> But here too, there is a more complex idea that governs the relationship between non-professional actors and the camera. Many times these frontal poses of characters looking at the camera involve the same form of misidentification (and manipulation) of the POV shots mentioned above. That is, what seems to be an acknowledgement of the camera turns out instead to be a character looking at the Man. In one scene, for example, the Man goes to the town judge (Rolando Hernández) in hopes of finding a place to stay. In a medium close-up shot, the judge laboriously strings together his lines about the town’s attributes (fig. 4). Meanwhile, off-screen a man shouts, asking the judge a question, which,



FIGURE 2. Still from *Japón*



FIGURE 3. Diego Velázquez, *Los borrachos, o El triunfo de Baco*, 1628-1629. Oil on canvas, 165 x 225 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

in turn, causes the judge to stop and address the man before returning to recite his lines. The entire scene produces a sense of unease, as if the viewer has just witnessed something that was clearly meant to be cut or reshot. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the scene shows that the judge (who seems to have strabismus) is not looking into the camera, but just to the side of the camera where the Man stands out of frame. From the DVD behind-the-scenes footage, we also learn that the man yelling is also staged, as we can see the director lift his arm to give him the cue to shout. In other words, the contingent proves to be staged, deliberate and controlled.



FIGURE 4. Still from *Japón*

This control is paramount for Reygadas, so much so that he has stated that, much like a puppeteer, he ties strings to his actors' legs in order to get their timing right. He continues: "I believe that when somebody is acting and thinking about the timing of a character, they are not there any more."<sup>37</sup> This does not mean that these are *not* bad actors but it does seem to suggest that their lack of artistry might be part of the point. Or to turn this around, it is as if the artistry of a professional actor threatens to undermine the unity of Reygadas's aesthetic world. But how? Earlier it was noted that, for Reygadas, "real cinema" is unlike "film theater" and "illustrated literature" in its relation to dialogue and plot. But this can be extended to acting as well. Professional actors, according to Reygadas, are "a carryover from theater" which works against the idea of their *not being there any more*.<sup>38</sup> That is, professional actors are too artificial or theatrical. Elsewhere Reygadas claims that professional actors are unconvincing since they appear in one film as one character and in another as someone entirely different.<sup>39</sup> What is wrong with professional actors is that their artificiality produces something like the opposite of what "real cinema" is meant to do. Professional actors impede the director's efforts to create something entirely unique, a "complete self-contained world," because professional actors, paradoxically, never really leave the viewer's world. Or said differently, non-actors uphold the distance between art and life that the theatricality of professional actors threatens to eliminate.

Reygadas expands on this idea in another interview in which he addresses the importance of "portrait photography" when talking about his use of non-actors who, much like "dogs, a sunset or a tree," are "deeper" and more "sophisticated" than professional actors.<sup>40</sup> Reygadas's reflections on portrait photography recall a point that the art historian Michael Fried has made about the work of contemporary photographers such as Rineke Dijkstra and Thomas Ruff. In his book, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008), Fried develops the notion of "to-be-seenness," a type of gesture whereby subjects are depicted as being aware of the camera, but in

a way that doesn't "succumb to theatricality."<sup>41</sup> Theatricality, for Fried, functions as a project that demands the beholder's presence by emphasizing the objecthood of the work. A conventional theatrical account would involve a photographic subject who looks outward, seemingly bypassing both the camera itself, toward the beholder, demanding to be beheld. This forced exchange not only stresses that the beholder's identification with the subject but also insists on eliminating the divide between art and life. But where theatrical art asserts objecthood, "to-be-seeness" in these photographers' works functions, instead, as an antitheatrical gesture as it requires an aesthetic distance that refuses any kind of shared experience between the photographic subject and the viewer.

From this position, Reygadas's point that his non-actors are more like "dogs, a sunset, or tree" is rather insightful because one can immediately see that, for the director, there is no interest in eliciting, much less intruding on the viewer's world. The point is *not* that non-actors are in fact like dogs or sunsets, but rather that there is no attempt on Reygadas's part to produce a situation in which spectators, as Rowlandson would have it, "identify" with these characters, much less share "participation in the events."<sup>42</sup> Quite the opposite: these characters, in their awkwardness, seem to suggest a distance—much like the "separation" Antebi alludes to above—between their lives and our own. Here we might even say that these non-actors' inability to control their craft sustains, following Fried, a certain absorptive gesture that denies the possibility of being fully beheld. We will return to Fried later when addressing antitheatricality in the relation to duration in *Japón*. For now, what is important to recognize is that, for Reygadas, part of creating this "whole, complete, self-contained world" is using non-professional actors as a means to overcome the risk of succumbing to the theatricality of professional actors who drive cinematic commodities.<sup>43</sup>

#### IV

While Reygadas aims to construct a "self-contained world" (vis-à-vis storyboard, plot, camera work, non-actors) in order to insist on a distance between the film and the viewer, scholars have understood these aesthetic aspects and choices in *Japón* as mechanisms to bring them together. That is, they have imagined the film's interest in indexicality, spontaneity and contingency as markers of an anti-intentionalism aimed at rupturing the aesthetic frame.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, the reading of the film as utterly theatrical is widely seen as part of the film's politics. This notion is perfectly captured in de Luca's reading of *Japón* as promoting a kind of new social order. De Luca contends that *Japón* endorses an animal ethics, or what he calls "cinematic non-anthropocentrism."<sup>45</sup> This ethical vision, according to de Luca, is conveyed primarily through pans and long takes that document

the contingent relations between humans and non-humans (and the death of animals in particular). He continues: "As the camera scans and surveys the natural environment, it allows for the integration of chance events and other living beings to enter its field of vision. At the film's beginning, for example, a 360-degree pan takes in the landscape after the man's arrival and fortuitously registers a herd of goats on the horizon" (225). De Luca argues that as horses, birds, and other animals cross paths with humans, the film makes visible a vision of society that turns away from a hierarchal structure where humans are seen as superior to all other animals. Quoting Mary Anne Doane's work on early cinema, de Luca insists that *Japón* confirms a desire for "a denial of the frame as boundary and hence promised access to a seemingly limitless vision."<sup>46</sup> What this "denial of the frame" suggests, in other words, is a desire for the division between art and life, between humans and non-humans, and, especially, between the subjects appearing in the film and its viewers, to be overcome.

This emphasis on deframing, as we are already beginning to see, is limited neither to de Luca nor to one particular shot. Addressing the Man's POV shots, Rowlandson declares that "Reygadas evokes a cinematic equivalent of the novelistic first-person narrative through the hand-held camera," which "exercise[s] a similar repositioning of the viewer away from the traditional role as mere spectator towards that of participant in the construction and discourse of the work."<sup>47</sup> Much like de Luca, Rowlandson wants to imagine the POV shot positioning the viewer as an active "participant" by bringing him or her into the work. Niels Niessen also makes a similar claim for deframing in his reading of *Stellet Licht*, which, he argues, "does not merely give the representation of a miracle; that is to say, show its effects. Instead, it becomes it."<sup>48</sup> But as Steinberg rightly points out, "Niessen thus agrees with the conceit of the film to have conquered representation and to have produced the very miraculous world that the viewer inhabits through its viewing."<sup>49</sup> This aesthetic fantasy whereby the viewer is imagined as inhabiting the aesthetic world also entails a politics. The disappearance of the frame, or what de Luca calls a "puncture [of] the realm of representation," now requires that the spectator participate in the present, and, purportedly, also demands that he or she act socially and ethically.<sup>50</sup> This newfound awareness is part of the ethical imperative of the film, as affective intensities are now collectively shared between filmic subjects and viewers. From the position of De Luca, by eliminating the frame, the viewer comes to immerse himself or herself in this "cinematic non-anthropocentrism."

Yet, as we've already begun to see, Reygadas's commitment to the "frame" complicates not only de Luca's theatrical fantasy of this frameless and "limitless vision," but also, I would like to suggest, a dominant strain of literary and cultural criticism that insists that, in order to be ethical or political, art should be more like non-art. Or to put this in slightly different terms, Latin

Americanist criticism and theory often treats the erasure of the distinction between art and non-art as bridging the divide between the filmic subject and the beholder. As I have written elsewhere, much of this critique of aesthetics (largely framed around human rights in the aftermath of the last dictatorships in the Southern Cone) within last 40 years, has sought to problematize or eliminate the aesthetic frame by asserting the primacy of the reader/viewer/beholder.<sup>51</sup> We can trace this logic back to several seminal works such as Guy Debord's "Society of the Spectacle" or Roland Barthes's 1967 text "The Death of the Author." Barthes, in particular, sought to undermine the centrality of the author and the work in order to liberate the reader from the authoritarianism of both the author and the critic. Today this logic is both pervasive and visible in the work of scholars such as Idelber Avelar, Jon Beasley-Murray, John Beverley, Nestor García Canclini, Josefina Ludmer, and Nelly Richard. To be sure, these scholars diverge in their various commitments to indexicality, postmodernism, postautonomy, posthegemony, relational aesthetics, or new materialism. Nevertheless, all their political work begins by questioning the concepts of author or artist and work of art.<sup>52</sup>

By giving up those terms, however, they refuse to meet the demand made by the work itself. At the same time, they also conceptually repudiate a political opening that the work offers. In relation to indexicality, for instance, Anna Kornbluh rightly contends that if literature "is not thought but index, not creation but document, then there can be no possibility of its functioning as critique. Without independent ideas, it cannot promote alternatives."<sup>53</sup> What Kornbluh signals here is that art allows for a possibility to think beyond the social, ethical and political world in which we live.<sup>54</sup> More specifically, what this entails is not simply the relevance of "critique," but that this lack of "critique"—that is, a lack of disagreement with the status quo—also entails a lack of potential alternatives. Of course, "alternatives"—or the lack thereof—become especially problematic in this neoliberal period when people can't seem to imagine political or cultural realities outside of capitalism. As Fredric Jameson explains, if in the 1980s there was still a sense that there was an outside of the system of commodity production—that is, that one could still create a type of art that "existed outside the system, that resisted commodification"—with the end of the Cold War that sense had vanished.<sup>55</sup>

To the extent that art has been fully incorporated into the market, the critique of concepts like author/artist and the work of art—as fundamental as a critique of neoliberalism is for scholars like Ludmer or Beasley-Murray—must also be reconsidered. In fact, these scholars' commitment to the idea of eliminating the aesthetic frame represents if not an affirmation, then at least a clear compatibility with neoliberalism today. That compatibility becomes evident when examining the question of the director's

intention against anti-intentionality, indeterminacy and contingency. In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption under Capital,” Nicholas Brown contends that the dominant form of literary and artistic criticism today becomes an endorsement of the market, to the extent that it shares the same commitment to treating art as only a commodity. More to the point, Brown examines the way anti-intentionality functions within a capitalist mode of production. If a person, according to Brown, makes a bowl for the market,

he is primarily concerned with one attribute, its exchangeability: that is, the demand for bowls. And that demand, and therefore all of the concrete attributes that factor into that demand, are decided elsewhere, namely on the market. So while he might still make decisions about his bowls, those decisions no longer matter as intentions even for him, because they are entirely subordinated to more or less, informed guesses about other people’s desires.<sup>56</sup>

If the consumer buys the bowl and decides to burn it, then, from the standpoint of the seller, this matters very little because she is not in the business of telling the consumer what his or her interest ought to be, nor what he or she should do with the object. To the extent that the artist is primarily interested in meeting a demand, as Brown puts it, once they are *decided on the market*, the artist’s intentions become irrelevant. Which is just to say that the death of the author and rise of the reader that began with Barthes—and is central to postmodernism, postautonomy, posthegemony, relational aesthetics, and is key for de Luca’s frameless political vision of Reygadas’s film—does not provide a critique of the market, but rather becomes emblematic of the market’s triumph. In other words, rather than thinking beyond neoliberalism, the primacy of the reader today is literary criticism’s equivalent to the capitalist slogan that the customer is king.

But insofar as neoliberalism is interested in subsuming everything under the market, which produces the conditions for rendering concepts like the work, author, meaning, and representation irrelevant, Reygadas’s desire to create an intentional, autonomous space in *Japón* can now be parsed as a repudiation of this neoliberal logic. Indeed, one can begin to trace the rejection of this logic in Reygadas’s aim to create a “complete self-contained world” that cannot simply be reduced to a pure index of reality. In the next section, I will explore this point a bit further in relation to time, since the temporal question has been the focus of much criticism concerning *Japón*, especially in the term slow cinema. To do this, however, I’d like to return to Fried’s idea of time in theatrical art.

## V

Fried's thoughts on theatricality were first developed in his landmark essay, "Art and Objecthood." In that essay, Fried discusses the rise of minimalism—or what he calls literalism—in the 1960s in the works of artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Robert Smithson, artists who sought to imagine art as a *situation* that "virtually by definition, includes the beholder."<sup>57</sup> What Fried meant, in other words, is that minimalist artists want the beholder to experience their works as objects. Perhaps the best example of this minimalist conception for Fried is found in Tony Smith's description of experiencing the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike for the first time:

When I was teaching at Cooper Union in the first year or two of the '50s, someone told me how I could get on to the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. I took three students and drove from somewhere in the Meadows to New Brunswick [...]. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there which had not had any expression in art. The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most paintings look pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.<sup>58</sup>

Instead of a work of art, the theatrical fantasy of minimalism—much like de Luca's account above—is a type of art that is impossible to frame: "you just have to experience it." The emphasis on a "situation" that comes with the disavowal of the frame, according to Fried, also raises the question of time. Where in a modernist's painting, for example, time is inscribed in the work, the theatricality of a literalist work demands that time form part of the beholder's experience. This is why Fried states that, unlike modernist art that has "no duration," or is "experienced as a kind of instantaneousness," the literalist situation obliges the "presentment of endless or indefinite *duration*" (166-167). He continues: "The literalist preoccupation with time—more precisely, with the *duration of experience*—is, I suggest, paradigmatically theatrical, as though theater confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of *time*" (166-167). Fried's point is that the interest a literalist situation elicits is, in theory at least, inexhaustible, and in this sense, endless.

This theatrical gesture is explored further in Fried's *Absorption and Theatricality*, which examines eighteenth-century paintings through the critical work of Denis Diderot.<sup>59</sup> Literalism finds its aesthetic origins, for Fried, in a theatrical form of art, which often consists of represented figures who look outward and directly address the beholder (they demand the beholder's interest). Likewise, modernism finds its origins in absorptive art where figures are depicted as utterly engrossed in their own world, and thus they treat the beholder as if they were not there. Crucially, for Diderot, these absorptive works offer the most conceptually effective understanding of the unity of the work of art. Fried elaborates his thinking in this way:

Diderot's conception of painting rested ultimately upon the supreme fiction that the beholder did not exist, that he was not really there, standing before the canvas; and that the dramatic representation of action and passion, and the causal and instantaneous mode of unity that came with it, provided the best available medium for establishing that fiction in the painting itself. (103)

It should be noted that film has often stood outside of this conversation about absorption and theatricality precisely because of the automatic quality of cinema, which is "hermetically sealed" from the beholder, and thus cannot confront the problem of theatricality.<sup>60</sup> More recently, however, Fried has suggested that certain kinds of contemporary film (and photography) provide a space to discuss these notions. As already discussed, an antitheatrical gesture appears in the idea of "to-be-seeness" as non-actors sometimes address the camera but do not "succumb to theatricality."<sup>61</sup> And yet this "to-be-seeness" is only one component in the film that helps to create this "complete self-contained world."

Perhaps the most crucial elements that gesture to antitheatricality in relation to the development of time in Reygadas's films are the long takes and pans, which seem to linger too long over an object and extend beyond the conventional editing pace. Consider again Reygadas's comment about the four-minute sunrise scene in *Stellet Licht*: "The beauty in my film is the sun itself. You don't have to create it." While this shot relies on indexicality (and the recording of time that is central to its logic), the fact that Reygadas uses a time lapse to record this sunrise indicates that this shot is not simply interested in capturing this beauty, but rather in creating something more measured and calculated. The point is not necessarily to make the viewer feel the passing of time. On the contrary, the point is that the film's representation of the sunrise can't quite be felt in the same way as a real sunrise. The time lapse serves, instead, to create an awareness of a temporality that exists only within an aesthetic frame. Or said differently, the importance is

found less in the sunrise than in the four-minute shot that makes this scene meaningful.

But again, cinematic time in the film is created through combination of shots, effects, and editing. When considering the importance of form in films such as *Japón* and *Stellet Licht*, one gets the sense that *Japón* is interested in developing an idea of time that can *only* exist within this “self-contained world.” Of course, in film—unlike Fried’s account of a modernist painting which has “no duration”—this is an impossible task since the indexical register demands the recording of time external to the film. And it is equally impossible because the absence of duration in film would not create time but rather conceptually obliterate it. In short, it would signify the death of time. And yet something like the thematization of this desire of an art form with no duration is found in the scene immediately following the opening sunrise shot in *Stellet Licht*. The camera cuts to a Mennonite family eating breakfast, as a wind-up clock, out of frame but in the room, is heard ticking. After the family finishes eating, the father, Johan, is left alone at the table. Moments later, he gets up from his chair, stands on a stool and reaches for the clock in order to stop it. That clock will remain still throughout the film until one of the last scenes when another character winds it up again. There are two important points to highlight here. The first is that Johan’s gesture reveals a truth about cinematic time, one that maintains an indexical relationship to time, but also works against it: much like Johan’s hand stopping the clock, the director controls, manipulates, and creates cinematic time. The second is specific to Reygadas’s films. While the time between the stopping and restarting of the clock can be understood as a limbo or moral purgatory for its characters, it can also be read as a kind of dead time from which emerges an account of cinematic form. The duration of the film is not only imagined as stopped, but from this death of time the story materializes (diegesis). That is, the film is imagined *as if* it had no duration, as if it were a *continuous dead time*.<sup>62</sup>

Which is just to say for Reygadas this *continuous dead time* serves to make present an aesthetic world that requires interpretation. For this reason, I want to propose that at the center of Reygadas’s films there is an “aesthetics of dead time,” a term that reflects the impossible cinematic demand to create time with “no duration” as a means to assert the primacy of the director’s intention. No doubt, the term dead time is often defined as a time that is meaningless, unproductive or simply boring; as such, many directors decide to cut it out. Yet, for Reygadas scenes in which “nothing happens” are crucial to both his directing style and to his commitment to art. Discussing, for example, Abbas Kiarostami’s *Koker Trilogy* and *Taste of Cherry*, which were an inspiration while making *Japón*, Reygadas explains how excited he was by viewing a driving scene in which Kiarostami “doesn’t cut and doesn’t cut, and you could hear and see Iran, and the dirt roads ... I couldn’t believe

someone was offering me those gifts.”<sup>63</sup> For Reygadas, dead time—this unproductive time which Kiarostami refuses to cut—is a gift, because it offers him the opportunity “to hear and see Iran.” But the point is not just to see Iran (which traveling to Iran could also allow you to do) but rather the gift is crafted through and against the conventions of narrative film. Here again one can consider the series of extended shots in *Japón* of children walking, sunsets, horses copulating; by choosing to leave these scenes in, Reygadas is insisting that this time, far from meaningless, be considered “eminently meaningful.”<sup>64</sup> Or said differently, the aesthetics of dead time can be comprehended as taking the idea of real time which is completely unintentional and transforming it into an intentional element of what he describes as “real cinema.”

What I want to suggest is that the aesthetics of dead time in *Japón*, emblematically developed through the extensive long takes and pans, is an antitheatrical attempt to assert the film’s status as a measured artistic construction. *Japón* seeks to overcome its theatricality by asserting that this time be understood as autonomous rather than as indivisible from the viewer and his or her experience. That is, Reygadas’s aesthetics wishes to create an “instantaneous mode of unity” that makes time meaningful in the movie. In sum, the narrative with a clear beginning, middle and end, along with the use of non-professional actors, montage, and especially the long takes and pans, all aim at creating a sense of time that will be understood within the limits of the frame. To be sure, what is a gift for some is experienced as boredom for others, but what is relevant here is that whatever the response (even Reygadas’s), it is constitutive of the director’s intention. Whether the viewer desires or experiences something from the film (he surely does), that desire or experience is rendered beside the point by the director’s aim to create cinematic time that must be interpreted. Time, in this sense, is not so much meant to be experienced as it is meant to be understood.

Insofar as Reygadas’s antitheatrical project insists on interpreting cinematic time, it also makes visible the limits of a term like “slow cinema” as it is often used for films in Latin America and elsewhere. With this in mind, I’d like to briefly explore and problematize de Luca’s account of slow cinema in *Japón*. It is worth repeating de Luca’s definition of slow cinema as stressing “silence, stillness, minimalism, and an emphasis on duration itself.”<sup>65</sup> Unlike my reading of dead time, which can be considered as something like “the farthest pole from an emphasis on duration,” de Luca’s definition of slow cinema stresses the “emphasis on duration itself.”<sup>66</sup> And this definition also lays the foundation for de Luca’s political claim, where the aim of slow cinema is “to rescue extended temporal structures from the accelerated tempo of late capitalism.”<sup>67</sup> Of course, for de Luca, slowness is a product of cinematic form, but this type of form quickly gives way to an intensification of the beholder’s experience. That is, to the extent that the term slow

cinema has been understood as rescuing “temporal structures,” it does so largely by endorsing a vision of film that “quickly exhausts the image’s representational dimension,” so that a newfound “collective situation” can be “experienced.”<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, the emphasis on experience (and boredom, in particular) also necessitates that slow cinema, for him, be viewed in a theater rather than at home or on a computer. De Luca thus argues that:

the discomfort or boredom provoked by extended shots of characters wandering pointlessly from one place to another, which stubbornly delay narrative gratification, may prompt the spectator to look around and see whether such feelings are being shared by other spectators or make one wonder what other viewers within the same site are making of such a film. (38-39)

Although it may seem that this account goes against de Luca’s frameless vision proposed above, it ultimately ends up reinforcing the primacy of the beholder’s experience. Politics in this reading, in other words, is conceived as redescribing representation as a *situation*, which, in turn, “provides the conditions for an ethical spectatorship” (41-42). For de Luca, the politics of slow cinema has less to do with the representation of time than with an experience that affords a “collective situation.” But this also means that the force of slow cinema is located in how the slowness in the film “restores a sense of time and experience” outside of the film (41). In short, slow cinema, on de Luca’s account, wishes to overcome the film’s status as film in order to become an object that gives rise to a shared temporal experience between film and spectator.

But insofar as the term slow cinema is crucially about the primacy of the beholder, it also ends up reaffirming rather than rejecting the logic that everything is *decided on the market*.<sup>69</sup> In the age of art’s real subsumption, the term slow cinema, much like the terms postautonomy and posthegemony, suggests that the consumer’s experience is the only thing that counts. From this position, the aesthetics of dead time—unlike slow cinema—becomes important because it cannot be simply packaged and sold like so many other experiences. One can begin to process the aesthetics of dead time, especially the long takes in *Japón*, not as a means to draw the consumer in (or as an affirmation of his or her subject position), but almost as the complete opposite: as a rejection of the notion that cinematic time can be held or possessed by the consumer. Dead time is less about demanding that the spectator experience time than about creating an aesthetic space that cannot be reduced to a world that only satisfies consumer demands.<sup>70</sup> In short, the aesthetics of dead time has everything to do with a series of choices that are made internal to the work, rather than directed at meeting any demand as such (the viewer’s, the market’s).

My point here is not to deny that cultural elites buy movie tickets to *Japón* and international art films more generally. Nor is it to deny that film festivals and art galleries are the primary venues where these films are released. A pretty standard report on ticket sales could confirm either claim. Rather my point is that this data are largely secondary to the film's meaning. My argument has been to contend that the irreducibility of meaning to the commodity offers an alternative to the logic of neoliberalism. By insisting on its status as a measured artistic creation, *Japón* makes this point more forcefully. At the same time, I am *not* advocating here for a return to past modernist aesthetic projects, much less a return to a nineteenth-century claims of art for art's sake. Nor am I suggesting that this assertion of art as an anti-neoliberal project signals a return to the class politics of the recent past. Rather than a class politics, the emergence of this interest in an aesthetic of dead time is closer to the creation of what Walter Benn Michaels calls a class aesthetics, a vision of society that is not organized according to the differences between readers, consumers, and subject positions.<sup>71</sup> This class aesthetics functions as a point of entry, a conceptual space that challenges neoliberalism's demand that authors, art, and readers be reduced to sellers, commodities, and consumers. To return to *Japón*, we can see how its class aesthetics renders visible a conceptual space from which one can begin to imagine a world beyond neoliberalism, a space that perhaps gives rise to a conception of society where questions about labor, exploitation, and economic inequality can suddenly emerge *not necessarily* from the dustbin of history but rather from the ashes of the neoliberal present.

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## NOTES

A special thank you to Carlos Reygadas who graciously made available several of his films to carry out my research.

<sup>1</sup> Fausto Gilberti, *Piero Manzoni* (Montova, Italy: Corraini Edizione, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> *Japón*, directed by Carlos Reygadas (2002; New York: Criterion Collection, 2019), DVD.

<sup>3</sup> "Conversation between Reygadas and filmmaker Amat Escalante," *Japón* (2002; New York: Criterion Collection, 2019), DVD.

<sup>4</sup> William Rowlandson, "The Journey into the Text: Reading Rulfo in Carlos Reygadas's 2002 Feature Film *Japón*," *Modern Language Review* 101 (2006), 1032.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Julian Smith, "Review *Japón*," *Sight and Sound* 13, no. 3 (2003), 50.

<sup>6</sup> Craig Epplin, "Sacrifice and Recognition in Carlos Reygadas's *Japón*," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 28, no. 3 (2012), 303-304, 301.

<sup>7</sup> Tiago de Luca, "Natural Views: Animals, Contingency and Death in Carlos Reygadas's *Japón* and Lisandro Alonso's *Los muertos*," in *Slow Cinema*, eds. Tiago de Luca and Jorge Nuno Barrada (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 224. Subsequent references are cited in parentheses in the text.

<sup>8</sup> Tiago de Luca, "Slow Time, Visible Cinema: Duration, Experience, and Spectatorship," *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 1 (Fall 2016), 28-29. Subsequent references are cited in parentheses in the text.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the fossil and photography, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 9-11.

<sup>10</sup> André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Steinberg, *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco: Afterimages of Mexico, 1968* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 140.

<sup>12</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 271. Quoted in de Luca, "Natural Views," 222.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Franco, "From Modernization to Resistance," in *Critical Passions: Selected Essays* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 301.

<sup>14</sup> Jason Wood, *Talking Movies: Contemporary World Filmmakers in Interview* (London: Wallflower Press), 196.

<sup>15</sup> Ignacio Sánchez Prado, *Screening Neoliberalism: Transforming Mexican Cinema, 1988-2012* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), 6-7.

<sup>16</sup> Epplin, "Sacrifice and Recognition," 296.

<sup>17</sup> Horacio Legrás, *Literature and Subjection: The Economy of Writing and Marginality in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 21. Quoted in Epplin, "Sacrifice and Recognition in Carlos Reygadas's *Japón*," 296. Subsequent references are cited in parentheses in the text.

<sup>18</sup> Legrás, *Literature and Subjection*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> Sánchez Prado, *Screening Neoliberalism*, 157.

<sup>20</sup> Charlotte Higgins, "I am the only normal director," *The Guardian*, August 22, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2005/aug/22/edinburghfilmfestival2005.edinburghfilmfestival>. This does not exclude an underlying interest with Japan in Mexican art. There is a lengthy tradition of Japonism in the Mexican arts, going back to José Juan Tablada, and an obsession with the exoticized other. See Eduardo Ledesma, *Radical Poetry: Aesthetics, Politics, Technology, and the Ibero-American Avant-Gardes, 1900-2015* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 33-52.

<sup>21</sup> The commitment to form (and irrelevance to identitarianism) can be seen in his comments about the Mexican Mennonite community in his film *Stellet Licht*: "I am not particularly interested in Mennonites. I like that they are so uniform, so monolithic. They are all dressed the same. They are archetypes: the mother, grandmother, children. This way, I could concentrate on the essential: the love story." Karin Luisa Badt, "Silent Light or Absolute Miracle: An Interview with Carlos Reygadas at Cannes 2007," *Bright Lights Film Journal* (August, 1 2007): <https://brightlightsfilm.com/wp-content/cache/all/silent-light-absolute-miracle-interview-carlos-reygadas-cannes-2007/#.XFrY389KgdU>.

<sup>22</sup> Higgins, "I am the only normal director."

<sup>23</sup> In his book *Realism of the Senses*, de Luca suggests investigating "the tension between formalism and spontaneity" (32) in *Japón*. This tension, however, is primarily described as a conflation (32) or contradiction (73), which gives rise to the film's "sensory realism" (32). *Realism of the Senses in World Cinema: The Experience of Physical Reality* (London: I.B Tauris, 2013). In de Luca's later essays on *Japón*, this same contradiction turns into a theatrical account of the beholder's experience. My argument, instead, insists that not only is there no contradiction between formalism and spontaneity in *Japón*, but the commitment to form becomes a kind of negation of theatricality.

<sup>24</sup> Demetrios Matheou, "A Good Place to Die," *Sight & Sound* 13, no. 2 (2003), 12.

<sup>25</sup> *EnVivo*, "Hangout Carlos Reygadas," YouTube video, 24:39. Posted Oct. 20, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fv6kz0iC9Hg>.

<sup>26</sup> A similar point is made by Sergei Eisenstein when he notes, "The apparent arbitrariness of matter, in its relation to the *status quo* of nature, is much less arbitrary than it seems. The final order is inevitably determined, consciously or unconsciously, by the social premises of the maker of the film compositions." Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. and ed. Jay Leyda (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1977), 4.

<sup>27</sup> "Conversation between Reygadas and filmmaker Amat Escalante," Criterion Collection.

<sup>28</sup> Badt, "Silent Light or Absolute Miracle."

<sup>29</sup> Higgins, "I am the only normal director."

<sup>30</sup> *Contra Campo*, "Entrevista con Carlos Reygadas," YouTube video, 10:02. Posted Jan. 28, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkkr0TRe5E#t=415.736054>.

<sup>31</sup> José Castillo, "Carlos Reygadas," *Bomb* 111 (Spring 2010): <https://bombmagazine>.

org/articles/carlos-reygadas.

<sup>32</sup> Susan Antebi, "Crippling the Camera: Disability and Filmic Interval in Carlos Reygadas's *Japón*," in *Libre Acceso: Latin American Literature and Film Through Disability Studies*, eds. Susan Antebi and Beth Ellen Jorgensen (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016), 74.

<sup>33</sup> Wolfgang Bongers, "La estética del (an)archivo en el cine de Pablo Larraín," *A Contracorriente* 12, no. 1 (2014), 191. Although Bongers here is speaking about the work of Chilean director Pablo Larraín, the point applies to Reygadas as well.

<sup>34</sup> Steinberg, *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco*, 140.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, "Review *Japón*."

<sup>36</sup> Rowlandson, "The Journey into the Text: Reading Rulfo in Carlos Reygadas's 2002 Feature Film *Japón*," 1031.

<sup>37</sup> David Jenkins, "Carlos Reygadas: Interview," *Time Out: London* <https://www.timeout.com/london/film/carlos-reygadas-interview-1>.

<sup>38</sup> Castillo, "Carlos Reygadas."

<sup>39</sup> Jenkins, "Carlos Reygadas: Interview."

<sup>40</sup> Castillo, "Carlos Reygadas."

<sup>41</sup> Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 43. Subsequent references are cited in parentheses in the text.

<sup>42</sup> Rowlandson, "The Journey into the Text: Reading Rulfo in Carlos Reygadas's 2002 Feature Film *Japón*," 1028-29.

<sup>43</sup> Much like non-actors, music speaks to a sense of immediacy and even corporeality while still maintaining a formal distance between the work and the beholder. Reygadas has suggested, for example, that "real cinema" "is closer to music than to theater" and that "music doesn't represent anything, it is just something that will convey feeling." Castillo, "Carlos Reygadas." Nevertheless, this immediacy of music, like the presence of non-professional actors, is deliberate and "calculated." In reference to the aforementioned suicide scene and the music that accompanies it, Reygadas states:

The camera makes turns, about four to one side, two to the other, as well as a full 360-degree pan. It's quite complicated because it had to match perfectly Arvo Pärt's "Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten." It was all calculated: I made drawings, tying them together to make a long line and calculating everything mathematically. (Castillo, "Carlos Reygadas")

From this position, what is most interesting about the extradiegetic music in Reygadas's film is that it not only undermines the idea of pure indexical immediacy of image and sound (Arvo Pärt does not emanate from the ground and sky), but does so in order to insist on a world that can only be created by the director.

<sup>44</sup> Matheou, "A Good Place to Die," 12.

<sup>45</sup> De Luca, "Natural Views," 225. Subsequent references are cited in parentheses in the text.

- <sup>46</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 154. Quoted in de Luca's "Natural Views," 225.
- <sup>47</sup> Rowlandson, "The Journey into the Text: Reading Rulfo in Carlos Reygadas's 2002 Feature Film *Japón*," 1027.
- <sup>48</sup> Niels Niessen, "Miraculous Realism: Spinoza, Deleuze, and Carlos Reygadas's *Stellet Licht*," *Discourse* 33, no. 1 (2011), 32.
- <sup>49</sup> Steinberg, *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco*, 136.
- <sup>50</sup> De Luca, "Natural Views" 222.
- <sup>51</sup> Eugenio Di Stefano, *The Vanishing Frame: Latin American Culture and Theory in the Postdictatorial Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018).
- <sup>52</sup> For a more comprehensive conversation on these trends in contemporary Latin American theory, see Di Stefano and Emilio Sauri's "Making it Visible: Latin Americanist Criticism, Literature, and the Question of Exploitation Today," *nonsite.org* 13 (2014): <https://nonsite.org/article/making-it-visible>.
- <sup>53</sup> Anna Kornbluh, "We Have Never Been Critical: Toward the Novel as Critique," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 50, no. 3 (2017), 400.
- <sup>54</sup> It is worth remembering Claire Bishop's point that the "aesthetic doesn't need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, because it always already contains this ameliorative promise." Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books), 29.
- <sup>55</sup> Nico Baumbach, Damon R. Young and Genevieve Yue, "Revisiting Postmodernism: An Interview with Fredric Jameson," *Social Text* 34, no. 2 (2016), 144.
- <sup>56</sup> Nicholas Brown, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption under Capital," *nonsite.org* (2014), <https://nonsite.org/editorial/the-work-of-art-in-the-age-of-its-real-subsumption-under-capital>.
- <sup>57</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1998), 103. Subsequent references are cited in parentheses in the text.
- <sup>58</sup> Quoted in Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 158.
- <sup>59</sup> Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Subsequent references are cited in parentheses in the text.
- <sup>60</sup> Fried here is citing Laura Mulvey in an essay on Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's *Zidane: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Portrait*. Fried, "Absorbed in Action," *Artforum International* (September 2006), 336. For a more sustained conversation on photography and film, see Fried's *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*.
- <sup>61</sup> Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 43.
- <sup>62</sup> This point is very much inspired by Fried's borrowing of Stanley Cavell's idea of "continuous presentness." *Another Light: Jacques-Louis David to Thomas Demand* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 236. Fried offers his most extensive engagement

of the term presentness in film in his reading of Douglas Gordon's *k. 364*, which follows two Israeli musicians who travel by train from Berlin to Poland to perform Mozart's *Köchel Composition k.364*. Fried frames this reading around portraiture, but also considers questions of narrative, shots and montage to suggest that the film aims at the pursuit of presentness. I do not have the space to offer a detailed analysis of Fried's reading of this film, but I will quickly note that for Fried this pursuit of presentness is primarily located in the arrangement of imagetrack and soundtrack in the film, which offers a sense of time that has "no past – no future" (240). Thanks to Steve Buttes for pointing to this passage in Fried's book.

<sup>63</sup> "Conversation between Reygadas and filmmaker Amat Escalante," Criterion Collection.

<sup>64</sup> Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 160.

<sup>65</sup> De Luca, "Slow Time, Visible Cinema," 28-29.

<sup>66</sup> Fried, *Another Light*, 257-258.

<sup>67</sup> De Luca and Jorge Nuno Barradas, "Introduction: From Slow Cinema to Slow Cinemas," in *Slow Cinema*, eds. Tiago de Luca and Jorge Nuno Barrada (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>68</sup> De Luca, "Slow Time, Visible Cinema," 38-39.

<sup>69</sup> De Luca himself offers one such way time is imagined as consumed when addressing slow cinema as a "trend" that "parallels ecocriticism's recent rise to prominence and ecologically minded movements such as slow living, slow food and slow travel. De Luca, "Natural Views," 219. It doesn't take much, however, to see that the participants of such movements, far from resistance to neoliberalism, embody ideal neoliberal subjects whose privilege offers access to so-called authentic, local, and/or exotic realities. On this account, *Japón* becomes nothing more than a niche consumer package that is sold to cultural elites.

<sup>70</sup> And if the consumer ends up walking out of the theater or turning off the TV, this does nothing to negate this point.

<sup>71</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, 28-36.