

LISANDRO ALONSO'S *LA LIBERTAD* AND  
THE OBJECTIVIST TRADITION OF  
JUAN JOSÉ SAER

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What happens when the cinematically inspired literary technique of objectivist description, which is most often associated with the *Nouveau Roman*, is translated back into film? What might such an exercise reveal about the limits of each medium's capacity to represent time, subjectivity, and embodied experience? What new inroads might it offer for understanding the politics of "slow" cinema in the neoliberal era? I pursue these questions by considering the early films of Lisandro Alonso, one of the most paradigmatic figures in this trend in Latin American filmmaking at the turn of the millennium, in light of the influence of Juan José Saer, who spent years studying the French *Nouveau Roman* and is acclaimed for developing his own version of objectivist style in his experimental novels. I propose that this intermedial approach to Alonso's early films might help tease out the political stakes of his signature style, which, like that of the *nouveau romancières* in the 1950s and 60s, is easily mistaken for pure formalism.<sup>1</sup>

The *Nouveau Roman*, which emerged in France in the 1950s, is often assumed to be apolitical, in part because the term is frequently used as shorthand for a "nebulous postwar version of experimentalism or avant-gardism in the novel."<sup>2</sup> Its novelty owes to the break it stages with both the nineteenth-century realist novel and with Jean Paul Sartre's notion of *littérature engagée*, which predominated in the 1940s and 50s on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>3</sup> This new novel, as epitomized by the work of one of its most vocal proponents and dedicated practitioners, Alain Robbe-Grillet, rejects equally the totalizing gaze and chronological continuity of the realist novel and the focus on the existential freedom of the individual subject in the committed literature of Sartre and his disciples.<sup>4</sup> Robbe-Grillet's objectivist style renders characters primarily as embodied participants in their material surroundings rather than sovereign agents or psychologically coherent individuals. This effect is achieved through a visual aesthetic that emulates the "pure" gaze of the camera. Abstaining from drawing distinctions between things, characters, and setting, the camera-like narrator thus treats all the world as objects whose surfaces are studied in minute detail but whose depths are left unplumbed. This descriptive technique, which Rob-

be-Grillet calls *chosisme*, is informed by the phenomenological tradition but rejects its more humanistic uptake (the emphasis on the subjectivity of the individual in Sartrean existentialism). For the objectivist gaze, the backstory and interiority of the characters are inaccessible and ultimately less important than the way these characters inhabit the material world and the suspended present of the narration.

This formal treatment in many ways resembles that adopted by the Argentine filmmaker Lisandro Alonso in his early films. Alonso made his mark on the international film festival scene with low-budget productions like *La libertad* (2001), *Los muertos* (2004), and *Liverpool* (2008), which follow solitary male protagonists as they traverse richly detailed landscapes and perform quotidian activities, often in real time. The famously laconic performances of his largely non-professional actors consist of bodily movement, manual labor, and repetitive tasks rather than acting in the traditional sense of interpreting and verbalizing inner states. Though there may be insinuations of a backstory (the protagonists of these films are all estranged from their families and communities for reasons that are not directly narrated), the onscreen plot of an Alonso film is often reducible to physical translocation and interaction with the landscape: a man harvests trees in the pampa and sells the lumber (*La libertad*); upon being released from a provincial jail in Corrientes, a man makes his way upriver to the remote village where he was raised (*Los muertos*); a sailor disembarks in Ushuaia and traverses a wintry landscape to visit his mother (*Liverpool*).

Alonso's use of non-professional actors and hyperbolically long takes, which privilege sensorial experience over plot advancement or psychological interiority, situate him within the turn that Tiago de Luca has called "sensory realism," a trend most often associated with slowness.<sup>5</sup> This aesthetic of "deceleration" coupled with a preference for natural setting and light aligns Alonso's films with the documentary, ethnographic, and Bazinian realist traditions in filmmaking, more interested in capturing a reality than entertaining.<sup>6</sup> It also contributes to the sense many viewers have that his films are aggressively boring. In addition to expressing indifference if not hostility towards the demands of marketability, Alonso's signature aesthetic interpellates the viewer as an embodied subject, calling for sensorial participation rather than psychological identification or intellectual interpretation.<sup>7</sup> In fact, these latter impulses are consistently rebuffed. As critic Bernard Chappuzeu writes, by giving the spectator "sensory contact" without allowing for "symbolic abstraction"—social or psychological understanding of the people shown—Alonso returns to cinema's fundamental character as passive recording device that shows but does not interpret.<sup>8</sup>

This same attribute of the camera is commonly understood as what the *nouveau romancières* sought to emulate with objectivist description and their

privileging of instantaneous appearances over interiority or backstory. In making this comparison, however, I do not mean to suggest that Alonso's style belongs to a literary genealogy *rather than* a cinematic one. Instead, the *Nouveau Roman* marks a moment of confluence of the two.<sup>9</sup> As such, there is insight to be gleaned by considering it a predecessor to subsequent developments in both media.

Though there is no evidence of direct intertextual dialog between Alonso and these experimental French novelists writing four decades earlier, the filmmaker has been compared to cinematically inspired Argentine authors of a previous generation, such as Juan José Saer.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Alonso claims that his treatment of time was inspired by Saer, who, informed by his *apprentissage* in the worlds of the *Nouveau Roman* and avant-garde filmmaking, developed his own version of objectivist description known for the way it draws out time, slowing its progression and suspending the present moment.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, Alonso cites Saer's 1974 novel, *El limonero real*, as inspiring him to devote a full feature-length film to one day in the life of a campesino. This novel famous for its temporal dilation marks the height of Saer's experimentalism and is somewhat anomalous in the author's work for its focus on peasant life.

Set on New Year's Eve on remote islands in the Paraná River, *El limonero real* draws out the narration of a single, relatively uneventful day in the lives of rustic fisherman over the course of over two hundred pages. It chronicles the largely banal actions of its protagonist, Wenceslao, and his family in minute detail while gesturing towards a backstory of grief and loss that is not directly narrated; it can be glimpsed only in flashback-like fragments. *La libertad* employs a similar premise; it shows one day in the life of Misael Saavedra, a woodcutter who plays himself, focusing above all on the duration, sounds, textures, and rhythms of quotidian actions. Alonso treats his labor (felling trees), his subsistence activities (cooking, eating, sleeping, etc.), and his sporadic interactions with others (catching a ride into town, making a phone call, etc.) with the same subtly estranged minimalist aesthetic that would subsequently emerge as his signature style: unnervingly long takes, sensorial immersion in the landscape, scant speech, and a focus on embodied interaction with the natural environment. In *La libertad*, as in Saer's *El limonero real*, the landscape—composed not only of visual information but of sounds, patterns, and repetitive tasks—takes precedence over narrative diegesis, and to the extent that we can access the interiority of the laconic characters, it is largely through their physical movements and relationship to their surroundings.<sup>12</sup>

Both the novelist and the filmmaker linger on banal actions such as walking down a path, building and watching a fire, and defecating in the woods. The inclusion of such scenes indicates a rejection of conventions surrounding narrative ellipsis as well as a fascination with embodied experience as something worthy of attention in its own right. As I go on to propose, it is by sharing in

the temporality of such daily activities that readers and viewers alike might gradually come to perceive the socio-historic totality that, though initially occluded by the isolating tendency of objectivist description, binds them to the peasants represented. Here I take inspiration from Jason Baskin's phenomenological reading of Raymond Williams's notion of social totality. For Baskin, social relations become perceptible in the act of reading literature not when they are directly studied as if they were discreet objects but rather when the reader recognizes one's embodied participation in a totality that "includes both reader and text in a whole social and historical process."<sup>13</sup> In Alonso's cinema, this perception comes about in the viewer through sharing time and embodied copresence with the characters on screen.

If Saer's style and its uptake in Alonso evoke the *Nouveau Roman*, this is no coincidence given the degree to which Saer was steeped in French experimental aesthetics when he wrote *El limonero real* in the 1960s and 70s. In 1968, Saer went to France on a grant to study the *Nouveau Roman* (due in part to Argentina's military dictatorships, he would remain there until his death in 2005). Yet Saer does not merely replicate this aesthetic; he gives it his own inflection. Saer insists his own experiments with objectivist technique are primarily inspired by his compatriot Antonio di Benedetto and maintains some distance from the practitioners of the French *Nouveau Roman*, whom he finds overly dogmatic in staking out the novelty of their writing.<sup>14</sup> Though he studied the *nouveau romancières* and their cinematic technique directly, Saer's visual poetics in his most experimental phase also reflects his immersion in the world of avant-garde cinema, which began before he left Argentina, as well as his training as a poet.<sup>15</sup>

As critic Rafael Arce observes, somewhat surprisingly for an author whose style is cinematically inspired, Saer's narrative gaze marks the limits of the camera when it comes to representing the subjective experience of time and place: "It is not that novelistic narration displays the impossibilities that filmic storytelling would come to solve; it is the opposite, the possibilities of writing mark a certain appearance of things that is irreducible to the visual."<sup>16</sup> As such, Saer's take on objectivist description offers a response to one of the most common criticisms lobbed at Robbe-Grillet: "Why write these novels plagued with impossibilities if that which the *nouveau roman* aimed at could be achieved naturally in film?"<sup>17</sup> Reading Saer, it becomes apparent that what the camera risks missing is the way the landscape is infused with the subjectivities, pasts, and futures of the characters who dwell there. Though one might question whether the cinematic camera necessarily elides such subjective experiences and complex temporalities (as Arce implies), such an elision is often taken to be the goal of objectivist aesthetics in film and literature alike.

Poststructuralist readings of the *Nouveau Roman*, which abound, tend to see the trend as refusing interpretation and narration in favor of pure descrip-

tion and stripping form of content, but Frederic Jameson challenges this view, arguing that the new, experimental novel contains both content and history but that these are repressed, requiring the reader to perceive them negatively.<sup>18</sup> As Thomas Franck contends, the politics of the *Nouveau Roman* lies in this negativity, which he understands in Adornian terms.<sup>19</sup> Negative dialectics, for Adorno, compels the thinker to cultivate awareness of that which cannot be fully perceived from any given vantage point, that which does not fit into our conceptual understanding without leaving a remainder.<sup>20</sup> I want to propose that the political work of Alonso's films, like that of Saer's take on objectivist literature before him, lies in training the viewer to perceive negatively that which appears to be absent: interiority, history, and social relations.

Alonso's films have often been read as expressing the isolation and alienation of the neoliberal subject, but my reading of *La libertad* as, at least in part, an homage to Saer's dilatory poetics suggests that Alonso's long takes and subtly estranging camera work also serve to confer plentitude upon the temporal fragment. The past and future may not be directly accessible from within the film, but they nevertheless immanently inhabit the present. Similarly, the socio-economic relations that bind seemingly isolated places and individuals to a broader sense of history are rarely depicted and most often evoked negatively. Nevertheless, Alonso, like Saer before him, suggests that such relations are never absent; rather, they animate and inform the most minute and banal interactions with one's material surroundings. In both cases, description, rather than narration or interpretation, is what suggests the presence of that which cannot be directly perceived: social, economic, and historical ties that have been attenuated but that are never completely broken, for better or worse, even for the most aloof individuals in the most remote locations.

In the following sections, I gloss the existing scholarship on Saer's cinematic aesthetics and engagement with the *Nouveau Roman* before turning briefly to Gustavo Fontán's 2017 screen adaptation of *El limonero real*. I contrast Fontán's lyrical portrait of provincial life with the approach taken by Alonso in *La libertad* and go on to argue that Alonso's film bears the closer formal resemblance to the version of objectivism practiced by Saer. I propose, moreover, that what Alonso takes from Saer, most notably in *La libertad*, is not simply slowness but also cyclicity, and relatedly, the ability of past and future times to be perceived as immanent in the present.

### **From Cinema to Literature and Back Again**

The cinematic nature of Saer's prose and the way it evolved in conversation with the *Nouveau Roman* on the one hand and *El Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano* on the other have been widely recognized by critics. While there is nothing anomalous about a twentieth-century experimental writer taking

inspiration from film, Saer stands out from his contemporaries for the degree to which he *formally* emulates the cinematic medium. As critics Alejandra Figliola and Gerardo Yoel write: “While Puig narrates Hollywood cinema to weave it into in his own texts, Saer makes cinema.”<sup>21</sup> The cinematic techniques he deploys towards this end include mobilizing the “auditory and visual perceptions” of the reader through play with sound, rhythm, light and color.<sup>22</sup> In Saer’s fiction, this cinematic approach to narration has the effect of slowing down narrative time, showing his world visually, “frame by frame. . .”<sup>23</sup> In his most experimental prose, he does away with narration per se almost completely in favor of camera-like objectivist descriptions.

In fact, David Oubiña has argued that Saer’s signature treatment of time—a suspension or dilation of the present—might be understood as reproducing the temporal fragmentation inherent in moving picture technology and its Victorian predecessor, the chronophotograph.<sup>24</sup> Whereas film strings together stills to create the illusion of fluid motion, Saer’s prose, like the chronophotographic images of Étienne Jules-Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, break this continuity, calling attention to the suspension of time that is a precondition for visibilizing movement.<sup>25</sup> It is this temporal intervention that Oubiña sees as inspired by Robbe-Grillet.<sup>26</sup> Occurring in a perpetual present, Robbe-Grillet’s literature and cinema alike epitomize the Nouveau-Roman sensibility in which time emerges divorced from linear chronology and cause-and-effect relations. Scenes that capture duration but abjure linear development create the paradoxical impression that time is holding still at the same time that it is passing.

Importantly, however, in negating temporal continuity, neither the *Nouveau Roman* nor Saer’s stop-motion narrative style suggests that time ceases to pass or that experience ceases to accrue. If time is often suspended and fragmented in Saer, it is not by any means absent. To return to the example of *El limonero real*, which purportedly informs Alonso’s treatment of time, Saer couples his famous poetics of duration with a cyclical narrative structure in which the day in question re-commences eight times. Making narrative progress is thus a question of incessantly looping back to the beginning, starting over again, and re-narrating familiar scenes from slightly different perspectives. Through this iterative process, banal actions and seemingly inconsequential scenes are slowly saturated with affect and meaning. As one continues to read, backstory, social relations, and unspoken thoughts, feelings, and memories begin to emerge as perceptible if not fully legible from within the fragment of an isolated scene.

In this sense, Saer’s visual poetics are not truly objectivist because they refuse to separate the objects described from the subjectivity that perceives them. This difference might be described in terms similar to those Merleau-Ponty uses to distinguish Cézanne from the impressionist tradition that initially inspired him: whereas true impressionism depended upon “instantaneous per-

ception,” Cézanne insists upon a more complex model of phenomenological perception by including more colors than one literally sees at any given moment and by inducing the viewer to activate senses beyond the visual, so that they might “see” tactile and even olfactory attributes of the object as well.<sup>27</sup> In both cases (Cézanne and Saer), the work of isolating visual surfaces and temporal fragments from the whole of which they form part is purposely thwarted; such shards of experience evoke for the viewer or reader more than what is directly depicted. It is in this sense that, as Arce notes, Saer’s descriptions, which emphasize the multi-sensorial, often synesthetic experience through which the world is perceived, far exceed what the cinematic camera can directly show. As such, ironically, given the inspiration Saer takes from cinema, this effect is difficult to reproduce in film.

The difficulty of translating Saer’s peculiar version of objectivist description back into film surfaces in Gustavo Fontán’s 2017 cinematic adaptation of *El limonero real*. As one disappointed commentator grants in a two-and-a-half-star review of the film: “We all knew well that it was going to be very complicated to bring Saer to the screen.”<sup>28</sup> Perhaps counterintuitively, this predicament is due in part to the moving camera’s ability to record colors, sounds, and movement, which creates the illusion of capturing the fullness of lived experience. How, then, is the filmmaker to draw attention to that which haunts a given scene without being directly visible, that which must be perceived with the senses?

Some of the more generous critics of the film have proposed that, despite electing to leave out the most experimental and jarring elements of Saer’s style, such as temporal fragmentation and recursivity, Fontán seeds doubts in the viewer about what one is seeing. These doubts, proposes reviewer Rafael Guilhem, are what lead the viewer to contemplate the negative space surrounding what we can observe in the film.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, then, Fontán takes advantage of a different kind of fragmentation unique to cinema—the idea that there is always a world beyond the frame, before the camera rolls and after the final cut, informing and shaping that which happens onscreen—to convey Saerian negativity. Critic Cristian Vázquez describes the visual techniques Fontán employs to lend his film the thickness and opacity of Saer’s descriptions: “The film acquires the necessary density through the use of light and shadow, offscreen, metonyms in the form of close-ups, multiple sound plains, out-of-focus images that dominate the screen and barely allow one to make out what is happening behind them, which will turn out to be the principal action.”<sup>30</sup> In sum, the accumulation of visual and auditory details, rather than leading to the sense that the profilmic world has been exhaustively represented, suggests that there is always something that we do not see, something perhaps far more important than what we do see.

This negative gesture becomes most pronounced at the end of the film,

which features a full six minutes of silent, black screen before the final credits. Viewers who do not get up and leave or assume the film is defective might register this move as an attempt to convey all that remains invisible, unnarratable. Saer's novel famously contains a black box on the page, which might be understood as achieving similar ends, but an important difference is that Saer does not end the novel with literal, visual opacity. On the contrary, this moment occurs at its half-way point, and the ability to narrate is subsequently resuscitated, brought back from the brink of complete dissolution.

What Fontán misses, then, is not simply the negativity of Saer's poetics (although this is far more subtle in the film adaptation), but rather, its pedagogy. Beyond signaling the gap between experience and its narrative representation, Saer retrains the perception of his readers, challenging them to arrive at meaning differently. In the absence of linear progression towards a denouement, it is a deepening of the present moment accomplished through slow description and iteration, that might draw the reader into this world and teach one how to perceive its significance (and that of each of its fragments). To answer the question of how this dialectic coupling—of negativity and fragmentation on the one hand and education of the senses through gradual exposition on the other—might be rendered in slow cinema, I propose that we return to Alonso.

### Alonso's homage to Saer

Like *El limonero real*, Alonso's first feature-length film, *La libertad*, follows a cyclical temporal structure: just as the novel begins and ends with the same phrase, "Dawn breaks and his eyes are already open," the film begins and ends with footage of Saavedra eating by a fire, shirtless, with a thunderstorm brewing in the distance, as if to close the daily cycle narrated and suggest its repeatability. The way that Alonso includes multiple takes of the same scene, introducing new camera angles that do not advance the plot nor reveal much in the way of new information, also evokes Saer's style in *El limonero real*, where the narrative gaze re-creates the same scenes from different vantage points, framing and reframing the action like someone taking a series of photographs. In both cases, the accumulation of different takes of the same scene points to the inexhaustibility of the real and the inadequacy of the representational medium—be it writing or film—to fully capture lived experience: there is always more to notice, more details to be filled in. Even as this negative and self-reflexive gesture introduces an alienating effect to the reading or viewing experience, repetition (and implied repeatability) has the effect of slowly rendering this world more familiar, its rhythms more foreseeable.

In one of Saer's strangest formal decisions in *El limonero real*—a form of visual prolepsis or "more-than-seeing" — Saer grants the narrative gaze the ability to "see" (Saer puts the verb "ver" in quotes) into the future.<sup>31</sup> Saer repeat-



edly lapses into the future tense to narrate events (or sometimes just temporal movement registered in terms of the shifting of the sun in the sky) that have not yet arrived. These prolepses often begin by turning our attention up to the treetops or to the sky. In some cases, it is plausible that the narrative gaze corresponds to that of the protagonist, Wenceslao, and that he thus “sees” the future unfolding before his eyes by virtue of the cyclical nature of his daily routines.

In other instances, however, the narrative gaze that carries us into the future is clearly distinct from Wenceslao’s. The most pronounced example, which I have analyzed in more detail elsewhere, is a mid-day scene where the family is eating lunch, when three indistinguishable “splotches” appear on the horizon.<sup>32</sup> While Wenceslao and his brothers-in-law are described squinting into the distance trying to make out these shapes, the narrative “cuts” to the future-tense narration of a moment of recognition that has not yet arrived: “Later they will know that they are la Negra and Josefa, Agustín’s daughters, who are coming from the city with a friend they have brought to see the coast.”<sup>33</sup> From there, it proceeds to give a visually detailed account of the arrival of Wenceslao’s nieces and their interaction with their cousins, all in the future tense. This proleptic narration forecasts the immanent contact between Wenceslao’s isolated country existence and the modern exchange economy represented by his city-dwelling nieces, who quite literally breach the horizon of his world to regale their country cousins with tales of city life. The lives of these young women, who shop in supermarkets, visit beauty salons, and ride in cars, contrasts sharply with those of their relatives, who continue to live off the land, to bathe in the river, and to get around by canoe or horse-drawn cart. Their arrival thus belies the unadulterated autochthony of Wenceslao’s regional world.

As such, history is present in Saer’s novel even as the linearity and emptiness (to gloss Walter Benjamin) of time in modern capitalism is thoroughly undermined by the eddying and folding of the narrative. Simply put, Saer’s peasants do not exist in remote, mythic time. Just as *La libertad* presents Misael Saveedra as a fully coeval figure whose existence is nevertheless out of joint with modern time, *El limonero real* subtly signals the coexistence and in fact the interdependence of Wenceslao’s family and capitalist modernity. Like Saavedra, who must go into town to sell his lumber and haggle over prices, they must sell their fish and crops in the city, often on terms unfavorable to them. Wenceslao’s son, whose death provokes the unnarratable grief at the novel’s core, has, like his female cousins, been lured by the material promises of the city; he died on an urban construction site pursuing more lucrative employment. None of this backstory, however, forms part of the diegesis; it is only glimpsed in moments of analepsis and prolepsis, which nevertheless color the present moment in ways that may not be immediately evident to the reader.

In at least one moment in *La Libertad*, as well, the camera appears to possess the ability to see through time. In fact, I read the so-called “dream se-

quence” during Saavedra’s siesta as a citation of or play on Saer’s visual prolepsis: in this sequence composed of enigmatic travelling shots, a gaze more omniscient than that of the protagonist sweeps through time and space, towards the outer horizon of the visible to reveal to the audience a dimension of Saavedra’s life that we have not yet glimpsed. Unlike other traveling shots in *La libertad*, which might conceivably be understood as expressions of Saavedra’s gaze—for example, panning from treetop to treetop as if deciding which limbs to harvest—here the camera’s gaze appears to wander of an independent volition. In contrast to the calm methodical movements of Saavedra, in this sequence, the camera’s gaze almost races, like a spotlight sweeping over the forest canopy, seeming to move with more curiosity than purpose, occasionally lingering on images that catch its interest before darting on. Much like the multiple shots where the camera continues to roll long after the protagonist has moved offscreen, this moment calls attention to the filmmaker’s presence and dispels the illusion that the film is driven by ethnographic interest in Saavedra.

As in *El limonero real*, the emergence of a gaze autonomous from that of the protagonist forecasts increasing contact with the outside world. This mobile gaze takes us from the remote-feeling, sparsely forested landscape where the first half of the film has taken place to landscapes increasingly shaped by human activities: we arrive at cultivated fields of corn, and then a barbed wire fence, behind which, at a medium distance, a silver-white old-model truck enters the shot. When Saavedra returns home at the end of the day, we will see him retracing a similar path in reverse, leaving the road, climbing over the fence, walking through the corn field, further supporting the idea that the “dream” is a premonition of sorts of where Saavedra is about to go. Though Saavedra’s existence is never depicted as primitive—he wears modern clothes and uses a chainsaw—this sequence, which introduces agriculture, fencing, and motor traffic in quick succession, could almost be read as a time-lapse movie of the arrival of “civilization” to the pampas. It serves, then, to gesture towards a historical narrative in which Saavedra is still inscribed, even if his decisions (to live and work alone) and those of the filmmaker (to foreground embodied experience over narrative) seek to cast it off or push it out of the frame.

Then, precipitously, the film cuts back to Saavedra and shows him waking up. In the next scene, Saavedra waits by the side of the road for a silver-white, old-model truck that sounds much like the one we saw approaching in the so-called dream sequence. This moment marks Saavedra’s first contact in the diegesis with the outside world and with other people. Saavedra will ride into town with the truck’s owner, son, and dog and then borrow the truck to sell his timber and run a series of errands, including buying a soda and some gasoline and making a phone call. These actions, as a number of critics have observed, are what signal his imbrication and precarious status in a larger economic system. In my reading of the pseudo-oneiric sequence as Saerian prolepsis, the

first approach of the white truck foretells Saavedra's immanent contact with the outside world, breaking the illusion of a self-contained existence unencumbered by webs of social and economic interdependence.

His entrance into the modern exchange economy is not, however, a diegetic event. Like Saer's peasants, Saavedra was already bound to this world at the start of the film. As such, the future-tense contact we glimpse in moments of prolepsis is already immanent in the present. Even if traveling into town is not always part of Saavedra's daily life, his quotidian activities make possible and in turn depend upon his participation in the market economy represented during this trip. As such, here, like in *El limonero real*, visual prolepsis serves less to carry the viewer into another time or another place than to reveal aspects of the present that might not be discernable to a more temporally static gaze. Through their treatment of time—encompassing slowness, recursivity, and prolepsis—Saer and Alonso train the reader or viewer's gaze to acquire this temporal depth and mobility, to see more than what initially meets the eye and, thus, to recognize the historical and the social as immanent in banal actions even when not directly represented.

### The Politics of Alonso's Films Revisited

Though slow aesthetics in cinema is often seen as divorced from politics, I join those such as Tiago de Luca and Jorge Nuno Barradas who have pushed back against this assumption, arguing that slow films should not be automatically classified as retrograde nostalgia pieces, despite rejecting the accelerated aesthetic of mainstream cinema in the twenty-first century and harkening back to earlier moments in the history of filmmaking. Far from expressing a “longing for pre-industrial temporalities” or turning away from the complexity of time in the present moment, many slow films in fact investigate the “cotemporality” of people and spaces left behind by globalization.<sup>34</sup> As the present piece illustrates, this is very much the case of Alonso.

Yet in the slow turn in Latin American cinema, conveying cotemporality is rarely a matter of simply reinserting marginalized rural subjects into historical time. As in the cases of *La libertad* and Paz Encina's *Hamaca paraguaya* (2006), Jens Andermann has argued, capitalistic modernity is more likely to exist as an offscreen presence; the precarious existence of rural subjects that appear onscreen is bound to the nation and the global market in a relation of inclusion through exclusion that denies these subjects both full participation and full autonomy.<sup>35</sup> This implicit and negative engagement with historical forces does not, however, undercut the political force of such films. In fact, in spite of the lack of direct reference to history or politics in Alonso's filmmaking, Andermann sees him as “the most uncompromising among Argentina's neo-naturalist film-makers” when it comes to the “politics of the look, its possi-

bilities for exposing – and potentially, of surmounting—the radical inequalities of contemporary society.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, the way Alonso’s films foreground the marginalization of subjects like Saavedra as well as the invisibility and erosion of social and historical relations is precisely what makes them symptomatic of neoliberal reality.

Andermann is not alone in signaling *La libertad*’s critique of neoliberal values and aesthetics. The fact that the film appeared in 2001, the same year as Argentina’s catastrophic financial crisis, invites meditations on the precarity of life on the geopolitical peripheries of late capitalist globalization.<sup>37</sup> Though the film’s subject matter—the labor of a solitary man, his involvement in and dependence on an extractivist market—lends itself to being read through this lens, it is the form of the film that most forcefully repudiates the demands of neoliberal market. What Gundermann calls the arduous experience of viewing Alonso’s films marks a stark contrast with the fast-paced, action-rich styles the critic associates with “neoliberal frenzy” and commercial success.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Alonso’s hyperbolically long takes of manual labor and scenery create a defamiliarizing effect that many viewers find uncomfortable, tedious, and even unwatchable. For this reason, Andermann affords Alonso a place of prominence in the set of neoregionalist filmmakers whom he sees as challenging the legibility and exoticism of Latin America in mainstream cinema at the turn of the millennium.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, Andermann suggests that experimental, improvisational, neorealist cinema such as Alonso’s may actually “have more in common with the object of its narrative (neoliberalism) than it chooses to reveal.”<sup>40</sup> Principally, by focusing on individuals and small groups, they may neglect broader social consciousness, thus cementing the alienation of the individual and the foreclosure of commonality in neoliberal society. As Laura Martins, who reads Saavedra as symptomatic of the dispossession of collectivity and citizenship, forcefully declares, “there is no community in Alonso’s filmmaking.”<sup>41</sup> This is certainly true within the individual films, but I want to explore the possibility that community, like history, may not be as absent as it initially appears.

At a first glance, it might seem that relations (to community, to society, to history) are only evoked negatively, as that which is missing from Alonso’s world; allusions to the protagonists’ estranged families suggests that community is in ruins. The same could be said of *El limonero real*, a world in which interpersonal communication and collective memory have been rent by trauma and loss—most notably the death of the protagonist’s son but also the imminent loss of a subsistence-based way of life in the countryside—but where, nevertheless, the past, along with its affective charge, is present as a barely legible haunting of embodied interactions between human subjects and landscape. The backstory of Saavedra in *La libertad* is even more inaccessible. (We learn from his phone call that he has a daughter, but that is about it). Yet in neither

case is the destruction of the collectivities of the past the end of the story.

In order to understand the emergence of community and relationality in Saer and Alonso's worlds alike, it is necessary to zoom out from the individual text and recognize that the lives we see in close up in *El limonero real* or *La libertad* exist in an intertextual web and in relation to a larger collectivity that becomes perceptible in the act of reading or viewing. El Ladeado, one of Wenceslao's nephews, reappears in *Nadie nada nunca* (1980), thus weaving Wenceslao's seemingly isolated world into *la zona*, Saer's name for the fictional version of his native Santa Fe province that he creates through his intertextual oeuvre peopled by recurring characters. Similarly, Saavedra reappears, alongside Argentino Vargas, the nonprofessional actor who stars in *Los muertos*, in *Fantasma* (2006), which takes place in a Buenos Aires movie theater before, during, and after a screening of *Los muertos*. The metatextual nature of this film suggests that filmmaking itself is a way of creating community, literally bringing people together, but also suturing disconnected lives through a common formal treatment, in Alonso's case, an uncomfortably slow visual exposition of the minute and the quotidian, whether Saavedra's labor in the countryside or that involved in running an urban cinematheque.

As I have been emphasizing, this style also invites viewer participation through the activation of the senses, emulating for the viewer a sense of immersion in the material landscape and, as in *La libertad*, asking one to synch one's viewing experience to the slow, iterative rhythms of working life. As Martins notes, viewers are interpellated as corporeal subjects, their compulsion to interpret thwarted, their experience redirected towards immanent sensorial experience.<sup>42</sup> In soliciting embodied rather than intellectual participation and thus displacing western reason from the center of life, Martins contends, Alonso joins authors such as Piglia and Saer in foregrounding ethical relation.<sup>43</sup>

This move may also be political, as Francine Masiello argues, citing Saer's *Nadie nada nunca* (1980). For Masiello, texts that hone the readers' senses so that they might start to perceive what escapes direct representation have an important role to play in creating political citizens.<sup>44</sup> In *Nadie nada nunca*, written during the most repressive years of Argentina's last military dictatorship, what the reader learns to perceive through the senses and the affects is the horror of state violence, which is difficult to directly narrate due to censorship, self-censorship, and individual and collective trauma. In *El limonero real*, it is the grief-stricken struggle to perpetuate a way of life and forms of situated knowledge that are being subsumed by global capitalism. In the case of *La libertad*, I am suggesting, what the viewer comes to perceive is the illusory nature of autonomy and isolation in rural settings in the neoliberal global era.

In this sense, then, the objectivist aesthetics of Alonso, like that of Saer, go beyond critique. In interpellating their readers and viewers as embodied subjects, such texts train us to perceive not only what is deeply wrong with society

but also forms of experience that remain transmissible. In both cases, this is accomplished through a slow, descriptive, and materialist gaze. Descriptions that teach the viewer or reader to perceive more than what initially meets the eye are antithetical to the pejorative sense of “description” that Georg Lukács denounces in the bourgeois novel and the modernist novel alike: that which reifies social and historical relations.<sup>45</sup> In fact, I propose that Saer deploys cinematic description as a kind of counterfetishism, what Héctor Hoyos calls “the study of things as a means to reveal the true nature of social relations.”<sup>46</sup>

It is worth noting that the confluence of old and new materialisms that Hoyos signals in *Things with a History*, was already present in the *Nouveau Roman*. According to Jameson, one of the few critics to recognize the political nature of this highly formalist turn, Robbe-Grillet’s novels demystify the “categories of the ideology of everyday life” such as “the subject, of time, of things, and the like” by way of their attention to material objects.<sup>47</sup> His *chosisme* dismantles the “unspoken primacy of psychological and psychoanalytic interpretation,” with their focus on the private world of the individual psyche, and redirects the reader’s attention to the shared material world, thus “revealing the social significance of what had hitherto seemed a psychological compartment or a mode of perception.”<sup>48</sup> As we have seen, in Saer’s hands, objectivist technique does not eliminate subjectivity or relation so much as displace them from the individual onto the material world in which cohabitation takes place. Affect and memory cease to be interior and individual; they spill out into objects, settings, and the forever scintillating, never static relationships between them, rendering all of these what Jane Bennet calls “vibrant matter.”<sup>49</sup>

Far from being a gesture alien to film—as Arce’s reading suggests—this capacity to imbue objects and landscapes with subjectivity and mood may be one of film’s fundamental attributes. In fact, it is this capacity of cinema, Oubiña argues, that objectivist writers from Robbe-Grillet to Saer seek to bring into literature: “Though it is true that cinema holds the fascination of modern novelists, it is not the objective capacity of the camera that attracts them but rather its possibilities in the realm of the subjective and the imaginary. It’s not about illustrating a slice of reality but rather reflecting upon it.”<sup>50</sup> I would propose, following Masiello and Martins, that the act of reflection solicited in Saer and Alonso alike is not solely intellectual, conceptual, or analytical; it is a matter of staying with one’s sensorial perceptions.

Much as Merleau-Ponty writes of Cézanne’s aesthetic, the turn towards phenomenological experience as a means of putting rational thought and the sciences “back in touch with the world of nature which they must comprehend” is an extreme form of realism rather than its abdication; it is a way of “pursuing reality without giving up the sensuous surface.”<sup>51</sup> Implicit here is the interconnection of surface and depth, embodied experience and social totality that Baskin recognizes: reality is not reducible to nor separable from the sen-

suous contact one has with its surfaces.<sup>52</sup> For Saer and Alonso alike, slowness serves to draw out the reader or viewer's contact with the sensuous surface of the real so that we might begin to perceive what is not directly visible as well as what is. This includes other times latent in the present, qualities perceivable through senses beyond the visual, affective resonances, and the traces of connections to communities and historical forces not explicitly represented. In short, it is when we are asked to look long enough at a single slice of material reality that, rather than seeing it in isolation, we begin to see it as shot through with relation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Alonso's films are often accused of being elitist and overly aesthetic, catering to a film festival crowd while sidestepping political engagement. Tiago de Luca and Jorge Nuno Barradas, *Slow Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 11.

<sup>2</sup>Adam Guy, *The Nouveau Roman and Writing in Britain After Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2019), 2.

<sup>3</sup>For evidence of the influence of Sartre's thought in Argentina, one need look no further than the pages of Ismael Viñas and David Viñas's *Contorno*, a journal that ran from 1953-1959, where leading intellectuals of the day debated his notion of *littérature engagée*.

<sup>4</sup>Guy, *The Nouveau Roman*, 3.

<sup>5</sup>De Luca traces this trend in the work of Carlos Reygadas, Tsai Ming-liang, and Gus Van Sant among others. Tiago de Luca and Jorge Nuno Barradas, *Slow Cinema*, 5-6.

<sup>6</sup>Christian Gundermann, "La libertad entre los escombros de la globalización," *CiberLetras* 13 (2005), <http://www.lehman.edu/faculty/guinazu/ciberletras/v13.html>, 4-5.

<sup>7</sup>Laura Martins, "En contra de contar historias. Cuerpos e imágenes hápticas en el cine argentino," *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 37, no. 73 (2011), 401-20.

<sup>8</sup>"Contacto sensible"; "abstracción simbólica." Bernard Chappuzeau, "La imagen lejana y el impulso de tocarla: La recepción afectiva de Liverpool (Lisandro Alonso, 2008) en el extranjero," in *Cine argentino contemporáneo: visiones y discursos*, ed. Bernard Chappuzeau and Christian Von Tschlilischke (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2016), 163. When not otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>9</sup>Many *nouveau romancières*, including Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, and Nathalie Sarraute were also filmmakers, and the degree to which the Nouveau Roman and the Nouvelle Vague (French New Wave Cinema) were intellectually intertwined in post-war France has been painstakingly documented. See Dorota Ostrowska, *Reading the French New Wave: Critics, Writers and Art Cinema in France*. (New York: Wallflower Press, 2008). Critic Marie Smart has gone as far as to call the Nouveau Roman "the literary branch of the French New Wave." Marie Smart, "New Novel, Old Tune: Beckett and Pinget in Postwar France," *Modernism/Modernity* 21, no. 2 (2014), 529.

<sup>10</sup> Martins, "En contra de contar historias," 417.



<sup>11</sup> Dennis West and Joan M. West, "Cinema beyond Words: An Interview with Lisandro Alonso," *Cineaste* 36, no. 2 (2011), 33.

<sup>12</sup> I use "landscape" in Tim Ingold's sense as the phenomenological world in which we dwell, which is continuous with what he calls the "taskscape." Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape," *World Archeology* 25 (1993): 152–74.

<sup>13</sup> Jason M. Baskin, "Soft Eyes: Marxism, Surface, Depth." *Mediations* 28, no. 2 (2015), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Juan José Saer, "Notas sobre el Nouveau Roman," in *El concepto de la ficción* (Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 2012), 170–78. Noé Jitrik also makes the case that Saer was inspired by objectivist description in Antonio di Benedetto's work even before it caught on globally. Noé Jitrik, "Entre el corte y la continuidad: hacia una escritura crítica," *Revista Iberoamericana* 68, no. 200 (2002), 730.

<sup>15</sup> Before his exile, Saer collaborated with Fernando Birri, the so-called father of *El Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano*, at the Instituto de Cinematografía at the Universidad Nacional del Litoral in Santa Fe, where Saer would go on to teach history of cinematography. Saer joined the Instituto de Cine in 1962. For more on Saer's relationship to poetry and how it tempers his visual, cinematic aesthetic, see Ashley Brock, *Dwelling in Fiction: Poetics of Place and the Experimental Novel in Latin America* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2023).

<sup>16</sup> "No es que la narración novelesca ponga en evidencia las imposibilidades que el relato filmico vendría a resolver: es al revés, son las posibilidades de la escritura las que marcan cierto modo de aparición de las cosas irreductible a lo visual." Rafael Arce, "La imagen novelesca," *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 66, no. 2 (2013), 115.

<sup>17</sup> "¿Por qué escribir esas novelas plagadas de imposibilidades si aquello a lo que apuntaba el nouveau roman podía lograrse con naturalidad en el cine?" Arce, "La imagen novelesca," 109.

<sup>18</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Modernism and Its Repressed; or, Robbe-Grillet as Anti-Colonialist (1976)," in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986. Volume 1: Situations of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 167–80.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Franck, "Dialectique Négative du Nouveau Roman," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 22, no. 3 (2018), 309–17.

<sup>20</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), 5.

<sup>21</sup> "Mientras que Puig narra el cine de Hollywood para entramarlo dentro de sus propios textos, Saer hace cine." Alejandro Figliola and Gerardo Yoel, *En fiebre y geometría: Puig, Saer y Mercado entre literatura y cine* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi,

2011), 63.

<sup>22</sup> Figliola and Yoel, *En fiebre y geometría*, 63.

<sup>23</sup> “muestra cuadro a cuadro . . .” Figliola and Yoel, *En fiebre y geometría*, 64.

<sup>24</sup> David Oubiña, *El silencio y sus bordes: modos de lo extremo en la literatura y el cine*. (Buenos Aires: Tierra Firme, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Oubiña, *El silencio y sus bordes*, 78.

<sup>26</sup> Oubiña, *El silencio y sus bordes*, 67.

<sup>27</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in *Sense and Non-Sense*. Trans. Herbert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 16, 20-21.

<sup>28</sup> “Todos teníamos muy claro que iba a ser complicadísimo llevar a Saer al cine.” Review by user “Juampidelocéano,” posted on Letterboxd, <https://letterboxd.com/film/el-limonero-real/reviews/by/activity/>.

<sup>29</sup> Rafael Guilhem, “Aguanoche: *El limonero real* de Gustavo Fontán,” *Correspondencias: Cine y Pensamiento*, accessed January 9, 2022, <http://correspondenciascine.com/2017/07/el-limonero-real-de-gustavo-fontan/>.

<sup>30</sup> “La película adquiere la densidad necesaria a través del uso de la luz y de la sombra, del fuera de campo, de las metonimias en forma de planos detalle, de los múltiples planos sonoros, de las imágenes fuera de foco que dominan la pantalla y apenas permiten entrever lo que sucede detrás de ellas, lo que vendría a ser la acción principal.” Cristian Vázquez, “El limonero real’ y las texturas de la literatura y el cine,” *Letras Libres*, 2016, <https://letraslibres.com/cultura/el-limonero-real-y-las-texturas-de-la-literatura-y-el-cine/>.

<sup>31</sup> Ashley Brock, “Algo más que mirar: More-than-Looking at Regional Life in Juan José Saer’s *El limonero real*,” *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 52, no. 1 (2018), 27-49.

<sup>32</sup> Brock, “Algo más que mirar,” 39-41.

<sup>33</sup> “Después sabrán que son la Negra y Josefa, las hijas de Agustín, que vienen de la ciudad con una amiga que han traído de paseo a conocer la costa.” Juan José Saer, *El limonero real* (Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 2010), 83.

<sup>34</sup> De Luca and Nuno Barradas, *Slow Cinema*, 12-14.

<sup>35</sup> Jens Andermann, *Tierra en trance: arte y naturaleza después del paisaje* (Santiago: Metales Pesados, 2018), 372, 380, 389.

- <sup>36</sup> Jens Andermann, *New Argentine Cinema* (London; I.B. Tauris, 2012), 84–85.
- <sup>37</sup> See Gundermann, “La libertad entre los escombros”; Andermann, *Tierra en trance*; Martins, “Desciudadanización: trabajo, identidad y políticas neoliberales en Argentina (El Cine de Lisandro Alonso),” in *New Readings in Latin American Spanish Literary and Cultural Studies* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), 68–80; Gonzalo Aguilar, *Other Worlds: New Argentine Film*, trans. Sarah Ann Wells (Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).
- <sup>38</sup> “Frenesí neoliberal.” Gundermann, “La libertad entre los escombros,” 6.
- <sup>39</sup> Andermann, *Tierras en trance*, 342.
- <sup>40</sup> Andermann, “December’s Other Scene: New Argentine Cinema and the Politics of 2001,” in *New Argentine and Brazilian Cinema: Reality Effects*, ed. Jens Andermann and Álvaro Fernández Bravo (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 160.
- <sup>41</sup> “No hay comunidad en el cine de Alonso.” Martins, “Desciudadanización,” 74.
- <sup>42</sup> Martins, “En contra de contar historias,” 409.
- <sup>43</sup> Martins, “En contra de contar historias,” 417.
- <sup>44</sup> Francine R. Masiello, *The Senses of Democracy: Perception, Politics, and Culture in Latin America* (Austin: U Texas P, 2018).
- <sup>45</sup> Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe,” in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, trans. Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970), 110–48.
- <sup>46</sup> Héctor Hoyos, *Things with a History: Transcultural Materialism and the Literatures of Extraction in Contemporary Latin America* (New York: Columbia UP, 2019). 4.
- <sup>47</sup> Jameson, “Modernism and Its Repressed,” 169–170.
- <sup>48</sup> Jameson, “Modernism and Its Repressed,” 171, 173.
- <sup>49</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010).
- <sup>50</sup> “Si bien es cierto que el cine ejerce una gran fascinación sobre los novelistas modernos, no es la capacidad objetiva de la cámara lo que los atrae, sino sus posibilidades en el terreno de lo subjetivo y lo imaginario. No se trata de ilustrar un trozo de realidad sino de reflexionar sobre ella.” Oubiña, *El silencio y sus bordes*, 66.

<sup>51</sup>Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," 14, 12.

<sup>52</sup>Baskin develops this idea through his reading of Merleau-Ponty and Williams: "Merleau-Ponty argues that the object of perception cannot be separated into 'surface' and 'depth' because in embodied experience they are interrelated. Depth provides the very thickness and texture that allows surface to be perceived. Though he likely never read Merleau-Ponty, Williams grasps this phenomenological insight when he argues that totality should not be conceived of as an object of focus in itself." Baskin, "Soft Eyes," 7.