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A palimpsest-image: place, space and film geographies

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A PALIMPSEST-IMAGE

PLACE, SPACE AND FILM GEOGRAPHIES

MIGUEL MACHADO

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Abstract

This thesis argues that landscape, place and the material image can be an emotional and narrative catalyst in the context of essay/documentary/art house films. It proposes the notion of the palimpsest-image as an orbit around three gravitational vectors: the relationship between place and space in film, the association of different art forms in the creation and interpretation of an image, and the simultaneity of discourses involving complex combinations of memory, history and imagination. Not necessarily present all the time, these three vectors interact, whether in the interpretation and organization of the theoretical discourse, or in the consideration of the practical work in its artistic and conceptual dimensions.

The core research addresses the possibility of forming film geographies through the arrangement of film space and its interpretation of place. The theoretical framework draws on history, geography, art history, film studies and the work of contemporary filmmakers, photographers and painters. This framework is related to the practical research centred on a film made with images recorded in the seven capital cities of countries from the former Yugoslavia. These cities are a platform for two objective ideas: first, to discuss questions of identity, memory, history and place in the context of an imaginary city, *Novi (2012-2015)*, portrayed as a spectral topography between past and present, symbolism and triviality; and second, to delineate a cinematic place that proposes the notion of film geography as a concept that surpasses the mere identification of geographic realism in films.

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Author's declaration

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

Introduction

Towards the palimpsest-image: a methodology

The term palimpsest originally referred to a manuscript used in the Middle Ages on which later writing had been superimposed atop erased contents. This recycling was a consequence of the scarcity of vellum, the material used to create the parchments, which, despite the erasure, would over time reveal traces of the original texts. Thus a palimpsest is the consequence of a layering process on a surface occurring over an extended period of time.

In the nineteenth century, the emergence of chemical examination of parchments allowed the former texts to be revealed systematically and fuelled the understanding of the object as a cumulative story of past existences and a figurative method for the accumulation of references and sources. In literature, literary criticism and literary theory[1], following Thomas De Quincey's 1845 essay *The Palimpsest*[2], which approached the palimpsest metaphor as a complex phenomenon comprising interleaved disparate texts similar to the human brain, the palimpsest begun to be proposed as a metonymy for derivative works. From Kristeva's post-structuralist notion of intertextuality[3] to the concept of hypertextuality[4] developed by Gerard Genette, the

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[1] For a genealogy of this metaphor see: Dillon, Sarah. T*he Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007.

[2] De Quincey, Thomas. "The Palimpsest " in *Suspiria de Profundis*. Blackwoods, 1845.

[3] Kristeva, Julia. "Word, Dialogue, and Novel". *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980, p. 64-91. Intertextuality defines the affiliation between a text and its surrounding texts, including quoting, plagiarism and allusion. The term was first used in the essay *Word, Dialogue and Novel* in 1966 and then included in Kristeva's first volume of essays *Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, Paris:Seuil, 1969.

literary appropriation of the palimpsest replicated its own process of transference to the endless connections and plays of author theory, history and creation. .

This double usage of the palimpsest as a representation of layering, whether in a paleographical object or a literary web, also has echoes in the way some archaeological sites are interpreted as cumulative palimpsests, "in which the successive episodes of deposition, or layers of activity, remain superimposed one upon the other without loss of evidence, but are so re-worked and mixed together that it is difficult or impossible to separate them out into their original constituents."[5] The overlapping narratives and ever-changing lands are summarized in the history of cities, with their multiple erasures, over-writings and memories resulting from various architectural periods, ideologies and politics, and from natural disasters and wars. A perfect example of a palimpsest city would be the Macedonian capital, Skopje, particularly following the ideologically driven renewal of Skopje 2014, a project for construction and restoration in the centre of town. Countless statues were scattered in and around the main square, from musicians and shopping women to epic models in a socialist realist style referring to the Macedonian past while, paradoxically, colossal institutional buildings constructed or recreated in a quasi-baroque fashion stamp the area with fantasist kitsch. Side by side, the new grandiloquent edifices and statues coexist with no less massive brutalist structures, eccentric and gloomy, and surrounded by the crumbling narrow cobblestone streets of the old Ottoman bazaar, the large avenues of socialist idealism and the Balkan spirit of courtyards and old neighbourhoods. Destroyed by an earthquake in 1963,

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[4] Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests*: *Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997, p.5. "Hypertextuality refers to any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary." The term originally appeared in: Genette, Gerard. *Palimpsest. La litterature au seconde degré* . Paris: Seuil, 1982, p.13.

[5] Bailey, Geoff. "Time perspectives, palimpsests and the archaeology of time" in Journal of Anthropological Archaeology 26, 2007, p. 204.

reconstructed as a gigantic new communist town in the international architectural style, and finally reimagined as a mythical site, strangely bleak and homely, Skopje is a concrete example of a palimpsest place in its intricate layering of matter, space and meaning.

The goal of this thesis is less to trace the accumulations of signs occurring in geographical configurations, than to use the palimpsest trope of erasure, transformation and construction as a model for the association of space and place in film and as a ground for the intersection of various artistic forms and discourses. Its nature is one of transit, of multiple borders crossed.

In that regard, a palimpsest-image is an accumulation of references and a multiplicity of associations to history that is contextualized in three ways: thinking film images as artistic creations; interpreting place in its geographical, cultural and material conceptions; and approaching philosophically and artistically spatiality. Consequently, a key concern here is to involve place and landscape as an emotional and narrative catalyst in film. This approach is an alternative to the formalist paradigms and to purely sociological questions aimed mainly at cultural determinations.

The core research addresses the possibility of forming film geographies through the arrangement of film space and its interpretation of place. The theoretical framework draws on history, geography, art history, film studies and the work of contemporary filmmakers, photographers and painters. This framework is related to the practical research centred on a film made with images recorded in the seven capital cities of countries from the former Yugoslavia. These cities are a platform for two objective ideas: first, to discuss questions of identity, memory, history and place in the context of an imaginary city, *Novi (2012-2015),* portrayed as a spectral topography between past

and present, symbolism and triviality; and second, to delineate a cinematic place that proposes the notion of film geography as a concept that surpasses the mere identification of geographic realism in films.

The palimpsest-image orbits around three gravitational vectors: the relationship between place and space in film, the association of different art forms in the creation and interpretation of an image, and the simultaneity of discourses involving complex combinations of memory, history and imagination. Not necessarily present all the time, these three vectors interact, whether in the interpretation and organization of the theoretical discourse, or in the consideration of the practical work in its artistic and conceptual dimensions.

To employ place and space as a method of analysis and creation it is fundamental to understand the relationship between them, taking into consideration their material, philosophical, geographical, cultural and artistic representations. However, the vast amount of theoretical works on space and place, combined with the complexity of meaning and multidisciplinary nature of both terms, renders any type of study inconclusive. The depth of research can be exemplified by one of the many texts within this area, the edited volume *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*[6], which includes entries on 52 important theorists.

Nonetheless, some recurrent connotations of the concepts can be used to delimit the theoretical discussions of the field. Space is considered mostly as a dimension or a network within which matter is positioned, while place refers to a geographical locality and a sense of dwelling. Space is geometry and abstraction, a realm without concrete meaning, and is associated with movement and expansion; place is stability, definition,

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[6] Hubbard, Phil, Rob Kitchin and Gill Valentine (eds). *Key Thinkers on Space and Place.* London ; Thousand Oaks : Sage, 2004.

pausing, and a link with identity. Place can be considered in the course of history, in the reality of geographical experience, in architecture, in poetic imagination or in urban sociology. Space is universal, as we see in the term "outer space," in contrast with the particularity of place.

In his work about place and space[7], John Agnew outlines the increasing tendency of radicalization between the concepts in the fields of geography and philosophy, with the two terms assuming alternative ideas of spatiality, "space being associated with objectivist theories, as in spatial analysis and Marxist political economy, and place with subjectivist theories, as in phenomenology and postmodernism."[8] Agnew adds that this paradigm follows an extensive period in which the two terms were also ineffectively conceptualized and kept separated from one another through a "strategy of fusion."[9] Following Agnew, I argue that place and space must each be thought of "as invariably depending on the other for either to have much by way of a satisfactory theoretical basis."[10]

This thesis explores the notion of spatiality but does not intend to import the so-called "spatial turn"[11] to the equation of place in space in film. The concept of "spatialization" as used since the 1970s in left-leaning social and cultural theory for the investigation of modern society and culture is a category specifically related to urban space and is

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[7] Agnew, John. "Space: Place" in Cloke, Paul and Ron Johnston (eds). *Spaces of Geographical Thought: Deconstructing Human Geography's Binaries*. London and Thousand Oaks : Sage, 2005.

[8] Ibid. p. 81.

[9] Ibid. p. 92.

[10] Ibid. p. 81.

[11] The "spatial turn" defined an emergent acknowledgment of the effectiveness of space as an organizing category and the notion of "spatialization" as a term for the study and explanation of modern and postmodern, society and culture. Some examples include: Henri Lefebvre (The Production of Space, 1974), Michel Foucault (Discipline and Punish, 1977), Ernest Mandel (Late Capitalism, 1975), David Harvey (The Condition of Postmodernity, 1989), Fredric Jameson (Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, 1991) and Edward Soja (Postmodern Geographies, 1989)

constructed in terms of social and political questions of historicity and power that are far from the focus of this study. There is a spatial discourse to be addressed, but I propose to shift the problematic of social sciences political and economic spatialization to consider a philosophical and artistic treatment of spatiality and its relation with place. There is a gap between the social theories of space and the way film space has been historically analysed, with a focus on ontological perspectives using either narrative or structuralist models.

In his study of Murnau's film *Faust* (Germany, 1926, 106m)[12], Eric Rohmer outlined three different spaces occurring in film: first, a pictorial space, where the film image represents the world through visual composition; second, an architectural space, the pro-filmic, that occurs before the photographic record even if it was specially arranged for film; and finally, the film space, reorganized by the sense and conscience of every viewer, a space enhanced by all the fragments that film encompasses. Rohmer's theory of space is essentially a theory of the representation of the world, a realist tradition of visualization that follows Bazin's centrifugal take on the film screen: as an open window to reality and to off-screen space. Opposed to this is Louis Seguin's theory[13] of total rejection of what is outside of the frame: like painting, he argues, film space is established only on the screen; it is centripetal, a pure production. The screen determines the framing where everything exists, where film becomes a particular and coherent world. Seguin brings into focus the filmmaker's authorship as the ultimate organizer of a space that, ultimately, is not dependent on reality. This distinction between opposite conceptions about cinema and place does not, however, as in other syntagmatic theories of film space, translate into a neglecting of the frame as a decisive

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[12] Rohmer, Éric, *L'organisation de l'espace dans le "Faust" de F. W. Murnau*, Paris: UGE, 1977.

[13] Seguin, Louis. *L'espace du cinema : hors-champ, hors-d'euvre, hors-jeu.* Toulouse: Ombres, 1999.

scheme to present, constructed or not, a view of place. My intention with the palimpsest-image is to approach framing as a discursive device: not to destroy the idea of framing as a window on the world, but to destroy the idea of framing as a literal point of view adjacent to the idea of a subject, which in film theory is mostly related to the human body. Even the classification of the film shot denotes that dependency as most designations consider the distance of the camera to the character (ex: wide shot, two-shot, close up, insert).

This methodology does not attempt to propose a general system of rules for an ontology of film place; instead, it incorporates philosophical concepts of space and links with other arts such as photography and painting in order to present a study of the possibilities for forming new geographies within film works. The transformative action of the frame plus the temporal dimension and the string of assembled frames configure another level in the treatment of spatiality. It is this auteurist, artistic and philosophical approach to spatiality and its intrinsic relation with place that forms the central part of the palimpsest-image.

The methodology of assembling different art forms, however, it is not motivated by a theory of a composite art, but rather by the panorama of an art of affinities, of a space outside of boundaries, where reverberations, intersections and projections are possible. My approach emphasizes the complexity of film far from theoretical exceptionalisms that configure, through intertwining traces with painting and photography, a spatial critique of dissolution and assemblage. The organization of this work tends to take the form of a spiral, the chapters and subjects overlapping and linking with each other and replicating the very process of montage in films and the palimpsest notion, creating a dialogue by collision and association. The critical approach also unites stylistic, cultural, historical and thematic analysis. Though the works discussed represent

different artistic sensibilities and strategies, working methods and contexts of production, they share a similarity in that place and spatiality are fundamental for the overall expression. Defining the palimpsest-image as a methodology rather than a type of cinema, this thesis provides a creative interface of different inscriptions in the spatiality of past and present, real and virtual, materiality and immateriality. Nevertheless, the palimpsest-image encompasses overarching concepts that are reflected in the films themselves. Furthermore, the methodology configures a border trope as a mapping of the creation of film geographies and as a meditation on such concepts as displacement, disaggregation, disappearance and transformation associated with multiple dialectic marks: interior and exterior, close and unclose, definition and blur, local and metaphysical.

This dissertation is inscribed within the realm of the early post-communist world of Eastern Europe, with each chapter based on a central film and the historical and artistic conjugations and juxtapositions it stimulates. The films also coincide with my own film project by sharing a similar subject anchored to Eastern European countries that reflects on post-socialist environments and post-war societies. For European cinema after the fall of the Berlin wall, film space became a significant ground in which place could be challenged and interpreted. This study is more focused on a philosophical and cinematic treatment of space rather than a political and physical mapping implicated by the transformations and disaggregation of territories, including the former Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, the distinction between a cinematic image based on philosophical and formal strategies cannot be disassociated from the conceptual and physical spaces of national territory and landscapes of identity. The latter are actually important in the assessment of a cumulative historical palimpsest of memory and land, which supports artistic assertions about place and space in relation to the self and geopolitics.

In what follows, I study both a filmic and a cultural method, bearing in mind how practices of spatial representation arrange for specific ways of contextualizing and reorganizing the places in which we live. What kind of space and place does each film present? And how do they relate with a film geography and the idea of the palimpsest-image? How are spatiality, memory and imagination interpreted by the artists? Which routes and similarities can be detected in terms of themes and aesthetics between them and the film genre they relate to? And how do they relate to the concepts of political, geographical and philosophical dissolution and disaggregation, production of space and the reflection of identity? I would like to evaluate the intricacies of artist's systems and contexts of production considering landscape and place as a cinematic verb and assessing whether the diverse personal links of the filmmakers to the places filmed reveals specific traits in their conception.

Chapter one, "A film with a view", recognizes the appearance of a new subfield, sometimes referred to as film geography, which gathers a human geography perspective about film, a system based on film mechanics, the reduction of cinematic place to a landscape theory and a strict focus on narrative film. In order to study the conception of place in a cinematic structure not limited to narrative film, I have recovered the work of W. J. T. Mitchell and his revision of landscape to summarize what he considers the two main theories of landscape in the last century: contemplative and interpretative. Considering Mitchel's notion that how we see landscape should be changed from a noun to a verb, I propose a reformulation of Alan Bonfand's idea of the saturated image as a way to promote an equilibrium between the space of the frame and a wider notion of spatiality and inscribe landscape and place as a cinematic verb. Bonfand's theory is only about the frame, while I extend it to the creation of film geographies using the concept of radiation of space. Finally, I address the work of the paper architects

Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin and suggest that they use place as an artistic verb instead of noun and inscribe new symbolic geographies in the old palimpsest manuscript idea.

In the second chapter, "Finding place", I begin with the staged montage of location scouting in the photography book by Resnais and Semprun *Repérages* (1974) to follow the notion of film geography in its double empty/saturated and centrifugal/centripetal manifestations analysed in the previous chapter and how they announce a possibility of treating emptiness as a way of constructing meaning in film. Considering that a serialist approach influenced by structuralism has been one of the recurrent ways of dealing with emptiness, identity and memory in film works about place, I examine two films about the city of Los Angeles - Thom Anderson's *Get Out of The Car* (USA, 2010) and James Benning's *Los* (USA, 2001) – with regard to their focus on recording place – "a place that plays itself" - instead of creating one. Then, I approach the in-betweenness of former Yugoslavia and its various manifestations, and I examine the Zagreb film locations of Orson Welles' film *The Trial* (France, Italy, Germany, 1962) in order to allude to the co-existence within an "impossible space" of many fragmentary possible worlds. Finally, I study *Ulisses' Gaze* (Greece, 1995), a film by Theo Angelopoulos following the dissolution of the country that exemplifies a wider study of the complex question of the border in a broad reflection about identity and memory.

Chapter three, "The space of enigma", studies the photographs of Dirk Braeckman, Sharunas Bartas' film *Few of Us* (Lithuania, 1996) and Josef Sima's paintings in order to think about the poetics of framing and spatiality and their association with historical constructions of identity and symbolic considerations of images. The chapter also explores the poles of the saturated image and the palimpsest-image by projecting the abstract boundless land and its compressed spatiality in the enigmatic space of the frame

in Bartas' film, and the emptiness, void and banality in the mysterious world of the framing spaces in Braeckman's photographs. The space of enigma is then a place in the process of being defined, whether by its intrinsic ambiguity, or by its catalytic radiation. The chapter reflects on the relations between interior and exterior, including the aesthetic, geographical and philosophical considerations of framing in its centripetal /centrifugal configurations, also outlined by the dynamics of shape and dissolution that are finally condensed in Sima's paintings.

In the fourth chapter, "Traffic of geographies", Beatrice Minda's photographs of exiled Romanians' empty houses, Chantal Akerman's travelogue essay *D'Est* (Belgium, France, Portugal, 1993) about the disaggregation of the Eastern bloc and Raimonds Staprans' atmospheric paintings are brought together to explore a vision of personal and collective displaced geographies inscribed in a space in transition.

Akerman's personal travelogue symbolizes the interaction between a mapping movement and the accumulation of a personal archive, and, in its demonstration of repetitive cartographic travellings and petrified interiors, echoes with the formal subjectivities of the tectonic spaces of Staprans' paintings and with the interstices of memory and identity alluded to Minda's photographs. The chapter evokes the dynamic between intimate immensity and immersion in a region, reflecting on subterranean and internal places, and conjugating a continuous view over the geographic, psychological and stylistic borders materialized in the dialectics local/international, reality/projection and realism/abstraction.

Linking Michael Schmidt's photographs of a trans-historic Berlin metonymically represented by the forgotten neighbourhood of Kreuzberg with Peter Hutton's contemplative film *Lodz Symphony* (USA, 1993) about a nostalgic world and the

mysterious and melancholic urban landscape paintings of Mario Sironi, chapter five, "Echoes from the city", attempts to study how the portrayal of an urban void is concomitant with the historical, social and geographical mutations of the city and the mode that emptiness is part of a discourse underscoring the reverberations of place and form.

Novi (2012-2015)

Filmed over the course of three years, between September 2012 and October 2015, in the seven capitals of the countries resulting from the disaggregation of the former Yugoslavia, the film *Novi (2012-2015)* (Portugal, UK, 2016, 54m) proposes a cinematic geography designed as a spectral topography capable of suggesting associations and projections between history and imagination, dissolution and construction, and archetypal and personal fragments.

I argue that there is a filmic discourse view drawing on these cities, a film notion based on the palimpsest-image that cuts across classifications and overlaps a radiation of place with a personal cinematic exploration of space. It incorporates disappearance and disintegration as concepts assembling an intrinsic aesthetic and material condition and a reflection about the features of decay, while rejecting the fascination of the modernist ruin sublime.

In *Novi (2012-2015)*, the work of memory is rendered by a past that is not presented directly as a depiction or an illustration, but rather gradually revealed in the connections between diverse temporal traces, which in this case allude to the palimpsestic structure of memory in its combinations, superimpositions, erasures and transformations. It is a

resonant structure of different places, stories and times, reinforced by the haunting manifestation of the voice-overs and the abstract rendering of black and white cinematography. A particular example is the case of a combination of two shots - one presenting the ruins of the former central library of Belgrade, bombed during the Second World War, through a slow travelling shot framed by the grates; the other, an image of a new library in the centre of Pristina, covered by a futuristic grid, that resembles the grates of the image seen before, and filmed in a long fixed shot; to set the tone, a voice-over begins to describe the first night the city was bombed. (Fig. 1)

However, filmed reality often does not picture exceptional or extraordinary elements of the cities; it is not immediately recognizable as having precise historical significance. There is sometimes a relative flatness, a generic arrangement simultaneously linking the atmosphere of the world and the composition of the frame, as we can see in the residential buildings portrayed, in the places at the rivers or in the vague courtyards and streets. Place and landscape appear as a ghostly and enigmatic mass of nature, mood and architecture amalgamated in the space of the image. (Fig. 2)

In the penultimate sequence of the film there are shots picturing a melancholic snowy landscape conjugated with an apparently abandoned building covered by a cloud of white smoke moving in the space (Fig.3). These are images of Skopje filmed from the interior of a house showing one of the structures belonging to the old train station of the city, deactivated after the earthquake of 1963. Located at the rear part of the complex, the building is now surrounded by new edifices marking a territory that connects new and old, renovation and obsolescence, the outskirts with urban space, and nature with the intimate space of the house. It is the palimpsestic work of memory that is reflected in the aesthetic and geographical organization of the sequence and in the awareness of space and its demarcations, outlined by the repetition of the subjects, the similarity of

the framings and the symbolic fusion of shadowy negative space with the distant pastoral landscape composed as a picture on the wall and inside the image. In the end, a ruminant imagined film geography, where the past merges with the present as cumulative layers that expand to produce a new cinematic space. In *Landscape and Memory*[14], Simon Schama proposes that one of the distinguishing aspects of landscape in comparison with nature is that memory infiltrates the former: in *Novi (2012-2015)*, particularly in this sequence, an equivalent level of Schama's assumption is assigned to the creation of a filmic landscape.

If in the devastated cities of Europe, the urban void was the setting and model for the emergence of the postwar cinema of neorealism, then the empty space in *Novi (2012-2015)* is the palimpsest-image of a fictional reflection on a post-conflict cinema that deals with the concepts of disintegration, dissolution and re-creation. Yet, the film is not tagged with a reflection on a conceivable sense of a loss of Yugoslav identity subsequent to the fragmentation of the country into seven different states, nor to strict post-war emanations. In its place, there is a correspondence between the burgeoning stratification of former cities, the appeal of a foundational past associating inventive projections directly inscribed in the urban fabric, and a delineation of a film space developed within seven cities. The Yugoslav condition, its manifold history full of constructions and destructions, of new towns built on ruins or cleared ground, its crossroads location and its multiethnic composition, conjugate with a cinematic idea also built over multiple referential coordinates that presents an elegiac form of floating time.

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[14] Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

The spectral topography is made palpable in the sequence where phantasmagorical marks are literally inscribed in the film image. They provide a mysterious inscription of train passing spots and diffused compositions and act as bricks in the bridge of references and reverberations built with the modern clinical outdoor advertising seen in the sequence before and the actual settings of the politically obscure reconstruction of Savamala, an old industrial neighbourhood of Belgrade (Fig. 4). These nebulous and oblique images surpass documentary juxtapositions in order to contemplate relations between memory, history and spatial constructions. With their methodical artificiality, the outdoor close-ups contrast with the elusive and sombre presentation of the place in reconstruction. They both are seen, however, as screens, where the projected mode is outlined so as to suggest the composite histories adjacent to the production of space. A fragmented discourse of historical and geographical resonances is then linked with the architecture and the creative potential of emptiness, and it is this potential that I argue can play a catalyst role in the organization of a film structure not based on narrative stories.

I suggest three structural vectors where the interplay of place (architecture, landscape, townscape) and emptiness circumscribe a possibility of spatial, material and conceptual overtones. The first is emptiness as *form* and it is defined by an inclusion of evocative imagery activating the space of the frame by its plastic effects. The creation of space based on the dimension of depth is extended to the investigation of the surface as a discursive element, whether by organic material impressions or by compositional schemes. Flat arrangements unite distance and proximity in an overall floating geography and other abstractionist material filters, such as curtains and veils, generate a mysterious border between inside and outside, real and unreal (Fig. 5). They

simultaneously defy and define the window frame, challenging the perception of place with refrains of absence and revelation.

A second vector of emptiness is *atmosphere*, a transfer of descriptive and contingent qualities to the image. Matter is apprehended as fiction and as an observation of the real world; the conjugation of a graphical complexity of details and contours with the moulding of shadows and dream-like spaces reveals a crisscrossed border between objective constructions and illusive evocations. The material world is delimited in layers of geographical and topographical suspension, a phantom city of "Cinecitta"-like creations, sombre interior still-lifes and white foggy open spaces forming an abstract and timeless geography (Fig. 6).

The last modality of emptiness in *Novi (2012-2015)* explores the *symbolic* status of images in their affiliation with ideological and geographical transformations of the city and with metonymical and metaphorical associations of identity and place. Indistinct buildings, isolated cars and boats, empty stands and restaurants, are motifs that suggest an approximate connection with melancholy, disaggregation, abandonment or void, (Fig. 7) while the conjugation of statues and constructions point to myth and history (Fig. 8). There is a double condition of place as real and haunted, deterritorialized, a dynamic of disappearance and disintegration as much as of re-invention and imagination, an expanded space within a surreal confining plane.

The three modalities of emptiness can all be observed, for example, in a sequence that begins with a succession of images inside a vehicle where there are indistinct human silhouettes immersed in the morning light as abstract shapeless masses. There is a hypnotic movement, an urban pendulum-like travelling through a place materialized in blurry buildings and fleeting trees parading in the windows like inanimate

representations of a city deserted. The music, a dark dub scratched by a crumbling trumpet, alludes to the random incision of a dark sniper attack and the atrocities of conflict zones. Then, a fixed extreme long shot, echoing other exterior shots framed by the negative space of the interior of houses, pictures a distant mountain thinly framed in the black like a graphic collage. The image is also a gloomy and melancholic proscenium, slowly sliding with two other abstract forms in the dark frame. Four long shots follow, seen as a reverse shot mode, from the high angle of a mountain or the sky to the silent and empty rooftops of the city – an urban landscape treated in a non-contiguous fragmentary atmospheric space. A final image reunites the mountain view with an isolated building, slightly inclined in the shot (Fig. 9). These images captured in various cities (Zagreb, Skopje and Sarajevo) may point toward a war situation, perhaps the siege of Sarajevo, the bus moving in Sniper Alley[15], the crossings between interior and exterior, mountain and petrified city. However, there is no intention of a supposed film re-enactment, and these images may resonate and create other meanings; in this description, the possible historical echoes are mixed with cinematic expressive inscriptions, the phantom rides of early cinema virtualized through repetitive abstraction of windows and frames of the dark shadows of the past, through destruction and creation of a new space in reality.

At other times the three modes can be inscribed in a single shot, as in the selection of a wall fragment in the middle of the film (Fig. 10). The material components of this image can be isolated: a centre left located stone column that crosses the entire plane, circumscribed by two pipes on the bottom left and a window-like dark frame at the mid-right; the top of some vegetation appearing in the lower half, a roughly edged column

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[15] The informal name for streets Zmaja od Bosne Street and Meša Selimović Boulevard, which during the Bosnian War were lined with snipers' posts and became a dangerous place to traverse.

shaped on the right corner consisting of a diagonal pipe and a portion of tint, and an assortment of suspended wires hanging at the top. Itemized in such a way these parts seem prosaic, but the overall arrangement inspires a work of speculation on the connotation and impact of this slice of white wall. The textures and shapes induce an informalist landscape of a world between order and chance, construction and erosion. The wall recalls old hieroglyphics where enigmatic traces and marks inscribe revelations of a distant past: a symbolic atmosphere and activation of space where the real is mixed with the hyper-real, the organic with the non-natural, microscopically precise and paradoxically indeterminate.

An important and decisive characteristic in *Novi (2012-2015)* is the use of time and duration in the frame and editing. The average duration is approximately thirty seconds but there are extremely long takes, as in the case of the mountain abstractly framed from inside, described above. The long take creates a palimpsest-image that put forward various temporal moments in history and present, place and image; in this particular example, it is simultaneously a challenge of perception of space (the mise-en-abyme landscape, the rarefied elements of reality), consciousness of time (the slow effect of the movement in the image, the real-time duration of the shot itself) and evocation of place (the echoes inside the sequence, the locations of memory and fiction transferred to the viewer).

The duration inevitably, as was already hinted, interplays with the other shots immediately before and after, and creates an overall resonance with other similar shots in composition and rhythm. In this regard, *Novi (2012-2015)*, compounds a layered arrangement of diverse components – the motifs, objects and architectural elements selected; the voice-overs; the silence; the diegetic sound; the composed soundtrack – that are intrinsically autonomous but sill intricately intertwined, introducing complex

inter-relations. The overall structure of the film is based on two key-points: a subtle cadence with sequences -"scenes" and a spiral arrangement underlining rhymes between the shots and the sequences, echoes and repetitions, symmetries and associations.

These two key points constitute four types of editing naturally associated throughout the film. One might be called *associative*, which establishes a subtle sense in the interchange of the shots. It can happen inside the sequence, less an Eisensteinian dialectic shock exposing a new meaning that withdraws the autonomous signifier of the individual shots, than a supplemental inscription of charged reverberations; it can also make a bridge between sequences, a refined "raccord" of sorts, although it isn't always clear when a sequence begins or even if whether it is an independent sequence at all.

A second model, an *intensive* one, reflects the accumulation of similar shots inside a sequence (for instance, the first sequence, with dark courtyards and corners (Fig. 11), or that already described above with identical rooftops in a row). If this equivalence happens throughout the film, the editing appears to be *extensive*, a subliminal loop of rhymes and cadences (Fig. 12). Nonetheless, neither the intensive nor the extensive models are "rhythmic" montages with the only purpose of creating musical simulacrums, either in the city symphony tradition or in the film mechanics of structuralism.

A fourth and final model, an *analytical* one, reflects a descriptive intention, a portrayal of and encounter with a specific geographical space, even if what is filmed does not always exists exactly in the same space. An example of this type of editing is revealed in the picture of an old socialist neighbourhood (Fig. 13), with its gigantic grey tower blocks, somehow between proto-futuristic structures and decadent brutalist buildings. Many times explored and perhaps overexposed, it is neither the dystopian image of

socialist architecture nor a fascination for the graphical exuberance of these structures aligned in complex puzzles and hanging in the air as sculptures that is important, rather the reformist origin of these buildings and what they represent of the diverse stages of the organization of the territory in the history of people and places. That said, the analytical mode in this sequence fuses the plastic values of the material reality and the silence of this quiet neighbourhood with the idealistic designs and ambitions of Socialist Modernism. It is a generic place, as are so many in the post-war new cities, and the representation is made as an atmospheric deconstruction from inside the site, with a spatial coherence of the corners, windows, balconies, squares and corridors of the real, lived space. Yet, there is also a suggestion of collage between the open and transparent order of these Le Corbusier-inspired urban plans and the expressive geometric solitude of the cities of metaphysical painting; the editing practice develops moods and evocative links using a documentary approach to reality.

Also of consequence for the expression is the editing in the frame: from the first sequence there is a dialectic between outside and inside, between what is open and closed. Many compositions reverberate throughout the film and culminate in the last sequence (Fig. 14), where the image, literally divided between black framing and immersed white, once again finds the beginning of the film. There are views of picture-within-a-picture, an exterior-within-an-interior framed by all types of windows, curtains, and veils creating a double dissolution in the frame: one of distance and proximity and of immensity and intimacy. Not only do these layered filters denote a defamiliarization of the world creating visual opacity and geographic ambivalence, they also contribute to problematizing personal identity as it relates to matter and space.

An example would be the sequence (Fig. 15) demarcated by a droning ambient soundtrack as an abstract city is visualized, blurred by the glass of the windows and by

the extreme distance of the shot (Fig.16), which eventually generates a fusion between surface and depth, site and fiction In this case, we might say this is a hazy lyrical palimpsest proposing tales and meanings of other transformations of the city, as it could be the architectural plans of the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange (Fig. 17) for the reconstruction of Skopje or the aforementioned outdoor promotions for the renovation of Savamala (Fig. 18). The sequence has emotional associations with melancholy, disaggregation and void by conjugating the mise-en-scène of abstract elements and landscape views in a hypnotically unbalanced shot that also mixes motion with fixity. There is an ethereal dimension in the iconic generalization of place, a meditation on heterogeneous and phantasmagorical space that enounces a fantasized city immersed in the region and collapsed in the imagination. This (literal) oscillation of images of cities unbuilt, built and rebuilt reaffirms the emotional importance attached to architecture and place, from the familiarity of our intimate spaces to the abstract vastness of urban sprawl.

In his book *The poetics of Space*[16]*,* Gaston Bachelard debates the particular qualities of intimate and domestic spaces and wide external spaces and the way the perception and experience of these physical places shape our memories, thoughts and dreams. His conception of space is a "phenomenology of the imagination" and is based on the notion of "intimate immensity", an association of reverie and contemplation that describes the dialectic between interiority and exteriority, one that unites the concepts of "inside" (the intimate space") and "outside" (the world space): "it is through their 'immensity' that these two kinds of space – the space of intimacy and world space – blend". [17]

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[16] Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*, trans, Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994. Originally published in 1958 as La poétique de l'espace. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

[17] Ibid, p. 203.

Throughout the film the construction of space and its poetics of framing and spatiality are also described often in these shots from the interior of the houses contemplating the outside world, and outlined with the reflections of the voice-overs (Fig. 19). They inscribe yet another flux or simultaneity between interior and exterior, that of the simultaneous centripetal/centrifugal condition of the film image (Fig. 20). The space in transition of these images is, in the end, also an indication of the personal and collective geographies inscribed in the film.

In *Novi (2012-2015)*, the creation of a film geography as a consideration of a representational territory is twofold. First, there is a cartography of personal memories and aspirations involving conceptualizations of place and space and portraying a symbolic city both embracing the past and reinventing it. Then, a radiated process emerges from the connection between the pro-filmic and the cinematic frame, and catalyses place as a plastic, material and philosophical unit capable of being reimagined.

This imaginary city of *Novi (2012-2015)* is an existential filmic space that expresses the co-existence within an "impossible space" of many fragmentary possible worlds. Yet, the film does not epitomize the postmodern condition of simulation, where the simulacrum replaces real space. A more appropriate concept would be the notion introduced by Foucault: "heterotopia", a paradoxical and ambiguous place that, like utopia, has "the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" [18]. The difference between a utopia and a heterotopia is that a heterotopia retains a material reality: heterotopias are both real spaces and are 'outside all places', where time and space remain suspended like in a mirror in real and unreal

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[18] Foucault, Michel [1967] "Different Spaces", trans. R. Hurley in Faubion, J. D. (ed.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault Volume 2*. London: Penguin, 1998, p. 181.

space. They have "the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves"[19]. The term heterotopia has been widely used, first in architectural discourse, followed by media and film appropriations. My intention here is less to explore the common usage of heterotopia as a dystopian space or as a place with intrinsic rules that delimit a boundary among other places, than to reclaim a new association with the indexicality of film by extending the boundaries between frame and space, cancelling in the process another limitation of heterotopia as a conceptual frame for a film geography: the potential to be considered in a general theory of film ontology.

In line with Foucault's definition of heterotopias, *Novi (2012-2015)* relates to all the spaces that remain, either generating an illusional space (heterotopia of illusion) or creating a space that is another real space (heterotopia of compensation). Heterotopias can also be related to slices of time and therefore open up to heterochronies, which are associated with a breaking of traditional time, either representing the accumulation of time, linked in the modern era to the idea total archive in museums and libraries, or transitory time, as in temporal sites such as festivals and fairgrounds. A symbolic double heterochrony would be one that represents dissolution and disappearance, as a cemetery for instance, in its double condition of accumulation and transition.

Novi (2012-2015) it is not only an imaginary city built on images of seven different cities, it also incorporates many other heterotopias and heterochronies, a faded city, an in-between city, a nonspecific city, an archive city, a future city, and finally, a cinematic city. The city is then matter of suggestion and investigation, an urban landscape compression of different spatio-temporal traces and a cartography of contingencies; an invented city but also a haptic site, immersed in the region and collapsed in the

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[19] Ibid, p, 181.

imagination. The film geography of *Novi (2012-2015)* is a realization of in-betweenness, a process of reordering and reconstruction. Here we are in the domain of what could be designated the politics and poetics of location. Incorporated in the formation of place there is a significance that the filmmaker can craft in order to develop a personalized and complex radiation, a "platiality", a fluidity that comprehends both the material and mental dimensions of spatiality and place and catalyses new modes of thinking the real.

In *Novi (2012-2015)*, film space comprises three unclosed spatial concepts that ultimately form a complex centripetal/centrifugal flux: a pro-filmic space which I call *occupation* and which defines the material world as it exists framed by the camera; the second space, *construction*, results from the connection of editing, mise-en-scène (I use the term as film theory adopts the selection and organization of bodies and matter in a composition and also the aesthetics of sound) and shot (scale, angle, light). This is the space that defines framing as a discursive structure and is linked not only with the pro-filmic within the shot but also by the different associations with what precedes and follows. It is the diffuse space that appears between the pro-filmic and the construction, the concrete and the abstract, that brings to the film image a *radiation* space.

The palimpsest-image underlines a signifier to spatiality in its expressivity as expanded, infinite, condensed, abstract and impossible space. The simultaneous meditation on spatiality and emptiness inferences configures pivotal elements in the creation of a film geography that is in transition. As cities that gradually evolve from the centre to the periphery, from the vague terrain to a new construction, *Novi (2012-2015)* founds itself in the border of the place of identity and the space of creation. There is an intimate association between the subjectivities of various spatialities and the production of identity, and what could be a stagnant representation of a cumulative place instead

becomes active. The space in transition allows the identification and organization of heterogeneous movements into relational places. Each kind of space can be abstracted and interpreted independently, but it is the constant passage and transformation between them that institutes the essential condition of the formation of space.

The film develops a synthesis of two modes for approaching filmmaking: on the one hand, it is linked with a realist model, whether the documentary form, fiction or avant-garde film, which works with the material reality respecting its specificity. On the other hand, it reveals an artistic practice that seeks a reading of reality through a personal and aesthetic vision.

Accordingly, the film forms a fiction of space relating the real with abstract imagination, which echoes with other artistic practices, from photography to painting, without falling into the temptation of transferring the forms and techniques of one medium to another. There are not modernist self- referential approaches; instead the film explores a semantic dimension that lies within the places selected, which associated with the voice-overs and soundtrack, the editing and spatiality readings, and the discursive framing, attempts to generate a narrative geography.

A meditation equal parts tone poem, imaginary portrait and abstract idea of a city, *Novi (2012-2015)* explores the poetic spaces between documentary and fiction, and because it neither illustrates narrative stories nor relies on the technical determinism of treating the ontology of a medium as creation of meaning, it poses a classification challenge within the history of narrative cinema, the avant-garde, and documentary practice.

The creative documentary form with a personal and aesthetic point of view has been recently intertwined with other genres, from narrative film hybrids to the ethnographic-avant-garde. The latter inscribes itself in a tradition of the avant-garde "cinema of

attractions", which combined with the ethnographic sub-genre is far from the context and form of my film; and the former still depends on stories interpreted or symbolized by actors/non-actors. As a hybrid, *Novi (2012-2015)* shares at least an overall affinity with the essay genre in the way "readdresses, from a new audiovisual perspective, several basic questions raised by earlier forms of cinema about the tension between verisimilitude (documented reality) and artifice (free imagination). In that process, the essay film problematizes various traditional concepts such as narrative fiction and historical record, truth and fantasy, blurring the boundaries between the stable genres and calling into question all simplifying binary categories of representation" [20].

Originally inspired by French film theorist Alexandre Astruc - who defined in 1948 the idea of a "camera stylo" as a metaphor for break free cinema "from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language."[21] - the film essay has developed as a hybrid genre including such disparate forms as the travelogue, the reportage/journalistic, the philosophical, the auto-biography, the diary, the ethnographic, the literary and the compilation film (archive / found footage).

However more often than not the essay film works more as a demonstrative device of a theory or a reflection and its focus is less the work on film images themselves than a problematizing of the world in the perspective of intellectual history. As a thematic framework, *Novi (2012-2015)* is part of a family of films about place and, from this standpoint can be contextualized with one of the first manifestations of essay films, the

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[20] Alter, Nora M. "Essay Film" in Chevalier, Tracy (ed). *Encyclopedia of the Essay*. London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997, p. 262.

[21] Astruc, Alexandre. "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: Le Camera-Stylo." In Corrigan, Timothy (e.d) Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader. Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999, p. 158-162.

city symphonies. Nonetheless, despite treating the city as a material for expressive form and sharing a composite city with Dziga Vertov's classic film *The Man with a Movie Camera* (Soviet Union, 1929), it neither adopts a rhythmic reflexive celebration of cinematic vision nor depicts the attractions of the modern city. *Novi (2012-2015)* also does not share the tendency of many essay films and first person documentaries of making the filmmaker the focus of the work, revealing in the process that the relation of the artist with the subject is frequently more foregrounded than the subject itself. In my work, there is not a personal connection in relation with the places filmed and with their political geography; the film is in essence an existential reflection about space, place, identity, memory and imagination built with geographic, conceptual and cinematic coordinates that materialize the palimpsest-image and its dynamics of dissolution and construction.

The palimpsest-image methodology and the film complement the research by contributing with permutations of semantic value of framing and emptiness, and by defining a film geography mixing historical and real place with imaginary and impossible place in a revision of the poetics of abstract space and spatiality. In the process a design of film space also develops that is not connected with narrative cinema or formalist materialism and that encapsulates the accumulations of signs occurring in the displacement of the real, in the echoes and resonances between frame and editing, presence and absence.

The palimpsest-image is also defined by the way the chapters are structured; it is materialized as filmic view, where landscape and place reinsert a cinematic geography that goes beyond the ontology of the medium and a pre-codified view of the world; it is conjugated by the in-betweenness of finding and transforming place and emptiness in a reflection about identity, border and imagination; it is described as a discursive framing

equating with the potentialities of interpreting spatiality, a dichotomy of immensity and emptiness defining a space of enigma; it is a meditation on real and metaphorical space by exploring and creating various routes of travelling, transition and displacement, a conception of personal and collective geographies inscribed in the interstices of history and memory; and finally, it is a space of echoes, of resonant narratives of places and artistic forms expanding in the void.

Illustrations - Introduction

Fig. 1 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 2 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 3 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)
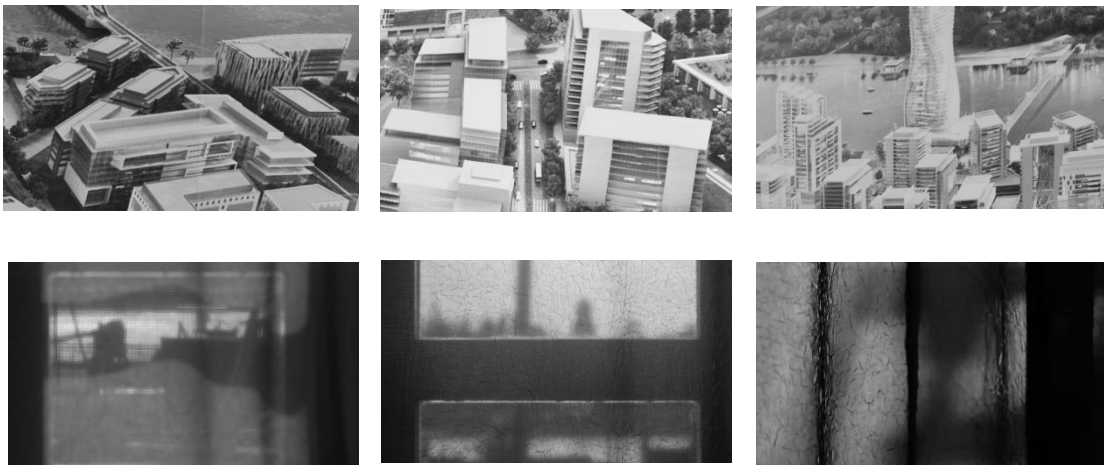
Fig. 4 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 5 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 6 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 7 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 8 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 9 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 10 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 11 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 12 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 13 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 14 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)
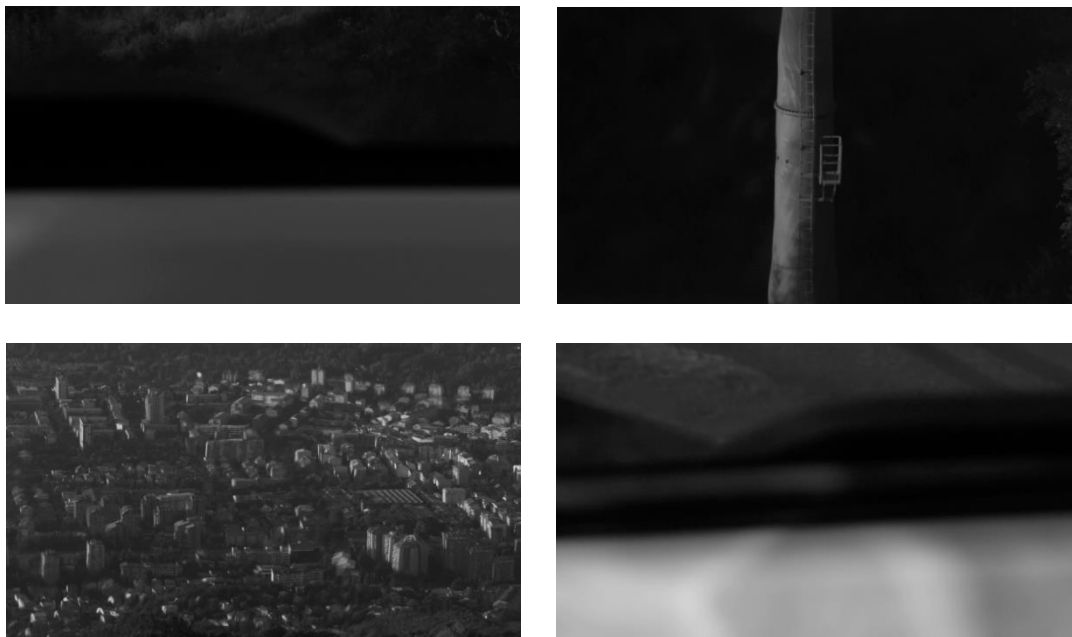
Fig. 15 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 16 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 17 Kenzo Tange, Master plan for Skopje (1967)

Fig. 18 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 19 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

Fig. 20 Miguel Machado, *Novi (2012-2015)* (2016)

1. A film with a view

Geography at the cinema

One of the key characteristics of theoretical approaches to the issue of geography in film seems to be the difficulty in accurately isolating important concepts. In fact, the wide framework that the term "film geographies" spans, includes such notions as "place", "space", "setting" and "landscape", as well as mapping orientations such as "cartography" or "topography". These terms are often used interchangeably, making potential research a tangled model of transverse ideas. One of the problems is the widespread usage of the words "place" and "space" in common language, making it difficult to organize a film theory using these words.

While studies dealing with place and film can be found throughout the critical history of cinema, specifically the social, cultural and architectural approaches focused on cities[22], it was only in the 1990s that the discursive lens of geography framed the matter. The new subfield[23], sometimes referred as film geography, consistently acknowledged for the first time the human geography perspective in the edited volume *Place, power, situation, and spectacle: a geography of film*. Jeff Hopkins summarizes the position: **"If**

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[22] Barber, Stephen. *Projected cities: Cinema and Urban Space*. London: Reaktion, 2002; Clarke, David B.(ed.) *The cinematic city*. London, New York: Routledge, 1997. Koeck, Richard. *Cine-scapes: Cinematic Spaces in Architecture and Cities*. London: Routledge, 2012; Koeck, Richard and Les Roberts (eds). *The city and the moving image: Urban Projections*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. Mazierska, Ewa and Laura Rascaroli. *From Moscow to Madrid : Postmodern Cities, European Cinema*. London: I.B.Tauris, 2002. Shiel, Mark. *Cinema and the City in History and Theory*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001.

[23] For a mapping of the field see: Kennedy, Christina and Christopher Lukinbeal. "Towards a Holistical Approach to Geographic Research on Film" in *Progress in Human Geography,* 21. 1, 1997, p. 33–50; Lukinbeal, Christopher and Stefan Zimmermann. " Film geography: a new subfield" in *Erdkunde*, 60.4, 2006, p.315-325; Escher, Anton. "The geography of cinema – a cinematic world" in *Erdkunde*, 60.4, 2006, p. 307-314.

place construction lies at the core of human geography, then the notion of a cinematic place is a fundamental concern for a geography of film"[24].

According to Hopkins, the way to interpret these cinematic places is to mirror film as landscape, in the sense that, "be they natural or cultural, physical or imaginary" landscapes "are first and foremost visual constructs"[25]. Consequently, the redirected cinematic landscape essentially delimits a filmic representation provided by the inherent phenomenological characteristics of the moving image (the iconic form of photography and the illusion of motion).[26]

Hopkins' semiotic methodology ties the conception of film geographies to appendices of film mechanics and here seems to reside one of the limitations of studies coming from the geographical field. An explanation of this limitation can be inferred from what Schlottmann and Miggelbrink consider the "geographical blind spot":

> Geography's visual approach to the world and its attempts to develop a clear picture of reality, seem rather to have inhibited epistemological reflection on visuality and visualization. Thus images and visuality could prove to be a geographical blind spot for the very reason that they play such a prominent role in geography.[27]

The same position is shared by Aitken and Zonn[28], who assert that geographic attention is often deficient on the critical analysis level, centring mostly on the geographic

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[24] Hopkins, Jeff. "Mapping of Cinematic Places: Icons, Ideology and the Power of (Mis)representation" in Aitken, Stuart C. and Leo E. Zonn, (eds). Place, power, situation, and spectacle: a geography of film. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1994, p. 47.

[25] Ibid, p.49.

[26] Ibid, p.50.

[27] Schlottmann, A. and J. Miggelbrink. "Visual geographies – an editorial", in *Social Geography*, 4, p. 1-11, 2009.

[28] Aitken, Stuart C and . Deborah P. Dixon. "Imagining Geographies of Film" in *Erdkunde,* vol. 60, issue 4, 2006, p. 326-336.

realism of films rather than how they create meaning. The fact that geographic studies on film rely almost entirely on references within their own sub-field narrows the point of view. As Hopkins, Aitken and Zonn develop an understanding of cinematic place that is based on landscape, they defend notion that landscape should be noticed as both product and agent of change, promoting the film location to the production of narratives, ideas and sentiments.

Landscape and other shot stories

Studies about place in film from outside the geographical field have also been predicated on a theory of landscape. Following various orientations, they focus predominantly on the relation between film and other arts, theories of the spectator and narrative film.[29]

Martin Lefebvre, one of the first writers to approach a theory of film landscape, links all of these approaches. More than investigating specific landscapes in the cinema or particular films where the concept is crucial, Lefebvre studies the notion and experience of landscape in narrative film, comparing it to the tradition of Western landscape painting. The author describes landscape in (narrative) film as a spatial notion distinct from setting or territory:

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[29] Some examples are: Maurizia, Natali. *L'image-paysage: Iconologie et cinema*. Saint-Denis : Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1995 ; Gustafsson, Henrik. *Out of Site: Landscape and Cultural Reflexivity in New Hollywood Cinema 1969, 1974*. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr Müller, 2008; Melbye, David. *Landscape Allegory* in Cinema: From Wilderness *to Wasteland.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; Lefebvre, Martin (ed) *Landscape and Film*. London: Routledge, 2006; Lefebvre, Martin. On landscape in Narrative Cinema in *Canadian Journal of Film Studies,* Vol. 20, No. 1, 2011. Ziegler , Damien. *La Représentation du paysage au cinema.* Paris: Bazaar and co, 2010. Mottet, Jean. *L'invention de la scène américaine: cinéma et paysage.* Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1998. Mottet, Jean (ed.) *Les paysages du cinema.* Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1999. Mottet, Jean (ed.) *L'arbre dans le paysage*. Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2002; Christie, Ian. "Landscape and 'Location': Reading Filmic Space Historically" in *Rethinking History*, volume 4, issue 2, 2000, p. 165-174.

All three terms are understood as different ways we have developed for representing space to ourselves: as the location for some unfolding action (setting); as a space of aesthetic contemplation and spectacle (landscape); and as a lived space that we possess – or would like to possess (territory).[30]

Drawing on the work of Tom Gunning and his investigation of Eisenstein's concept of "cinema of attractions" in early cinema , Lefebvre identifies a difference between "narrative" and "spectacular" modes of spectatorship, defending the position that film landscape communicates with the latter and belongs to a "historically constructed gaze"[31] shared by filmmakers and spectators that is traceable to the Renaissance. Therefore, the film landscape emerges in two different modes that are nonetheless intrinsic to the way spectators understand and experience the importance of landscape. The first of these, the "intentional landscape"[32], expresses a visual strategy usually associated with art house films that equates to the autonomous significance of traditional landscape art. This is a disposition that intentionally directs the spectator's attention to "the artist concept of the autonomous landscape"[33]. In the second mode (the "impure landscape"[34]), the spectator is not specifically driven by the author to offer any special meaning for the landscape, although he can still be involved.

In the introduction to the book *Landscape and Power*, W. J. T. Mitchell defends the notion that the way we see landscape should be changed from a noun to a verb. "It asks that we think of landscape, not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a

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[30] Lefebvre, Martin . "Introduction" in Lefebvre, Martin (ed). *Landscape and Film*. London: Routledge, 2006, p. xvii

[31] Ibid, p. xix

[32] Lefebvre, Martin. "Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema" in Lefebvre, Martin (ed). *Landscape and Film*. London: Routledge, 2006, p.30.

[33] Ibid, p.31.

[34] Ibid, p. 47.

process by which social and subjective identities are formed"[35]. He asserts the existence

of two predominant methods of studying landscape in the last century: one, associated

with modernism, "attempted to read the history of landscape primarily on the basis of a

history of landscape painting, and to narrativize that history as a progressive movement

toward purification of the visual field"; the other, associated with postmodernism,

"tended to decenter the role of painting and pure formal visuality in favor of a semiotic

and hermeneutic approach that treated landscape as an allegory of psychological or

ideological themes"[36]. The first of these, which he calls "contemplative", aims to

present an image intended for transcendental consciousness and is devoid of verbal,

narrative or historical elements. The second approach is "interpretative" and is

illustrated in how landscape is pre-decoded as a textual system, whether linking

characteristic structures and forms to generic and narrative typologies such as the

pastoral, the georgic, the exotic, the sublime, and the picturesque, or reading natural

features such as trees, stones, water, animals and dwelling as symbols in religious,

psychological, or political allegories.[37]

Not surprisingly, the latter approach has been studied in the context of narrative cinema,

as it is the case of Mottet's book which debates the emergence of American landscape

imaginary at the beginning of the 19th century via painting, photography and film[38],

Natali's iconological methodology defining the landscapes of some famous Hollywood

films as "archaeological hieroglyphs" embedded in a communal perception and

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[35] Mitchell, W.J.T "Introduction" in Mitchell, W. J. T (ed). *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2002, p.1.

[36] Ibid, p. 1.

[37] Ibid, p.1.

[38] Mottet, Jean. *L'invention de la scène américaine: cinéma et paysage*. Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1998.

intended to generate "rhetorical and ideological effects"[39] or Pallasmaa's allegorical study relating images of places - such as the image of the house in landscape, the mask-like appearance of the façade or the role of doors and windows as mediators between two worlds and as framing devices - with architectural metaphors that lead to the creation of "mind-spaces"[40].

As for the contemplative approach, the literature is based on avant-garde films[41], and the title of one of these books - *The Garden in the Machine* by Scott MacDonald[42] - illustrates the main characteristic of these films: the equation of film's mechanistic processes with the natural environment. *The Garden in the Machine* inverts the title of a literary essay published in 1964 - *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*[43] - which acknowledged a tendency in American literature to express the disruption of the pastoral ideal by technology due to the industrialization of America during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The revisionism of landscape suggested by Mitchell is based on the history of painting and instigates a rejection of landscape as a genre of art in favour of a representation mode existing in other media. Although he does not venture into the analysis of

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[39] Maurizia, Natali. *L'image-paysage: Iconologie et cinema.* Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1995, p.15.

[40] Pallasmaa, Juhani. *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema*. Helsinki: Rakennustieto Publishing, 2008.

[41] Sitney, P. Adams, "Landscape in the Cinema: the Rhythms of the World and The Camera" in Kemal, Salim and Ivan Gaskell (eds). *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.103-126; Turim, Maureen Cheryn. *Abstraction in Avant-Garde Films*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985; MacDonald, Scott. *The Garden in the Machine: a Field Guide to Independent Films About Place*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001; MacDonald, Scott. *A Critical Cinema 3: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998. MacDonald, Scott. *A Critical Cinema 4: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005.

[42] MacDonald, Scott. *The Garden in the Machine: a Field Guide to Independent Films about Place*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001.

[43] Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. Oxford: University Press, 1964.

landscape in film, it is not anachronistic to suggest that his distinction can encompass a significant number of film works dealing with landscape and place.

The "contemplative" mode, featuring, as noted above, the structural materialist films and theoretical work of filmmakers of the 1960's and 1970's such as Peter Gidal, Chris Welby, Malcom Le Grice and Michael Snow, is still present in the many reincarnations that proliferate at experimental film festivals, and appropriates the real as mouldable raw material in the service of technical semiotic dichotomist connections of nature and technology.

The interpretative mode is present, for instance, in the film psychogeographies of Patrick Keiller, particularly *London* (UK, 1994, 85m), *Robinson in Space* (UK, 1997, 82m) and *Robinson in Ruins* (UK, 2010, 101m), which use place as an illustrative background for a discourse about the politics of urban planning, architecture and the English economy and society. Although very different in its form, another example of the pre-decoded mode would be the sociological revalidations of the Lumière Brothers' films presented in two works by Sharon Lockhart – *Lunch Break* (US, 2008, 80m) and *Exit* (US, 2008, 40m). The former comprises a single slowed-down tracking shot through the central corridor of an iron factory in Maine during the workers' lunch, while the latter consists of four fixed shots showing the workers entering the same factory.

From fragment to space

In her analysis of cinematic empty spaces in British cinema, Charlotte Brunsdon claims that these vacant spaces can be "places of both narrative and analytic possibility, where the challenges of simultaneously thinking aesthetically, historically and geographically

about cinema can be articulated"[44]. Brunsdon considers two interpretations of place: one is based on the distinction made by Marc Augé between place and space, in the sense that place "can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity"[45], while space, by not having those characteristics, is a non-place that lacks identification and memory; the other conception of place that Brunsdon recognizes, refers to place "in the way Nowell- Smith does when talking about location shooting, and the way in which in some – just some films – location shooting does 'render up a sense of place' (…) a sense of a 'there-ness' which pre-existed the film, but which the film through its use of the photographic medium – however one theorizes this – makes present."[46].

However, Brunsdon's reflections are still applied to a fragmented territory of extracted film bits, a compilation of silent pauses that suspend the narrative flow, not a complete cinematic structure that concurrently comprehends the trace and the narration of place. Moreover, these spaces seem to contain the same pre-codification of the "interpreted" landscape as defined by Mitchell.

The relationship between film and spatiality is, I argue, a wide area of study, not only as Doreen Massey[47] points out, to extend the discussions of space, place and film over the recurrent geographies of the city, but also to include film space as a scheme to analyse the creation of film geographies and overtake the framing of landscape and place in the strict boundaries of a modernist focus on medium properties and a post-modernist inclination toward pre-iconographic reading.

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[44] Brunsdon, Charlotte. "Towards a History of Empty Spaces" in Koeck, Richard and Les Roberts, (eds) in *The city and the moving image: Urban Projections*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p. 91.

[45] Augé, Marc. *Non-places. Introduction to an anthropology of super modernity*. New York-London: Verso, 1995, p.77.

[46] Brunsdon, p. 95.

[47] Lury, Karen and Doreen Massey. "Space/Place, City and Film "in *Screen*, volume 40, issue 3, 1999, p.229-303.

One hypothesis capable of establishing a connection between the fragment and space may be the way Alain Bonfand's use of the concept of saturation in his book *Le cinema sature. Essai Sur les Relations de la Peinture et des Images en Movement*[48]. Here Bonfand recuperates the eternal debate between painting and cinema that has been an important field of film studies since the 1980s, with major interventions coming from Aumont, Bonitzer and Costa[49]. Bonfand, as a phenomenological researcher, brings the discussion to his own field of research. The two concepts outlined in his book come naturally from this intersection. The first of these is the refusal of any kind of literal quotation - the connection should be made always preserving the inherent phenomenological distinctiveness of both media. This position comprises the first part of the book, entitled 'The replacement of painting by cinema', and showing the association between painting and cinema as a revision of fundamental questions such as the pregnant instant and the crisis of the frame. In this section, Bonfand outlines reverberations between the filmmaker and the painter in five case studies: Albert Lewin and De Chirico; Alfred Hitchcock and Edward Hopper; Yasujiro Ozu and Piet Mondrian; John Ford and Clifford Still; Akira Kurosawa and Vincent van Gogh. In the second concept, he proposes that the cross-contamination of the two different media originates the condition of a saturated image, and it is this "new" image that renews aesthetic considerations about the frame. This concept of "saturation" is borrowed from

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[48] Bonfand. Alain. *Le cinéma saturé. Essai sur les relations de la peinture et des images en mouvement.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007.

[49] Aumont Jacques. *L'oeil interminable. Cinéma et peinture*, Paris: Editions Séguier, 1989; Bellour, Raymond. *Cinéma et peinture*, Paris: PUF, 1990; Bellour, Raymond. *L'entre-images. Photo, cinéma, vidéo.*Paris: La Différence, 1990 ; Bonitzer, Pascal. *Peinture et cinéma. Décadrages.* Paris: Cahiers du cinéma/Ed de l'Etoile, 1985; Dalle Vache, Angela. *Cinema and painting: how art is used in film?* Austin: University Of Texas Press, 1996. Costa, Antonio. *Cinema e pittura*. Turin: Loescher, 1993; Thivat, Patricia-Laure (ed). *Peinture et cinéma : picturalité de l'image filmée de la toile à l'écran,* Ligeia, 2007; Vancheri, Luc. *Cinéma et peinture : passages, partages, présences*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2007.

the philosopher Jean-Luc Marion[50], who asserts that a saturated phenomenon speaks of utmost phenomena confronting the perception and the state of phenomenality to its limits. For Bonfand, the saturated phenomenon is translated as something which is impossible to film, something surpassing the border of its representation within the medium. This impossibility is approached in his analysis on the void and the sublime in Antonioni's cinema, only to retreat in the last chapters of the book to argue that it is at its limit that film re-experiences the essence of painting in the acheiropoietos images of Godard's work and in the construction of the shot as icon in Tarkovsky's *Stalker.*

The challenge representing the saturated phenomenon is first approached by reading John Ford's film *The Searchers* (US, 1956, 119m) and Clyfford Still's abstract paintings through the representation of immensity. For Bonfand, Ford (Fig. 21) achieves this concept by double framing the shot (the landscape filmed from inside), allowing the off-screen space to be part of the cinematic frame, while Still (Fig. 22) magnifies the frame, pushing to a limit where the expansion breaks the borders and reveals plain colours from the discarded parts. This is one of the expressions of the saturated image: to unveil something off-frame that cannot be entirely covered in the frame.

Furthermore, according to Bonfand, the concept of saturation has the characteristics of the Hegelian idea of "sublation", which has a double meaning: to keep and to cancel. For this reason, the saturated image can also represent a sparse phenomenon. We see this, for instance, in the work of Antonioni, where Bonfand states that void is an independent and pervasive force which disintegrates the structure of representation in his films, thus establishing a saturated phenomenon. The process is obtained by filming conventional objects which evacuate the significance of the image due to its everyday

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[50] Marion, Jean-Luc. "Le phénomène saturé" in Courtine J.-F. (ed.), *Phénoménologie et théologie*, Paris: Critérion, 1992, p.79-128.

triviality. Bonfand explains the final scene of *L'Eclisse* (Italy, 1962, 126m) as an example of this perception, magnified in the final shot of a street lamp emitting an excess of light into the film frame and consequently emptying the image. Other motifs of saturation include, for instance, the sky, an explosion or an image of a sun that blinds. The disintegration process works in the order of the visible for what is immobile or collapsed. "It seems for Antonioni what it is visible gains its maximum relief when it is broken, melted, dispossessed of its common sense, its use value."[51]

Bonfand's reflections about the relationship of painting and cinema can be in some cases arbitrarily addressed, and unlike him I do not discard thematic correspondences and formal alignments between the two fields that are not dependent of any phenomenological singularities in the two media. This tendency would bring us back to the reductionism of Greenberg based conceptions of art validity, which in film were reinterpreted in the context of the Avant-garde and structuralist methodologies of film mechanics. Nevertheless, his studies of Still and Ford, one of book's "tours de force", and the phenomenality of emptiness in Antonioni together form the basis for his theory of saturation, and provide complex examples to explore. In this regard, I add that it is precisely the complex centripetal/centrifugal flux that occurs from off-screen space into the frame and its subsequent process of reduction and expansion of how film space radiates and introduces the notion of film geography. The "radiation" of space emerges from the connection between the pro-filmic and the cinematic frame and catalyses place as a plastic, material and philosophical unit capable of being reimagined. However this film space does not revert to the automatic rendering of an inherent quality of the medium; it is an artistic process that is dependent on personal selection and arrangement, what could be approximated in by the term "découpage".

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[51] Bonfand, p.193, my translation.

In his work about space in film, André Gardies[52] reflects on the eternal dialectics of place and space, arguing that place is to space as words are to language – "parole de l'espace"[53]. Gardies' semiologic approach tends toward excessive cataloguing, but the consideration of film space as a plastic and physical dimension of the intertwining between abstraction and reality and the assumption of place as an arrangement of potential meaning brings into focus the authorship of the filmmaker as the ultimate organizer.

(Im)possible worlds

This process of organization and recreation is inscribed in another example of "sublation": the work of Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin. During the last decade of the Soviet Union, with Mikhail Gorbachev's programs of perestroika (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) in play, a group of Soviet artists – Michael Belov, Mikhail Filippov, Nadia Bronzova, Yuri Avvakumov, Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin, collectively known as the "Paper Architects"[54] - projected the city as a dreamy landscape, merging recollections of the past with hallucinatory visions for the future (Fig. 23). Brodsky and Utkin, who became well-known representatives of this group, portrayed imaginary and bizarre structures and cityscapes based on proto-industrial assemblies, Egyptian catacombs and distorted idealistic city plans reminiscent of Ledoux or Le Corbusier. Their impossible designs simulated the impenetrable engraving style of prints from the 18th and 19th centuries, representing with an absurd,

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[52] Gardies, André. *L'Espace au cinema*. Paris: Meridiens Klincksieck, 1993.

[53] Ibid, p. 86.

[54] For a contextualization of the group see: Crysler C. Greig, Stephen Cairns and Hilde Heynen (eds). *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2012, p. 115-120; Klotz, Heinrich. *Paper Architecture. New Projects from the Soviet Union*. New York: Rizzolli, 1990.

obsessively detailed, visual ingenuity the estranging involvement of totalitarian

societies and their brutalizing architecture. Influenced by an eclectic assortment of

classical mythology and science fiction sources, these sinister urban landscapes were

first and foremost an architecture of resistance (Fig. 24), "visionary schemes in response

to a bleak professional scene in which only artless and ill-conceived buildings, diluted

through numerous bureaucratic strata and constructed out of poor materials by unskilled

laborers, were being erected - if anything."[55] The destruction of Moscow's historical

architectural heritage by communist ideology was particularly addressed, for instance,

in two projects that combined the 18th century etchings of imaginary prisons by

Giovanni Battista Piranesi with the short story *The Library of Babel,* by Jorge Luis

Borges, an impossible library of all possible 410-page books.

Columbarium Habitabile (1989/90) (Fig. 25) planned a colossal structure in the middle

of a city where buildings scheduled for destruction could be preserved on a shelf, on the

condition that their inhabitants continued living there, while *Columbarium*

Architecturae (Museum of Disappearing Buildings) (1984/90) (Fig. 26) was filled with

miniatures of demolished historic architecture. For David Crowley, "the grid-like

concrete structure of Brodsky and Utkin two Columbaria invokes the high-rise blocks of

the 1960s and 1970s known as "novostroiki". Prefabricated panel construction and

standard parts turned architectural construction into an exercise in slotting square boxes

into square holes."[56] Brodsky and Utkin's architectural fantasies, while reflecting on the

failure of socialism, created a new reality, a porous reunion of past, present, philosophy

and thought. Lois Nesbitt underlines that their "etchings present whole worlds or

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[55] Nesbit, Lois Ellen. "Man in the Metropolis: The Graphic Projections of Brodsky and Utkin in Nesbitt, Lois Ellen. *Brodsky & Utkin*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991.

[56] Crowley, David. "Paper Architecture: The Columbaria of Brodsky and Utkin" in Adamson, Glenn and Jane Pavitt,. *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970-1990*. Victoria & Albert Museum, 2011.

environments and not just individual buildings. As such they fall into the tradition of visionary schemes for cities and societies, from Ebenezer Howard's *Garden cities of tomorrow* (1898) to Antonio Sant'Elia's *La citta Nuova* (1914) to Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse* (1930). However, these earlier schemes often included implicit or explicit social agendas aimed at broad transformations of society and were often accompanied by manifestos. Brodsky and Utkin's work, on the other hand, provides no specific social program: narrative and symbol replace manifesto and icon."[57]

What these etchings also imply, and not because of their connotation with the original scrolls, is the notion of the palimpsest, in the form of a place-text that is being reworked while earlier forms are indicated or reinvented and erasures are alluded to, generating an intricate layering of historical and present signs, real or imagined. Brodsky and Utkin match the utilitarian and claustrophobic dystopian space of Soviet communist architecture and urban planning with a dystopian place of eccentric imagination, more allegorical because they cannot be materialized in the present world, of the material and the political. They use place as an artistic verb instead of a noun by exemplifying the possible inscription of new symbolic geographies in the new architecture of the old palimpsest manuscript.

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[57] Nesbitt.

Illustrations - Chapter 1

Fig. 21 John Ford, *The Searchers* (1956)

Fig. 22 Clifford Still, *1962-d* (1962)
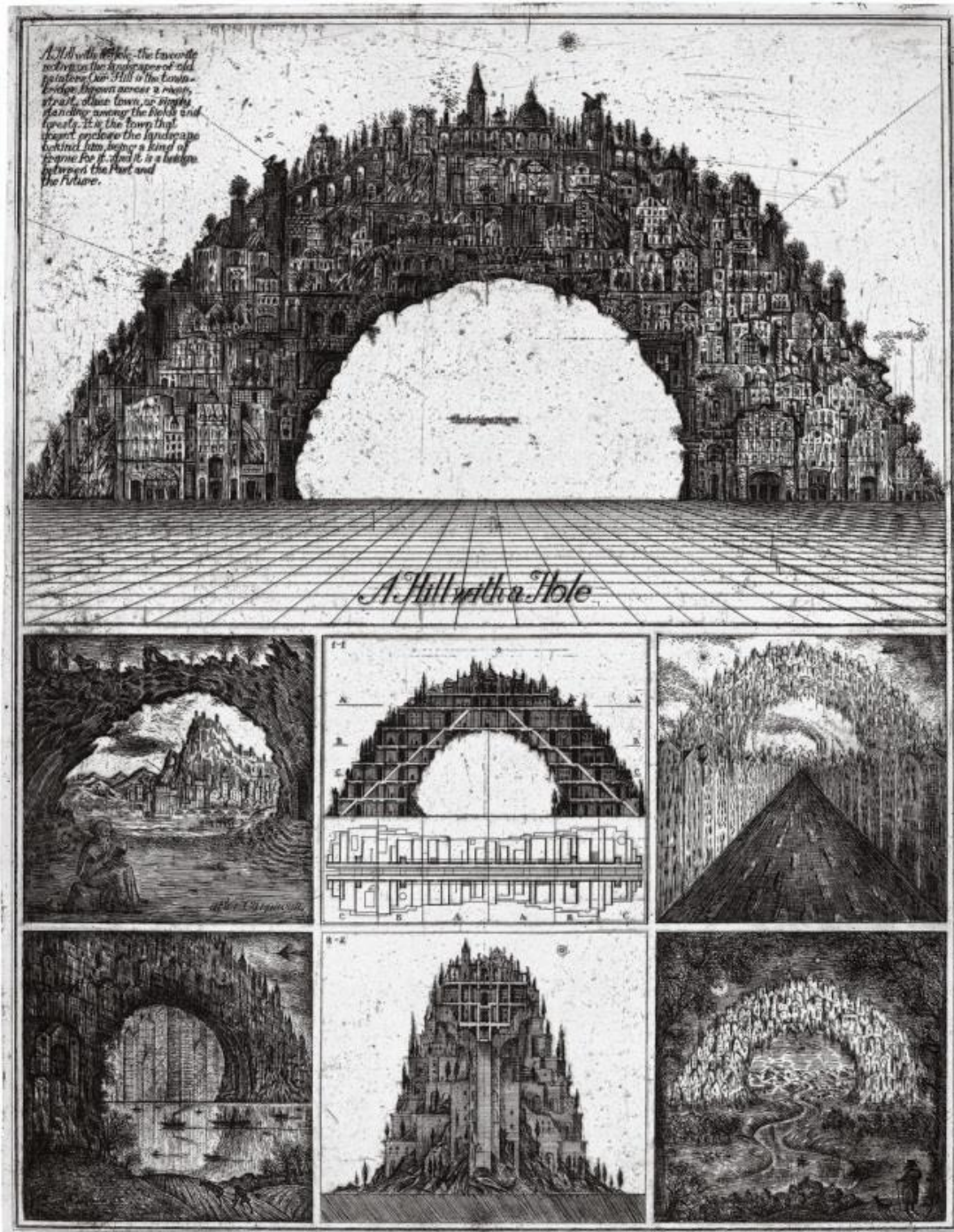
Fig. 23 Brodsky & Utkin, *Hill with a Hole* (1987/90)
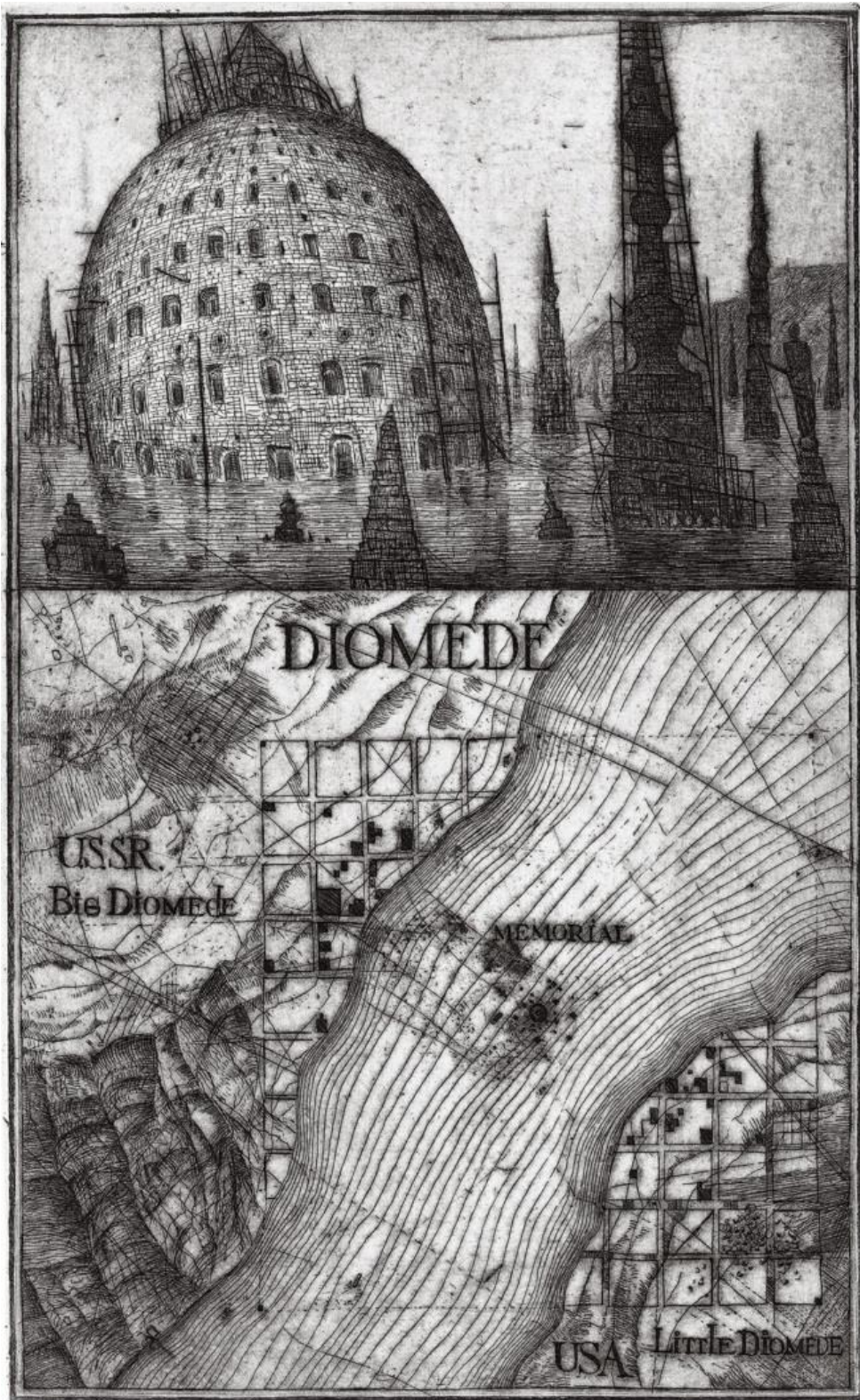
Fig. 24 Brodsky & Utkin, *Diomede* (1989/90)
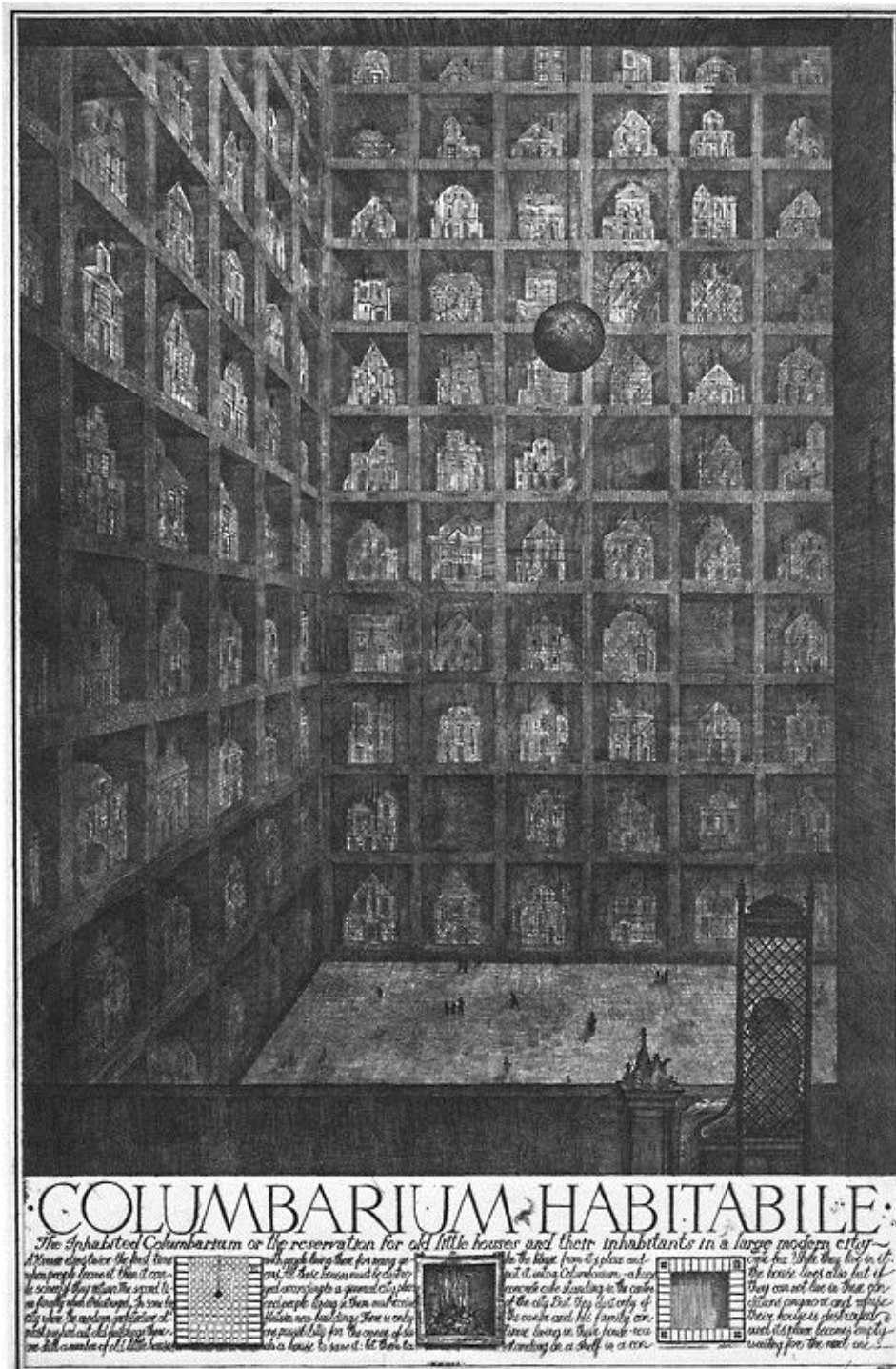
Fig. 25 Brodsky & Utkin *Columbarium Habitabile* (1989/90)
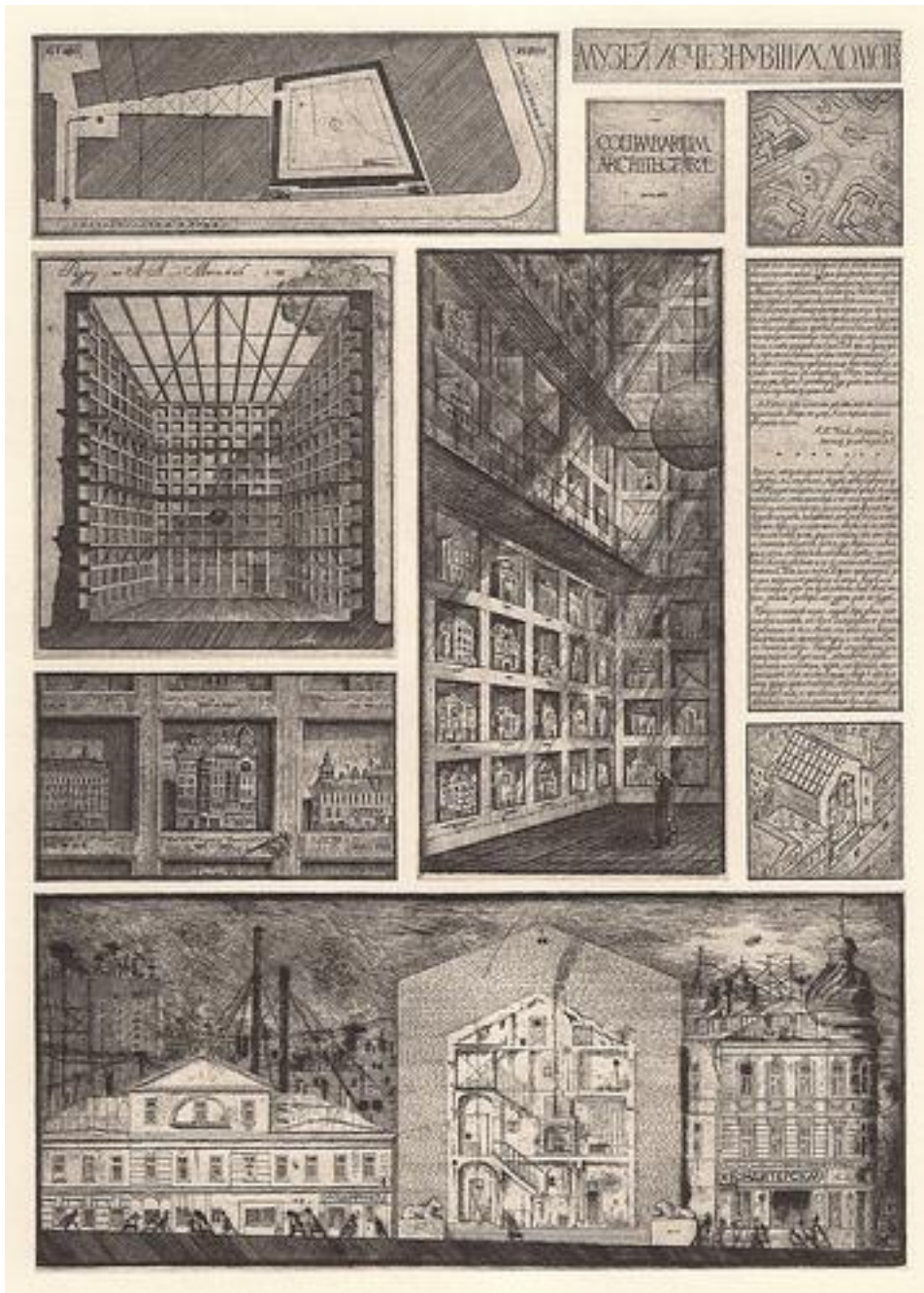
Fig. 26 Brodsky & Utkin *Columbarium Architecturae* (1984/90)

2. Finding place

Reperages-stylo and the agreement of emptiness

In 1974, Alain Resnais published a book of photographs[58], taken between 1948 and
1971, of locations in France, England, Japan, Scotland and the United States. Entitled
Repérages, the French word for location scouting, these images were place studies of
films that Resnais wanted to make, particularly one, based in London, pursued over
seven years and abandoned in 1974 (*Les Aventures de Harry Dickson*). The book is co-
signed and organized by Jorge Semprún, Resnais's writer in *La guerre est Finie*
(France, 1966) and *Stavisky* (France, 1974), in a mysterious itinerary of space and
memory. In the introduction Semprún wrote that, instead arranging the photos
chronologically or by geographic origin, he chose to edit them in "a dramatic sequence
capable of underline the internal coherence of Resnais's photographic work"[59]. The
result is a world of gloomy façades, alleyways, tunnels and industrial landscapes, a
material phantasmagoria linking all the different images and supporting what Semprún
calls "the visible avatars of the same dreamt city"[60]. From the first image (Fig. 27), a
quasi-abstract ramshackle façade covered with vegetation, followed by a photograph of
the front door of a cemetery framed, again, with thick vegetation (Fig. 28), to the last
sequence of the book[61], the general idea is one of dissolution, disappearance and

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[58] Resnais, Alain and Jorge Semprún. *Repérages*. Paris: Éditions du Chêne, 1974.

[59] Ibid. p.2.

[60] Ibid. p.3.

[61] For a more detailed analysis see in the online Bibliothèque du film of the Cinémathèque Française an
article by Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues and Jean-Louis Leutrat. http://www.cinematheque.fr/uk/museum-
and-collections/actualite-collections/actualite-patrimoniale/reperages-photographies-resnais.html. Date of
access: 04-10-2013

abandonment, something that, as Emma Wilson outlines, is generally present in the films of Alain Resnais: "the material world is for Resnais one of mourning and petrification, cross-cut with aesthetic beauty"[62].

Nevertheless, for all the emphasis Resnais places on the search for places which could indicate a potential aesthetic and cultural impact, for all dramatic successions and rhymes Semprún draws in the editing, *Reperages* is mainly, for the authors, a setting, a place void of action, and because of that, a place where only characters could, eventually, fulfil the concept of the film work: "these are photographs of places – of settings – where Resnais would like to see an action (…) empty places before or after the action, where there is, furtively, the inscription of some character"[63]. There is evidence of this idea when two photos (Fig. 29) of the same street are paired, the second one with a character walking, and the description underlines that fact: "Rue Nevers. Arrival of the characters at the empty decors of dramatic space." After all, *Reperages* may be understood as a photographic simulacrum of hypothetical parts of films never made.

The reading of visualizations of empty streets, buildings or other types of townscapes is commonly associated with concepts of incompleteness and omission. Although displayed in a different format, it is the usual trope of place as unfinished stage, as featured in David Campany's review of the ensemble of Resnais's London photographs included in the exhibition *Another London* at Tate Modern in 2012: "These are photorealist backdrops awaiting the daily drama"[64]. If not conceptually charged

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[62] Wilson, Emma. *Alain Resnais*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006, p.141.

[63] Resnais, p. 4.

[64] Campany, David. "On the hoof and shooting from the hip – Another London" in *Tate Etc*. 25, 2012. http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/on-hoof-and-shooting-hip. Date of access: 12-10-2013.

backgrounds for latent dramas, empty places in film seem recurrently to do nothing more than representing establishing shots or punctuation rhythms.

When Charlotte Brunsdon poses the question of: "what these spaces are empty of?", the first answer is not different. "They are empty of narrative. They are immanent: spaces in which something might happen. Something might be found, someone might hide."[65] But these places that Brunsdon is talking about are already meaningful spaces, "the most obvious empty spaces of post-Second World War British cinema", bombsites. Accordingly, ruins and vacant ground relate to something that existed before, but they are now "empty of the characteristics of the social: order, government, control". No longer places, these emptied spaces can only be "place-like" when rendered by the film story. For Brunsdon, these spaces exist in a filmic limbo, "symbolic possibilities"[66] to be organized in the context of a story. Just like the places of Resnais and Semprun's book, they represent an opportunity for a fiction, but they do not activate the process of fiction itself.

As Brunsdon notes, and *Repérages* outlines, empty spaces are frequently concomitant with ruins or abandoned sites. In the history of film, there is no shortage of interest in the subject, from Roberto Rossellini ' s neo-realist post-war *Viaggio in Italia* (Italy, 1953), to classic art house films like Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (Soviet Union,1979) or more recent festival-circuit releases such as Wang Bing's *Tiexi qu* (China, The Netherlands, 2003) and Jia Zhang-Ke's *Still Life* (China, 2006).

The exploration of ruins, however, reached its peak in the art world, namely the multiple photography-based projects approaching the matter. Abandoned hospitals,

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[65] Brunsdon, Charlotte. Towards a History of Empty Spaces in Koeck, Richard and Les Roberts, (eds). *The city and the moving image: Urban Projections*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p.99.

[66] Ibid, p. 96.

factories, warehouses, towns, resorts, hotels: everything was material for another study. A term was coined for this sub-genre: ruin photography. And its wonderland was found in the city of Detroit. The excess led to depreciating counter-terms such as detroitism or ruin-porn, rejecting the fascination with a dystopian vision of surfaces. The critics of detroitism/ruin-porn accused the image-makers of a historical failing by promoting an aesthetic of miserabilism - a postmodern show of decay without historical pathos. "As a purely aesthetic object, even with the best intentions, ruin photography cannot help but exploit a city's misery; but as political documents on their own, they have little new to tell us."[67]

In applying an academic abhorrence to other parts of Detroit and to the people that actually live there, the ruin photographers recalled touristic voyeurism – the city is nothing less than a depressed postcard "prêt-à-porter". In the post-modern world where the old is continuously new, the derelict down-town of Detroit is the new Rome. And just like the Hollywood productions filmed in Rome, the city is a collection of landmarks to be quickly consumed.

However, one thing critics fail is to assume the aesthetics of ruin have to describe some place in particular: "The decontextualized aesthetics of ruin make them pictures of nothing and no place in particular"[68]. Detroitism's vision of ruins can be seen as an extreme and shallow post-modernist variation of Robert Smithson's re-interpretation of the idea of the sublime, as he related with urban emptiness and industrial landscapes as examples of sites where decay results from a blend of natural forces and human actions.

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[67] Leary, John Patrick. "Detroitism" in Guernica Magazine, 2011. https://www.guernicamag.com/leary_1_15_11/. Date of access: 09-11-2013.

[68] Ibid.

The relation between emptiness and representation is, ultimately, a mediation of three approaches to place: creation, illustration, and observation.

In his book *Vers une Esthétique du Vide au Cinema*, Jose Moure develops a definition of emptiness in film and evaluates how different filmmakers such as Rossellini, Bresson, Ozu and Wenders use the concept to reflect on themes such as resistance, transcendence or drift:

> Far from being reducible to a theme (the theme of absence ...), a figure (the figure of the off-screen, the empty shot...), a process (the decadrages[69] ...), an isolated and identifiable form in the image or in the film, emptiness, as considered in its dual representative and productive value, operates more as a mode of representation, as an "exhibitor" that "affects" the image or the entire film without being decomposable. It is defined as a limit-concept that challenges film in its relation to the world, the real, the senses and the proper cinematic language.[70]

By considering the different dimensions of emptiness as elements contributing to new modes of apprehension and re-establishment of the world, and eventually promoting them to establish new modalities of representation, Moure questions the idea of emptiness in film in its diachronic history of repression, temptation and fascination modes.

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[69] The concept of "décadrages" (deframing) was theorized by Pascal Bonitzer in his book *Decadrages* (1985), and refers to disjointed, fragmented planes placed in the borders of the frame that mix off-screen space with point of view. Filmmakers such as Straub-Huillet, Duras and Antonioni used these "unusual and unfulfilled framings" as a way to instigate a non-narrative film suspense.

[70] Moure, Jose. *Vers une esthétique du vide au cinéma*. Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1997, p. 8-9, my translation.

The (un)making of place plays itself

One of the recurrent ways of dealing with emptiness, identity, memory and preservation in film works about place has been the serialist approach influenced by structuralism. For the purposes of this study, I select the work of Thom Anderson and James Benning, particularly two films - *Los* (USA, 2001, 90m) and *Get Out of the Car* (USA, 2010, 30m) - that make the city of Los Angeles their protagonist and elaborate a personal rumination about urban space through a topographical framework

Los is part of the so called "California Trilogy"[71] and is based on arithmetical procedures found in structuralist film: in this case, a grid structure of 35 two-and-a-half-minutes shots covering vistas of Greater Los Angeles. There is a touch of the Lumières' methodology in these distant and relatively unremarkable shots (Fig. 30), less in the latent enchantment with the representation of movement than a neutral presentation of moments and spaces of daily life that somehow transpose a personal aversion from Benning to the place.[72]

Los shares with other works in the filmmaker's oeuvre the purpose of drawing extended cartographic cinematic studies able to integrate a discourse with social, cultural, political and economic connotations. In this sense, although not so evidently as in previous films, he comes close to the ideology of the New Topographics in the reconceptualization of the American territory by means of strict formal aesthetic

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[71] The other ones are *El Valley Centro* (2000) and *Sogobi* (2002).

[72] Benning notes the early cinema influence during an interview around the presentation of the trilogy in the Berlinale 2002: "The idea was to go back to the beginning of cinema, to use full camera load to get at something, kind of like the early films recording a train coming into the station or two people kissing. A 16mm camera load is 100 feet, that's 2 minutes and 47 seconds. I thought I'll use 2 and a half minutes of that so I can slide the shots, cut off some at the tail or head, to adjust the timing of the shots. I was interested in recording things over a 2 and a half minute period, seeing what activities happen in that period of time."

configurations, acknowledging a special focus on urban design, industrial sites on the periphery and the relations between man and the natural environment.

Los is a compact mirror of the various dimensions of Benning's work: a distant urban symphony of unglamorous public spaces, industrial machinations and picturesque landscapes, punctuated by discreet observations of the city's anonymous residents and covered by a recurrent theme, which in this film (and trilogy), involves different bodies of water. The ensemble is united by a long take strategy that invites the viewer into an immersion both in the aesthetics of the frame and the geo-political and social implications of these micro-representations of reality.

In *Get Out of the Car* the theme of preservation and memory relates serialist cataloguing with personal "flânerie" over a 30-minute symphony dedicated to the fragments of a forgotten and abandoned city scape, far from the canonical images associated with Los Angeles. Murals, façades, advertising signs and billboards, statically framed and viewed by the sidewalk, organize an alternative walking guide through marginal neighbourhoods - an homage to a hidden city, neither visible from the ubiquitous car-driven society nor the glamorous and standard Hollywood perspective. The film is, in this sense, a manifesto and Andersen illustrates this with an inscription at the beginning of the film that precedes the many others found in the signs and buildings portrayed:

> A city symphony in 16mm composed from advertising signs, building façades, fragments of music and conversation, and unmarked sites of vanished cultural landmarks.

Furthermore, the successive commentaries and short interactions with residents and passers-by definitely place the film in self-referentiality territory ("A movie about absence"; "Maybe this is just a movie about getting lost"; "What are you doing? Taking

pictures? We're just trying to document what's left"), as Andersen was not entirely

secure in the collage of ambient sounds and local music with the slideshow-style images

to convey his idea. If *Get Out of the Car* documents its only process of documenting, it

is also a reverberating complement of *Place Plays Itself* (US, 2003) - his previous essay

film that extensively studies the locations of Hollywood movies based in Los Angeles -

in a way that reinforces the filmmaker's mission of claiming a realistic film portrait of

the city, so many times abused and distorted. Purposefully, the film mise-en-scène

resides in the accumulation of places and images of places, relating a movement that

replicates the resonances between reality and fiction. The structure regards a rhythmic

pulsation, the metronomic pace of an engaged "flaneur", occasionally broken in detailed

crops of the same motif and, in the process, forcing an abstraction. (Fig. 31)

There is a double-take on the presentation of the decay, one that mourns for the

transformations in the environment, caused either by natural forces or administrative

processes, and another one that aesthetically flirts with ruins. In his own text

commentary about the film, Andersen states that "the interest in decayed signs had

become a commonplace in contemporary art"[73] and for that reason he hesitated over the

years to fulfil his desire to make a documentary. Originally thought of as "simply a

study of weather-worn billboards around Los Angeles" with the title "Outdoor

Advertising", the film was the artist's response to the fascination with "billboards

abstract and semi-abstract patterns".[74] (Fig. 32)

Andersen recovers the proto-abstract topographies of Atget by intertwining a rigorous

and obsessive documentation of place with the creation of an atmosphere that

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[73] Andersen, Thom. "Get out of the car: A commentary" in Andong, Lu and François Penz. *Urban Cinematics. Understanding Urban Phenomena through the Moving Image.* London: Intellect, 2011, p.55.

[74] Ibid. p.55.

encompasses melancholic disappearance and lyrical evocation. There are also echoes of one of Benning's early films, *One Way Boogie Woogie* (USA, 1977, 60m) - vernacular music over chimneys and buildings, the same fondness for found abstractions and peripheral sites, the same militant elegy for a place that both call home. In *Get Out of the Car*, the close-ups, the fragmentation, the commentaries and the dialogue with the transients assume an epidermal relationship with the hometown, and even if the route goes through unknown parts of the city there is always a neighbourhood "flaneur" feel. In contrast, *Los* shows a distant perspective, the clinical and impersonal point of view that could be taken by a security camera. If Benning keeps place under surveillance and reorders a map through reference points spread across the city, Andersen materializes the cinematic travelling through the scale of the body itself, adding a haptic dimension to the urban depiction.

Both films may be seen as representatives of the city symphony tradition, one laudatory and celebrating the local culture, architecture and urban design, the other a contemplative study of the different dimensions of a place. Additionally, they share the same scheme of static shots, although Andersen surpasses 200 shots in 30 minutes, while *Los* renders one hour in 35 long shots. There is almost no movement in *Get Out of the Car,* with the exception of few shots with slight breezes on leaves and some occasional birds flying. *Los*, by contrast, shows a significant amount of movement, inscribing the perception of time as one of its fundamental aspects, frequently assembling accidental choreographies.

The in-betweenness

Get Out of the Car can also be seen as an exercise in nostalgia, a characteristic that

regularly comes attached to projects that attempt to find a common identity linked to a

place. In the case of the countries once designated as the Eastern Bloc, the focus has

mainly been on architecture studies, either through an overwhelming contemplation of

exotic constructions or by outlining uninterestingly repetitive townscapes. Both

viewpoints confine these socialist material organizations of place as dystopian

environments, peculiarly prone to delirious space-age cogitations and totalitarian

oppression.[75]

In *Spomenik*,[76] for instance, the Belgian photographer Jan Kempenaers presents a series

of photographs of Second World War memorials built in the former Yugoslavia (Fig.

33). If Kempenaers continues with the unchanged typology structure itemized in the

work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, he also renews the initial purpose of these monuments

as sites of memory. A consciousness of overlapping identity is redirected from different

periods of the history of the Balkans and the numerous beliefs accompanying them.

Solemn celebrations of battles for freedom, suggestions of the supremacy of the

socialist republic and avatars of the union of all Yugoslavs, these futuristic structures no

longer epitomize the nation, and instead circumscribe loss and abandonment. They are,

like the country they once represented, in-between, in the process of becoming.

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[75] The last years have seen the publication of significative amount of photographic books on this trend: Bezjak, Roman. *Socialist Modernism*. Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2011; Chaubin, Frédéric. *Cosmic Communist Constructions Photographed.* Köln : Taschen, 2011; Kempenaers, Jan. *Spomenik*. Amsterdam: Roma publications, 2010; Linke, Armin and Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss. *Socialist Architecture: The Vanishing Act*. Zürich: JRP|Ringier, 2012. Pare, Richard. *Lost Vanguard: Russian Modernist Architecture 1922-1932*. New York: The Monacelli Press, 2007. Vienna Centre of Architecture. *Soviet Modernism 1955-1991: Unknown History*. Zürich: Park Books, 2013.

[76] Kempenaers, Jan. *Spomenik*. Amsterdam: Roma publications, 2010.

The in-between condition of the former Yugoslavia is addressed in another book[77] devoted to modernist architecture, where the authors, indeed begin reacting to the standardization of judging Eastern European architecture as uniform and monumental.

> A recent wave of photographic monographs presents the buildings of the socialist East as if they were relics of some long-lost civilization: sad, dilapidated concrete mastodons, anonymous in their spectacular oddity, defying interpretation and lacking any meaning relevant for the present moment. (…) The socialist world and its concomitant architectural phenomena were in no way monolithic, either transnationally or within individual countries, not even within the same genre of architecture. Not all buildings from the socialist period are dilapidated; not all of them are enormous brutalist structures; and most are surely not stripped of meaning.[78]

Although centred on architectural analysis, the book provides a diversified framing in the consideration of certain aspects of in-betweenness, which counterbalance the wide use of the concept. As the authors note, the word has been applied too often, and to multiple regions, to the point that has become a meaningless formula of describing generalities. But "the in-betweenness of socialist Yugoslavia was exceptional: the country condensed so many overlapping geopolitical and cultural in-between conditions that they became one of its defining features."[79]

To wit, let us begin with the geographical location: a region intersecting West and East, fabricated in the realm of two former empires, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman, and influenced by Mediterranean culture on the coast - "a collection of frontier zones, setting up segments of native populations as "buffers" against the neighboring rival

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[77] Kulic, Vladimir, Maroje Mrduljas and Wolfgang Thaler (eds). *Modernism In-Between: The Mediatory Architectures of Socialist Yugoslavia*. Berlin: Jovis, 2012.

[78] Ibid. p. 2.

[79] Ibid, p.16.

empires".[80] Then, another buffer zone: the challenging Cold War equilibrium between Soviet influence and the Western world. Inevitably, resulting from the intricate history of the region[81], identity is constituted by multiple fragments that intertwine. A popular saying from the time describes the puzzle: one country with two alphabets, three languages, four religions, five nationalities, six constituent republics, and seven neighbours. All of this reflected the way in which cities and places were organized. For instance: the eruption of large new parts of the cities as Novi Zagreb or Novi Beograd, following the increase of population coming to work in the metropolis, or the entire new city built in Skopje after the earthquake of 1963, were manifestations of a desire to create new paradigms that at the same time concurred with the accumulation of previous structures and symbols.

It was in the early sixties too that Orson Welles made the film *The Trial* (1962, France, Italy, Germany, 118m) in Tito's Yugoslavia - the adaptation of Kafka's novel was largely shot in and around Zagreb (with other settings in Italy and Paris, in the abandoned Gare D'Orsay train station). Welles was not permitted to film in Prague, the location of the book, due to political restrictions set by the communist government of Czechoslovakia and searching for a city which could replicate the Mitteleuropa Austro-Hungarian atmosphere, he found in Zagreb's architecture and Tito's openness the perfect match. To create Josef K.'s workplace, with 850 office desks, a set was constructed in an exposition hall in the outskirts of Zagreb. There, he also found a different environment: "(…) The concrete and steel architecture erected around the outskirts of Zagreb, particularly along the frequently renamed postwar boulevard now

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[80] Ibid, p.24.

[81] The Great Schism of 1054 between the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church and the later Islamization of some parts of the Slavic population during Ottoman rule contributed to the existence of three different religions.

named after the town of Vukovar , provided Welles with an alienating new landscape to play with, a particularly thorough and unadulterated essay in Corbusian planning, the equal of anything else in Europe, providing a mute, threatening backdrop to Perkins' plaints and panics." [82]

One of these locations was the set for a sequence-shot of three and a half minutes in which Anthony Perkins' character offers to help a woman to carry a large suitcase, only to face an angry refusal (Fig. 34). They are surrounded by a vast space punctuated by Croatian versions of Le Corbusier's Unites d'Habitation, an oppressive scenery of socialist grand-scale urbanism with sinister buildings and indeterminate spaces between them. Later, in the last part of the film, a noir sequence of persecutions and gangsters is portrayed in dark baroque streets, the originally desired setting represented by the Upper Town of Zagreb (Fig. 35). With its rendering of "found places" in order to match the literary city of the existentialist novel, the expressionist ennui of film-noir and the idiosyncrasies of Welles, *The Trial* alludes to the co-existence within an "impossible space" of many fragmentary possible worlds and to the expanded geography of a cinematic place.

All the borders

One of the films made after the fall of Yugoslavia that exemplifies a wider study of the complex question of the border is *Ulysses' Gaze* (Greece, 1995, 176m), a film made by Theo Angelopoulos. It continues the theme of *The Suspended Step of the Stork* (Greece,

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[82] Hatherley, Owen. "Marxism and Mud – Landscape, Urbanism and Socialist Space in the Black Wave". in Kirn, Gal, Dubravka Sekulic and Žiga Testen (eds). *Surfing the Black Yugoslav Black Wave Cinema and Its Transgressive Moments*. Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academie, 2012, p. 201.

1991, 143m)[83] in the way representations of suspension, division and drifting are incorporated in a broad reflection about identity and memory. *Ulysses' Gaze* describes the return of a Greek-American filmmaker to the Balkans, travelling successively from Greece to Albania, Macedonia[84], Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and finally Sarajevo, Bosnia, in search of a film reel made by the first filmmakers that documented the region: the Manaki Brothers. The journey as an Odyssey is recurrent in the films of Angelopoulos and here, as noted by Andrew Horton, this adopts a triple role. "On one level it is a search for the roots of the cinema of the Balkans and, really, of cinema itself: its power, potential and history. Second, it is also a voyage through the history of the Balkans leading up to and including the ongoing tragedy of Bosnia. Finally, it is an individual journey for a man through his life, his loves, his losses".[85]

Angelopoulos' approach is based on majestic and distant long-take shots drawing complex staging choreographies, often developing vague time arrangements, as in the sequence when A. returns to Constanta, a port town in Romania, both an observer and a participant in several situations in the life of his family. David Bordwell notes that this method "drains away narrative denotation to a considerable degree, pushing instead toward a muted expressivity and monumental, near-abstract pictorial design." [86]The subdued tone is supported by the decision to film only in winter weather, to discard the clichés connected with sunny Greece. Thus, mist is ubiquitous in the films of Angelopoulos, equally as stylistic device and thematic statement. Les Roberts defines it a non-place in the mist:

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[83] With *Eternity and a Day* (1998), these three films are generally considered a trilogy of the borders, roughly resonating the alterations of the Balkan region.

[84] Called Republic of Skopje in the film.

[85] Horton, Andrew. *The films of Theo Angelopoulos: a cinema of contemplation.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999, p.197.

[86] Bordwell, David. *Figures traced in light: On Cinematic Staging.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, p.146.

> For this dialectical refugee, the clamor of history has given way to the inertia of silence. Banished to the margins, to the interstices of identity and community, his is a vision of trail and precarious isolation. Home, for this latter-day Ulysses, has now become a non-place in the mist: Ithaca, a displaced and internalized landscape prompting existential journeys of the individual. [87]

While the mist in *Ulysses' Gaze* can be seen as a symbol of the dilution of borders, or even a suspended moment in time and space, as is represented by the scene in which an idyllic multi-ethnic Croatian, Muslim and Serbian orchestra entertains the population of Sarajevo during foggy days free of snipers, it also suggests that this place could be a possibility of a new beginning (Fig. 36). In fact, the interpenetrating real and metaphysical borders of the film imagine a fluid locus that spans the diverse cultural identities and boundless reorganizations of the Balkan territory. The filmmaker's journey can "steadily trace the dissolution of an idea of the nation" but it is ambiguous that it evokes a passage "from place to non-place"[88] because home and nation are not always associated. As described in the first chapter, the notion of non-place defined by Marc Augé involves a place where identity, memory and identifiable social relations are lost, but the intricate distribution of people in the Balkans, the specific geography of the region and the cumulative structure of cities, neighbourhoods or streets cannot be easily isolated.

Originally Greek Vlachs, the Manaki Brothers are, nonetheless, presented as "true representative of the Balkans". Through their endless travels in the region, the Brothers documented diverse manifestations of the Balkan culture, including weddings, funerals and religious ceremonies, a path that A. symbolically tries to replicate as he follows his

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[87] Roberts, Les. Non-places in the mist: mapping the spatial turn in Theo Angelopoulo's Peripatetic Modernism in Wendy Ellen Everett and Axel Goodbody (eds). *Revisiting space: space and place in European cinema*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005, p.325.

[88] Id. p. 330

desire to trace a collective identity during another mediation of the borders that reprises the dissolution of Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the century and the subsequent wars. In the film, some images from a documentary about the filmmakers are shown, and, particularly, we retain the words of one of the brothers (Miltiades Manakis): "See this street? All the armies of Europe have trudged through it. And with each war they changed its name. Now it's called Marshall Tito Street. But we called it Forty Pianos Street." [89]

For Bordwell, "the filmmaker's quest is at once a parallel to the 1940s, an interrogation of central European history since World War I, and a quest for the historical significance of the Balkans, all presented through A's search for the 'first image', vanished footage from the turn of the century"[90]. Angelopoulos does not, however, form any standpoint regarding ideological or political considerations. By contrast, A's journey is ambiguously framed through events alluding to the history of the Balkans which resemble dreamy fragments with no manifest association to the present. Far from representing a thorough documentation of history, *Ulysses' Gaze* instead expresses, by means of a fictionalized interpretation of memory and place, the condition of in-betweenness of the region. Bonding imagination and history, Angelopoulos elaborates a tangible film geography of melancholy and expectation, embracing dissolution not as a process of emptying, but rather as a dialectic of transformation where history, mythology and personal story concur to promote a relationship with place as a foundation for the construction of identity. "We are very much 'in-between', all of us here. People need a new sense of community, politics, and beliefs,"[91] Angelopoulos said of *Ulysses' Gaze* and its connotation with regard to Yugoslav disintegration. The filmic

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[89] Horton, p.188.

[90] Bordwell, p.143.

[91] Horton, p.189.

in-betweenness recovers this dialectic of presence and memory via the negotiation of

palimpsest-images with the capacity of abstraction and the perception of belonging.

Illustrations - Chapter 2

Fig. 27 Alain Resnais, *Reperages*. "Ruins of Marquis de Sade castle, Lacoste (Vaucluse)" – 1949

Fig. 28 Alain Resnais, *Reperages* ."1960. London cemitery. In the footsteps of Harry Dickson"
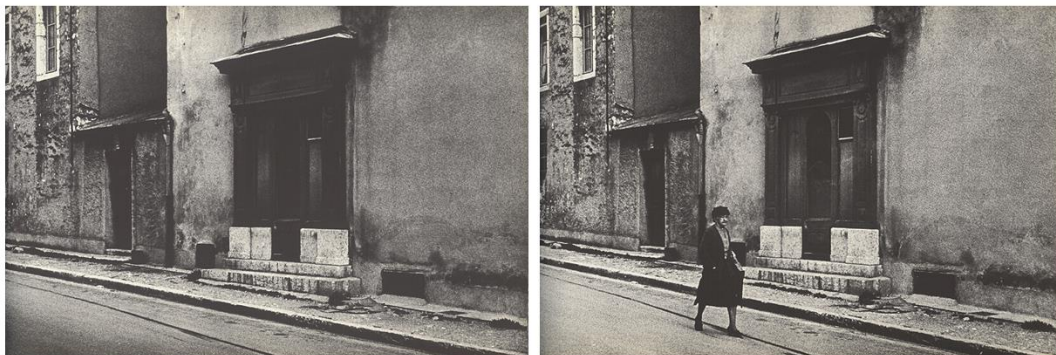
Fig. 29. Alain Resnais, *Reperages*. "Rue de Nevers: arrive des personnages dans les décors vides de l'espace dramatique" - 1974

Fig. 30 James Benning, *Los* (2001)

Fig. 31 Thom Andersen, *Get out of the Car* (2010)

Fig. 32 Thom Andersen, *Get out of the Car* (2010)

Fig. 33 Jan Kempenaers, *Spomenik,* (2010)

Fig. 34 Orson Welles, *The Trial* (1962) – socialist Corbusier "noir"

Fig. 35 Orson Welles, *The Trial* (1962) – Mittleeuropa baroque "noir"

Fig. 36 Theo Angelopoulos, *Ulysses Gaze* (1995) – imagined orchestra in the mist of Sarajevo

3. The space of enigma

The catalyst framing

In July 2012, already enrolled in this PhD program, I saw for the first time on display a photograph (Fig. 37) by Belgian photographer Dirk Braeckman in a group exhibition titled *Mindscapes,* located in downtown Brussels. Surrounded by a multitude of varied and exuberant "photographs of mediums, scenes of voodoo, evanescent bodies, materializations and subjective landscapes"[92], Braeckman's large format 120 x 180 cm picture captivated me with its serene and enigmatic austerity. If I attempt to summarize in one sentence a description of this photograph, this would need to involve some of the recurring features of Braeckman's universe: a certain banality of a slightly old-fashioned domestic interior defined by a small corner place and sustained by a murky grey; the result is an ethereal and indistinct atmosphere that absorbs the subject and negative space.

The formal logic Braeckman's photographic construction conveys an idea of the image fundamentally based in reality, even if it is sometimes filtered through an almost ritualistic process of technique discovery accomplished in the dark room. Also dark, generally, are the interiors depicted, mournful settings deprived of human life, though with phantasmagorical and ambiguous signs. Previously, in the early decades of the photographer's career, there were bodies inhabiting the images, indifferent, revealing a posture of unaffected disinterest or furtive self-absorption. There were also self-portraits in an expressionist manner that defied, as belligerent masks, the spectator.

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[92] Fol, Carine, Michael Kröger, Julien Libert and Catherine Mayeur. *Mindscapes*. Bruxelles-Musées-Expositions, 2012.

B.E.-L.Y.-96, the title of the photo, is a cryptic designation with initials and numbers, like all the other titles of Braeckman's oeuvre. Apparently, the numbers indicate the date when the photo was taken – 1996, a time that represents a turning point from the early period of the photographer career. The major influence was the awareness of the book by Luc Sante, *Evidence*[93], a collection of evidence photographs taken between 1914 and 1918 by New York City police detectives investigating murders and suicide.[94] Braeckman's photography at the time mirrored underground and punk trends and, despite the fact that he was living in New York, he avoided the temptation to deepen the "zeitgeist" of the metropolis's cool underworld. Instead, he returned to Belgium and began to develop a new emotionally reserved approach underlining a rigid composition of rarefied figurative subjects. In the end, the expressionism of the past was replaced by introspection towards the intrinsic elements of the image: forms, volumes and light, studied in the interior of a shadowy arrangement.

Since Walter Benjamin's commentary about the resemblance of Atget's deserted streets to crime scenes settings, this metaphorical trope of the empty image has become a critical cliché. However, in the appropriation of Braeckman, it is noticeable how the images are inspired by the paradigm of *Evidence* and its scenes of a certain temporal suspension, waiting for resolution (Fig. 38). The things, the objects, compose a strange atmosphere of silent emptiness, where the dislocation of reality stimulates a search for interpretation. The photographs by Braeckman, like the crime scenes of Sante's book, are images to be read, deciphered, examined across the surface. (Fig. 39, 40)

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[93] Fol, Carine, Michael Kröger, Julien Libert and Catherine Mayeur. *Mindscapes*. Bruxelles-Musées-Expositions, 2012.

[94] Sante discovered this archive while researching for his first book *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York*, published in 1991.

The corridors, bathrooms, hotels, and conference rooms of Braeckman's photographic interiors encapsulate a group of favoured objects and fragments including floors, walls, corners, doors, carpets, blankets, tables, chairs, ceilings and curtains, with the last becoming a literal metaphor for the cover/uncover dichotomy and the act of looking, where the organization of space plays a decisive role in creating an enigmatic tone. The photographs of the exteriors are also defined through a circumscription of space, a kind of "sample" that is withdrawn without context, allusion or inscription (Fig. 41). There is a sense of imminent eruption, yet Braeckman rejects drama and story and this apparent negation of rhetorical suggestion or traditional storytelling positions the image in a distant light of significance. For Frank Vande Veire, "the flattening of the image does not make things dissolve in their formal photographic treatment, but remains a manifestation of the space itself. It lends the space an obstinate, impenetrable 'thingness' (Fig. 42). It interweaves everything into a compact whole that, however desolately and meagerly furnished it may be, is of an astonishing 'fullness': not the fullness of specific things, but the fullness of a presence that haunts a place but is not incarnated anywhere."[95]

Sometimes, there is an assembly between shapeless masses and grid-like structures, an illogical condition that indeed constitutes the foundation of Braeckman's art, the prominence of the surface, whether an architectonic façade, the tactility of a bedspread or the texture of a wall. This prominence of the surface stimulates as well additional reflections about flatness and depth, adding a quest for perception to the space. This trompe l'oeil consequence it is a conceptual stylization of a transitory space that we could define as a catalyst framing. Braeckman's photographs are portraits of spaces and

[95] Vande Veire, Frank. "Blind Auto-Reflexivity: Dirk Braeckman's Light on Photography" in A-Prior magazine, nº7, Spring/Summer. Kurt Vanbelleghem, 2002.

the intimate nature of the portrait style also informs the image with an autonomous significance beyond serialism (Fig. 43). These images catalyse other images; they create a hypnotizing and interior space that invites a sequel.

From outer space

If we view the conception of space in Braeckman's work from a perspective of transition, in the sense that it is a place in the process of being defined, whether by its intrinsic ambiguity, or by its catalyst radiation, we may draw a connection with the enigmatic cinematic universe of the first films by the Lithuanian Sharunas Bartas. By 1996, the time of Braeckman's bedroom photo, Lithuania was already six years separated from the former Soviet Union (it had been the first Soviet republic to declare independence in 1990, a year before the formal dissolution), but Bartas' films were still ruminating about a drifting post-communist society in a permanent state of transition and vagueness. In *Few of Us* (Lithuania, 1996, 105m), his fourth film, launched in 1996, the narrative is sparse and nebulous – the story of a woman arriving by helicopter to a remote place in Siberia where a tribe called the Tofalars have an austere way of living. The action is punctuated by disconnected events: there are tanks crossing muddy and rugged lands, distant trains passing by, wandering dogs in the middle of nowhere, drunk bodies in semi-darkness sheltered by an agonic accordion melody, a crime, a woman sliding on the top of stony ground; opaque situations enunciating an outlandish territory of primitive gestures and inhospitable landscapes.

Filmed in long fixed compositions (except the first minutes from the helicopter) and without dialogues, *Few of Us* relies on an organic rhythm of silent rituals and muted lyricism to convey an obscure atmosphere of archetypal desolation. There is a

continuous equilibrium between distance and proximity which is present from the very start, as we see in the first sequence of the film, where the introspective look of the woman inside the helicopter is matched with the almost abstract bird's-eye views of the Siberian territory. This place exposed in the foreground visually and lyrically dissolves the drifting people and ultimately generates an elusive space.

In the context of the early work of Sharunas Bartas, this despondency can be linked with the aimless existence in post-Soviet Lithuania portrayed in his films *Three Days* (Lithuania, 1991, 75m) and *The Corridor* (Lithuania, 1994, 85m), a bleak world rendering convoluted connections between the past and present. *Three Days* - as his first film, the 1990 documentary *In the Memory of a Day Gone By* (Lithuania, 1990, 40m) - was shot in the seaport city of Kaliningrad, a Russian exclave between Poland and Lithuania on the Baltic Sea, and reveals a grey and decaying place reminiscent of Tarkowsky's "Zone", while *The Corridor* is set in a claustrophobic house in Vilnius. In a way, *Few of Us*, although located in the Far East, unites the gloomy and crumbling indoors of *The Corridor* with the desolate and inhospitable outdoor spaces present in *Three Days*. They condense people and landscapes as an open site without exit, and the sombre interiors as containers of a cloudy existence.

Bartas was the main figure behind a generation of Lithuanian filmmakers (Audrius Stonys, Artūras Jevdokimovas, Rimvydas Leipus, Valdas Navasaitis, Arūnas Matelis) who emerged during the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the resulting independence of Lithuania. In 1989, still in the era of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika, he launched Kinema, an independent film studio intended to develop a fresh dynamic

far from the Soviet production system[96]. Three films from this period particularly interact with the style and themes of Bartas in *Few of Us*. The first one, *Ten Minutes Before the Flight of Icarus* by Arūnas Matelis (1990, 10 min), follows in a silent detached fashion the modifications of post-Soviet society in Užupis, a historical old town quarter of the capital Vilnius. The second one, *Earth of the Blind* by Audrius Stonys (1992, 24 min), is a dark portrait of the rural world that conveys, through its contemplative images and expressive sound, the resonances between a cow's trip to the slaughterhouse and a blind man's world. Finally, *The Black Box* by Algimantas Maceina, (1994, 38 min), refers to the genocide of Lithuanian society by presenting the repatriation of the remains of the filmmaker's grandfather from Siberia to Lithuania. Combining essay film with a poetic and subtle approach to documentary, these films match Bartas' own feature film meditations of post-soviet Lithuania in the wake of the disaggregation of the Soviet empire.

It is not clear that the trip of the young woman to the far-flung Tofalar village has anything to do with the dislocation of hundreds of thousands of Lithuanians to Siberia under various Soviet regimes, but the Tofalar subject it is a continuation of Bartas' diploma film *Tofalaria* (1986, 16m), which documented the community's way of life, and it seems that *Few of Us* comments on the forced marginalization and degradation of indigenous tribes and lifestyles (especially due to imposed drinking rituals and kolkhoz culture). Bartas' himself commented vaguely in interviews that the woman could possibly be a replication of something similar to what happened to him when he found the village and then came back to film.

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[96] Sukaityte, Renata. "The apparitions of a day gone by and the stasis of the present in the films of Sharunas Bartas" in Giukin, Lenuta; Janina Falkowska and David Desser (eds). *Small Cinemas in Global Markets: Genres, Identities, Narrative*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014, p. 107-120.

There is a moment in *Few of Us* that symbolically relates the characters whom we might consider the defining poles of the narrative, and does so through the organization of the mise-en-scene and its intrinsic association with the importance of landscape and place in the film. After the first sequence, which shows the helicopter journey of the young woman to the Siberian village, we see a grey landscape shot crossed by a Tofalar leading some reindeer. Then, there is a short sequence that shows the aged man arriving at a small house near a stream, where he sits inside, smokes a cigarette and contemplates a portrait painting of a semi-naked young woman hanging on the wall. The sequence ends with a close-up of the introspective man, followed by a wide shot of a mountain landscape, an image of the woman seated on top of a stony hill, and finally a landscape very similar to the one first described at the beginning of the sequence, this time traversed through the right of the frame by the man on the way back (Fig. 44). The conjugation of the main characters, one representing the Tofalar people, the other, the stranger, not just in the community but also in the landscape, is presented by a mechanism that paces the entire film: the blending of close-ups of figures and empty shots of landscape that are, nonetheless, false point of view shots. Among other things, this compound illuminates a fundamental hypothesis in the film, namely that it overlaps the significance of narrative and place denoting both a material and fictional connotation. The repetition of shots and the molecular back and forth movement of the Tofalar announces the equivalent arrival and departure of the woman that resumes the film, while the dialogue between the actor and the landscape fuses contemplation with an ideology of despair and emptiness.

This sequence also encompasses many of the typical components of Bartas' cinematic world: a laborious blend of realist sensibility and abstract narrative as a model for the dissection of a post-communist society, the "road-movie" genre in the manner of a

disenchanted existentialist drift, the use of long reflective fixed shots, the predilection

for misty and gloomy environments, the subtle modulation of sound, a relentless

mechanization of gestures and emotions, and above all, a kind of laconic

somnambulism that shapes the universe of the film. There is, in this perspective, a

symbolic equalization of the characters and their incorporation in the space of the film,

whether as a metaphoric association with the dissolution of Soviet Union, the isolation

of the Tofalar people or the forced exile of Lithuanians in Siberia under Soviet rule.

If we analyse some of the press reviews at the time *Few of Us* was released, one image

unites many descriptions of the film: a desolate landscape. The French magazine *Les

Inrockuptibles*, for instance, talked about "eternal and empty landscapes" and "a kind of

sparse village in the middle of desolate mountains".[97]

This idea of the bleak landscape was already present in the observations made by

foreign travellers in the Russia of 18th and 19th centuries. In his book, *This Meager

Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia*, Christopher Ely[98] studies

the work of Russian writers and realist landscape painters of the 19th century, such as

Aleksei Savrasov, Ivan Shishkin (Fig. 45), Fedor Vasilyev (Fig. 46), , and Nikolai

Nekrasov, and concludes that they represented a century-long search initiated at the end

of the 18th century for an essential image of the Russian land that could signify an

affirmative national identity. The mysterious comforts of the gloomy skies, the

expansive flat fields and the impenetrable forests of the north united the Russian

inhabitants with their surroundings and expressed a common veiled soul. Fedor

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[97] Ostria, Vincent. "Few of Us" in *Les Inrockuptibless*, 18-09-1996.
http://www.lesinrocks.com/1996/09/18/cinema/actualite-cinema/few-of-us-11233300/. Date of access:
14-10-2015.

[98] Ely, Christopher. This Meager nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia. DeKalb:
Northern Illinois University Press, 2009.

Tiutchev's 1859 poem, '*These Poor Village*'[99], describes this reconciliation with the landscape and place:[100]

These poor villages,

This meager nature:

Long-suffering native land,

Land of the Russian people!

Proud foreign eyes

Will not notice nor grasp

The light that shines through

Your humble barrenness.

Worn by the weight of the cross,

The Heavenly King in the guise of a slave

Has passed through all of you,

Native land, blessing you.

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[99] Id, p. 139.

[100] For an overall connection of space with the Russian national identity see: Smith, Jeremy (ed). *Beyond the limits: the concept of space in Russian History and Culture*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2000; Dobrenko, Evengy; Naimen, Erik. *The landscape of Stalinism: the art and ideology of Soviet Space*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003; Burbank, Jane; Anatolyi Remnev and Mark von Hagen. *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700-1930*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007.

"This meager nature of the long-suffering native land" simultaneously mirrored and moulded the idea of Russian identity, one that developed from the filter "of neoclassicism, which privileged the beautiful and the idealized over the ugly and everyday"[101]. The humble features of the Russian landscape "became a powerful national symbol, to be revered precisely for their lack of similarity to the more immediately appealing vistas of Western Europe"[102]. However, as Mark Bassin reminds us in his study of pre-revolutionary Russian identity, "the problem of identity in modern Russia is commonly framed in terms of the elemental tension between the country's alternative embodiments as empire or nation. (…) One must search very hard to find any significant subjective sense of mutual exclusivity between the two (Russia and empire)"[103] The landscape that is referred to here as the one associated with the Russian soul is in fact a part of the historic Russian land that covers the forests of the north to the open fields of the south. Although Siberia is historically part of Russia, it was always seen as an exotic remote territory, and its mountainous landscapes, more suited to the idea of the western sublime, were not included in the common vision of Russian landscape painting.

Part of this concentration of Russian land imagery can be explained by what Catherine Evuthov considers the historical centralism of the country: "Russian history has, for the most part, remained oddly indifferent to the concept of geographical space and to the spatial as well as temporal dimensions of historical events. The 'biggest' country has

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[101] Hughes, Lindsey. Russian Culture in the eighteenth century in Lieven, Dominic (ed). *The Cambridge History of Russia: Volume 2, Imperial Russia, 1689-1917.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p.84.

[102] Ibid, p.102.

[103] Bassin, Mark. Geographies of Imperial Identity in Lieven, Dominic (ed). *The Cambridge History of Russia: Volume 2, Imperial Russia, 1689-1917.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p.45.

remained largely confined to a flattened, homogenized, centralized perspective"[104].

Siberia represents in this sense a boundless abstract land, a vast vague terrain of spatial nomadism.

Bartas' space in *Few of Us* is not only geopolitical and aesthetic but also historically accumulated and reverberated as a palimpsest of continuous operations of the cultural idea of landscape, place and national identity. There is a pair of shots that symbolizes many of these accumulations of meaning (Fig. 47). The first begins with a landscape of the Siberian territory symmetrically divided into two halves: the upper part, a dense amount of trees announcing the Siberian mountains and parting the image with a large block of green only interrupted in the upper right corner by a glimpse of the sky; in the other half, a piece of land almost entirely submersed by rocks, a fallow field ripped by stones. Two sights in the same shot are representative symbols of the Russian landscape identity: the impenetrable forest and the rugged plain. After some seconds, a Tofalar with three horses enters through the right side, followed, now from the left, by a military tank that stops and drops off the young woman. Only now do we understand the interior of the vehicle we had seen in the shots before where the driver and the woman were impassively smoking. The next shot, also with a composition divided in two relatively symmetrical halves, shows in the upper part mountains covered by fog and snow, and in the lower half the small indigenous village bisected by a slightly diagonal rivulet. The tank enters the shot and follows the rivulet until it vanishes in the mud as it sinks partially out of frame into a trench, then briefly re-emerges to continue on its slow-moving ride and becomes indiscernible again as it fades into the village cabins. During this very long static shot, which contains yet another Tofalar passing by,

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[104] Evtuhov, Catherine. *Portrait of a Russian Province: Economy, Society and Civilization in Nineteenth-Century Nizhnii Novgorod*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011, p.6.

the tank does not coincide in any way with any of the Tofalar; by means of its imposing shape and harsh noise, it appears as a perforation in the image, in the geography and in the local community. This conjugation of mud, the meagre village and the mountainous sublime and the division of the image by symmetrical blocks but different geological and aesthetic resonances inscribes the film with a multilayered symbolism.

In its multiple variations, the Symbolist movement configured a turn away from naturalism and proposed instead an enigmatic and expressive reality based on a deep emphasis on sensibility and inner thought. One of the defining traits was the evocative force of its complex metaphors, which mediated the aspirations of the modern man and the vison of the world as a "forest of symbols". [105]

Considered one of the first symbolist works, *Dans le Reve* (Fig. 48) was published in 1879, by Odilon Redon. It was an album of ten lithographs consisting of phantom-like heads and bodies floating in a murky chiaroscuro, comprising a melancholic absurdism, a portrait of human fragments imagined as magnified cryptic particles of the world. They also created a magnetic sensation of frozen time, a gloomy and unsettling quality that somehow shares the opacity of the images of *Few of Us*.

At the time the impressionists were fascinated by the effervescent world around them, Redon was creating a universe of symbols and fantasies disjointed in the void, like the indecipherable gaze of the pensive close-ups we see inside the cavernous interiors of the Tofalar houses.

Twenty years later, Redon added pastel colours to the arsenal of charcoal, ink, black pastel and lithographic crayons that he used in his drawings. From this time, *Les Yeux*

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[105] "(...) L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles (...)", 'Correspondances' in Baudelaire, Charles. *Fleurs du Mal*. Paris: Poulet-Malassis et De Broise, 1857.

Clos (1890), a portrait of his wife Camille Falte, induced an impenetrable dreamy vision fluctuating in undefined space (Fig. 49), similar to the themes of absence and apparition of *Few of Us*. (Fig. 50)

Rather than adopting a deterministic strategy of direct allusions to the Soviet past, *Few of Us* scans with a telluric pulse the environment of this Siberian territory, including landscape elaborations and symbolist recreations, and composes a subtle metaphysical rumination on the natural world with echoes of the history of the region that resound through an intangible spatiality. It is a discussion of the local, the border and the universal based on a place that seems to be from another world. These mysterious images despite offering visions of raw idiosyncrasy retain a strange dignity. The sensations are cumulated on duration, on visual texture and muted communication, on expressive sound and lyrical tranquillity. The space of the film is a dispute between a numinous human meditation and a distant ethnographic observation where geographical frontiers are not fundamentally defined and complete: on the contrary, they are somewhat elusive and discursive.

There is an image that completes the first sequence of the film, in which the helicopter disappears in the shot. We then just see the shapes of a distant glacial mountain, like the curtains announcing a new landscape, a new story, a new world; a border of the exile, which follows the movement of the helicopter over the abstract land and pictures the mountain image as the space of the enigma.

Shape and dissolution

There are intrinsic characteristics that relate the territory of *Few of Us* with the conceptual approach of the boundary, emptiness and the occupation of place. In his *Letter from Siberia* (France, 1957, 62m), Chris Marker hints at the "biggest vacant spot of the world". In fact, as we symbolically and physically enter in Siberian territory, there is a confluence between the minuscule human settlements absorbed by the immense place and the reorganization of space calculated by the fiction and inscribed in the film framing. Landscape and place in Bartas' film characterize an inverted sublime expressing the absence of the transcendental - a centripetal saturated phenomenon resurfacing instead in the limits of the frame. It is a process of compression, no longer a distant apprehension of the real. Place doubles as a film geography without exit, and by encapsulating fictive characters as pointless drifters and real nomads as immobile bodies, points to an impossible redemption. These characters are phantoms in the present, real and tangible, transformed in elements of an infinite landscape pushed inward toward the squeezed space of the image, like the images of Redon.

Coming back to the iconic composition of the woman in the stony ground, we sense the unstable equation between shape and dissolution inscribed in the puzzling atmosphere of the entire scene. The bizarre position of the woman presented as an apparition, the rigid rhythm of the descent, the extended duration, the stone as metaphor for architecture and sculpture, all of this indicates an intricate image where motives of zoomorphism, fastidiously detailed, are transposed for a stage of suspension.

The opaque dissolution of the human within the vastness of the world is also present in the work of the Czech painter Josef Sima, as he too promotes a conception of the space as a refined re-creation of frozen traces of matter. Although he never formally aligned

himself with the surrealists, the Sima's work advances the enigmatic corpus of surrealism "towards an exploration of origin, essence and the unity of the world"[106], expressed through detached and intangible particles of nature. His paintings reverberate with both spatial and spiritual meanings, corresponding places and landscapes as atomic structures in permanent redefinition. It was a highly distinctive work at the time, evoking the diffused light and dissolved universe of Turner and the imaginative lyricism of early metaphysical painting.

Born in Prague, Sima arrived in Paris in 1921 and, after connecting with the Surrealists, began to exhibit in 1925 in the Salon des Surindépendants in the Surrealist section. But, it was after joining the group "Grand Jeu" in 1928[107], that he began exploring the landscape as a spectral and mysterious agglomeration of nature. *Double Paysage, Tempête Électrique*, (Fig. 51) from 1928, for instance, presents a complex panorama of doubles: crystal stones, ghostly cactus, puddles of water and other abstract elemental figures positioned in the fragmented planes of the image, which seems to allude simultaneously to a schematized construction and a profound absorption of the world, in which there is a blending of objective and subjective dimensions of the space of the framing. There is a detectable immobility, a petrified "electric storm" that compresses the immensity and the sublime into a surface of enclosed immaterial shapes – ghostlike enigmas in space, as in *Country – Light,* one of his last paintings. (Fig. 52)

The poles of the saturated image and the palimpsest-image are projected in the vague boundless land of Siberia and its flattened spatiality presented in the enigmatic space of

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[106] Fijalkowski, Krzysztof and Michael Richardson. "Years of long days: surrealism in Czechoslovakia" in Fijalkowski, Krzysztof, Michael Richardson and Ian Walker. *Surrealism and photography in Czechoslovakia: on the needles of the day*. Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013, p.11.

[107] The "grand jeu" was formed by Sima and Pierre Jean Jouve and refused the dogmatic line of André Breton.

the frame, and in the emptiness, void and banality of the mysterious world of the framing spaces in Braeckman's photographs. The space of enigma is then a place in the process of being defined, whether by its intrinsic ambiguity or by its catalytic radiation; the dynamics of shape and dissolution are finally condensed in Sima's paintings and create a linkage of spatial perceptions that evoke a multiplicity of visual and metaphorical considerations, including historical constructions of identity and symbolic explorations of images.

Illustrations - Chapter 3.

Fig. 37 Dirk Braeckman, *B.E.-L.Y.-96* (1996)

Fig. 38. Luc Sante, *Evidence* (1992)

Fig. 39 Luc Sante, *Evidence* (1992)   Fig. 40 Braeckman, *K.A.-A.N.-96* (1996)
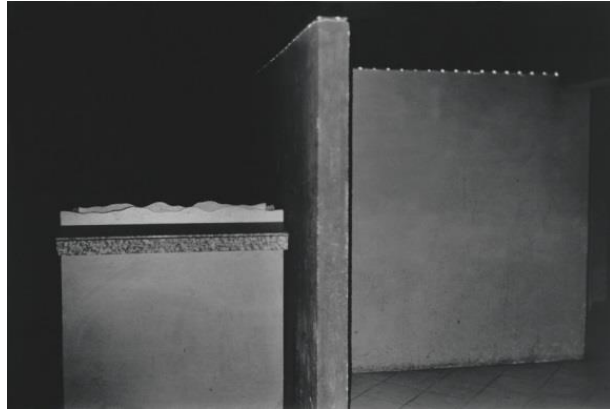
Fig. 41 Dirk Braeckman, *E.D.-L.O.-97* (1997)
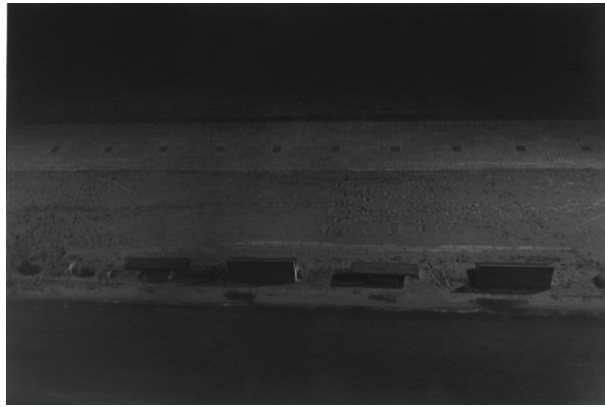
Fig. 42 Dirk Braeckman, *D.I.-D.U.-00* (2000)

Fig. 43 Dirk Braeckman, *C.C.-G.E.-95 (*1995)

Fig. 44 Sharunas Bartas, *Few of Us* (1996)

Fig. 45 Ivan Shishkin ,*The First Snow* (1875)

Fig 46. Feodor Vasilyev. *After a Rain* (1869)

Fig. 47 Sharunas Bartas, *Few of Us* (1996)

Fig. 48 Odilon Redon, *Dans le Reve* (1879).

Fig. 49 Odilon Redon, *Les Yeux Clos* (1890)

Fig. 50 Sharunas Bartas, *Few of Us* (1996)
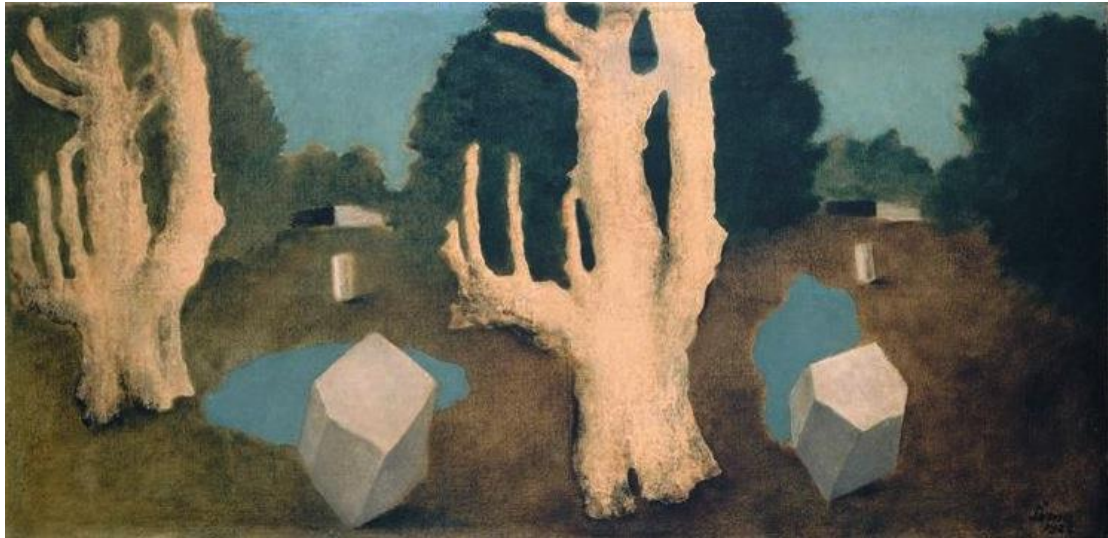
Fig. 51 Josef Sima, *Double Paysage, Tempête Électrique* (1928)

Fig. 52 Josef Sima, *Country – Light* (1967)

4. Traffic of geographies

Travelling from home

In 1947, after living in occupied Latvia and in a Displaced Persons camp[108] during World War II, Raimonds Staprans emigrated to the United States with his family. He began to study art under Mark Tobey at the University of Washington and later moved to the San Francisco Area, where he studied with Hans Hofmann at UC Berkeley. His experiences during the Soviet invasion led the young Latvian to pursue an artistic path: "I decided to become a painter – the invasion also ended my innocence and forced me to become aware of aggression, injustice, and cruelty. Thus, in an oblique way, I owe my career as an artist to the misfortunes that befell us during that time.[109]" He also became a playwright, the role which he is mainly associated in his homeland, orienting more in his plays toward a reflection on the totalitarian reality of the past. *Cetras Dienas Junija (Four Days in June)*, for instance, a play about the last days in office of the acting president before the Soviet invasion, had a significant impact during the Latvian revolution of the early 1990s.

As a painter, however, Staprans is regularly associated with the Bay Area figurative school[110], a mid-20th century art movement that preferred a return to figuration during

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[108] The term is mainly used for camps established after World War II in Germany, Austria, and Italy, primarily for refugees from East Europe.

[109] Staprans, Raimonds. "Four Reflections." *Raimonds Staprans*. Berlin: Redmann Galerie and Kunsthandel, 1988.

[110] For more information about the movement see: Williams, Thomas. *The Bay Area School*. Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries, 2013; Jones, Caroline A. *Bay Area Figurative Art: 1950-1965*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989; Gerdts, William H, Susan Landauer and Patricia Trenton. *The Not-so-still Life: A Century of California Painting and Sculpture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003; Landauer, Susan. *The lighter side of Bay Area figuration*. Kansas City: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, San Jose Museum of Art, 2000.

the 1950s as an alternative to the already established Abstract Expressionism of the New York art scene that had also emerged in San Francisco.[111] With strong influence from the Nabis fusion style of domestic interiors and large blocks of colours, and the expressionistic melancholy of artists as diverse as Bacon or Giacometti, the painters, who included David Park, Richard Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff, Wayne Thiebaud, Paul Wonner, Nathan Oliveira, James Weeks, and Roland Peterson, were less interested in traditional drawing than showing conventional subject matter such as the figure, the landscape and the still life with new approaches.

Staprans worked briefly with the human figure at the beginnings of his career but he later focused on still-lifes and landscape compositions constructed around everyday objects (chairs, tables, fruits, cans, boxes) and distant views of anonymous buildings, docks and empty fields. The apparent naturalism is undermined via a strong emphasis on colour and composition, a laborious geometry of flattened surfaces and elusive perspectives. The still life paintings have affinities with the pop-art lyricist jewellery world of Wayne Thiebaud and the Matisse-infused interior spaces of and Richard Diebenkorn (Fig. 53) and Paul Wonner (Fig. 54), while the landscapes share the same universe of Diebenkorn and particularly of the French painter Nicholas de Stael with his combination of blocky forms and suggestive spaces. It is this "charged" space that distinguishes him from the Bay Area realists, who normally involve human presence more directly. The detached world of Staprans comprises an almost surreal and broken reality of vibrant abandoned objects (Fig. 55, 56)) and grid-like landscape structures, a

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[111] For a description of the importance and context of abstract expressionism in San Francisco see: Landauer, Susan. *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996; Albright, Thomas. *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-1980: An Illustrated History.* Berkeley; University of California Press, 1985.

permutation of "realist abstraction and psychological expressionism,"[112] in the words of Paul Karlstrom. He adds that "to a remarkable degree, these paintings are removed from life and temporal reality. The figure appears to have been banished. It is as if the human beings upon whose activities the objects in Staprans's paintings depend have departed - abandoned the chair, left the table, put the brushes in a glass, walked away from the docked boat - never to return". Staprans began sketching views of boats and water from his house in Riga, Latvia, as a child, and his dock landscapes maintain a childlike reductionism, a realistic "colour field painting" charged with a distinctive melancholic tenor, despite Staprans refusal to psychologize his paintings with "literature"[113]. Staprans immerses these spaces in atmospheric light, matching the space of still lives with the expansive landscapes (Fig. 57, 58, 59). Extending the boundaries of both abstraction and realism, they reinvent a geography without specific time, as poetic tectonics spaces in formation. (Fig. 60)

A process of physical and personal disconnection also occurs in the final sequence of *News from Home* (Belgium, France, 1977, 85m), an essay film by Chantal Akerman that mixes images of people and places of New York while the filmmaker reads letters sent by her mother in Brussels. A sequence of an extended travelling shot of eleven minutes from a camera mounted on the Staten Island Ferry that shows a departure from Manhattan (Fig. 61). Beginning with an unclear dark place punctuated by small spots of light, we hear the sound of the water splashing and, as the camera pulls back, the underside of a bridge is recognizable. The movement continues and the camera begins to map the structures and buildings on the shore, until the city skyline slowly fuses with

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[112] Karlstrom, Paul. "Control and Sensuality: The Realist Abstraction of Raymond Staprans" in Karlstrom, Paul (ed). *Raimonds Staprans: Art of Tranquility and Turbulence*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005, p.5.

[113] See Karlstrom interview with Raimonds Staprans (August 14 and 25, September 15, 1997), Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art. Hereafter,"Interview." A transcript of the interview is available on the Archives web site: www.si.edu/artarchives.

the water in a dreamy and foggy bluish space, where the only sound comes from the water, the gulls and the engine of the boat. Before, Akerman's voice-over was steadily being absorbed by the noise of a train moving through a series of dilapidated buildings - a group of sequences with vistas from different modes of transport (a car, the subway, the train, the boat) that signals the end of the film as a space in transit and counterpoints the static shots that Akerman primarily uses in the rest of her most structuralist-influenced film. Not only does the camera itself go from stasis to movement and then to the combined static movement of the cloudy blue space framed from the ferry, but the personal geography of the filmmaker is also secretively diffused in a peripatetic space between different types of home.

Subterranean region

Akerman will return to New York years later to make a film called *Histoires D'Amerique* (Belgium, 1989, 92m) about other kind of exile, that of Eastern European Jews in New York. Akerman's parents were Polish Jews who immigrated to Belgium in the 1930s before the Second World War. While she had made Jewish allusions in her films from the beginning, mainly in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (Belgium, France, West Germany, 1978, 127m), it is only with *Histoires D'Amérique* that she directly approaches the subject of the Jewish experience.[114] In the same year, she received a proposal from Kathy Halbreich (then Beal Curator of Contemporary Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and months later director of the Walker Art Center in

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[114] For investigations about Jewish perspectives in Akerman's work see: Bergstrom, Janet, 'Invented Memories', in Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey (ed). *Identity and Memory. The Films of Chantal Akerman.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003, p. 94-116; Fowler, Catherine. *The films of Chantal Akerman: A cinema of displacements*. PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 1995, p. 250-293; Lebow Alisa. "Memory Once Removed: Indirect Memory and Transitive Autobiography in Chantal Akerman's D'Est" in *Camera Obscura 52,* Duke University Press, 2003, p. 35-84.

Minneapolis), Susan Dowling (producer for WGBH Television) and Michael Tarantino (an independent curator and critic) to create a multimedia installation about the union of the European Community. Akerman was immediately attracted by the project, due to the possibility to make a work "in many languages". Nevertheless, she sent a counter-proposal to also include what was happening outside the Union, namely the preponderance of nationalism and anti-Semitism in other European countries. Some months later the Berlin Wall fell and in the following year the dissolution of Soviet Union began. Due to financial problems, the film, which was supposed to be the basis of the installation, had to be financed with the usual television circuit of art-house film funding and was made as an independent piece during three trips between the summer of 1992 and the winter of 1993. In her notes to the film, she acknowledges both the historical moment of the transformation of the East and the personal motivation to travel to the region. "While I still have time I would like to make a big journey through East Europe. (…) I would like to shoot with my own style of a documentary bordering on fiction. I would like to film everything that moves me."[115]

D'Est (Belgium, France, Portugal, 1993, 107m) was that travelogue essay covering East Germany, Poland, the Baltics, Ukraine and Russia from the end of summer to winter - a personal attempt by Chantal Akerman to approach the diaspora of the Eastern European Jews and to document the mode of life after the collapse of communism, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany. The film summarizes Akerman's journey to a genealogical and cultural essence haunted by the holocaust and the disaggregation of the Eastern Bloc, using a complex mix of reportage and lyrical documentary, without commentary or dialogue.

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[115] Akerman, Chantal. "About 'D'est" in Akerman, Chantal; David, Catherine; Tarantino, Michael. *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's D'Est*. Minneapolis Walker Art Center, 1995, p.17.

We see ubiquitous lines of people waiting at bus stops and at train stations, posed domestic interiors, countryside landscapes and roadside sites with occasional buses, cars and trucks passing, working farmers, concerts and other musical gatherings, and a particular penchant of Akerman to track people walking. The filmmaker cadences these selected vistas by organizing a hypnotic rhythm between lengthy tracking shots and static camera takes which encompasses the depiction of space and place and the subjective emotion of dwelling, filtered by an impressionistic approach that presents the implications of post-communist political, social and economic transformations over a densely ambient sound track.

D'est would be the first documentary of a connected group of works encompassing *Sud* (Belgium, 1999, 70 min), an investigation of the American South (Alabama, Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana and Georgia) through the lens of the 1998 lynching of James Byrd Jr. by three white men in Jasper, Texas, *De L'Autre Côté* (Mexico, USA, 2002, 99 min), a study of the immigration between Mexico and the United States linking Mexican landscapes, interviews with locals and American authorities and an overall questioning of the border policies and their effects on the population, and finally *Là-Bas* (France, 2006, 78m), a personal reflection about home, identity and depression that is mostly based in her own apartment in Tel Aviv. All these documentaries chart Akerman's interest with borders and displacement, nomadism and identification, whether in Eastern Europe, the American South, the US-Mexican border or the Middle East.

Her work similarly articulates and crosses over traditional boundaries between narrative film, the documentary and the avant-garde, installation work and museum space and even between the affiliations of literature and film. She has made more than 30 films, including romantic comedies, video art-pieces, TV documentaries, art-film features and

the feminist-minimalist success of the seventies: *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Belgium, France, 1975, 201m).

In fact, feminist film critics were the first to embrace Chantal Akerman by choosing to promote her as symbol of the movement. Not only *Jeanne Dielman*, but also films such as *Saute Ma Ville* (Belgium, 1968, 13m), *Je tu il elle* (Belgium, France, 1974, 86m) and the aforementioned *News from Home* and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* have all been debated from a feminist perspective, a model cinema uniting women-centred subject matter and the rejection of dominant (male) cinematic practices.[116]

After an initial infatuation with Godard and European modernism[117], Akerman's style was later heavily influenced by the American Structuralist avant-garde, mainly by the Canadian experimental filmmaker Michael Snow[118] and his palette of lengthy pans and tracking shots of nearly-empty spaces. Akerman had discovered Snow through her

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[116] For examples of this type of criticism see: Bergstrom, Janet. "Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles" in *Camera Obscura nº2,* 1977, p. 115-121. Bergstrom, Janet. "Chantal Akerman: splitting'" in Bergstrom, Janet (ed.), *Endless Night: Cinema, Psychoanalysis, Parallel Histories*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p. 273-90. de Lauretis, Teresa. "Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Film Theory", in Erena, Patricia (ed). *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 303; Rich, B. Ruby. "In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism", in Erena, Patricia (ed). *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 271-72, 277; Flitterman-Lewis, Sandy. "What's beneath her smile? Subjectivity and desire in Germaine Dulac's The Smiling Madame Beudet and Chantal Akerman's Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles" in Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey (ed) *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman.*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003, p. 27-40; McRobbie, Angela. "Chantal Akerman and Feminist Filmmaking", in Cook, Pam and Philip Dodd (ed). *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993; See also an interview of Akerman with seven feminists critics in *Camera Obscura nº 2* (fall 1977), p. 118-121.

[117] See, for instance, Ivone Margulies mapping the theatricality of the characters and the dialogues of *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* within a particular strand of European anti-naturalism composed by Bresson, Duras, Straub/Huillet and Rohmer. Margulies, Ivone. "Echo and voice in 'Meetings with Anna" in *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*. Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey (ed). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003, p. 59-76.

[118] She mentioned his influence in many interviews as this one with Nicole Brenez: "I saw it in New York (La Region Centrale, Michael Snow, 1969), when I was 21, thanks to Babette Mangolte, who brought me into a world I hadn't known about, a world at the time very small, very covert. The sensory experience I underwent was extraordinarily powerful and physical. It was a revelation for me, that you could make a film without telling a story. And yet the tracking shots of <———> (Back and Forth, 1969) in the classroom, with movements that are purely spatial while nothing is happening, produce a state of suspense as tense as anything in Hitchcock. I learned from them that a camera movement, just a movement of the camera, could trigger an emotional response as strong as from any narrative." *Useful Book #1: Chantal Akerman, The Pajama Interview*. Viennale, 2011.

News from Home cinematographer Babette Mangold during her stay in New York. Ben

Singer, for example, writes about Jeanne Dielman as a perfect ensemble of both

inspirations: "like the American avant-garde, it makes revelations about the physical

and temporal basis of the medium, and like the European modernist cinema, it analyzes

and undermines conventional codes of narrative form and meaning construction."[119]

Furthermore, the film also exemplifies a regular trope of Akerman's world, which is

labelled by some critics as "hyperrealism"[120]: the scrupulous depiction of the ordinary

activities of everyday life, but vaguely contextualized.

We see many of these considerations packed into the beginning of *D'Est*, condensing

signs of the themes and formal tactics of the film. After an opening shot of a green

highway overpass at twilight encompassing the glimmering of neon lights, the rumble

of the vehicles, and the film credits, a subsequent arrangement of quotidian shots marks

the beginning of the road trip (Fig. 62). From a day-lit interior we see an open window

demarcating a lush green landscape, followed by what seems to be the exterior part of

the preceding shot, a German café facing an expansive rural road. Next, a close shot of

the tree seen in the landscape before, taken from exactly the same angle, followed by a

"montage" of shots that includes a man sitting on a bench looking at the camera,

housing estates and courtyards, a long tracking shot following a woman walking, people

in the park, an elderly couple playing a board game by an open window, a living room

with a woman posing and looking at the camera, and finally people on the beach and

gathering for an outdoor concert. It is summer in Eastern Europe, and this sequence

formulates a sort of prolonged establishing shot from the German countryside to the

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[119] Singer, Ben. "Jeanne Dielman: Cinematic Interrogation and Amplification" in *Millenium Film Journal 22* (Winter/Spring 1989-1990), p. 57.

[120] Kovacs, Andras Balint. *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 382; Margulies, Ivone. *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1996, p. 3.

Baltic coast, fragmented in the "montage" sequences of mainstream narrative films. In the case of Akerman, this "montage" does not fulfil the common editing dictate of compressing time; on the contrary, it is a dilatation of time.

From this sequence, we identify a careful assortment of details pointing to a specific topographic space, narrative time and stylistic procedures: the season; the juxtaposition of rural naturalistic landscapes, posed interiors and anonymous urban spaces; voyeuristic perspectives; an amplified ambient soundtrack; extended duration; and the equation between movement and fixity. It is a suspended linearity assembled by a cumulative editing gesture orchestrating associations, oppositions and extensions.

In *D'Est*, the allegories of travelling, transition, displacement, nomadism and exile are even more evident than in other works: "people as blurred (indéfinis) as myself"[121], as the filmmaker said to *Camera Obscura* magazine about her experience in New York in the 1970s. An autobiographical empathy entwining formal and thematic logic for an auteurist scheme explores the politics and poetics of identity. Somewhere in the middle of the journey, maybe in Ukraine or Russia, as a Cyrillic sign in the road indicates, there is an essential passage of the film that contains five shots of people walking and carrying suitcases in a vast landscape (Fig. 63). The shots are continuous and apparently signify a linear progression of a sequence of people walking (with the exception of the first one, obviously shot on different days). However, when we analyse in detail, it is clear that the people portrayed are always different from shot to shot. For that matter, understanding the sequence of wandering people as a symbolic re-enactment of the Jewish diaspora echoes the filmmaker's project of assembling a personal history of

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[121] Quoted in Martin, Adrian. "Chantal Akerman. Mujer Caminante. In Adrian, Martin. *Qué es el cine moderno?* Santiago: Ucbar Editors, 2008, p. 161.

diaspora by means of metaphorical and anti-naturalist strategies encrusted in the documentary material.

In her multimedia installation based on the film, which premiered in 1995 at the Walker Museum in Minneapolis with the title *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's D'Est*, she states the following:

 And slowly you realize that it is always the same thing that is revealed,

A little like the primal scene.

And the primal scene for me although I fight against it…

It is far behind or always in front of all images barely covered by others

More luminous, radiant even

Old images of evacuation

Of walking in the snow with packages

Toward an unknown place,

Of faces and bodies placed one next to the other

Of faces flickering between robust life

And the possibility of a death

Which would strike them down without their having asked for anything…

Once the film is finished,

I said to myself

So that's what it was: that again.[122]

The installation itself contained three combined moments matching the three galleries in which it was presented. The first gallery projects the entire film in a dark room. A second room presents 24 video monitors arranged into eight triptychs positioned at approximately eye level; each group shows five-minute fragments of the film, after each of which they briefly go blank. In the third room, there is a single monitor on the floor, showing a tracking shot of a street at night. The camera begins to tilt up and disappears into the sky. The filmmaker's voice coming from two speakers on either side of the monitor reads a text that starts with a recitation, in Hebrew and subsequently in translation, of the Second Commandment. After about five minutes, the images reappear, and the voice continues for a short period in the darkness. For the whole time, a cello plays the melody of the Kol Nidre, a prayer chanted in synagogues at the evening service that begins the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur.

Throughout the film however, the references to Judaism or the personal history of Akerman are less evident. There are no indications of Jewish iconography and even her mother's town is ignored. Akerman contextualizes: "I went, then I wrote. Without understanding. Visions in passing. Dazzled by the summer. Travels by East Germany and by Poland. On the way I still passed the town where my mother comes from. Didn't see it, didn't look." [123]

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[122] Quoted text in David, Catherine. "D'Est: Akerman Variations" in *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's D'Est*, p. 63.

[123] The entire monologue is published in Lebow, p.41.

This collective journey through intimate memory and history establishes a kind of distant projection of interiority. As Margulies points out, the film's "underlying motif might be a gaze at the traces of a history shared by Akerman's parents"[124]. However, the palimpsest of past and present signals an infinite "melancholic narcissism"[125] when the organization of the documentary material in pieces "bordering on fiction" is displayed in the treatment of people by means of endless invading "reportage" tracking shots. The stylized movements that form the main corpus of the second part of the film cause discomfort and betray the humanist theme in favour of similar clinical and repetitive structuralist devices used in earlier works. Akerman's recurrent tracking shots passing by faces, some ignoring the lens or pretending to ignore it but betrayed by glancing looks, others openly avoiding or playing with the camera, and some obviously annoyed, match the "big brother" voyeurism of the totalitarian systems that are the subject of her introspection.

The sequence filmed inside a train station waiting room takes this methodology to its logical extreme: over the course of 11 minutes, three panoptic-style tracking shots map the crowded station with a mechanized structuralism that transforms a reflection of personal memory into a clinical pre-decoded view of post-communist societies. Akerman invokes a heavy-handed metaphor for this moment: "The images I have documented there echo other images of my childhood related with the war; although not images of things I have seen, they are part of my imaginary. For me, these people

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[124] Margulies, p. 202.

[125] Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "Chantal Akerman: The Integrity of Exile and the Everyday" in Ofner, Astrid (ed). *Chantal Akerman: eine Retrospektive der Viennale und des Österreichischen Filmmmuseums*, Viennale, 2011

waiting at a Moscow station, we could say that we are going to put them in the camps".
[126]

Ivona Margulies argues that Akerman "constructs a correlate of geography, a geography that moves in time just as it has moved with history. This geography is traversed by a personal and political history, alternate energies that resist the track of a linear progression. In D'Est, for example, this resistance reverberates against the limits of the contemporary myth of Eastern Europe."[127]

Attending to transient, unclear subjects of motion, gesture and focus, Akerman generates rhythmic combinations, where the material and signifying contexts of the film begin to be summarized in an expanded notion of spatiality. Space is measured here as a fluid and volatile dimension, continuously open for clarification. The geographical frontiers that the film crosses are re-created by the film space and the discourse of the "East" and its reverberations with Akerman's subjective geography. This deterritorialized place conjures a double metaphor: of space as transit and of the filmmaker as trafficker of geographies.

The place inside

Along with the abundant tracking shots of people, Akerman charts a series of fixed interior shots of kitchens and living rooms recalling her earlier works, as the kitchen of Jeanne Dielman for example, and subsequently they show people engaged in repetitive actions. Others are posed portraits, a bit forced, almost rehearsals for compositional

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[126] Cinergie.be. Le site du cinema belge, Webzine n°82, April 2004, my translation. Date of access: 16-05-2012.

[127] Margulies, p.202.

studies of archetypal familiar memories (Fig. 64). Composed as tableaux-vivants, they are paradoxically frozen in time, aged photographs matching the timeworn furniture. Unlike some of the travellings, the intimate sphere of the domestic space establishes a quiet sense of dignity that cancels out the implicit voyeurism. These still-lifes portraits have an empathetic lyricism reminiscent of that of the Bay Area Figurative School. Additionally, in their subtle indexing of bodies and objects with space and their investigation of the association of home with identity, (absolutely crucial in communist societies and exiled communities), they share a similar conceptual framing with those portrayed by Beatrice Minda in her book *Innenwelt (Innerworld)*, [128] a work that also follows paths of diaspora and identity.

Taken between 2003 and 2006, the Minda's photographs uncover vacant interiors of houses of Romanians in their homeland and in exile in France and Germany (Fig. 65). The book is organized into three different parts: the first, with 24 photographs, was composed in the Romanian cities of Bucharest, Timisoara, Caracal, Sambata, Oravita and Tomnatic, while the other chapters have 18 photographs each and present, respectively, houses in Paris, Munich and Berlin, the favoured destinations of 20th century Romanian immigrants, and, improvised dwellings used by illegal migrant workers in Massy-Palaiseau, in the suburbs of Paris. The book also presents, at the end, a series of short statements from the occupants.

The images do not tell us anything in particular about the individuality of the inhabitants, but they reveal echoes of the past and its correlation to the present. They interrogate the connections between personal and collective identity within the

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[128] Minda, Beatrice. *Innerworld. Photographs of Romania and of Exile.* Ostfildern*:* Hatje Cantz, 2007.

Romanian political-historical background. They also relate the private journey of the photographer to her own roots, the "atmospheres of the spaces in my childhood."

The rooms in the first series reveal an attempt to maintain a private world that had been attacked by communism. With their antique furniture and abundant books and paintings, these spaces seem to circumscribe the lost world of the intellectual bourgeoisie. In one of the essays that complements the book, Richard Wagner, himself forced to leave Romania for Germany following a political ban in 1987, exposes how the former dispossessed elite still fight for the return of their property and how they see it as an opportunity to re-create their old space[129]. Most of the time, their furniture was kept in rooms and small lodgings in order to preserve, even if symbolically, a familiar world. In their mirror role of articulation of pride and identity, the rooms are also a private form of resistance.

Despite their mapping serialism, these photographs convey a subtle narrative arrangement. Gradually, during the second series of exile houses in Germany and France, the images activate an immersion of a flat two-dimensional space reduced to corners, walls, furniture details, doors, paintings and other decorative objects "where the memory of origin is now preserved only as quotation"[130]. This route towards abstraction is condensed in the third part of the book, the images representing and indeed being a snug and restricted space, which seems to dissolve into a ghostly drawing.

"(…) One needs things to identify with. For me, all these objects are my roots. They were always in our family's house. I have lived with these objects since my childhood. They give me security. They comfort me like a benevolent eye that accompanies me.

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[129] Wagner, Richard. "The room's message. On the photographs of Beatrice Minda" in Minda, p. 21.

[130] Pohlmann, Ulrich. "On the fading of things" in Minda, p.11.

They are a continuation of life, not like the sharp disruptions that I have experienced."[131]

In *Innerworld*, Beatrice Minda transcends the documentary by suggesting a deviation from a topographic description of a place, one that serves primarily to locate and explicate, to a personal topopoetic representation of place, transporting a resonance between a choral take on history and self-identification. It is a meditation on heterogeneous and phantasmagorical space that also seems to frame a search for the collapsed house geographies of her placeless past.

These places, as Akerman's personal travelogue, are a visualization of personal and collective exiled geographies in a transitional space. They symbolize the reunion of a mapping overtone and the accumulation of a personal archive. The symbolic interiors echo the spatial subjectivities of the tectonic landscapes of Staprans' paintings, interstices of memory and identity. The tension between intimate immensity and immersion in a region mirror the subterranean traffic of geographies and internal places, and reveals an unbroken link with the borders materialized in the dialectics local/international, reality/projection and realism/abstraction.

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[131] Testimony of Ioana Ratiu in Minda, p.157.

Illustrations - Chapter 4.

Fig. 53 Richard Diebenkorn, *Interior with view of the ocean* (1958)   Fig.54 Paul Wonner,*Untitled* (1961)

Fig. 55 Staprans, *The Orange Bench* (1972)   Fig.56 Staprans *The Orange Crate with a Red Apple* (1971)
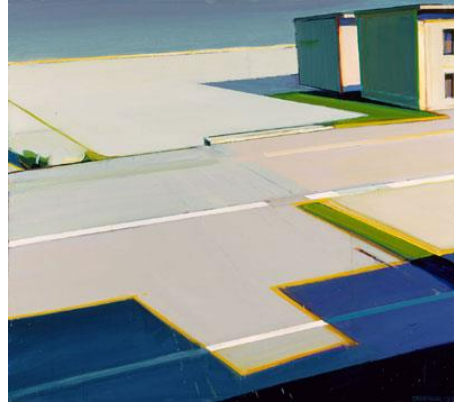
Fig. 57 Staprans, *Corvallis,Morning Frost #2* (1967) Fig. 58 Staprans, *Pacifica,Road to the sea#3 (*1995)

Fig. 59 Staprans, *Run of the river* (1965)   Fig. 60 Staprans, *Airport* (1966)
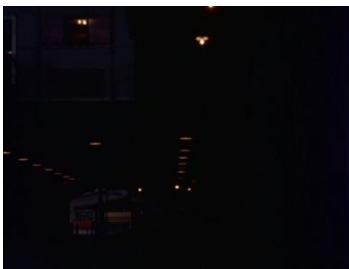

Fig. 61 Chantal Akerman, *News from home* (1977) – three different images from the last travelling.

Fig. 62 Chantal Akerman, *D'est* (1993)

Fig. 63 Chantal Akerman, *D'Est* (1993)
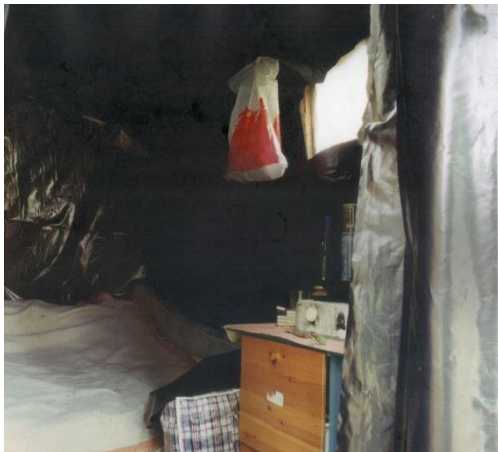
Fig. 64 Chantal Akerman, *D'Est*

Fig. 65 Beatrice Minda, *Innerwold* (2007)

5. Echoes from the city

Site infinite

In 2005, the German photographer Michael Schmidt edited a book about Berlin called *Berlin nach 1945* (Berlin After 1945)[132]. The 55 images in the book were taken in 1980, almost exclusively in Kreuzberg, a neighbourhood surrounding the wall in central Berlin, where Schmidt has lived for most of his life[133]. The pictures survey a cityscape devoid of people and focused on the post-war buildings and the places between them: playgrounds, firewalls, parking lots (Fig. 66). Schmidt has a preference for non-descript locations, although he recurrently integrates, from different angles and organized in diverse compositions the facade of Anhalter Bahnhof, formerly the largest railway terminus of Berlin, now converted to ruins. At the time, West Berlin looked like most other West German towns, but in fact, the city, as the East part, was also a territory under occupation, with formal sovereignty of United States, France and Great Britain.

Schmidt was born in October 1945, only five months after the end of the war in Europe, in what would become West Berlin. However, during his childhood he lived in the East for some years before returning to the West. The construction of the wall in 1961 arbitrarily split a part of Kreuzberg-Friedrichstadt in two, a northern one in East Berlin, and a southern one in West Berlin. The southern part was a section of the city that had been heavily bombed during the war and it was this territory, dominated by office edifices, shops and residential buildings that had turned into an isolated area once the

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[132] Schmidt, Michael. Berlin nach 1945. Göttingen: Steidl, 2005.

[133] Frecot, Janos in *Berlin nach 1945*.

wall was built. The emergency state programs launched during the 1950's under the name "Demolish to reconstruct" had to be suspended, hence the desolate crumbling stasis of the area.[134] By 1980, no careful urban planning had been developed and the partially reconstructed buildings coexisted with enormous concrete blocks randomly constructed. Only in the following years, with the organization of the "International Building Exhibition", were the open spaces and derelict structures replaced by blocks and towers built by international architects.

This "after 45 Berlin" of Kreuzberg marks a time and state in German history that no longer exists. Nevertheless, the urban document was not the subject of Schmidt's photographs, nor even was the dystopian peripheral world symbolized in the vacant lots of his neighbourhood. There is a topographical vagueness repeated like an echo between the images, a melancholic contemplation about the disruption of history and the question of identity that seems to be dedicated to projecting the lack of personal connection with place. With his distant views of in-between sites and indistinct architecture, the world created in Berlin after 1945 appears to be suspended in a hallucinatory trans-historical state. For Heinz Liesbrock, these images are a "close link between historical memory and the search for a pure visual form of evidence. His photographs do not speak of history; history has become a visual form within them, and the pictures seem to be completely saturated with its weight."[135]

Michael Schmidt's early books were also devoted to Berlin neighbourhoods, the first also about Kreuzberg (1973), then Wedding (1978) and to the city and its inhabitants in a general way (Berlin: Stadtlandschaft und Menschen, 1978). These works are less

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[134] Ibid, p.20.

[135] Liesbrock, Heinz. *Michael Schmisdt. Landschaft, Waffenruhe, Selbst, Menschenbilder(Ausschnitte)* (Michael Schmidt. Landscape, Ceasefire, Self, Pictures of People – Selections), Westfalischer Kunstverein catalogue, Munster, 1998, p.132.

abstract than *Berlin nach 1945*, revealing instead a more pronounced social and political commitment with the documentation of certain forgotten sections of the city. Although never quite identical, there is an approximate connection with the work of the "New Topographics" generation. Some of these artists - John Gossage, Stephen Shore, Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz - had visited and participated in exhibitions in the institution that Schmidt founded in 1976 and in which he was involved for five years, the "Werkstatt für Photographie" (Workshop for Photography). In 1978, Schmidt showed parts of the original exhibition from 1975 in Rochester, New York: "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape". John Gossage, one of the visitors, returned to Berlin several times later to take photographs and eventually published two works about the city, one focusing on the wall[136] and the other a study of post-wall Berlin.[137]

Schmidt's Berlin in the book has a different arrangement than that of the New Topographics school, however one that conjures up an abstract narrative with the recurrent presence of the same subjects and zones of the city. At times, a building appears fragmented and multiplied over various scales, angles and framings. Elsewhere, a parking garage jumps from the geometric foreground to the distant receding perspective and a specific firewall, scattered by the lens, doubles as a white light and a soft grey. The largely vacant space around the former Anhalter train station is the focus for no fewer than five pictures.

The repetition also extends to the formal arrangement of the composition, with its emphasis on abstractionist affinities, explorations of horizontality and verticality, and graphic formalism. The trope of an allusive proscenium recurrently recurs as a central

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[136] Gossage, John. *Berlin in the Time of the Wall*. Bethesda: Loosestrife Editions, 2004.

[137] Gossage, John. *Putting Back the Wall*. Bethesda: Loosestrife Editions, 2007.

focus between lateral geometric blocks, together with the negotiation of depth and flatness, usually bisected by cubist buildings and skyscrapers emerging in the blanched horizon. The selection and treatment of these subjects and forms animates the space with a propulsive force, the area along the margins of the image seems to penetrate through the exterior or is instead elongated beyond the frame, a synthesis that inspires a volume of speculation on the sense of place.

In the only image of the wall (Fig. 67), the proscenium trope is used to show the wall framed as an empty theatre stage between two curtain-like dark buildings. The subsequent photographs present almost the same composition of the same firewall, one frequently pictured in several images: the two images are divided in half with two large blocks of uniform space and the only difference is the rendering of the building in one photo as a ghostly white, while the other portrays a shadowy grey.

When the wall fell and everybody was taking photos, Smith was discreetly photographing deserted neighbourhoods in the East, remote from the effervescence of the present just as his photographs remain remote and he refuses eager documentation. He had previously addressed the wall more directly in the expressionistic eruption of *Waffenruhe* in 1987, showing the effects of the wall on people and the surrounding areas. After some years, in 1996 he would publish *Ein-heit*, a more conceptual work about the past and the German reunification mixing his own pictures with photographic copies of images from newspapers, magazines and propaganda publications.

The Berlin of 1980 transposed to the present of 2005 in the book is a double inscription of history, a doubly lost place amplified through the echoes between time, distance and disappearance. It is a link with an undisclosed memory, and thereby an uninterrupted route for the alignment of a metaphorical space indefinitely prolonged.

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Post-vistas

It is probable that when he was photographing Kreuzberg in 1980 with his Linhoff camera, Michael Schmidt passed by the American filmmaker Peter Hutton, also walking around the neighbourhood with his Bolex. Hutton was a guest of the DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst) and lived in West Berlin for one year with a funding from the institution to complete a silent film study of Berlin:

> (…) I spent a considerable amount of time wandering around an area between Kreuzberg and the Tiergarten. The landscape was more rural than urban. (…) There were modern structures here and there, but I was attracted to the abandoned quality of the landscape. I rarely met people when I was shooting, but when I did, I filmed from a distance. Almost everything I filmed at this time was either damaged architecture or a broken landscape that was reminiscent of another time (the 1920s or the 1950s). A feeling of alienation pervaded this area. In retrospect, I realized that I was attempting to construct in film a scale model of the city as it existed in a time period shortly after the end of the war, about the same time my knowledge of German history stopped. [138]

Peter Hutton had begun making city portraits few years before, with the first chapter of in his *New York Portrait* (US, 1978 -79, 15m), erratically structured and rather short. This was a silent film, a collection of long static shots of New York, separated by a few seconds of black, outlining a kind of primitive poetic documentary, simultaneously revisiting the origins of cinema and the traditions of painting and still photography. In *New York Portrait*, the city is revealed through chiaroscuro compositions, a style that we may also discern in the film frames of Berlin (Fig. 68) and definitely a different approach compared with the deep palette of greys and diffuse light that are characteristic of Schmidt's photographs. Also diverse, and judging by the images

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[138] Hutton, Peter. This long century. WWW.canyoncinema.com. Date of access: 12-11-2015.

available and by his discourse, is Hutton's focus on ruins, in contrast with the more distant and abstract atmosphere of Berlin nach1945.

Hutton continued his journey across the Eastern Bloc countries, first visiting Moscow and Leningrad via East Berlin during his time in the city, and then coming back to the region years later to make two city portraits, one in Budapest, still during the communist era, and the other, in the early 1990s, a study of the Polish city Lodz.

Budapest Portrait (US, 1986, 30m) was shot between 1984 and 1986, the first film made by a filmmaker outside the Soviet bloc at Béla Balász Stúdió.[139] Hutton photographed a Budapest far from the city centre's grandeur and concentrated instead on a cold and austere vision of Soviet style urban planning, which, together with enormous Socialist Realist monuments, dominated a landscape largely devoid of human presence, which was often only perceptible in oblique traces.

This sense of seclusion is also revisited in *Lodz Symphony* (US, 1993, 20m), a film Hutton shot in the Polish city just a few years following the break-up of communism. Hutton points the camera to the smoke of the chimneys and the movement of the textiles machines, introducing the industrial heritage of Lodz, a manufacturing dynamo in the 19th that declined in post-industrial society. Unlike the films of Vertov or Ruthmann from the city symphony tradition of the 1920s, Hutton does not celebrate the brilliance of the modern city. Instead, paired with the industrial backdrop, we see unoccupied streets and decadent façades, a disappearing world that Hutton metaphorically outlines at the end of the film with a gradually darkening succession of almost abstract compositions (Fig. 71), smoothly interrupted in the last shot by a white curtain blowing in the centre of the black frame.

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[139] The studio made some alterations (including removing the late Andropov's portrait) and added a soundtrack for a version of the film re-titled Memoirs of a City.

However, the film intertwines with an even broader reflection that alludes to the painful century that Poland experienced. *Lodz Symphony* is, in this sense, a lament, not only for a vanished era, but also for the people that suffered the trauma of World War II and the Holocaust. Shots of photographic portraits posted on walls are combined with the perilous equilibrium of workers on rooftops (Fig. 69) and the smoke slowly waving from the industrial chimneys, while images of cemeteries balance despondent framings of anonymous buildings: an evocative world of a waning age still haunted by the weight of Poland history. (Fig. 70)

Hutton's usual arrangement of long stationary shots is surprisingly interrupted by a travelling shot depicting the smiling faces of several polish men looking into the camera, a very uncommon procedure in the work of this filmmaker that echoes, although less theatrically, a similar tracking shot from *Karhoza*t, a film by Hungarian director Bela Tarr from 1987, and several shots from Akerman's *D'Est*.

It is a work that reveals a deep reverence for the world, sharing the amazed contemplation of the first filmmakers with the romantic sensibility of traditional landscape painting. In fact, these are the programmatic axes with which he has been continuously associated (and often stated in interviews): on the one hand, as first pointed out by Scott MacDonald[140], the 19th century Luminist painters (the so-called Hudson River School)[141], and on the other, the Lumière Brothers' vistas.

Scott MacDonald recalls the distinction made in 19th-centuryAmerican landscape painting between the "grand operatic" painters and the "Luminists" ('the still small voice', in the words of critic Barbara Novak) and draws a parallel with 20th centuryfilm:

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[140] Macdonald, Scott. Peter Hutton: The Filmmaker as Luminist in *Chicago Review*, 47.3, 2001, p.67-87.

[141] One of his films, *In Titan's Goblet* (USA, 1991, 10m), refers explicitly to a landscape painting by Thomas Cole from 1833, who is regarded as the father of the Hudson River School of painting.

the former epitomized "the literal, as well as historical, background of epic commercial films",[142] such as John Ford's films, and documentary approaches such as Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (US,1921), Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (US,1984) and Robert Fricke's *Baraka* (US,1993); the latter, a trend observed within American experimental film and represented by Peter Hutton himself, Larry Gottheim, Nathaniel Dorsky and Leighton Pierce.

Like the Luminists, Hutton's focus is less a vision of place as a monumental appearance than a personal identification with the rhythms of nature and their effects. He aligns with a film phenomenology point of view, and in this regard perfectly fits with the early silent period and part of the American avant-garde, although his works, delineated by silhouetted buildings and suggestive motions, carry a shadowy subjectivity that undermines the documentary.

A merchant seaman before turning to film, Peter Hutton was born in Detroit and lived many years in the Hudson River Valley. Most of his landscape films, where his affiliation with the Luminists is more prominent, reaffirm this personal association with specific places, as is the case with the series of studies of the Hudson River and its surrounding landscapes, comprising such films as *Landscape (for Manon)* (US,1987, 18m), *Study for a River* (US, 1997,16m), *Time and Tide* (US, 2000, 35m) and his recent film (also about industrial Detroit) *Three Landscapes* (US, 2013, 47m). Many shots in his films are of boats and ships, or filmed trough them, also reflecting his attachment with the maritime world, as in *At the Sea* (US, 2006, 60m), a film that obliquely tracks the life and death of a shipping container, depicting first its construction in an East

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[142] Macdonald, p.67.

Asian port, then the voyage "at sea" and finally its disassembly on a shore in Bangladesh.

There is an undeniable fascination for vistas of the earth's surface and an affinity with the work of early filmmakers that Hutton himself acknowledges. Nevertheless he brings a first-person perspective to the contemplative non-fiction reality, whether through his life experience, or as a visitor with an "idea" of place, as he describes in his thoughts about Eastern Europe and Berlin in particular:

> (…) The Berlin of 1980 was steeped in the atmosphere of a John le Carré novel. The cold war was on. Reagan had just been elected president in the US. The city I saw felt more like Ruttman's Berlin after a lobotomy: vacant lots, ugly modern architecture, a lot of negative space. (…) I was drawn to one particular area in Kreuzberg: an overgrown field behind the Anhalter Bahnhof. A chunk of the original façade of the train station remained standing, like a piece of brown bread that had been partially eaten by rodents. Behind the façade was a vast field, crisscrossed with many worn paths, where trucks occasionally parked. Beyond the field were old industrial structures, including a bunker, originally part of the railroad yards, now collapsed and overgrown with trees and bushes. The area was both mysterious and foreboding. This was my favorite piece of landscape, and I returned to it many times throughout the year (…)[143]

If in Berlin he searches for the immense empty field of the disappeared train station, in Lodz he charts the signs of the disintegration of the industrial world, a symbolic dissolution of the city's soul. It is a revisitation of the idea of a former industrial capital, filtered through the Cold War age that led to its decline and punctuated with the ghosts of the World War. The contemplative and interpretative modes of Mitchell are intertwined: while the painterly silent meditative compositions revert to a primordial

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[143] Hutton, Peter. This long century. WWW.canyoncinema.com

introspective gaze, the allusions to the past of Lodz and Poland condense a humanist and material theme of disappearance. From the Lumière vistas, the city symphonies of the 1920s and the aesthetics of post-war neorealism, Hutton retains an interest in the atmosphere of the city and its suburbs, but eschews any moralistic or informational dimension. At the same time, he projects the 19th century Luminist landscape sensibility and its own dreamy and nostalgic version of the sublime onto the sensation of urban emptiness. As a result, Lodz Symphony evolves into an evocative portrait of a concurrent real and idealistic lost world in which perception and cinematographic registration itself are scrutinized in the space of the film shot. "I think if an image is engaging, it provides the eye with an interesting spatial map to follow. I'm interested in reminding people of the visual potential of engaging with an image, of going on a little journey within the image. Each shot becomes a film in itself, if it's choreographed in an interesting way, where you see the development of a movement and often a transformation and then the conclusion". [144]

In *Lodz Symphony*, a saturated image emerges through this equation between the materiality of the frame, reiterated with the black leader that marks the space between the shots, and the historically resonant reality that expands the atmospheric details of light and movement circumscribed in the film shot.

Muted site

When the Allied forces closed in on Milan in late April of 1945, Mario Sironi, fearing partisan reprisals, decided to take the road out of Milan toward Switzerland. But the

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[144] MacDonald, Scott. *A Critical Cinema 3. Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998, p.145.

Italian painter associated with Mussolini was stopped at a partisan roadblock, and only saved from being shot when the writer Gianni Rodari intervened. Although he avoided judicial condemnation, as an artist deeply identified with the fallen regime, his status drastically deteriorated in the post-World War II period. He had already returned to easel painting in 1943, abandoning the monumental murals and public paintings he composed during the 1930s, but this time the characteristic melancholy of his earlier cityscapes was even deeper and darker.

At the beginning of his career, Mario Sironi was linked with Umberto Boccioni and the Futurists, but shortly after World War I he came progressively closer to the work of the metaphysical painters Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carrá. He began to paint urban landscapes, some retaining the imagery of the industrial world of the Futurists, but replacing their love of modernity and movement with the mysterious world of metaphysical painting. These cityscapes of empty streets, massive walls, warehouses and geometric buildings depicted a gloomy realm of muted tones and blocky forms. Most of the landscapes were from the proletarian suburbs of Milan, where Sironi had lived since the end of the war, and they portray the working class neighbourhood reduced to a scheme of flat planes of vacant streets, subdued buildings and bleak horizons, painted in the muted hues of ochre, brown and grey that branded the industrial world and the public housing façades of Milan. Occasionally, the haunted gloom is extended to anonymous traces of urban life - a tiny tram, a dark truck, a lonely passer-by. (Fig. 72, 73)

Mario Sironi was a complex and controversial figure. A devout fascist even before 1921, he was the artist most closely associated with Mussolini and the regime and the one who stayed with Il Duce until the fall of Fascism, unlike other cultural figures who also supported the regime, such as Bontempelli, who withdrew in the late 1930s, or

Pagano,who died in a concentration camp for his anti-Fascist activities, or Marinetti, who openly criticized the regime's antimodernist philosophy. He even supported the Republic of Salò, the German-backed Italian puppet state of 1943-45 (Marinetti also supported the republic, but he died in 1944). For that reason, the views on Sironi's art and idiosyncrasies is overloaded with political extrapolations and conflicting partitions between those who see his glumness as an intrinsic desolation over the solitude of the modern world, and those who accuse him of cynical propagandist mythmaking. There remains a division between the consideration of his early work and the mural allegories of the regime as separate universes or as the same sort of ideological instruments.

For Braun, for instance, "there is no contradiction between Sironi's urban landscapes and his murals: both respond to Fascism as it evolved from a movement to an established order. His early images of the industrial milieu have their roots in the radical left (Futurism and Syndicalism) and Nationalist ideologies that formed the basis of Mussolini's first political program"[145]. As she states, these are not the expression of the author's particular melancholy inclinations or a result of personal problems, but rather a deliberate illustrative way of pointing out the social tensions of the Milanese working classes of that time. She extends revisionist criticism by dropping any kind of artistic autonomy: the pictorial techniques are used by Sironi to veil the urban scene in silence and immobility in order to install an epic rendering of the urban environment as a cryptic revolution. The factories and empty streets, for Braun, allude to a series of strikes that occurred in Milan neighborhoods in 1920, and the trucks are those of the Fascist squads that attacked the workers' revolutionary bolshevism.

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[145] Braun, Emily. *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics under Fascism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.16.

Whether rhetorical caricatures of ideology, or proto-post-apocalyptic muted settings, the urban landscapes of Mario Sironi account for crisscrossed reverberations with the city, the personal and the social transitions that affected the country's identity. Shaped in years of controversy and conflicting existences, of aesthetic eruptions and post-war trauma, they call for a reflection on a critical period of history. Their understated beauty and enigmatic mood interlace a texture of disquiet suspension, a site of absence. (Fig. 74)

Before Robert Smithson in the 1960s turned his attention to the industrial sublime and its "entropic landscapes" of manufactured wastelands, Sironi was painting uncanny silos, factories and warehouses (Fig. 75, 76). The city's emptiness not only denotes the bareness of the suburbs, but also evokes a feeling of personal estrangement. In many ways, the cityscapes recall those of Schmidt: the solidity and geometry of the buildings juxtaposed with deserted surface-like streets and terrains, the lack of identity with place, the proletarian peripheral neighbourhoods of an abstract petrified world. (Fig. 77)

Later, in his post Second World War paintings, the landscapes become bleached material traces, like informalist palimpsest gestures of despair. This last phase of Sironi's work reorders space as a dreamlike claustrophobic plane, reflecting an ascetic variant of post-war modernistic existentialism but, unlike his earlier period, not placed within tangible political and topographical milieus. Yet, within each period, he brought to our awareness a rendering of the world delineated in metaphorical layers of geographical drama. (Fig. 78)

Alain Bonfand, who wrote his doctoral dissertation about the melancholy and anguish in the work of Sironi (and Klee) specifically in the period between 1933 and 1940[146], as the painter institutionally embraced the fascist dogmas in the form of monumental murals, noted the affinities of Sironi's melancholy with the work of Michelangelo Antonioni. This is first seen in an explicit quotation in the film *La Notte* (Italy, 1961, 122m), when the character played by Marcelo Mastroianni in his apartment passes a large painting by Sironi called *La Notte*, a relatively unknown work of the Italian painter portraying a naked woman in the foreground[147]. The work was, most likely, the inspiration for the title of the film, but what really defines the shared universe is the overall sensation of gloominess that spans the film, especially in the wanderings of Mastroianni's wife, played by Jeanne Moreau, across the outskirts of Milan, the same setting as Sironi's earlier landscapes. A second presence of Sironi's work is more evident in *Il Deserto rosso* (Italy, 1964, 120m), Antonion's drama based in the industrial zone of Ravenna, a film that fuses despair, sadness and mental stress with foggy landscapes, the smoke of the chimneys and the abstract solidness of factories and ports.

When Sironi died in August of 1961, Antonioni was filming *L'Eclisse*[148], a film that is mostly set in the E.U.R. neighbourhood, an upper-class residential area in the outskirts of the city expressly constructed around the European Exhibition that the Mussolini government was preparing to show off all its grandeur, but which never took place

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[146] Bonfand, Alain. *L'Ombre de la nuit : La mélancolie et l'angoisse dans les oeuvres de Mario Sironi et de Paul Klee entre 1933 et 1940.* Paris: La Difference, 2005.

[147] Bonfand, 2007.

[148] L'Eclisse was filmed between July and September of 1961.

because of the beginning of the war[149]. *L'Eclisse* begins with the end of a relationship and ends with a montage-based sequence of mostly empty shots of the neighbourhood, without any of the characters of the film. Here we find a dissolution of relationships, traditional narrative and a phantom exhibition that never existed in a place marked by the material traces of fascism; but also of deep associations of place and space within the cinematographic form. As the last sequence of the film suggest, the palimpsest-image is an equation of disappearance and disintegration as much as of echoes, superpositions and constructions.

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[149] Rhodes, John David. The eclipse of place: Rome's EUR, from Rossellini to Antonioni in Rhodes, John David and Elena Gorfinkel (eds). *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
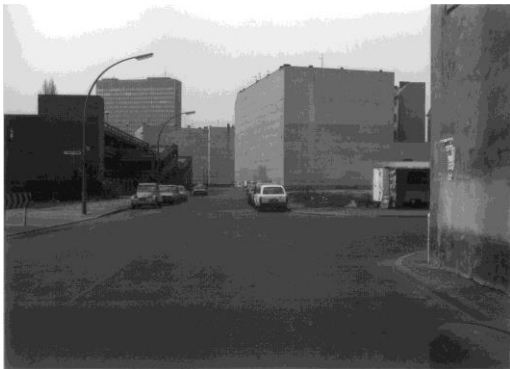
Illustrations - Chapter 5.

Fig. 66 Michael Schmidt, *Berlin nach 1945*(1980)

Fig. 67 Michael Schmidt, *Berlin nach 1945* (1980)

Fig. 68 Peter Hutton, film frames of Berlin in 1980

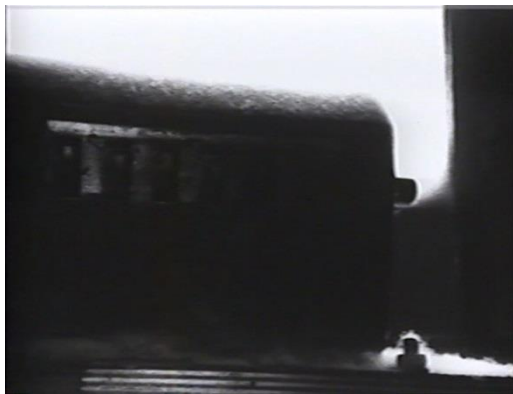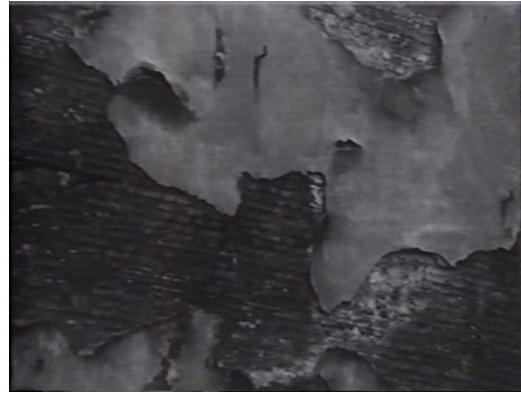Fig. 69 Peter Hutton, *Lodz Symphony* (1993) - "Eisenstein-like" low-angle shots of roof-tops

Fig. 70 Peter Hutton, *Lodz Symphony* (1993)

Fig. 71 Peter Hutton, *Lodz Symphony* (1993) – the last four images of the film

Fig. 72 Mario Sironi, *Paesaggio Urbano* (1919)   Fig. 73 Mario Sironi, *Paesaggio Urbano* (1921)

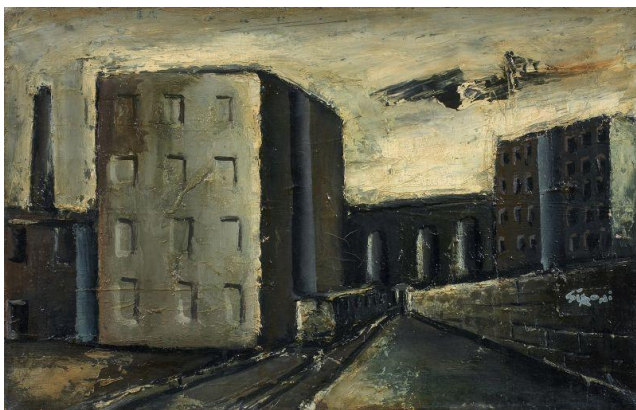Fig. 74 Mario Sironi, *Gasometro, dela citta* (1922)

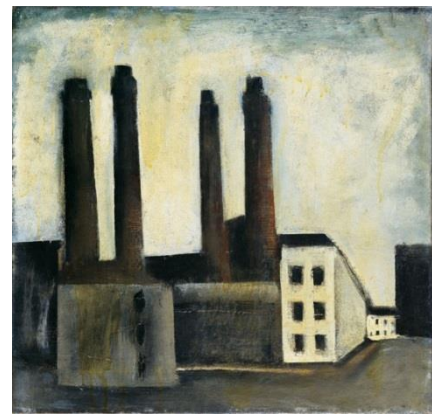

Fig. 75 Mario Sironi, *Periferia* (1934)

Fig. 76 Mario Sironi, *Paesaggio urbano* (1927)

Fig. 77 Mario Sironi, *Paesaggio urbano* (1928)

Fig. 78 Mario Sironi, *Paesaggio* (1949)

Conclusion

By attempting to recognize the principles based on which geographic studies approach the correlation between place and film, I have tried to determine whether the notion of film geography surpasses the mere identification of geographic realism in films. I have isolated two essential limitations of the field: an ontological scheme based on the characteristics of film mechanics and the reduction of cinematic place to a landscape theory. Although landscape is often cited as product and agent of meaning, its significance is only considered in the realm of narrative film.

Most other film studies about place that are not focused on specific questions related to cities are also dedicated to theories of landscape in narrative film, usually integrating spectatorship considerations and the former tradition of landscape painting, as is the case with Martin Lefebvre's spectacular mode transferred from the early "cinema of attractions" conception.

Thus, to be able to write landscape and place as a cinematic verb instead of a noun, I propose Alan Bonfand's idea of the saturated image as a way to promote an equation between the space of the frame and a wider notion of spatiality. Unlike Bonfand, however, void and emptiness are not negative concepts used to disintegrate the system of representation; they are instead a propulsive force capable of developing a new narrative of place and space. Then, the antagonistic "contemplative" and "interpretative" landscape theories of W. J. T. Mitchell can be traversed, not only by an overarching curve, but also by a film space emerged from the double condition of the saturated cinematic image: emptiness and immensity as elements of a film geography.

The combination of emptiness and narration brings questions of philosophical and cinematic representations into a structure of non-descriptive studies about place. The challenge of a re-evaluation of some of the conventions reserved to the conception of emptiness in documentary and essay films rests on the idea of the palimpsest-image as a mediator between history and imagination, material reality and the expression of boundlessnes. By simultaneously rejecting sociological cartographic procedures of serialist films about place and the apolitical formalism of the structural film, I argue that it is possible to depart from a view of landscape as an enclosed readymade fragment to expand it to a reflection about place as a narrative dimension, memorial traces and cinematic dwelling.

The space of enigma alludes not only to the organization of space in an image and its translation of reality, but also the gap between the images, the catalyst framing of the movement forward, and the inward opposite of the compressed spatiality, which is illustrated by the dynamic of shape and dissolution. This dialogue produces a network of spatial perspectives that provoke a variety of visual and metaphorical considerations, including historical constructions of identity and symbolic explorations of images.

This multi-layered resonance further illuminates the reading of a post-communist society by Sharunas Bartas as a profound insertion in the film imaginary of the historical role that landscape and place play in the representation of a nation and how the abstract land of a permanent outsider epitomizes a diluted cinematographic space.

The assembly of geographies and identity with the crossing of biographical signals and spatial speculations as represented in the journeys from the East of Post-War Latvia to exiled America in the West, to return to the post-communist East, only to detour again from a shared second point of departure in Germany and chart the diaspora from East to

West once more, serves to inscribe a history of places and a narrative of space through combinations of the various ideas of borders affiliated with the palimpsest-image, such as interior and exterior, real and imagined, local and regional. The coexistence of these interactions expands something less often considered, that abstraction and figuration are not merely concurrent poles of a visual work, but also a spatial fiction of place, whether by means of existential travelogues covering the Jewish diaspora and the dissolution of the Communist East, or organized through personal intimations with the history of the Romanian exile and immigration. As the "realist abstraction and psychological expressionism" of Minda's photographs suggest, Akerman's film charts and Staprans paintings recall, the potentials of this agglomeration reside between the interstices of the tectonics of history and individual memories, in the place where transpositions of ideas of place and reinventions of space occur.

These reverberations are extended from the aesthetics of contamination of painting, photography and film in the post-communist portrait of Lodz Symphony, to the echoes between different post-war periods and the peripheral neighbourhoods of Berlin, Lodz, Milan and Rome and the crossings of different generations, personalities and political affiliations.

Hutton's film hints at a nostalgic lost world through the mapping of pre-communist signs and is mediated by other nostalgic identifications with 19th century landscape painting, the origins of the cinematographer's gaze and the avant-garde "pure perception", while Schmidt's photos interact with other moments and facts of history and identity, writing with the cityscapes of muted infinite sites, as the paintings of Sironi, narratives of estrangement and isolation.

This work contributes to the history of landscape and place studies by expanding the notion of landscape, as bracketed by W. J. T. Mitchell, beyond "contemplative" and "interpretative" theories. I argue that these theories can be equated and reinterpreted by reformulating the notion of the saturated image and integrate it in the concept of a palimpsest-image - an inventive construction of the image, a geographical and cultural reinvention of place, and a narrative approach of spatiality. I believe that the study of different ways to write place as a cinematic verb conjugated with artistic and philosophical considerations of cinematic space beyond ontological discussions can contribute to the film studies field. Finally, I think that the concepts of the palimpsest-image and film geography unified in the practical work of *Novi (2012-2015)* can indicate a different path in films about place by reinventing emptiness and spatiality as forms of meaning.

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Filmography

At the Sea (Peter Hutton, US, 2006, Col, 60mins.)

Budapest Portrait (Memories of a City) (Peter Hutton, 1986, US, B&W, 30mins.)

D'Est (Chantal Akerman, 1993, Belgium, France, Portugal, Col, 107 mins)

De L'Autre Côté (Chantal Akerman, 2002, France, Belgium, Col, 103 min)

Earth of the Blind (Audrius Stonys, 1992, Lithuania, B&W, 24 mins.)

Exit (Sharon Lockhart, 2008, US, Col, 40 mins.)

Faust (F. W. Murnau, 1926, Germany, B&W, 106m)

Few of Us (Sharunas Bartas, 1996, Lithuania, Col, 105m)

Histoires D'Amérique (Chantal Akerman, 1989, Belgium, France, Col, 92 mins)

Get Out of the Car (Thom Andersen, 2010, US, Col, 30 mins.)

Il Deserto Rosso (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964, Italy, France, Col, 120mins)

In the Memory of a Day Gone By (Sharunas Bartas, 1990, Lithuania, B&W, 40 mins.)

Karhozat (Bela Tarr, 1987, Hungary, B&W, 116 mins)

Là-Bas (Chantal Akerman, 2006, Belgium, France, Col, 78mins.)

Landscape (for Manon) (Peter Hutton, 1987, US, B&W, 18mins)

La Notte Michelangelo Antonioni, 1961, Italy, France, B&W, 122mins)

L'Eclisse (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962, Italy, B&W, 126mins)

Letter from Siberia (Chis Marker, 1957, France, Col, 62 mins)

Lodz Symphony (Peter Hutton, 1993, US, B&W, 20mins)

London (Patrick Keiller, 1994, UK, Col, 85 mins)

Los (James Benning, 2001, US, Col, 90mins)

Lunch Break (Sharon Lockhart, 2008, US, Col, 80 mins)

News from home (Chantal Akerman, 1977, France, Belgium, Col, 85 mins)

New York Portrait: Chapter I (Peter Hutton, 1979, US, B&W, 16mins)

Novi (2012-2015) (Miguel Machado, 2016, Portugal, UK, B&W, 54mins)

One Way Boogie Woogie (James Benning, 1977, Canada, US, Col, 60mins.)

Robinson in Ruins (Patrick Keiller, 2010, UK, Col, 101mins)

Robinson in Space (Patrick Keiller, 1997, UK, Col, 82mins)

Study for a River (Peter Hutton, 1997, US, B&W, 16mins.)

Sud (Chantal Akerman, 1999, Belgium, Color, 70mins)

Ten Minutes Before the Flight of Icarus (Arūnas Matelis, 1990, Lithuania, Col, 10 mins)

The Black Box (Algimantas Maceina, 1994, Lithuania, Col, 38 mins.)

The Corridor (Sharunas Bartas, 1994, Lithuania, B&W, 85 mins.)

The Man With a Movie Camera (Dziga Vertov, 1929, Soviet Union, B&W, 68mins)

The Searchers (John Ford, 1956, US, Col, 119mins)

The Suspended Step of the Stork (Theo Angelopoulos, 1991, Greece, Col, 143 mins.)

The Trial (Orson Welles, 1962, France, Italy, Germany, B&W, 118mins)

Three Days (Sharunas Bartas, 1991, Lithuania, Col, 75 mins.)

Three Landscapes (Peter Hutton, 2013, US, Col, 47mins.)

Time and Tide (Peter Hutton, 2000, US, Col, 36mins.)

Tofalaria (Sharunas Bartas, 1986, Soviet Union Col, 16 mins)

Ulysses' Gaze (Theo Angelopoulos, 1995, Greece, Col, 176mins.)

Painting

1969-2 (Clyfford Still, 1969, US)

After a Rain (Feodor Vasilyev, 1869, Russia)

Airport (Raimonds Staprans, 1968, US)

Corvallis,Morning Frost #2 (Raimonds Staprans, 1967, US)

Country – Light (Josef Sima, 1967, Czechoslovakia)

Double paysage, tempête électrique (Josef Sima, 1928, Czechoslovakia)

Gasometro, dela citta (Mario Sironi, 1922, Italy)

Interior with view of the ocean (Richard Diebenkorn, 1958, US)

Les Yeux Clos (Odilon Redon, 1890, France)

Pacifica,Road to the sea #3 (Raimonds Staprans, 1995, US)

Paesaggio Urbano (Mario Sironi, 1919, Italy)

Paesaggio Urbano (Mario Sironi, 1921, Italy)

Paesaggio urbano (Mario Sironi, 1927,Italy)

Paesaggio urbano (Mario Sironi, 1928, Italy)

Periferia (Mario Sironi, 1934, Italy)

Run of the river (Raimonds Staprans, 1965, US)

The First Snow (Ivan Shishkin, 1875, Russia)

The Orange Bench (Raimonds Staprans, 1972, US)

The Orange Crate With a Red Apple (Raimonds Staprans, 1971, US)

These Poor Villages (Fedor Tiutchev, 1859, Russia)

Untitled (Paul Wonner, 1961, US)

Photography

B.E.-L.Y.-96 (Dirk Braeckman, 1996, Belgium, B&W)

Berlin in the Time of the Wall (John Gossage, 2004, US, B&W)

Berlin nach 1945 (Michael Schmidt, 1980, Germany, B&W)

Berlin: Stadtlandschaft und Menschen Michael Schmidt, 1978, Germany, B&W)

C.C.-G.E.-95 (Dirk Braeckman, 1995, Belgium, B&W)

D.I.-D.U.-00 (Dirk Braeckman, 2000, Belgium, B&W)

E.D.-L.O.-97 (Dirk Braeckman, 1997, Belgium, B&W)

Ein-heit (Michael Schmidt, 1996, Germany, B&W)

Evidence (Luc Sante, 1992, US, B&W)

Innerwold (Beatrice Minda, 2007, Germany, Col.)

K.A.-A.N.-96 (Dirk Braeckman, 1996, Belgium, B&W)

Kreuzberg Michael Schmidt, 1973, Germany,

N.P.-Z.L 97) (Dirk Braeckman, 1997, Belgium, B&W)

Putting Back the Wall (John, Gossage, 2007, US, B&W)

Repérages (Alain Resnais, 1974, France, B&W)

Spomenik (Jan Kempenaers, 2010, Belgium, Col,)

Waffenruhe Michael Schmidt, 1987, Germany, B&W)

Wedding Michael Schmidt, 1978, Germany, B&W)

Etching on paper

Hill with a Hole (Brodsky & Utkin, 1987/90, Soviet Union)

Diomede (Brodsky & Utkin, 1989/90, Soviet Union)

Columbarium Habitabile (Brodsky & Utkin, 1989/90, Soviet Union)

Columbarium Architecturae (Brodsky & Utkin, 1984/90, Soviet Union)

Installation

Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's D'Est (Chantal Akerman, 1995)

Litography

Dans Le Rêve (Odilon Redon, 1879, France, B&W)

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