



POETRY AND FILM: *EL SOL DEL MEMBRILLO*
AND *LOS AMANTES DEL CÍRCULO POLAR*

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In the running commentary for the DVD edition of *The Godfather* trilogy, Francis Ford Coppola states his predilection for some scenes that are, in his view, particularly memorable. In part two of the series, the “Murder of Fannucci” scene is a case in point. The loosening of a light bulb and a towel-wrapped gun that bursts into flames after the shooting draw the following remarks:

We are always trying to figure out how to make these violent scenes memorable or interesting or just . . . you know, if you give it a detail that is just a little different, that it somehow makes what it’s really about, which is somebody murdering somebody, just a little more . . . poetic, I guess, memorable in some way.

The use of the adjective “poetic” to describe a scene in a movie is nothing new. Actually, entire films are routinely dubbed “poetic” or “lyric” in an attempt to recognize certain moments in their narrative that could be equivalent to what Francis Ford Coppola identifies in his film. Especially noteworthy in Coppola’s commentary, however, is the word “poetic” in connection with such a scene. Notwithstanding its violent nature or its clearly narrative-oriented editing, poetry can still be invoked as the concept that truly characterizes this sequence of images. Underlying Coppola’s notion of what would make a scene poetic one may distinguish: a) an appeal to the category of the memorable, hence a tacit invocation of memory as an enhancing poetic fac-

tor in the realm of the visual; b) an explicit acknowledgement of the special value of details in such a medium; and c) the presupposition that, whatever poetry is, it will make the abstract concrete. For some, these would hardly constitute definite traits of the lyric genre. In Coppola's view, they account for the poetic element in a cinematic murder. In filmmakers' reflections on their craft, scholarly articles, journalistic film criticism and reviewing, and publicity campaigns, the assumptions on which the different uses of the label *poetic film* may rest are manifold, yet one might say that they activate the same set of expectations. To state that a film is *lyric* or *poetic* seems to promise a cinematic experience that will somehow differ from our ordinary experience of movies as storytelling. Such a statement also seems to assume that poetry *creates a stir* in the film's flow, that it hints at the road not taken for cinema as artistic production, that—if only for a fleeting moment—the medium of the moving picture is exonerated from being simply entertainment, just plot-oriented fiction or the mere photographic projection of reality. To state that a film is poetic ultimately suggests that we may in fact know what both the lyric and cinema *really are*. It is, after all, a matter of essences.

Through a deeper yet more self-questioning engagement with the “essence” of both the lyric and film, this essay poses the set of questions that naturally follows from that continuous, casual pairing up of literary genre and audiovisual medium. What does it really mean to say that a film is *lyric* or *poetic*? What types of images should one expect to see that could make the film diverge from *normal* cinematic experience? And, even more telling, what conception—or preconception or misconception—of poetry warrants that label? These pages will provide, if not answers, a further degree of self-awareness in the perception of lyricism in the art of the moving picture.

While I begin by citing a number of casual, to some extent uncritical, assertions on the relations between poetry and film, it is not my intention here to dismiss them as theoretically naïve. Their ubiquity is in itself eloquent. One can dismiss their recurrence as trivial usages of an overrated adjective or, quite the contrary, one can try to ascertain what that recurrence means. In other words, even if the term *poetic* is employed for lack of a better word, we might do well to scrutinize that lack and the dependence on that particular word to fill it.

The first section of this essay turns quotation into criteria and establishes the parameters for a more rigorous study of the poetic film. It also addresses, however implicitly, the need to question the universal validity of our notions of both the film medium and the lyric. Regarding the latter, one can affirm

that the origins of the genre as we understand it today are Romantic and the notion of subjectivity has come to constitute the genre's conditions of possibility.¹ "Non-narrativity" will be the critical concept added here, one that figures prominently in established definitions of the lyric. It is a concept (in fact a criterion) that has been intuitively suggested by filmmakers and occasionally theorized by critics as a decisive factor when deeming a film poetic.

The second and third sections of this essay will go on to test the critical productivity of the aforementioned criteria (subjectivity and non-narrativity) on two recent Spanish productions: *Los amantes del círculo polar* [*Lovers of the Arctic Circle*] (Medem 1998) and *El sol del membrillo* [*Dream of Light*] (Erice 1992). Questions of a national cinema will not be absent from the following discussion, although they will not be fully addressed either.

Quotations and criteria.

The language of cinema has been for so long and so overwhelmingly narrative that we tend to forget that, for many a pioneer critic and filmmaker, poetry was the stuff cinema was made of. Such a specific linkage between a verbal art and an audiovisual medium will eventually recur in the more elaborated thoughts of a Buñuel or a Pasolini. Is it possible that those early assertions and these more recent musings could help us isolate the values at stake in a theoretical discussion about poetry and film? Could they establish a web of quotations from which we could derive a set of key critical categories? Do they announce those Benjaminian moments of discontinuity that will allow us to "read the actual history of cinema against the background of its 'inherent negation', of the possible alternative histories which were 'repressed' and, from time to time, break in as 'returns of the repressed'" (Žižek 123)?

Before attempting to answer these questions, a preliminary clarification is in order. Although I make use of some of the thoughts elicited by avant-garde or experimental cinema, I do not concern myself here with the products of such a filmic practice. The cinematic production of the so-called historical avant-gardes, or the films by, say, Maya Deren or Stan Brakhage

1. See Arac. On the history and importance of the *lyrisches Ich* for a modern understanding of the lyric as the "literary genre of the subject," see Combe.

constitute extreme cases, frontal assaults at the hegemonic ways of filming in their times. Yet my interest is, once more, the subtler inscription of poetry (or the more subtle possibilities of invoking such an inscription) in films less obviously counter-hegemonic. The contact zones here are deemed more productive than the zones of exclusion. The parallel history of avant-garde, *modernist*, or experimental cinema is, without a doubt, instructive. But it is precisely its parallel course to the so-called mainstream cinema that I opt not to follow. I am rather interested in intersections, in tangencies, in the aforementioned contact zones. In that sense, the return of the repressed image and the invocation of a Benjaminian historicism are indicative enough of my research program.

Riccio Canudo, reputedly the first film critic in history and inventor of the “seventh art” designation, characterized cinema in 1914 as “Plastic Art that unfolds according to the laws of Rhythmic Art” (Romaguera 18). In 1926, Jean Epstein, who contended that film was not the seventh but the first of the arts, also called it “lyrosophy.” In so doing, he suggested for the first time that the art of the moving picture was an exercise in “image thinking.”² For Epstein, “cinema [was] the most powerful medium of poetry, the most real medium of the unreal, of the ‘surreal,’ as Apollinaire would have had it” (Romaguera 340). Six years later, Jean Cocteau asked himself “what the cinema of poets might be” (ibid. 46), and declared that in *Le sang d’un poète* (1930) he literally “tr[ie]d to film poetry” (ibid. 47). Germaine Dulac proclaimed that the new art should “work the rhythm of images” to make each movie a “symphonic poem” (ibid. 96–97). She was actually commenting on Abel Gance’s *La Roue* (1923), and the French director himself would declare in 1954 that, in retrospect, “cinema’s impotence rested precisely on its exclusive tendency to narration” (ibid. 469).³ Not even the documentary, sometimes posited as a direct reflection of reality and as the only use of the movie camera that could defy the dominance of narration, is in reality free from a substantial and meaningful association with poetry. In his pioneering articles on the nature of the early documentary, John Grierson went as far as to write

2. “Art is thinking in images,” goes the maxim with which Victor Shklovsky begins his famous “Art as Artifice.” At this point, I must mention one of the many “roads not taken” by these pages: the concept of image as an integral part of both the lyric and film. For reasons of space, the contemporary critical discourse on ekphrasis or on the verbal/visual relations are obviously absent from this paper.

3. The quotes by Canudo, Epstein, Dulac, and Gance are all my translations from the Spanish.

that “Realist documentary [. . .] has given itself the job of making poetry where no other poet has gone before it” (151).

While many other similar quotes are available, no more are necessary to make this point. These pioneering heralds of cinema *qua* art repeatedly invoked poetry as one of its first conditions of possibility.⁴ Already perceiving the new art as under the pressure of its commercial uses, they underscore the *poetic* essence of film as art in an attempt to contest the rapid consolidation of film as a type of storytelling akin to theater and the novel. “Mere” entertainment, “realist” narrativity (as in the “reality” created by realist or naturalist novels and theater), photographic reproduction of reality . . . in the early attempts at evaluating what the new medium could offer as art, the obstacles and the foes were already apparent. Among them, the most formidable seems to be narrativity or, again, narration understood as a syntagmatic chain of images that both obeys and enacts certain temporal and causal laws.

The first theorist to propose a description of the precise mechanisms by which film avoids the fate of becoming a narrative art form is Victor Shklovsky. Poetry is, of course, the alternative. More precisely, a specific idea of poetic discourse in consonance with Shklovsky’s theoretical principles provides the critical starting point. Hence, the particular idea of the lyric underpinning his “Poetry and Prose in Cinematography” (1927) is one that privileges form over content and one that needs prose as the other of poetry. “In a poetic film,” writes the Russian formalist, “the technical-formal features predominate over the semantic features. The composition is resolved by formal techniques rather than by semantic methods” (Eagle 130). And, in a telling conceptual jump, Shklovsky immediately concludes: “Plotless film is poetic film” (ibid.). More recently, but in the same contrastive spirit, Jenaro Talens also has opposed “poetic discourse” to “narrative discourse” (19–26). For Talens, himself a poet, the former “is based on the very process of articulation, which is in itself the only narrated event” (21). Likewise, in poetic discourse the subordination of space and time “to the logic of causality [. . .] is not pertinent” (ibid.) and the “reader / spectator has to construct, that is, (re)cognize” and not only “discover and recognize” (ibid.). Talens anchors his conceptualization of poetic discourse on Luis Buñuel’s *Un chien andalou* (1928), one of those exemplar “extreme cases” mentioned above.

4. For a thorough review of the first debates on the poetic qualities of film in the Spanish context, see Pérez Bowie.

Buñuel himself, in a talk delivered long after the making of *Un chien andalou* entitled “El cine, instrumento de poesía” [“Cinema as an Instrument of Poetry”] (1958), states the question in a way inspired yet not determined by a surrealist praxis:⁵ “Cinema as an instrument of poetry, with all that this latter word holds of a sense of liberation, subversion of reality, a passage into the marvelous world of the subconscious, and nonconformity to the restrictive society that surrounds us” (136). And, later on, assessing a type of cinema very much in vogue in those days, he adds: “Neorealist reality is incomplete, conventional, and above all, rational; poetry, mystery, everything that completes and enlarges tangible reality is entirely missing from its works” (140).

As in Coppola’s case, this apology of filmic poetry partakes of a very specific idea of what poetry on the whole should be or do. But in Buñuel’s words we already have visibly in place the basic set of contrasts only implicit in previous discussions of film as poetry. Interestingly enough, Buñuel starts with the most comprehensive polarity: in film, poetry is opposed to reality. Or, to be more precise, to a particular type of reality that roots itself in what is reasonable: one whose representation would depend on a customary grammar of images, on the “Institutional Mode of Representation,” as Noël Burch would put it. As suggested above, narration (or a reasonable, conventional narration made of moving images) is the hidden term of the opposition within that all-encompassing polarity that opposes poetry to reality itself. In fact, the only cinema “school” that made reference to the literary genre in its title was called precisely *poetic realism*, as if something in the movies by Jean Vigo, Marcel Carné, or Julien Duvivier would continuously point towards some insufficiency in the known cinematic treatments of reality.⁶ We will see later how persistent and how pervasive the notion of non-narrativity as a factor of poetry in film has become.⁷ Suffice it to say for now

5. The “inspired but not determined” expression accounts for both the year of Buñuel’s paper (1958) and my self-imposed limitation regarding avant-garde or experimental films. In keeping consonance with both that date and my object of study, *Los olvidados* (1950) would constitute a more provocative text for the consideration of poetic qualities than the more obvious *Un chien andalou*.

6. The term “poetic realism” was first used to describe the novels of Marcel Aymé. Definitions of its characteristics in film are somewhat vague but extremely pertinent to the question of non-narrativity to be developed in full in the next section. “Images in these films,” writes Edward Baron Turk, “take on values independent of their narrative function” (109).

7. I cannot resist making a passing reference to the last historical moment in which the two genres seem to be as close as ever. During the 50’s, the writers and filmmakers associated with *Cahiers du Cinéma* and the French *Nouvelle Vague*, resorted continuously to the idea of poetry in film. One has the feeling that the reasons were the same as that which motivated the pioneers: to champion

that the same “negative term” is conspicuously present when the lyric is defined as “any fairly short, non-narrative poem presenting a single speaker who expresses a state of mind or a process of thought and feeling” (Adams 99).

If Buñuel’s words may seem dated, due to the reduction of the concept of poetry to the specific poetic practice of surrealism (however questionable it may seem)⁸ Pasolini’s “The Cinema of Poetry,” a paper read in June 1965 at the first New Cinema Festival at Pesaro, furnishes us with a more complex and eclectic elaboration of related ideas. When Pasolini declares that “the language of cinema is fundamentally a ‘language of poetry’” (172), he justifies his declaration by making reference to the oneiric nature of film and to an irrational component that “cannot be eliminated” in it (*ibid.*). More interestingly, Pasolini also mentions a “mythical and infantile subtext which, because of the very nature of cinema, runs underneath every commercial film which is not unworthy” (*ibid.*). Afterwards, that enigmatic “subtext” is further described as an “unrealized, subterranean film” (182).⁹ In evaluating what hinders the realization of such a sub-film, the Italian director ends up with the usual suspect: “This language [of poetry] tends to be placed diachronically in relation to the language of film narrative” (*ibid.*). In spite of the criticism of Pasolini’s text over the years (by Umberto Eco, Stephen Heath, and Christian Metz, among others), and in spite of how much semi-otic naïveté it may display, “The Cinema of Poetry” still seems to be one of the most suggestive approaches to the possible existence of a poetic cinema, for Pasolini also links what is poetic in film to an operation that resembles precisely the workings of the lyric voice.¹⁰ His “Free indirect subjectivity” is tantamount to “the language of a ‘first person’” (185). “Free indirect speech” lays the foundation for what he considers a way to blend subjective shots

a cinema that could present an alternative to commercial, standardized storytelling. Luc Moullet, for instance, could write of “the poetic feeling for camera movement” in the films by Samuel Fuller: “For many ambitious film directors, movements of the camera are dependent on dramatic composition. Never so for Fuller, in whose work they are, fortunately, totally gratuitous: it is in terms of the emotive power of the movement that the scene is organized” (Hillier 148).

8. For a rejection of the label “surrealist” in Buñuel’s *Un chien andalou*, see Talens.

9. Buñuel quoted Man Ray expressing a very similar idea: “[in any film] cinematographic poetry struggles to rise to the surface and manifest itself” (67). That an element of poetry is present in every film is a particularly apt idea in a study that chooses not to focus on experimental or avant-garde cinema.

10. For a discussion of the critiques and assessments Pasolini’s ideas on cinema have received and for complete references to them, see Viano (22–31).

with some sort of authorial gaze.¹¹ If one thinks of the number of poems that present not only an utterance but a view (the illusion of someone looking, of a person seeing something and being, in turn, determined by what he or she sees), the premise that utterance and gaze are equally represented in the lyric itself provides a promising starting point for consideration of such seemingly aberrant constructs as a “voicing gaze” or a “gazing voice” in film. In fact, the critical advantages in substituting an utterance for the image have already been explored. In his semiotic phase, Christian Metz foregrounded the concept of a “speaking subject” in film studies. His tactical operation was designed to address the once fashionable problem of cinema as language, although very much limited to film’s diegetic capabilities. With no semiotic agenda, one wonders if that substitution is still valid or fruitful with regards to an understanding of a “filmic utterance” seen as closer to a lyric voice than to a narrative one.¹² The enabling premise is, then, that whatever we think of an utterance doing in the lyric *qua* differentiated literary genre, the gaze must do equivalently in film. The emphasis here falls, of course, on the idea of equivalency. In equating film with poetry, there is always the impulse to compare and contrast, to entangle oneself in the verbal/visual debate. Even if the verbal *versus* visual dichotomy were a necessary part of any incursion into the poetry of films, at this point in the debate it would seem wiser to avoid a critical discourse that may drift towards a straightforward comparison between the verbal language and the language of images. Simply put, the question is not how you can make poetry with the moving picture but what qualities in the filmic medium can be the equivalent of the most recognizable qualities of the lyric *qua* genre that performs and not only reflects subjectivity.¹³

Let me try to state my working hypothesis as clearly as possible: if we take the lyric to be *the mainly non-narrative genre of the subject*, films that deserve the adjective *lyric* or *poetic* should reveal non-narrativity as a structural value

11. “[. . .] the immersion of the filmmaker in the mind of his character and then the adoption on the part of the filmmaker not only of the psychology of his character but also of his language” (Viano 175). The closest poetic device seems to be dramatic monologue.

12. This filmic “enunciation,” this “I of the camera,” in the felicitous expression of William Rothman, is what makes P. Adams Sitney speak of a “lyrical film” phase in Stan Brakhage’s cinematography (155–87).

13. The most typical side effect of these discussions consists of “what-poems-can-do-that-movies-cannot-or-vice-versa” type of arguments. It seems to me that that line of investigation goes nowhere.

in their discourse. Likewise, those films would enable a reading that presents them as the *poesis* of subjectivity: as the *making* of a subject out of the gaze, out of an act of looking like voicing. The two Spanish productions mentioned above epitomize this structural value of non-narrative images (Erice) and the *poesis* of subjectivity through film (Medem). In choosing them, I choose paradigmatic examples of what a poetic cinematography could be under very precise criteria. Is this enough to make them representative of the poetical nature of Spanish film? Do they signal the possibility of considering that particular national cinema as poetic?

The discourse of difference has been openhandedly brought into play when discussing the cinematic production of Spain. The recent history of the country appears to substantiate that difference. A bloody civil war and the anomaly represented by Franco's regime in the middle of a post-war Western Europe account for many a justification of Spain's cinematic difference. Even the label *poetic*, when linked not only to a specific film or director but also to a substantial part of Spanish film production, points towards the Civil War and, especially, towards the conditions of possibility of *art cinema* under Francoism. Spanish "oppositional" film then was poetic because it was metaphorical, and it was metaphorical (sometimes "allegorical" is the preferred term) because it had to be made under Franco, because of the censor. Ironically enough, censorship gave birth to poetry. The underlying premise in this case is that metaphor stands for the lyric as a whole: a belief that, in spite of its popularity, must be tied to very specific junctures in Western literary history.¹⁴

The presumed eccentricity of Spanish "art films" sometimes springs from national aesthetics that predate the Civil War and Francoism. Goya and Valle-Inclán are liberally mentioned, as is also the *picaresca* genre, Cervantes, the *sainete* and even *zarzuela*. Cultural specificity is the name of the game, and it must be played incorporating not only history, but also art and literature, in the analysis of a national cinema.¹⁵ Without objecting to any search

14. The most articulated and sophisticated defense of this "poetic reading" of Spanish oppositional cinema under Franco (one that, to be fair, moves beyond Francoism and is predicated on the filmic representation of war) is Antonio Monegal's. He also partakes of the well-established premise that metaphor or allegorical discourse is inherently poetic. His study, however, finishes with a more all-encompassing and, to some extent, mystic vision of the expressive powers of poetic discourse: "only poetry can meet the challenge of exceeding the limits of representation" (215).

15. The paradigmatic works along these lines are the books by Peter Besas (1985), Virginia Higginbotham (1987), Thomas Denevy (1993), and Marsha Kinder (1993). For a critique of some of these

for the specificity of the Spanish filmic production, I opt here to bracket national history and national culture as the possible sources of Spanishness for Spanish cinema. The movies by Erice and Medem make Spanish film poetic, but not because of censorship. They stand out as the production of Spanish authors (both Basque, actually), yet they can be read not only *vis à vis* foreign industrial cinemas (with their own distinct themes, iconography and aesthetics), but against the background of industrial cinema within Spain as well. If, along the way, these pages contribute to a discussion of the concept of national cinema, it will be do so by presenting the concept for examination as much as for consideration.

Images that do not narrate.

If one were to change the famous *auteur* theory for a more specific *poète* one, Víctor Erice would represent its epitome in the Spanish tradition.¹⁶ Erice's three feature length films to date are constantly discussed in terms of their poetic or lyric qualities. For newspaper reviewers and film critics alike, the first two, *El espíritu de la colmena* [*The Spirit of the Beehive*] (1973) and *El sur* [*The south*] (1983), obtain their lyricism mainly from metaphor, their use of ellipsis, and their cinematography.¹⁷ But what happens if we approach Erice's films, instead, assuming that their moving images constantly reveal a desire to *arrest narration* and that this desire is what gives them their lyric character?

books' claims on the specificity of Spanish cinema and, especially, for a critique of Kinder's claims, see Zunzunegui (*El extraño*). Truth be told, the Spanish critic seems to defend a vision of cultural specificity that makes use of basically the same references: *sainete*, *zarzuela*, the "tradición esperpéntica" (101), and Spanish "realism," with roots in Medieval and Renaissance literature (Arcipreste de Hita, *La Celestina*, the picaresque novel). Zunzunegui does not object to the *what*, but to the *how* (and sometimes to the *who*). For a more recent and balanced collection of essays on the "national and global" contexts of contemporary Spanish cinema, see the issue of *Post Script* edited by Marvin D'Lugo (2002).

16. For an insightful genealogy of the concept of authorship in film studies and its application to Spanish cinema, see D'Lugo (*Authorship*).

17. For the best general introductions to the films of Víctor Erice see, in English, Ehrlich (*An Open*) and, in Spanish, Arocena. Even though they do not deal with *El sol del membrillo*, two of the most suggestive and complete approaches to Erice's work are the essays by Santos Zunzunegui (*Paisajes*) and Paul Julian Smith. Focusing on *El espíritu de la colmena*, both texts can be taken as complementary readings of the movie in question as well as investigations on Erice's poetics. The question of how to understand the tension between "history and poetry"—once mentioned by the Basque director himself—figures prominently in both texts. Incidentally, Smith questions or at least qualifies the concept of *auteurism* in Erice's case.

These are images committed to proving that a temporal art lends itself to much more (or something different) than a narrative. They are images that resist convenient placement in a syntagmatic chain, images that foreground that *underlying, unrealized, embryonic* film once identified by Pasolini in any given movie. Nowhere is that film less embryonic or more realized than in Erice's third and latest work.

El sol del membrillo is a film about a Spanish painter painting.¹⁸ For nearly two and a half months, Erice's camera registers Antonio López's attempts to capture on his canvas the reflection of the autumn sun on his backyard quince tree. Visitors walk in, friends stop by, and family members and construction workers move around the vicinity of the house. The camera attests to all this surrounding activity in a variety of ways. It even wanders around capturing a neighboring urban landscape of blinking TV sets and urban graffiti. Yet it always comes back to Antonio's artistic obsession, making it, to some extent, its own. As the director himself explains, the problem is that, for a still life, this tree does not stop moving.¹⁹ Nature simply refuses to stand still. Predictably, the painting is left unfinished; the quinces fall from the tree, and the painter, himself the object of another painting, falls asleep while posing for his wife. He dreams of a light that is not of this world, while we see the fallen fruits rotting. The movie's final images transport us to springtime and the same quince tree growing new quinces.

No one would deny that this movie tells a story; the question is how non-narrative one feels these images are while they tell it. The problem here is, of course, the fine line between narration and that nebulous entity that the prefix "non" seems to invoke without defining. In other words: the problem is to clearly demarcate the images that do not contribute to the narration when the concept of narration itself is, at least since the avant-gardes, so fluid and so protean. My provisional way around this predicament is to think of narration not simply as a way of *telling*, but as a way of *knowing*. Narration as a form of knowledge offers a much more appropriate contrast with the

18. For a reading of the movie that emphasizes some of the aspects of the filmic narrative left out here, see Kinder ("Refiguring"). For Kinder the movie, more than an investigation of cinema and painting, is a work that "succeeds in capturing [. . .] the local/global nexus of a postcolonial subjectivity" (ibid. 88): a bold statement, to say the least. On the other hand, Zunzunegui sees in Erice's latest feature a cinematic synthesis between Méliès and Lumière ("Lo viejo" 72).

19. "On the one hand there is nature, the tree, a living subject, and on the other is painting, which is trying to reproduce the tree at the precise moment of its splendor. But the tree is not a still life: it's moving, it's alive" (Morgan 27).

epistemological mode of the lyric.²⁰ Among the “classic” ideas about the lyric, its epiphanic nature stands out as the one that seems to cause less disagreement. In most defenses of metaphor as the poetic trope *par excellence*—as, say, the lyric’s condition of existence—temporal considerations are neglected when they could constitute the richer venue of investigation. If metaphor can be conceptualized also as “meaning rediscovered for the space of an instant” in Christian Metz’s formulation (*The Imaginary* 270), considerations of time enrich our considerations of aesthetics and epistemology in the film medium. The moment of instant revelation is moreover underlined in opposition to a mode of “discursive understanding.”²¹ Incidentally, and with regard to *El sol del membrillo*, the differentiation between telling and knowing also constitutes a safeguard from confusing rhythm with plot, duration with action. The slowness of this movie does not explain the alleged non-narrative nature of its images: the difference between a story and a slow story has nothing to do with the quality of its images, but with the rate with which they succeed each other. It is still *telling* but with a slower pace. Now, if the unusual duration of the shots begins to constitute *another* way of looking (call it an obsessive one) in which time is invested in stasis rather than translated into syntagmatic movement, then slowness does turn into a status-changing factor within the image. In Deleuze’s terms, the image becomes “a direct representation of time,” movement-images become time-images. One might also say that the image counters or complements narration as a form of knowledge, as the privileged form (or ordering) knowledge takes in film.

Time is still of the essence here, but it seems to be unfolding otherwise. Deleuze’s “direct representation of time” entails a weakening of narrative montage and hence a weakening of the narrative means to engage with reality. Accordingly, one could claim that in *El sol del membrillo* time-images investigate reality without translating it into narration or without drawing their epistemological power from such a discursive mode. Put another way, Erice’s latest work brings Pasolini’s unrealized “sub-film” to the surface. Narration has been kept to a minimum or, rather, sent to the bottom, a

20. I am drawing here from Hayden White’s formulation: “narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate *knowing* into *telling*” (1).

21. And now the reference is, of course, Paul Ricoeur: “I take temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate reference. Their relationship is therefore reciprocal” (165).

phrasing that could give us an optimal way to tackle the “problem” of drawing a line between narrative and non-narrative images. It is not a question of existence but one that involves different degrees of presence. We can even go in the opposite direction for once and say that the lyric itself never shunned narration. Without resorting to concrete examples of narrative lyric poems, one is tempted to say that there is an embryonic narrative, an underlying, and unrealized “sub-narration” in almost every lyric piece. *El sol del membrillo* mixes those ingredients in an equivalent manner, and the resulting combination is the aspect in which I would prefer to root the lyricism of the movie.

In Erice’s movie, Pasolini would stress its continuous “obsessive framing”: those moments in which the camera is fixed on its object and in which time’s movement is noticeably restricted to one frame. *El sol del membrillo* is defined as a moving picture by the movement within each shot, rather than by the movement between them. Quite often that movement is hardly perceptible: the time this image represents is closer to the frozen time of a photograph. And yet the photographic image has been denounced as false in the movie itself by the painter’s explicit refusal to paint from a snapshot. These images may be moving like the tree does: inevitably yet imperceptibly. *Obsessive framing* is still a useful concept to unearth the poetry of narrative films, insofar as the obsession leads narration to a standstill. Strangely enough, montage may produce a similar effect in this film. And I am not referring to a montage of attractions (Eisenstein) nor to what Pudovkin would call *lyrical* and Béla Balázs *poetic* montage. Rather, I am referring to the manner in which some of these images are ordered so as to counter a representation of time solely as forward, syntagmatic movement.

In *El sol del membrillo* there are several occasions in which the shots of objects and spaces that surround the main set—adjacent, so to speak, to the main action—work as both transition and disruption. Disruption, that is, of the narrative flow. More than once the camera punctuates its pursuit of the artist’s struggle with the still yet moving tree with brief shots of other *still lives*, of simple objects that, as Linda Ehrlich aptly puts it, “appear at once mundane and transcendental” (*Interior* 203). This is montage that links through a detour, montage that disconnects as much as it ties. In one of the best examples of such a procedure, we are taken from the dialogue between Antonio and his wife in front of the quince tree to the same two characters leaving the house. Separating those images, five straight cuts show a façade, the unfinished painting by itself, the painter’s tools, an adjacent little table,

and the plumb line that once centered the object to be painted and now marks the center of the screen. If they are subordinated to the story, they are not so in any narrative or descriptive capacity. Insofar as these images possess a functionality that it is not immediately associated with, say, *pushing the story forward*; they remain a possible source of poetry in the film. Quoting Deleuze again, they will represent “weak linkages” in a “sensory-motor schemata” (21). They can even be thought of as images that claim some independence of meaning. They are still part of the whole and yet, if only briefly, a unit of sense. They are not “cutting to the chase,” however slow that chase may be. These images demand interpretation as if they demanded existence.

When by the end of the movie we are shown the camera filming the tree, occupying the place of the painter, even looking *at us* (an invisible camera filming another camera), one realizes that *El sol del membrillo* is less about painting than about being. The whole film is about a way of looking that characterizes the onlooker. The film, in fact, creates a “gazing subject,” a subject position, if you will, that can be concurrently occupied by the painter, the filmmaker, and the audience. Whether each and every film creates this subject position is an issue I will discuss momentarily, but in this particular film, that positionality cannot go unnoticed. By the end of the film, the subjects who obsessively look (painter, filmmaker, spectator), the ones who pay an almost unnerving attention to detail and the ones who can be fixed for so long and with such intensity on spaces and objects, overlap. The best way to describe what this movie does would be *to imagine a subject*, if “to imagine” could be understood as *to create out of images*, or to be created as a subject out of the images one obsessively watches.

The voice, the gaze, and the subject.

When the fact that the spectator was “the center of the movie” went from explaining a number of cinematic conventions to the realization that the “true subject” of the movie may be absent from the screen, the art of the moving picture may have gained the status of ontology. Marxism, psychoanalysis, and feminism quickly explored this newfound dimension of film: namely, that it was as much about the projection of reality as about the projection of a subject. “Suture” was then born as an all-encompassing concept that could betray an agenda or disclose an ideology. It was thus possible for the spectator to be aware of the active role that he or she played in a

process of viewing that was, in fact, a process of being. Much has been said and argued since that turning point in our appreciation of films.²² Let us approach the issue from another angle, from a lyric one, of course. Let us take up the concept of *utterance*, “the phenomenalization of the poetic voice” (de Man 55) as our guiding concept. Let us explore some of the critical possibilities in using the expressions “filmic utterance” or “film enunciation.”

Since the advent of structuralism, it has become a commonplace in the study of the lyric to start with the word *I*. As a deictic, as a shifter, that personal pronoun allows a “linguistic space” to be claimed by any speaker saying *I*. “*I* is the person saying *I*,” goes the well-known formula by Benveniste. The advantages of bearing that in mind while entering the genre of *pure enunciation* are evident. Equally evident, as should have become clear by now, is that such a process, outside the realm of linguistics, is not automatic. A linguistic phenomenon initially employed to enrich our reflections on the genre seems to have become its straight jacket. One can always think of lyric poems whose first person pronoun one is unable to make his or her own. More than linguistics or pragmatics must be at play in this “utterance appropriation” if gender, sexuality, ethnic background, language, and nationality play any part in the process of enunciation, in the process of reading itself. Without space to supply examples or proofs, I am ready to affirm that the first person singular in the lyric must resist as much as invite habitation.

In film studies all this could be translated into “the problem of identification.” Utterance is, in the cinematic medium, a gaze. As one may or may not occupy the place of the speaker, one may or may not occupy the place of the onlooker. Do we identify with the person looked at or with the person who does the looking? Are we a perspective or a spectacle? The right answer is, of course, “both.” Or “it depends.” Or “none of the above.” Identification in film appears to be mobile, fluid. To think about it like that helps to turn the gaze into a shifter of sorts, a place to occupy yet to occupy so precariously that one can lose track of who is looking and from where.²³ Against Stephen Heath’s advice, let us assume that in film there are indeed equivalents to the

22. “Suture” is a concept taken from Lacanian psychoanalysis (from Jacques-Alain Miller, to be precise) by Jean-Pierre Oudart in 1969. Daniel Dayan made it known to the English speaking public in 1974, and Dayan was criticized in turn by William Rotham. See also Heath.

23. In an article on *El verdugo* (1963) by Luis García Berlanga, Jean-Claude Seguin reintroduces the use of linguistic concepts such as “deictic” and “enunciation” in a very suggestive manner.

pronouns in language (94). But they are just that: “equivalents.” Otherwise one would fall prey to the anxiety of the verbal/visual comparison and contrast. If one takes a pronoun in a certain context (say, the lyric *I*) as an ambiguous space from which to enunciate that in turn results in the “causation of the subject,” the gaze might be the equivalent “space” in the cinematic medium. We are thus moving from language to images as “the cause” of the subject. Among the most recent Spanish films, Julio Medem’s *Los amantes del círculo polar* stands out as precisely the one that most clearly exploits this subject-generating value of the gaze in film.

Medem’s filmography has been read mainly as a cinematic examination of Basque national identity leading to the filmic investigation of more complex notions of transnational and even post-national identities.²⁴ Medem’s revealing itinerary starts in a rural Basque setting and, to date, ends up in a luminous Mediterranean island. Medem’s locations, in reality, seem to dislocate as much as they situate. Yet it is the formal qualities of his films, their “rhapsodic and oneiric” quality (Smith 3) or their “striking imagery” (Stone 164), that truly account for their uniqueness and for what can be considered, in more senses than one, a “Medem look.” The director’s peculiar use of subjective shots, in particular, becomes a technical choice that can and has been tied to thematic concerns. Medem’s films “prioritize the look,” writes Isabel Santaolalla, to guarantee access to the “multiple layers of reality” (334) the director is interested in capturing. “By shifting point-of view from characters in films to animate and inanimate objects,” declares Jay Beck “[Medem] radically restructures the visual regime of ‘looking’ (159). Paul Julian Smith puts it more simply yet forcefully: “Julio Medem is ‘the cineaste of subjectivity’” (146).

As in Erice’s case, Medem’s storytelling also seems to be prone to poetry in the eyes of film critics. In fact, the young director has acknowledged his belated viewing of Erice’s *El espíritu de la colmena* as a revelation (Stone 160). Yet with Medem’s films the critic cannot invoke metaphor or “poetic” cinematography as the determining factors for his filmic poetry. Virtually every reviewer of *Los amantes* in 1998, for instance, used the word “poetic” or “lyric” in connection with either its plot or its images. Not one of them

24. See Richardson for what he calls “patterns of Basqueness” in *Vacas* and D’Lugo (*Locating*) for the concept of a “transnational project” exemplified by *Los amantes*. Paul Julian Smith also speaks of “postnational subjects” in Medem’s films (146).

specifies where exactly the movie's poetry lies or what they understand by the "poetic" in film. I would argue that Medem's images return to the concept of "unreality" as an agent of cinematic poetry and that unreality is also connected to point-of-view camera work. The director himself has made remarks close, at least in spirit, to those of Buñuel and Pasolini. Medem, like them, speaks of two "realities" and of the capacity of the film medium to settle in a sort of in-between space. As Isabel Santaolalla puts it: "[Medem's] films seem to deal with different territories at the same time, their plots and characters enhancing rather than solving the tension between them" (333–34).

The form taken by Medem's unreality in *Los amantes del círculo polar* is that of chance: in this film coincidences have a structural value. It should be noted that "chance" has the same structural value in most of Medem's feature films, from the very first one, *Vacas* (1992), to the latest, *Lucía y el sexo* (2000). If Truffaut once wrote of Nicholas Ray that his realism "is a realism of words and poetic accidents 'à la Cocteau'" (Hillier 109), there is certainly a poetic accident "à la Medem" that forces a constant "suspension of disbelief" and breaks with verisimilitude in a specific manner. A manner, and this is crucial, that also has to do with the use of the characters', as well as the spectator's, eyes.

Los amantes del círculo polar tells the story of Otto and Ana from their childhood romance to their last encounter in Finland. The film is ostensibly divided into sections in which either Otto's or Ana's point of view governs the sequences. Their names alternate on the screen to underline the fact that what we are about to see is a particular "vision." Every episode, every meaningful event, is told—or viewed—twice. But this is not a perspectivism à la *Rashomon* (Kurosawa 1951). The two "versions," the two gazes, are continuously looking for a place to converge, as it were. "Point-of-view shots," as they were classically called, dominate the whole movie. Within all these points of view, there are a few that project imagined, dreamed, or impossible scenes. Yet the marks that would conventionally announce the unreality of those images are hardly present. Only a fade to black and what seems to be a fade to bright white can be distinguished as a punctuation of sorts, providing too unreliable a roadmap for all this filmed reality and fantasy. How to navigate these images, how to determine who is looking and from where (positionally, imaginatively), always requires some effort and elicits some confusion. One could recall a good number of scenes to exemplify the con-

stant fluidity of this filmic enunciation, but the final scenes of the movie suffice.

By the end of the movie, the captions that precede each episode and inform the audience whose point of view they are going to share go from stating simply the name of the main characters to indicating “Ana’s eyes” and “Otto in Ana’s eyes.” In those final sequences, the two main characters and the spectator are, more clearly than ever, occupying—even struggling to occupy—the same viewing space, the same vantage point of looking *and* of being on the screen. Let us review the sequence of events and images.

“Ana’s eyes” starts with a classic alternation between the character looking and whatever she is looking at (the road through a windshield, a newsstand, and the front page of a newspaper). Then the first “objective” shot of the sequence shows Ana getting out of the red van that brings her downtown and reaching for a newspaper. For a second, a neutral position from which to look seems to restrain the emotional involvement that each shot-countershot series demands from the audience. But soon enough the camera reveals itself to be hand-held as it moves forward and slightly turns to film Ana’s eyes again. Shots of her eyes and what she sees alternate again until the close-up of the newspaper she is looking at flies up in the air. A screeching sound has preceded the violent flight of the newspaper. Subsequently, an extreme trembling close-up of Ana’s eyes dissolves into herself running into the apartment across the street. From now on, the hand-held camera will follow her upstairs and into the apartment. Otto finally appears in one of the rooms and the camera, still hand-held, and still swinging slightly, films their dialogue equidistant from each lover. Finally, there is a cut to a close-up of Ana staring into the void. Seen from the back, Otto enters left-frame and hugs her. The final shot takes us back to the extreme close-up of Ana, but Otto’s face is now reflected in her teary eyes. “Otto in Ana’s eyes” is precisely the phrase that fills the screen: the sequence is going to be seen or told again. In this case Otto’s eyes organize the spectacle, but the whole sequence is less strict in its subjective tenor. When we learn that the screeching sound previously heard was made by the brakes of a red bus stopping too late, when we see what has happened to Ana, it is Otto’s but also the Finnish driver’s gaze that takes us to the accident. Otto rushes to a prone Ana, kneels down besides her, and closes his eyes. This leads first to a screen blackout and then to an extreme close-up of Otto’s face. Ana is still there: dead. But crying. Again, we are given the extreme close-up of Ana’s eyes with Otto’s reflection in them. At this point one is tempted to think of “Las Meninas.” This is a

reflection of a character who is neither present on the canvas nor situated where he should be to produce that reflection. Otto occupies the so-called off-screen space, but the true off-screen subject those eyes should reflect is the one sitting in the dark, the spectator. This is the last entangling of points of view that makes evident that a subject looking equates with something more puzzling and more complex than a perspective or a point of view. In fact, we can now go back to the scenes that presented the lovers' encounter in the apartment with the realization that they were post-mortem. That reunion never happened. If we saw it, it was part of a future imagined by a dying Ana. It is indeed tempting to invoke the Aristotelian difference between history as things as they really happened and poetry as things as they should have happened, but one is aware of how imprecise that invocation of poetry would be. It is preferable to go back to the idea of a filmic enunciation that recalls the lyric because of its shifting capability. The blackout of the screen caused by Otto closing his eyes can be recuperated for this reading. It obviously takes the spectator on and off of screen, in and out of a subject position, in and out of a looking subject. Do all these images constitute exactly a lyric utterance? Perhaps they do not. But it is my contention that they might demonstrate how film, in its own medium, does what the lyric has been doing for centuries. The speaking subject has become the looking subject, with the reader/spectator as its *constitutive outside*.

So let us conclude that some movies can be called poetic or lyric when they make evident that their representation of a subject is at the same time the *projection* of subjectivity. Although this is something that happens in any film by virtue of the nature of its conventions, some films give those conventions a specific significance. Making use of Stanley Cavell's terms, cinema's "automatizations" (*The World* 187) are, in certain films, made meaningful. And in the case of *Los amantes* they are made meaningful because the gaze finds itself in the midst of a weakened deixis that resembles or that can be equated with the kind of deixis the lyric mobilizes.

The corollary that follows from this, and the one that, for now, I am not going to pursue, goes like this: in lyric poems that rely for their effects on the verbal representation of a vision (a speaking subject that is also a looking subject), we will be entitled, accordingly, to speak of *cinematic poetry*. But this is the last road (or direction) not taken in these pages. The one taken has ended with films by Víctor Erice and Julio Medem as evidence that a critical analysis of poetry in film has a future beyond the casual mention of lyricism when discussing certain works or scenes. "Poetic film" can definitely

stop being just an expression to become a category: a category permanently in need of clear and visible criteria, but a category nonetheless. And, most importantly, the criteria that have been used here ought to be understood not as “ordinary” criteria, but as Wittgensteinian criteria. The distinction here is vital for the research program this article proposes. “In using ordinary or official criteria,” writes Stanley Cavell, “we *start out* with a known kind of object whereas in using Wittgensteinian criteria we *end up* knowing a kind of object” (*The Claim* 16). Hopefully, making use of very specific criteria, this essay has ended up knowing what kind of an object a poetic film is. Hopefully, the future identification and analysis of other poetic films produced in Spain will make us end up knowing (or knowing differently) what kind of a concept a national cinema is.

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