WHEN MIGRATION IS A MATTER OF SCIENCE FICTION: *EL MAR LA MAR*

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main difficulties associated with representing a contemporary phenomenon as complex as forced migration lies in finding the right distance from "the pain of others" (Sontag, 2004). The questions explored by Susan Sontag in her discussion of images of war are also worth asking when considering representations of the migration crisis. How can we accurately depict the tragedy of so many millions of human beings who decide to leave their homes to flee a life with no future or to escape death? What moral demands do these images impose? What capacity do they have to engage us and compel us to take a side in response to the horror they expose? These questions are of crucial importance in the contemporary context, when numerous media sources promoting exclusionary nationalist narratives, which are having an increasingly active influence on the political powers, are proving highly effective in creating and circulating discourses that depict migrants as a threat to social stability (Nyers, 1999; King and Wood, 2001; Moore, Gross and Threadgold, 2012; Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017; Wilmott, 2017).

Exacerbating this discouraging geopolitical situation, despite the counter-discourses of individuals, groups and institutions that seek to foster positive attitudes towards migrants, is the current oversaturation of public attention with images that result in widespread compassion fatigue among distant observers of the crisis, as various authors have pointed out (Lodge, 1996; Moeller, 1999; Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; 2008; 2012; 2013; Dahya, 2017; Yalouri, 2019). The exhaustion resulting from being repetitively subjected to images that are difficult to digest leads to a perceptual desensitisation. An endless succession of images of bodies huddled together as they try to cross all kinds of visible and invisible borders (the sea, the desert, the mountains), of the faces of children whose expressions seem to plead

for our mercy, and of the ruins of cities devastated by relentless bombing end up numbing the gaze of viewers who are exposed to these realities by the media.

Navigating these troubled waters through the medium of the non-fiction film—a political space that is the focus of this article—are a number of documentaries that operate as counterweights to the discourses of anger and hate filling the public sphere today while at the same time offering approaches that avoid provoking the demotivating phenomenon of compassion fatigue. In analysing these films, it is important to remember first of all that the notion that the film screen offers the spectator a kind of raw reality is in fact a myth, as all representations are mediated, informed by specific cultural and institutional practices that determine the conditions that render the phenomenon represented intelligible. Although they have received more scholarly attention in the field of fiction films (Balló and Bergala, 2016), certain visual approaches and iconographic patterns also operate as the dominant frameworks in documentary depictions (Balló and Salvadó, 2023). Various authors have been reflecting on these patterns in recent decades. Towards the end of the last century, for example, Liisa Malkki pointed to the "tendency to universalize the 'the refugee' as a special 'kind' of person not only in the textual representation, but also in their photographic representation" (1995: 9). In a subsequent study, the same author identified two main modes of presenting migrants and refugees in the media: "(1) masses of people positioned to look like a 'sea of humanity'; and/or (2) close-up photographs of women and children" (1997: 235). Similarly, Terence Wright observed the lack of attention given to images in research on migrants and posited the existence of certain images or "historical archetypes that are used to portray the subject of forced migration" (Wright, 2000: 2) that draw upon models anchored in Christian iconography, which he labelled an "iconography of predicament" (Wright, 2000: 13). The traditional depiction of the Virgin and Child, which Wright identified in updated form in Dorothea Lange's famous photograph *Migrant Mother* (1936), or the recurring allusion to the expulsion from Paradise in fictional stories about migration, which he suggests bear many features of the "Road Movie" genre, point to a productive line of research on the role of the image in discourses of reality that has yet to be fully explored, although there have been some interesting contributions (Fregoso, 2003; Mannik, 2012; Wright, 2014; Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017; Robinson, 2019; Franceschelli and Galipò, 2021; Beiruty, 2020; Eklsa, 2022; Balló and Salvadó, 2023; Moghimi, 2024).

ALL REPRESENTATIONS ARE MEDIATED, INFORMED BY SPECIFIC CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES THAT DETERMINE THE CONDITIONS THAT RENDER THE PHENOMENON REPRESENTED INTELLIGIBLE

In any case, the persistent repetition of these visual strategies—exemplified in this century by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's award-winning documentary on global migration, *Human Flow* (2018)—have established an inventory of images that seem to be contributing actively to the de-politicising of "migrant cinema" (Rings, 2016; Yalouri, 2019; Cerdán and Fernández, 2022). This is the hypothesis underpinning this study: that the perceptual desensitisation resulting from this "ultra-familiar, ultra-celebrated image" (Sontag, 2003: 21) defining migrants is related to a large extent to the redundant and stereotypical nature of their audiovisual representations. This means that compassion fatigue can only be reversed by *re-sensitising* the gaze and nudging the distant observer towards a more empathetic and proactive position.

To this end, the estrangement strategies analysed in Russian formalism, which are rooted in the poetic function of language, seem a useful frame of reference for rethinking migrant cinema. These are discursive strategies that generally offer a different perspective on the object represented, as the Russian literary theorist Victor Shklovsky argued in his landmark essay "Art as Technique" (1917). In contrast to any individual's habitual experience, the prolonged perception expected of a viewer of an artwork produces a "sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" that effectively defamiliarises the mundane, rational gaze (Shklovsky, 2017: 16). This is the artist's ultimate aim: to hold the viewer's gaze on the object, to keep it in its intransitive condition in order to prevent it from disappearing behind a meaning that would be the ultimate objective of the utilitarian gaze.

If aesthetics and ethics are combined, this defamiliarisation can operate as a precondition for a potential politicisation of the gaze, as Laura Marks (2000) suggests in relation to the "intercultural cinema" created by filmmakers who are part of a diaspora, a migrant community or a cultural minority. Citing the classical distinction proposed by Alois Riegl (1985) between optic and haptic perception, the former being associated strictly with the visual and rational and the latter with the tactile and sensory (and therefore similar to that prolonged perception described by Shklovsky), Marks highlights the experimental filmmaking practices that lean towards the latter, effectively evoking "a response that is simultaneously intellectual, emotional, and visceral" (Marks, 2000: xvi). It is thanks to its capacity for pushing beyond the cognitive frame of the conventions governing mainstream cinema through its attention to the materiality and the sensory values of the image that intercultural cinema is able to create a context where "politics and poetics are inextricable" (2000: xvi).

This article focuses on a notable example that seems to bring the two conditions together: ethics and aesthetics are inextricably combined in *El Mar La Mar* (Joshua Bonnetta and J. P. Sniadecki, 2017), which explores the issue of migrants crossing the southern US border. It is a film that draws on the phenomenological and sensory power of contemporary documentary and address its topic through two complementary movements that pivot around defamiliarisation and haptic perception, leaning towards the poetic digression characterised, for example, by Andrei Tarkovsky's science fiction films. It is particularly reminiscent of *Stalker* (1979), a film that similarly describes a human journey across a vast open space where nature acquires a menacing quality much like the Sonoran Desert in *El Mar la Mar*. The "prevalence of atmosphere over space, story or image" which, according to Robert Bird (2008: 14), gives the Russian filmmaker's work something in common with poetic cinema, is of similar intensity to that displayed by the two filmmakers in their approach to the Mexico-US border: in both cases, the mise-en-scène, the framing and the sequencing are constructed in a way that prevents us from fully comprehending the world depicted, keeping our attention on the sensory surface of the image, as will be explored below. Rather than conveying what is happening on screen by means of a series of narrative events, much of *El Mar la Mar* can be described as aiming to "affect viewers 'emotionally and sensuously'" (Bird, 2008: 153), as Bird suggests in relation to Tarkovsky's films. But just as in the case of Tarkovsky's work, poetic distancing does not preclude political reflection. Bonnetta and Sniadecki's film ends with a formal ethical reflection on what lay hidden beneath the surface of the Sonoran Desert: the thousands and thousands of bodies of people who perished trying to navigate its deadly sands. The comparison with Tarkovsky's universe shifts here to *Solaris* (1972), in which the unsettling vastness of the alien planet whose inscrutable surface conceals the same death impulse as the desert in *El Mar La Mar*.

2. *EL MAR LA MAR*: PHENOMENOLOGY, SENSORIALITY AND NON-FICTION CINEMA

El Mar La Mar is the product of a collaboration between a sound artist (Joshua Bonnetta) and a highly experienced filmmaker with a background in ethnography (J. P. Sniadecki). It is a film that offers an unsettling view of the journey of migrants into the United States via one of its deadliest points of entry: the Sonoran Desert. Shot in analogue format on 16mm film stock, it is divided into three sections, clearly separated by intertitles that break up the story: "Rio" ("River"), "Costas" ("Edges") and "Tormenta" ("Storm"). The film had a significant international impact, receiving several awards and nominations at prestigious international competitions such as the Berlin International Film Festival and the IndieLisboa International Independent Film Festival.

El Mar La Mar has been described as an important example of the new sensory ethnographic cinema emblematically represented by the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) at Harvard University (Ginsburg, 2018), although its two creators do not seem to be comfortable with this label (Mulligan, 2017), mainly because the film transcends the limits of this movement, as will be argued here. The SEL was established at the beginning of the 21st century under the direction of Lucien Castaing-Taylor, a visual anthropologist who throughout the 1990s combined his work as a filmmaker with the publication of various essays that interrogate the use of audiovisual media in anthropology. According to its website, one of the SEL's objectives is to promote "innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography" (Harvard University, n.d.). The SEL gained recognition on the contemporary film scene for *Sweetgrass* (Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, 2009), which follows a group of livestock farmers over the mountains of Montana, and *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Verena Paravel, 2012), a dizzying audiovisual experience that immerses the spectator in the world of a fishing boat at sea. Since then, the screening of sensory documentaries at prestigious international festivals, including Locarno, Venice and Berlin, has given visibility to productions such as *Manakamana* (Spray and Velez, 2013), Sniadeki's films *The Yellow Bank* (Sniadecki, 2010) and *Foreign Parts* (Paravel and Sniadecki, 2010), which bear the unmistakeable mark of the SEL, and films by Spanish directors such as Mauro Herce's *Dead Slow Ahead* (2015) and Lois Patiño's recent *Samsara* (2024), which seems to be an explicit showcase of sensory strategies.

The growing interest in these documentaries is rooted in the so-called "sensory turn" that took place in the field of social sciences in the final decades of the 20th century (Howes, 2003). In contrast to the traditional ethnographic approach, which attempts to offer an audiovisual translation of an intelligible reality using semiotic structures, a number of ethnographers and filmmakers began proposing new ways of understanding the Other. At the heart of these practices was the concept of experience, as Castaing-Taylor notes: "film not only constitutes *discourse about* the world, but also (re)presents an *experience of* it" (1996: 86). The similarity of this idea to the guiding principle of phenomenology is revealing. As Merleau-Ponty concisely explains, the phenomenological movement "tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is" (2005: vii). This notion has a radical impact on the process of interrogating the Other in cinematic representation. Rather than trying to explain the world as ethnographic films have traditionally done, a sensory documentary offers an experience of it through an attitude of reduction that eschews the preconceived evaluation of the world that it seeks to interrogate. In the strictest sense, it involves the "bracketing" the world described by Edmund Husserl (1962) in his concept of *epoché*, which served as a starting point for his new philosophical approach. Such is the phenomenological imprint on which most of sensory documentaries are founded: the camera, plunged

RATHER THAN TRYING TO EXPLAIN THE WORLD AS ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMS HAVE TRADITIONALLY DONE, A SENSORY DOCUMENTARY OFFERS AN EXPERIENCE OF IT THROUGH AN ATTITUDE OF REDUCTION THAT ESCHEWS THE PRECONCEIVED EVALUATION OF THE WORLD THAT IT SEEKS TO INTERROGATE

into an unfamiliar environment, can only capture fragments, impressions and loose scraps of a world in the process of forming rather than a world completed. Far from offering an audiovisual experience of a closed, intelligible world, they offer a perceptual experience full of "colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: xi).

2.1 From "Costas" to *Stalker*: Estrangement and Nomadic Space

In a reflection of its phenomenological foundations, *El Mar La Mar* begins first with the suspension of all knowledge about the world in which we are to be immersed, including the visual tropes that have traditionally governed the social imaginary of undocumented migrants from Mexico to the United States. In other words, before we can experience what it means to cross the deadly desert, we must abandon any idea of the existence of a reality outside our own consciousness and all a priori judgements of what the Sonoran Desert means. That is the *epoché* proposed by the film-makers in the "Rio" section.

Thus, as Snadiecki himself explains, the sole purpose of the overture at the beginning of the documentary is "to defamiliarize and disorient you, so that you can reorient yourself through your perceptual apparatus, and through your sensorium" (quoted in Mulligan, 2017). In this way, you will be more receptive to the sensory experience you are about to be immersed in. "Rio"

unsettles our viewing experience by confronting us with a screen that offers us almost nothing on which to anchor our vision for almost three minutes. We are located at the fence that separates the two countries, but there is nothing to confirm this: no caption or voice-over to name the place, indicate the time or specify any details that would make it recognisable; just an endless succession of vertical strips superimposed vertiginously over the view, in a scene in which texture and abstraction trump content. It is impossible to overlook the resemblances to the long tracking shot that follows the explorer, the writer and the scientist into the Forbidden Zone in *Stalker*, despite the obvious differences between the two scenes: the extreme camera speed in Snadiecki and Bonnetta's film contrasts with the formal slowness of the scene in Tarkovsky's film, while the series of black vertical strips in *El Mar La Mar* differs from the positioning of the characters' heads between the camera and the landscape in *Stalker*. But these differences cannot obscure the similarities: the sideways camera movement, the mobility of the gaze, and the indiscernible nature of the landscape. In both cases, the movement fulfils a similar function: to cleanse our gaze, offering a blurred, undefinable image that undermines our ability to recognise the location; in short, shaking off any visual prejudices that we may have in relation to the border.

Only then, once the narrative expectations for any documentary on this subject have been suspended, can the spectator be plunged directly into the ambiguous universe that defines "Costas". Throughout this segment, analogies with *Stalker* can also be identified. Robert Bird's reflection on the relationship between the spectator's experience and the material world in Tarkovsky's universe, "blocking our desire for continuity with a sensorial resistance that foregrounds the material intervention of the medium itself" (2008: 223), finds an echo in Bonnetta's assertion that *El Mar La Mar* "is about a physical world: a place, its ma-

terials, its elements" (quoted in MacDonald, 2019: 490). In short, in both films, the expression of the sensory takes precedence over abstraction and the conception of space. In the Forbidden Zone in *Stalker*, rust corrodes manufactured objects exposed to the elements (cars, tanks and unrecognisable objects), and the abandoned, half-demolished buildings encountered by the characters on their journey are depicted as ruins of a recognisable past. The lushness of nature that seems to stop for nothing and no-one, the black coal with red burning embers still flickering and the wind stirring up the sand all focus our gaze on the physicality of the Zone. Similarly, the Sonoran Desert in *El Mar La Mar* is constructed with an emphasis on its materiality. The fire that sweeps across the mountain slope in the dark of night (darkening the image is of course one of Tarkovsky's main defamiliarisation strategies), the entrails of an animal barely distinguishable from the fingers that are skinning it, the plants and shrubs scattered across the terrain that are beaten by the wind or rescued from the darkness by the blinding flashes of the border police's spotlights, the clusters of clouds of all shapes and sizes that sail over the mountains and huddle around their peaks, and the distant points of light crossing the screen whose origins are never revealed; all these elements combine to offer a high level of sensory resistance to the conceptualisation of the setting depicted.

The insistent fixation on the concrete and the material aspects of both settings has an impact on the spectator's overall conception of the space: neither *Stalker* nor *El Mar La Mar* offer the slightest possibility of conceiving of the location in terms of unity. Constructed instead as an instance of Deleuze's (1986) "any-space-whatever" (a characteristic feature of modern cinema), both films eliminate any possibility of establishing contiguous or complementary relationships between the fragments that might at least allow the development of a plausible hypothesis about the limits and dimensions of the setting. This way

of understanding the space becomes a powerful phenomenological feature: the places represented are established by juxtaposing scattered pieces with no strong connection; they are a mere set of impressions with no clear relationship between them and that offer no glimpse of their topography. Both are spaces that are felt rather than comprehended.

Indeed, as the guide stresses, nobody has any conception of the Zone in *Stalker*. Moreover, it is a territory where nothing remains constant, a place that is made and unmade with every new foray into it—traps appear and disappear or change location—and where the only way the travellers have of orienting themselves is by randomly throwing metal nuts. Instead of following a predetermined route guided by regular signs, the travellers chart an extraordinarily irregular path, more circular and labyrinthine than linear, seemingly random and incomprehensible to the new visitors, which rather than marking the territory actually undermines any possibility of defining it. Each foray into the Zone therefore entails a new path and a new orientation, because there is no map and no possibility of establishing points of reference.

This same confusion, absence of references and lack of connection between fragments also characterises *El Mar La Mar*. In Snadieki and Bonnetta's film, the spectator is plunged directly "into a space that you're not able to decipher right away" (Mulligan, 2017). This is precisely what is striking about the Sonoran Desert: not so much the possibility of mapping where the film was shot, as Janet Walker (2024) proposes to do, as the sheer impossibility of conceiving of a map of Sonora, as Sniadecki himself suggests: "like the sea in the sense that it's an amorphous entity; you can't really know its volume or contain and reduce it to something easily understood, and its coasts and edges are constantly shifting" (quoted in MacDonald, 2019: 491). Vagueness and fuzziness are superimposed over clarity and demarcation in the depiction of the Sonoran Desert.

The night-time shots that barely distinguish the shapes and contours of the objects and characters filmed (soldiers, migrants, horses, barely discernible outlines of forms), the use of decontextualised close-ups that often fail even to capture a recognisable figure, sequencing governed by compositional and rhythmic rather than spatial criteria—in accordance with Tarkovsky, for whom rhythm "is the main formative element of cinema" (2002: 145)—all inform the construction of this inscrutable world for the spectator.

A good way of understanding the spatial approach of both projects is by considering their confrontation with the sedentary space/nomad space binary analysed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987). While sedentary space, whose quintessential graphic representation is the map, is recognised as being "striated by walls, enclosures, and roads between enclosures" (1987: 381), nomad space is defined as a smooth location "marked only by 'traits' that are effaced and displaced with the trajectory" (1987: 381). In opposition to the subjects of sedentary space, these authors explain, the wandering subjects of nomad space are first and foremost "vectors of deterritorialization. They add desert to desert, steppe to steppe, by a series of local operations whose orientation and direction endlessly vary" (1987: 382). The condition of travellers venturing into the Forbidden Zone, both in *Stalker* and *El Mar la Mar*, thus seems obvious: like nomads, they do not know the territory and can only wander around it blindly, making and unmaking their way, crossing the territory with no clear destination and without even the certainty that they will really be able to cross it.

The idea of the journey through the Sonoran Desert, in the words of one of its inhabitants, is a kind of "trippy little world" is reminiscent of Žižek's reflection on the estrangement provoked by Tarkovsky's vision: "Could we not perhaps draw the Brechtian conclusion that the typical Tarkovskyan landscape—the human environ-

ment in the process of deterioration and invasion by nature—represents a vision of our universe from the imaginary point of view of an alien?" (2006: 135). This is also essentially the spectator's position in relation to the images and sounds perceived: a subject as bewildered and disoriented as an alien faced with the disturbing and threatening experience of travelling through a place with no connecting points and no known boundaries.

2.2 From "Storm" to *Solaris*: the *lieu de mémoire* and the originary world

While the elaborate reassessment of the sensory in "Edges" is necessary for the activation of a critical gaze on the migration crisis, it alone is not enough. The estrangement resulting from the attention to formal and expressive values—the defamiliarisation of the aesthetic object as an end in itself, according to Shklovsky (1978)—hinders or may even prevent reflection on the content represented. Stuart Robinson points this out in relation to a particular form of migrant cinema that adopts strategies typical of contemporary non-fiction, such as hybridisation and indifference to the symbolic values of the story, thereby avoiding the "potentially dehumanising pitfalls of more didactic approaches", but risking the "phenomenological disconnection on the part of the potentially interested spectator" (Robinson, 2019: 118). As they are unable to establish connections that allow the spectator to identify with the characters' experiences, such films run the risk of demotivating the distant observer.

Conversely, *El Mar La Mar* is significant precisely for its manifest intention to transcend the sensory and reintegrate the perceptions into a broader experience that can mobilise the spectator politically. This is why the film's directors baulk at the idea of including the film in the conceptual framework of the SEL, as unlike the productions made at the Harvard lab, Sniadecki and Bonnetta's film does not hold back on commenting on the world it tries to depict. Instead, the phenomeno-

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WHILE "EDGES" IS ORGANISED AROUND THE CONCEPT OF THE "ANY-SPACE-WHATEVER", "STORM" ADHERES INSTEAD TO THE NOTION OF THE ORIGINARY WORLD

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logical and sensory experience in "Edges" is complemented with another experience that requires the spectator to adopt a cognitive approach.

To this end, the film includes a final segment that contrasts with the ones before it in terms of both content and form. In "Storm", we shift from the strange and disconcerting universe of the Sonoran Desert to the depiction of a *lieu de memoire* in the strictest sense: a place where collective memory is crystallised in the manner described by Pierre Nora (2008). This mutation of the space appears subtly throughout "Edges". Little clues dropped into the narrative (the testimonies, although too disconnected to construct a cohesive story, provide information about what it means to inhabit the Sonoran Desert) have been preparing the spectator to confront what the desert means in symbolic terms. It is no mere coincidence that the final sequence focuses on showing what Slavoj Žižek describes in relation to *Stalker* as "human vestiges in the process of being reclaimed by nature" (2006: 135). Thus, the ground-level long shots in *Stalker* showing the remnants of untold stories while the characters lie down to rest—metal containers, a mirror, scraps of a calendar, coins and a religious icon, all lying under the water—have a grim echo in the detailed attention to the vestiges of loss at the end of "Edges": half-buried rags and water bottles, footprints made by the bodies that passed through there at some point, a backpack, some cards, a religious image and the electronic parts of a phone overwhelm the material representation of the place, encouraging a reflection that points to another level of meaning easily associable with the humanitarian crisis.

This progressive inscription of meaning culminates in the construction of the desert presented in "Storm". Here, the screen acquires a significant value that it has lacked until now, condensing a symbolic function revealed firstly in a shift of visual register. The array of oppositions to the previous segments is obvious: in contrast to the chromatic variety and richness of the first segments, the sombre quality of the black and white produces a greyscale image with practically no shades or contrasts. After the predominance of fragmentation in "Edges", with its build-up of elements, objects and frame types characterised by oblique angles, comes the extreme flatness of "Storm", with its succession of frontal wide shots that barely establishes any figurative difference between them. The frames, rather than being connected sequentially in sound narrative logic, focus the spectator's gaze inside their boundaries, to images that are closed in on themselves.

The monumental nature of the screen then becomes overwhelming, with a completely empty set displayed as a kind of grand stage that seems to be awaiting the arrival of actors who never appear. In formal terms, it could be described as a kind of scenic layout, a mere backdrop with no shape or outline of a landscape, defined only by its minimal elements: little more than a line of horizon separating the earth from the sky, the material from the ethereal. The ceremoniousness and distance so typical of a *lieu de mémoire* is conveyed entirely by the image, which is transformed into a global image of the whole desert. In short, while "Edges" is organised around the concept of the "any-space-whatever", "Storm" adheres instead to the notion of the originary world, a world that "is recognisable by its formless character. It is a pure background, or rather a without-background composed of unformed matter, sketches or fragments" (Deleuze, 1986: 123). Unlike the fragmentary nature and spatial disconnection of the "any-space-whatever", the originary world forms a whole that unites all its parts; however, rather than organising these elements, the aim is

to "gather up the scraps, form the great rubbish dump and bring everything together in a single and identical death impulse" (1986: 130). The space is thus charged with a gloomy potential that seems also to be the principle governing the Sonoran Desert in "Storm", as Sniadecki himself has hinted by describing the desert in the film's final segment as "cleansing and terrifying, biblical and primordial" (quoted in MacDonald, 2019: 494).

Deleuze points out two major differences between the concepts of the "any-space-whatever" and the originary space. First, while the former is related to the affectivity or emotion of the gaze, the latter is associated with its primordial condition, with impulses and visceral responses. And second, while the "any-space-whatever" can be constituted as an autonomous, fully fictional—or alien—space, the originary world is necessarily related to the "geographical and historical milieu which serves as its medium" (Deleuze, 1986: 124). In this way, the world represented aims to expose the violence and cruelty that characterises the real world. The desert in "Storm" inevitably establishes a cycle of reciprocity between what it shows and what it does not show, between the poetic nature of the image and the harsh reality of what it alludes to.

What can be taken from Deleuze's bleak reflection and Sniadecki's description is best understood by a less perceptible yet more substantial shift that occurs between the two segments: while the desert in "Edges" has been crossed, albeit only phantasmally, by nomadic bodies (of migrants, collaborators and inhabitants, but also spectators), the desert in "Storm" has no corporeal presence at all. The voice-over accompanies the image without explaining or describing it (instead, the poem "*Primero Sueño*" ["First Dream"], by the 17th-century Mexican poet Sor Juana de la Cruz, is recited). The voice-over's autonomy from the image reinforces the radical absence of bodies on screen. But the fact they are not visible does not mean thy are not imagined. There is no need to show the corpses or skeletons of migrants killed by the brutal weather, roving robbers or border police. Nor is it necessary to resort to the iconographic inventory of migrant cinema with gratuitous images of men, women and children hiding in train cars or behind the shrubs and bushes scattered across the region. With its sparseness, the screen in "Storm" outlines an archaeological, stratigraphic image which, according to Deleuze (1987), combines perception with imagination, what we see and what we imagine. And just as Deleuze argues that "the earth stands for what is buried in it" (Deleuze, 1989: 244) in the films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, the Sonoran Desert is transformed in the final segment of *El Mar La Mar* into the desolate tombstone beneath which are buried the bodies of all those who did not survive the journey and whose memory is now placed in the power of the spectator, who must imagine the unimaginable.

Ultimately, the rhetorical shift effectuated from "Edges" to "Storm" can be compared with the shift from the concrete nature of the Zone in *Stalker* to the abstract quality of the sentient ocean in *Solaris*, a homogeneous, liquid entity that resists all human attempts to penetrate its surface. The meticulous attention to the visible in "Edges" and *Stalker* stands in opposition to the attention given in *Solaris* and "Storm" to the invisible, to what lies deep below. Thus, just as the surface of the alien planet affects the deepest psychic layers of the scientists on the Solaris space station, the desert in "Storm" penetrates our subconscious, compelling us to wonder what lies beneath the ground, the meaning concealed in its inaccessible subterranean layers. There is one difference, however, because the sentient ocean in Tarkovsky's film is turned into an ocean of memory in *El Mar La Mar*, an overwhelmingly isolated space for the spectator, who must imagine what the landscape hides. As a primordial image, the wide shot of the desert reveals in its visual simplicity the death impulse that this lethal place represents. Death is, in short, what awaits all those who confront Solaris or Sonora.

3. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

This article has sought to clarify the distance between Bonetta and Sniadecki's vision and the principles of the sensory documentary. In a preliminary exercise to defamiliarise the gaze that eschews the typical didactic register and iconography of migrant cinema, "Edges" immerses the spectator in a sensory experience of the Sonoran Desert that is ultimately transformed into a commemorative reflection in "Storm". The productive dialogue this film establishes with Andrei Tarkovsky's science fiction filmography reveals the emphasis they place on the physical, material aspects of the universe depicted, and the fact that this focus is the aesthetic starting point that leads to an essentially ethical end point. While in the first part of *El Mar La Mar* the setting resembles that ambiguous, unsettling region through which the protagonists wander in *Stalker*, nomadic subjects stumbling across an amorphous terrain that is reconfigured with each foray into it, the documentary's conclusion has more in common with the inscrutable surface of the planet Solaris, where any search for meaning is ultimately fruitless and inevitably leads to death.

Notably, however, Bonnetta and Sniadecki's project converges with Tarkovsky's from the opposite direction: while the Russian filmmaker uses generic codes to explore moral questions about what it means to be human,[1] the two contemporary directors begin with a moral issue—a human crisis—to push the audiovisual experience into the realm of horror and the fantastic. It is thanks to these two complementary movements, combining poetic and political distancing, that *El Mar La Mar* sidesteps the problem of passion fatigue and proposes new ways of talking about migration, which, as Laura Marks (2000) has suggested, may be able to offer answers that are at once intellectual, emotional and visceral. ■

NOTES

1   "Science fiction in *Stalker* was nothing more than a tactical starting point, useful to help us highlight the moral conflict even more starkly, which was essential for us" (Tarkovsky, 2002: 222).

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WHEN MIGRATION BECOMES A MATTER OF SCIENCE FICTION: *EL MAR LA MAR*

Abstract

This paper analyses *El Mar La Mar* (Joshua Bonnetta and J. P. Sniadecki, 2017), a documentary about the migration crisis at the southern US border that aims to overcome the perceptual desensitisation caused by "ultra-familiar" images. To this end, it eschews the iconographic regimes of migrant cinema and resorts instead to the poetic estrangement that characterises Andrei Tarkovsky's science fiction films. Through the use of defamiliarising strategies throughout much of its length, the film immerses the spectator in a sensory experience of the Sonoran Desert akin to that of *Stalker* (1979) with its detailed focus on the physical and material world of the Forbidden Zone. However, this focus is merely an aesthetic starting point that is ultimately complemented with a strictly ethical conclusion. The final segment of the documentary adopts the qualities of the sentient ocean in *Solaris* (1972), with a world that draws the spectator's attention to what lies beneath the desert's surface: the thousands of migrants who died while trying to cross its expanse. It is through this combination of aesthetic and ethical movements that *El Mar La Mar* elicits a response from the spectator that is at once sensory, emotional, and intellectual.

Key words

Documentary; Migration; Science fiction; Sensoriality; Joshua Bonnetta and J. P. Sniadecki; Andrei Tarkovsky.

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CUANDO LA MIGRACIÓN ES ASUNTO DE CIENCIA FICCIÓN: *EL MAR LA MAR*

Resumen

El siguiente trabajo analiza *El Mar La Mar* (Joshua Bonnetta y J. P. Sniadecki, 2017), un documental sobre el drama migratorio en la frontera sur de los Estados Unidos que busca superar el entumecimiento perceptivo de las imágenes «ultra-conocidas». Para ello, se aleja de los regímenes iconográficos del *migrant cinema* y recurre al extrañamiento poético que singulariza el cine de ciencia ficción de Andrei Tarkovski. A través de estrategias de desautomatización de la mirada en gran parte de su metraje, el documental confronta al espectador con una experiencia sensorial del desierto de Sonora, que es del mismo orden que en *Stalker* (1979) y su detallada atención al mundo físico y material de la zona prohibida. Pero dicha revalorización es el punto de partida estético que se complementa con un punto de llegada que es estrictamente ético. El último segmento del documental asume los rasgos del océano pensante de *Solaris* (1972), mundo que dirige la atención del espectador hacia aquello que esconde bajo su superficie: los miles de muertos de migrantes que perecieron intentando atravesar su territorio. Es gracias a ese doble movimiento complementario, estético y ético, que *El Mar La Mar* logra concitar en el espectador una repuesta que es tanto sensorial como emocional e intelectual.

Palabras clave

Documental; Migración; Ciencia ficción; Sensorialidad; Joshua Bonnetta y J. P. Sniadecki; Andrei Tarkovski.

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