

GEOLOGY, HISTORY, AND LANDSCAPE IN LOS MATERIALES (LOS HIJOS, 2009)*

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Los materiales [The materials] (Los Hijos, 2009) created a commotion in the Spanish-speaking experimental film world¹ after its premiere at the Punto de Vista International Documentary Festival, where it received the Jean Vigo Award for best direction in 2010. Months later, it ratified this success with the Special Jury Mention at FID in Marseille. The film was reviewed widely in specialized and general publications, as well as in blogs and digital periodicals, and rated fourth best in the category “Invisible Cinema of 2010”, a poll taken by critics of *Cahiers du cinéma España*. It was frequently screened at film festivals, art centres, and cinemathèques and, at the end of 2011, it was released on DVD by Cameo. It was the first feature by the Los Hijos collective, whose members, all born in the early 1980s – Javier Fernández, Luis López Carrasco and Natalia Marín – had met while they were studying at the Madrid Film School (ECAM). They banded together in the fall

of 2008 to make a short film that they later submitted to a competition at the Centro de Arte y Naturaleza-CEDAN [Centre for Art and Nature], in Huesca (Pena, 2010: 79). The result of this first collaboration was *El sol en el sol del membrillo* [The Sun on the Quince Tree Sun] (2008), which the filmmakers described as *The Quince Tree Sun* (El sol del membrillo, Víctor Erice, 1992) version 2.0 (Pena, 2010: 79); it is an ironic, slightly irreverent swipe at one of the milestones of recent Spanish documentary. With their considerable sense of humour, which prevents them from falling into an arid academicism, their stylistic subtlety and their conceptual sharpness, Los Hijos undermine the presumptions of a certain type of cinema – Víctor Erice’s is only one example – that takes its capacity for redeeming reality a little too seriously.

Los materiales shares many of the qualities of *El sol en el sol del membrillo*. It mixes cinephilia, a lyrical feel for landscape – Los Hijos would proba-

bly cringe at these words – and an interest in examining, deconstructing, and reconstructing the basic constituents of the film image. *Los materiales* is a portrait of Riaño (León, Spain), a village with over two thousand years of documented history that was submerged under the waters of a reservoir in the mid-1980s and rebuilt near its original location. But more than the specificity of the place, the film reflects “what is entailed in arriving at a territory and trying to explore it”, a process in which they admit they failed catastrophically (Realisateurs FID, 2010). In part, the film is the chronicle of this failure, which is also the failure of an artistic project and of the filmic apparatus, whose power to capture the intricacies of reality has inevitable limitations, and the film wallows in them. However, there is no bitterness over these predicaments in *Los materiales*. Just like *El sol...*, the film is both jocular and self-critical, attitudes conveyed through the subtitled – never heard – dialogues in which the filmmakers question their motives for making the film, their inability to empathize with the dwellers of Riaño, and the progress of their production. The title itself evokes precariousness, and hints that what is contained in the film is a collection of outtakes, unedited footage, focus and light tests, and rehearsals; taken together, these provide a model kit rather than a finished, well-rounded whole.

These characteristics give the film considerable freshness and immediacy, qualities that have prompted some critics to describe *Los materiales* as “cinema of the YouTube generation” and as a kind of cinema that seeks to start from zero (Zunzunegui 2010: 80). “Starting from zero”, in this case, did not entail dismantling the syntax of commercial cinema with a revolutionary purpose, as Jean-Luc Godard did when he used this expression to

justify his sharp political turn in the late 1960s,² but a desire to leave history aside. Tradition has become too burdened with masters and masterpieces which, sublime as they may be, have also become trite and irrelevant. This is a legacy that Los Hijos cite frequently – as Steve Marsh has pointed out, their very name, Los Hijos [The Children], invokes filiation and descent (2014: 352-53) – but always between quotation marks. At the same time, it is important to read the signs of precariousness in *Los materiales* as deliberate stylistic gambits and as allegories of the limitations of the apparatus, and not as symptoms of carelessness or abdication in the face of intractable material, even if this is the impression that the film seeks to communicate. Several critics have noted that Los

Hijos’s neglect of form and apparent haphazardness are carefully mediated and calibrated – put at the service of a project of considerable conceptual depth. Rubén García López (2013) places at the centre of this project the tension between the film

apparatus and the world-as-found – a tension he examines insightfully in the first shorts of the collective. Steven Marsh, for his part, focuses on Los Hijos’s interrupted, asymmetrical dialogue with tradition, which he describes through the notion of “haunting” developed by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1994). For us, *Los materiales*, along with *El sol en el sol del membrillo* and other works such as *Ya viene. Aguanta. Riégume. Mátame* [Here it Comes. Hold On. Water Me. Kill Me] (2009) or the feature film *Árboles* [Trees] (2013), articulate a very particular vision of history, landscape and the relationship between them, while pondering, at the same time, the cinema’s ability to reveal – or not – their particular connection. And as it reflects on landscape, memory and cinema, *Los materiales* weaves a semi-fictional

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plot about the relationship between the filmmakers. This relationship may be read as a personal story – three friends grapple with rivalry and disagreement while they make a documentary – and as an allegory about the aesthetics of the film.

FROM MATERIALISM TO GEOLOGY

A significant clue about the aesthetics of *Los materiales* is provided by its title. The back of the DVD jacket lists different meanings of the Spanish term “*material*”. One of the meanings *not* mentioned, since it is not common in Spanish, refers to the so-called “structural-materialist” cinema. The term combines the notion “structural cinema”, coined by P. Adams Sitney in 1969, with a later redefinition of this concept by Peter Gidal as “materialist” film (1977: 3-21, 1989). For Sitney, the cinema of structure scrutinized the components of the cinematic image and apparatus: framing, light, the qualities of the emulsion, the chemistry of development, the perceptual distortions provoked by different lenses, the image’s granularity, the pace of editing, the shape and dynamism of projected light (1969: 1-10; 2002: 347-370). Classic examples of this type of cinema are late 1960s and early 1970s films by Michael Snow, Ken Jacobs, Paul Sharits, Hollis Frampton, Ernie Gehr, Malcolm LeGrice, Lis Rhodes, and Birgit and Wilhelm Hein, among others, or the cinema without celluloid of Anthony McCall, which explored the beam of light generated by the projector and the way it transformed the surrounding space – a type of practice that Jonathan Walley has labelled “*para-cinema*” (2003: 13-30). In Spanish experimental film – unknown to Sitney and Gidal – counterparts to this international tradition are the experiments with loops, transparent leader, and out-takes by Manolo Calvo and Antonio Artero, the essays with found film and sound by Eugeni Bonet and Eugènia Balcells, or the cycle *Anti-Cine* [Anti-Cinema] by the unclassifiable Javier Aguirre (Bonet and Palacio, 1981: 36-38). While for

Sitney this self-reflexive inquiry was an aesthetic episode, a phase in the evolution of what he called “visionary film”, for Gidal it had ideological and political dimensions. As it highlighted the material substratum of the image and rejected the illusionism of fiction (the phantasmagoria through which the entertainment industry exerts its seductive powers), structural cinema was to film what dialectical materialism was to politics and economics. Both materialisms, filmic and dialectic, revealed the pulse of matter under an obfuscating idealism that impeded the correct perception of reality.

The cinematic materialism of *Los Hijos* cannot be smoothly aligned either with Sitney’s apolitical, aestheticized vision or with Gidal’s revolutionary élan. *Los Hijos* avoid exclusively formalist postures; history, violence, and the ethics of the film image are some of their central concerns. But their scepticism about the possibilities of the cinema to act as an instrument of truth – more on this later – prevents them from sharing Gidal’s faith in the subversive possibilities of self-conscious anti-illusionism.

The materialism of *Los Hijos* is particularly evident in their insistent examination of the double orientation of the image – as the index of an external experiential-perceptual continuum *and* as a product of the technology that channels such exteriority. *Los materiales* underlines

***Los materiales* (Los Hijos, 2009)**



the material properties of the medium through the use of black and white, the tempo of the editing, framing, and sound. The choice of black and white is a distancing gesture. Black and white highlights the constructed quality of the film, evokes an outdated visual culture, and, perhaps because of this, connotes pastness and memory, recurring themes in the film. Similarly distancing and self-referential are the numerous lingering takes held long after their informational value has been exhausted, affirming a slow time of the camera radically different from the time of human attention. The film opens with a majestic shot of snow-capped mountains reflected on the smooth surface of what looks like a lake – later revealed to be the Riaño reservoir. Subsequent takes show anglers wading in the water, insect-like in the distance, and rocky peaks covered by fog. The lengthy shots also underline the manner in which framing inevitably limits the field of vision. Shots taken through the windshield of a moving car are doubly confined: by the frame's characteristic rectangular shape and by the contours of the windshield, a frame within the frame and perhaps also a cinephile's homage to one of Abbas Kiarostami's fetish shots (CENDEAC, 2010: 3). These frames emphasize both the seen and the unseen. Night shots of passing traffic on the highway and of fireworks in a black sky celebrate the enabling role of the frame as part of a technology of vision. But other takes in which the action moves off-screen, out of the range of vision, highlight the frame's blinding potential. Towards the end of the film, during a night drive towards a forest fire glowing in the distance, one of the filmmakers (Luis) gets out of the car thinking that the driver who has stopped in front of him is Javi, another of the members of the collective, while the third member of the group, Natalia, clearly frightened, begs him not to leave the vehicle. The camera angle, an extreme high-angle shot pointing directly at the ground, only shows the dimly lit asphalt and suggests carelessness in the face of

MUCH OF THE RECENT CRITICISM OF THIS TREND HAS SHOWN THAT, IN ADDITION TO HAVING A SELF-REFLEXIVE ORIENTATION TOWARDS FILM MATERIAL AND THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC DEVICE, IT WAS A CINEMA WITH CLEAR THEMATIC PROCLIVITIES

urgency, and even the fear of a danger intuited beyond the limits of the frame.

Sound also functions as a materializing, anti-illusionist ingredient, both for what it includes and for what it excludes. The film oscillates between sync and non-sync sound; ambient noises and the testimony of a local informant are matched to the visuals, while non-synchronized popular songs heard towards the end of the film lack a direct spatio-temporal link with the image. In addition, there are moments of absolute silence – the monumental shot of the mountain that opens the film. But the most evident elision is that of dialogue. The exchanges between the filmmakers are subtitled rather than heard. This strategy underlines that the film is a deliberate construct – rather than a found reality – and deprives the spectator of the characterizing power of the voice and of its functioning as a point of identification and affective anchorage. In this regard, the subtitling brings about a Brechtian alienation: it hinders empathy and prevents the smooth blending of the film's ingredients into an organic whole.

Structural-materialist cinema was never just a self-referential exercise, as most recent literature on this current has demonstrated. Catherine Russell has shown that the formal resources of structural cinema, especially disruptive montage, fixed camera set-ups, and sound-image disjunction, were often deployed in ethnographies and documentaries that sought to criticize the colonialist and authoritarian aspirations of these genres and that were more receptive towards otherness and

difference (1999: 157-90). In a similar spirit, Suárez has explored the convergences between structural film and 1960s and 1970s electroacoustic music in order to highlight the politics of the body and of social difference that informed both media in those decades (2008: 62-90). MacDonald (2001) and Arthur (1978; 1979) have related structural cinema to the hidden life of spaces – whether architectural or natural. For Arthur (1979: 126-27), built spaces often externalize the cinematic apparatus: in the earliest films by Snow (*Wavelength* [1967], *Back and Forth* [1970]) and Gehr (*Wait* [1968], *Serene Velocity* [1970]), empty rooms, impersonal hallways, or the gaps between buildings act as versions of the frame or the *camera obscura*, an antecedent of the cinematic image. Natural spaces, for their part, exhibit an alien, mute nature that is inevitably invaded by human presence. Examples of this invasion are the shadows cast by the recording equipment and the electronic noises that guide the camera in *La Région Centrale* (Michael Snow, 1971); the off-screen commentary and snatches of commercial radio in *The Sky on Location* (Babette Mangolte 1983); and the roads, power lines, and ruined buildings in Larry Gottheim's and James Benning's landscape films (*Fog Line* [Gottheim, 1970], *Horizons* [Gottheim, 1973], *Deseret* [Benning, 1995]). All these elements underline that there is no unmediated relationship with the natural landscape (MacDonald 2001: 1-22; 89-107). Finally, Skoller and Villarrea have shown that the strategies of structural cinema have been used to inquire into history and memory. Skoller has analysed traumatic memory in such titles as *Signal-Germany on the Air* (Gehr, 1982-85) and *Utopia* (James Benning, 1998) (Skoller, 2005: 109-15). And Villarrea has studied the memory of urban change in *West of the Rails* (Tie Xi Qu, Wang Bing, 2002) and *One-Way Boogie Woogie/27 Years Later* (James Benning, 2004) (Villarrea, 2015: 110-28). These last two titles document how de-industrialization – whether in a Chinese mining region or in the American Midwest – leaves behind archae-



Los materiales (Los Hijos, 2009)

ological remains: empty factories and warehouses, mountains of rubble, workshops and loading decks increasingly overgrown with vegetation. The scant human activity occurring in these ruins is ghostly (in Wang Bing) or absurd (in Benning). Rather than show the invasion of nature by human devices, both directors describe the reversion of technology to still life – fossil or geological sediment.

Los materiales, like other titles by Los Hijos, shares the melancholy/absurd perception of history present in Wang Bing and Benning. The film casts an elegiac gaze on a modern project that has foundered and bottomed out: the spasmodic final lap of the Spanish modernization project, as defunct in many ways as the Chinese revolutionary project or the industrial activity of the American rust belt. *Los materiales* started as a larger work – a series of pieces on megalomaniac constructions that remained unfinished or were never used. This substantial project was eventually condensed into a portrait of Riaño (Pena, 2010: 79). The reservoir, a typical product of Francoist *desarrollismo* – the developmentalist economic approach of the regime's last decade and a half – was finished in 1986, although its human and ecological costs were totally out of proportion to its usefulness.³

The Riaño reservoir is depicted as a natural phenomenon – a geological accretion. It appears

in the film initially through its effects: dammed-up water, barren hillsides, and flooded valleys. When the walls of the dam are shown for the first time, in two shots linked by a jump-cut, they look like a prolongation of the abutting rock cliffs. The conversation accompanying the image, however, speculates on its history: on whether the villagers had asked ETA, the Basque terrorist organization, to blow up the construction, a suggestion that recalls the solidarity of the Basque left independence movement with Riaño and the parallel, roughly simultaneous, protests against a similar reservoir in Itoiz, in Spain's Navarre region. During a ride on a tourist ferry, the camera remains fixed on the surface of the water and, afterwards, on a bridge largely devoid of human presence that seems to blend in with the grey mountains and the milky sky. The bland, impersonal buildings of the "new" Riaño look like chalk cliffs. The town is mostly empty; some children cross the screen momentarily and a woman leans out of a window to shake a white piece of cloth only to disappear immediately afterwards. The reservoir, built as a power generator, seems to have reduced everything to a lifeless mineral state.

While buildings, public works, and technology take on the appearance of natural sediments, floating above them, like weather formations, are memory and history, which end up reverting back

Los materiales (Los Hijos, 2009)



to the earth. In a key scene in the film, the filmmakers interview Pedro, a native of Riaño who migrated to the Basque Country during his adolescence but returns regularly on holidays. Positioned facing the camera, Pedro recalls the recent history of the place where he stands: the Pármede shepherds' shelter, in the township of Burón. He points out the route taken by the firing squads and their victims during the Spanish Civil War; anti-Franco fighters from the area were rounded up and executed not far from where he is speaking. One of these fighters survived and was hidden by a neighbour until he recovered from his wounds. A shepherd from the area was rumoured to have killed a Republican loyalist (*maquis*) who had taken to the mountains after the Civil War, and would occasionally come down to the valley to kill one of the shepherd's sheep. "He's buried under that oak," Pedro says, pointing to his right. As Pedro speaks, we see how the filmmakers prepare the shot, cabling the mike, correcting Pedro's position, and adjusting the frame. While Pedro's testimony runs on, the image cuts to a behind-the-scenes shot of two of the filmmakers operating the camera. But the second camera that records them seems bored by the triteness of the situation – a conventional interview shot – and diverts its gaze to the clouds that drift above the mountains, just like Pedro's anecdotes. But these anecdotes – immaterial exhalations of the landscape channelled through the villager's voice – lead back to the ground. The *maquis* is buried right there. The executed loyalists ended up in mass graves nearby, swallowed up by the stony, unassailable earth that devours everything. In a subsequent scene, Pedro tries to locate the mass grave – the "pit of the executed" – in a beech grove but cannot find it. "Perhaps it was covered up, since there was so much bitching about it..." In the end, everything disappears under layers of rock – or underwater. The tourist ferry on the reservoir ("you have to be joking to call this the fjords of León", a subtitle complains) sails over the approximate area where

the village used to be, buried like the executed rebels or the shepherd's victim. History produces a kind of terminal moraine. While the angel of history envisioned by Walter Benjamin saw history as a mounting pile of rubble that reaches sky-high (2005a: 24), *Los Hijos* visualize the passage of time as a sliding down into the tectonic basement, a becoming-fossil from which rise, like fog, the testimonies that keep history alive.

This becoming-fossil differs radically from the "geological history" proposed by Mexican philosopher Manuel De Landa, for whom the processes of mineralization, sedimentation, and metamorphosis offer valuable models for a materialist conception of history. De Landa's proposal is based on the idea that history is a long process of mineralization. One of its most tangible by-products is the accumulation, as sediments of time, of a dense exoskeleton of buildings, infrastructures, materials, and technologies. In addition, the *longue durée* of the earth provides models of self-organization and autogenesis analogous to those experienced by human societies. For De Landa, geological sedimentation is structurally identical to the consolidation of social strata and communities, and the "auto-catalytic loops" and bifurcations that break the chemical balance and precipitate unpredictable change are structurally analogous to historical transformations and revolutions – usually explained without reference to the natural physical environment. Given the proximity of socio-historical and natural processes, human societies can be regarded not only as human but also as somewhat natural phenomena whose explanation may be modelled on geodynamics (De Landa, 1997: 25-101). In *Los materiales*, however, geology

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offers tropes of disorganization and entropy rather than of self-organization and structure. In this regard, the film lends itself to a different reading: equally radical, equally materialist, and also geologically grounded – a reading that we can mediate through the ideas on the relationship between history and nature formulated by Theodor Adorno towards the end of his life.

In a series of lectures delivered during the end of 1964 and the early months of 1965, Adorno rejects the usual conception of nature and history as starkly separate, mutually exclusive spheres. Against thinkers who assume that history

is only the evolution of something like a collective spirit and nature an indifferent setting in which the former unfolds, Adorno argues for a tight interlacing between nature and history (2006: 115-29). Adorno admits that nature is immediately converted into history when it is mediated through con-

sciousness, which appropriates it as its object and turns it into a second nature that inevitably bears human traces, although this does not negate nature's innate drives. On the other hand, Adorno continues, history behaves like nature when it unfolds unfettered, as a blind force that stifles freedom. Part of history's natural automatism resides in its constant movement towards death, dissolution, ruin, and sediment. Quoting Benjamin, Adorno proposes that history always ends up congealing in ruins or fossils (2006: 124-26).⁴ This is an innate potential of all living things, but it is less an example of self-organization – as in De Landa's formulation – than a reminder of the stark fragility of being. But, Adorno continues, this awareness should not lead to melancholy but to what he calls the "joy" of philosophy. This joy

lies in the perception that what seems given and fixed is not so, but only a moment in a larger totality in constant transformation. And it is our awareness of the ultimate vulnerability of life that allows us to understand such joyous mutability (2006: 128).

Adorno seems a rather arcane reference for “the cinema of the YouTube era”. However, his conception of a mutable historical totality entangled in natural processes and leading to death and dissolution, to earth and sediment, is clearly apposite to *Los materiales*, as well as two other shorts by the collective that make up, together with this one, what might be called a trilogy of the territory. *El sol en el sol del membrillo* reveals the artifice needed to create the illusion of nature. A copy of the Antonio López painting whose production was lovingly detailed by Víctor Erice in *El sol del membrillo* stands on an easel in a sown field. It is filmed in sunlight and under a cloudy sky, in rain and wind, and at different times of the day and night. An ant crosses the surface of the canvas. The filmmakers are shown placing the painting on the easel, composing the frame, calculating the distance and the exposure, and even placing the ant on the painting. Like *Los materiales*, the film reveals its own composition through these behind-the-scenes views – the film and its “making-of” are often indistinguishable in the works of the collective (Marsh, 2013; García López, 2013); and these views show the mediations that turn the natural into a second nature captured by the camera. At the same time, in the background of the image lies the earth’s powerful latency, visible in the landscape and in close-ups of surrounding details: moss on a tree trunk, a rotting bird carcass, lumps of earth, the stubble



El sol en el sol del membrillo (Los Hijos, 2008)

fields. Antonio López’s painting is rendered small, placed on a flimsy easel, beaten by the elements, and invaded by a persistent ant. The filmmakers are subjected to the harsh environment as well and complain about the heat and the mosquitoes. Lopez’s painting, which in Erice’s

film was the vanishing point and the synthesis of the painter’s and the filmmaker’s respective creative processes, becomes here a material residue, viewed as it begins to dissolve entropically into the earth and the atmosphere.

The short *Ya viene. Aguanta. Riégume. Mátame*, made shortly after *Los materiales*, also juxtaposes territory and cultural memory, except here the territory is not an unmarked natural milieu – as in *El sol en el sol del membrillo* – but the locations used for several emblematic Spanish films of recent decades: the train tracks that fascinated the small girls in *The Spirit of the Beehive* (*El espíritu de la colmena*, Víctor Erice, 1973); a pedestrian overpass from which the young protagonists of *Stories from the Kronen* (*Historias del Kronen*, Montxo Armendáriz, 1995) suspend themselves over speeding traffic; a side wall of Palacio del Conde Duque in Madrid, where Carmen Maura’s character in *Law of Desire* (*La ley del deseo*, Pedro Almodóvar 1986) tells a street cleaner to hose her down on a torrid summer night; and the environs of the Burgos cathedral, the setting for the tragic ending of Vicente Aranda’s *Lovers* (*Amantes*, 1991). Present views of these spaces are combined with subtitled fragments of the dialogues filmed in them. As with Pedro’s stories in *Los materiales* or the evocation of Erice’s film in *El sol del membrillo*, these cinematic memories are like ectoplasmic exhalations rising from neutral, indifferent land-

scapes which, as García López has pointed out, are now dreary and commonplace (2013: 90). Los Hijos wanted to question the picturesque leanings of recent Spanish cinema and to restore to these locations “their impurity, their dirt, their ambient noise” (Pena, 2010: 79). These local contingencies and impurities also show the ephemerality of film production; there are no traces in these – often ugly – locations of the films that were once made in them. What does remain, however, is the solidity of the physical background, largely impervious to the passing of time. While there are epidermal transformations on the surface of the land, the geographical substrate is perfectly recognizable. The setting of *El espíritu*, for example, is now dotted with warehouses and factories, but the plane and surrounding mountains remain pretty much as they are in the film made over three decades earlier. The rhythms of the land are much slower than the pace of ephemeral human action, and perhaps because of this, the camera’s indifferent, mechanical gaze is the ideal vehicle to capture them.

But precisely because it arises from an impersonal technology, the time of the camera is not an epiphanic time of insight and revelation, as André Bazin famously maintained, but a gradual, unhurried becoming, pervaded by long waits and static situations, inhabited at times by subtle molecular agitation and unresolved stirrings that lead nowhere in particular and communicate a tenuous vibration in the land or the atmosphere. This is neither the *chronos* of mere linear succession nor the *kairos* of revelation and eventfulness, but a third time without telos or structure: a mineral time of erosion and delayed dissolution, marked by the slow yet constant transformation of the light and the air.

This treatment of time and memory connects Los Hijos with what one might call a historicist turn in contemporary Spanish art, perceptible in numerous works that inquire into recent history with a double purpose: rescuing from oblivion ep-

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isodes and experiences buried under official history and questioning the traditional conceptions of history as the chronicle of things past – a linear chronology closed to the present (Hernández Navarro, 2012). Los Hijos’s work could be interpreted as a muted, sceptical version of this turn. The return to the past in artists and filmmakers such as Marcelo Expósito – *La tierra de la madre* (The Mother’s Land, 1995), with José Antonio Hergueta – , Virginia Villaplana – *El instante de la memoria* (The Instant of Memory, 2011) – , María Ruido – *Operación Rosebud* (Operation Rosebud, 2008) – , or, in a very different register, José Luis Guerín – *Innisfree* (1990) – is loquacious and articulate, driven by trust in the emancipating power of revisionist history. All these filmmakers delve into different historical moments – traumatic episodes in Spanish history in the cases of Expósito/Hergueta, Villaplana and Ruido; the production of a John Ford film in a remote Irish village in the case of Guerín – in order to rescue minor stories that nuance and modify official history. Their critical revisions of official history intend to correct violent erasures and to redirect the present towards more emancipated forms of collective life. For Los Hijos, however, the backward glance does not trigger a profusion of stories: there are

relatively few sequences devoted to direct remembrance in *Los materiales* and the film is, in general, quite taciturn. Nor does recalling the past unlock emancipatory impulses in the present. Rather than make the past talk, *Los Hijos* recreate its slow advance towards the silence of the earth. In this regard, they are closer to photographers such as Ana Teresa Ortega, whose series *Cartografías silenciadas* [Silenced Cartographies] (2007) revisits sites of Francoist repression in the present when the traces of their bloody history are no longer apparent; or Bleda and Rosa, whose series *Ciudades* [Cities] (1997-2000) and *Campos de batalla* [Battlefields] show empty landscapes that offer no signs of their tumultuous past of intense urban activity or violent confrontations.

MEMORIES OF DISINTEGRATION

Besides inquiring into the landscape and the memory of the land, and into film's ability to record them faithfully, *Los materiales* also tells a story about three filmmakers who arrive in a small town looking for something that they never quite find, and their failure makes them confront their group dynamics, their prejudices as researcher-observers, and the limits of their medium. This subtle, elliptical plot is at the same time an allegory of the film itself as an impossible, failed project.

The presence of the filmmakers behind the camera is evident from the first scene in the film. After the spectacular opening shot, a subtitle disrupts the bucolic quality of the view with an ironic, self-deprecating comment: "This is my most Angelopoulos shot ever." The cinephile's allusion and the ambivalence of the creators towards their own images are constant in the dialogues. A subsequent scene shows a couple on the edge of the reservoir. The filmmakers record them at a distance and speculate about them. The voyeurism of the scene naturally brings to mind several films: "I feel a bit *Blow-Up* doing this... or *Rear Window* as well." The mention of *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock,

1954) prompts derogatory comments about James Stewart and Hitchcock, whose only decent film, one of the interlocutors claims, is *The Birds* (1963) "... well, and *Rope*." *Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966), *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948) and *Rear Window* are not only films about unrepentant voyeurs, but also stories about crimes hidden behind everyday normality. Inspired by these stories, the filmmakers imagine one of the partners of the anonymous couple killing the other, hiding the body in the trunk of the car, erasing all traces of murder, and returning to the city as if nothing had happened at the end of the day.

This conversation presages in a humorous, personal tone the various forms of violence that punctuate the film: the executions during the Civil War and the post-war period, the murdered *maquis*, and the recent ecocide that has resulted in a place where, in the words of a local resident, "everything is dead." Natalia agrees: "Everything is dead here. This place is horrible." Furthermore, in the films just mentioned, visual evidence of the murder is difficult to locate. Neither Hitchcock film shows dead bodies, even though they structure the plot and are hidden in the midst of the action: in the inner courtyard of the apartment building in *Rear Window* or inside a trunk in the middle of the drawing room in *Rope*. In Antonioni's film, the visual evidence of a suspected murder is even more tenuous and seems to disappear overnight; the film is, in fact, a complex allegory about the unreliability of vision and the ruses of the gaze. Erased, buried, hidden away, submerged in water, or simply vanished, the dead bodies are similarly invisible in *Los materiales*. Take, for example, Pedro's unsuccessful search for the war-time execution site, his inability to locate the grave of the *maquis* ("it was around here, according to my father..."), or his uncertainty about the man who survived an execution squad – he does not remember whether he is still alive or not. Similarly doubt-ridden is the moment when the filmmakers ride the tourist ferry on the res-

ervoir – one of the tourist attractions with which the regional government tried to compensate for the disappearance of old Riaño – and try to guess the exact point where the village was, while the camera, which had stayed focused on the water until that point, dramatically changes angle and looks up at the sky, as if avoiding the scene of the crime.

Seeing is difficult, when not impossible, even though much of the film is taken up by lengthy takes and protracted contemplation. In *Los materiales*, the camera – and its addressee, the spectator – stares relentlessly, at times with irritation or indifference, only to ascertain that ocular inspection fails to deliver sense. Luis and Natalia wonder whether some white stains on a mountain top are animals or rocks while the fog gradually hides them from view. And during the night scene in which the filmmakers drive to a forest fire with the intention of filming it, the screen frequently goes to black and only the lines of dialogue are visible.

Related to the difficulty of seeing is the frustration of not finding what one seeks. The film starts with the image of a road that sinks into the water right ahead, a recurring location to which the filmmakers return several months later, when the water level was lower. On this second occasion, the journey also stops at the water's edge. During the drive, the filmmakers dispute the testimony of "the Italian woman" who told them that it was possible to find forks and shoes on the banks of the reservoir when the water level went down. Because it ends in frustration, this journey is similar to the interrupted trip to the forest fire. And it also echoes a later scene: the day after the fire, Luis and Natalia try to ask a local about the extent of the damages but he disappears before they can approach him. Luis and Natalia's subtitled conversation is superimposed on a ruined facade, as inscrutable as the elusive shepherd, or as the reality of the town itself. "Ask the dog", one of them says, a line immediately followed by



Los materiales (Los Hijos, 2009)

a shot of a dog they describe as "weird looking as shit", which sniffs the intruders without, naturally, proffering any answers. In all these cases, the camera's forward, penetrating movement comes up against water, darkness, evasion, a blank ruin, or a friendly pet's inability to speak.

The lack of correlation between searching and finding, looking and seeing, asking and answering make interruption and divergence one of the film's conceptual nodes. The conversations early in the film about Hitchcock, Antonioni, and murderous couples are, at bottom, about discrepant, disjunctive relationships. These allusions seem to infect the filmmakers' "lives", as from the start they do not seem quite capable of converging around the project. One of the three is always wandering off alone or disappearing. "Where is Luis?" asks one at the end of the voyeur scene. "Back there, somewhere." In a later scene, off-screen, Luis shoots the peaks covered in fog while Natalia checks a map next to him and Javi waits for them elsewhere. When Javi and Natalia interview Pedro, Luis stands aside, recording the landscape in the distance, and when the interviewers and interviewee start off for the place where the prisoners of war were executed, Luis, again, stays behind to film a beech grove. At the end of the film we find out that Javi has left. He resented that his partners were not respectful enough towards the villagers: deep down, they did not care about them.

Natalia and Luis regret the desertion but grant that he is partly right. “I grew up in a village like this. None of this impresses me”, reads a subtitle.

The disjunction that characterizes the relationships between the filmmakers translates into a formal disjunction within the film: the filmic materials do not blend into a homogeneous whole; there are constant jumps between shots, between one scene and the next, between subtitled dialogue, ambient noise and image. These jumps reveal cinema’s inherent discontinuity: film serves up rough fragments,

chunks of space and time endowed with their singular atmosphere and gravity; only with some violence may these fragments be homogenized and subjected to an external order. In part, *Los materiales* is the result of letting the fragments that make up the film

remain autonomous, eccentric, and dispersed. In addition, the film’s constitutive disjunctiveness results from the difficulty of making reality speak in an unambiguous fashion.

In this sense, *Los materiales* is quite close to numerous examples of ethnographic and documentary cinema that revolve around the impossibility of translating their object of observation. This object remains unassailably opaque and may be regarded as a visual correlate of what Jean-François Lyotard called *le différend*: a core of (non)sense that cannot be translated across languages or discourses and remains on the margins of the communicable and negotiable (1996: 41-46, 65-67). Practitioners of this style of documentary are Jean Rouch, Juan Downey, and Trinh T. Minh Ha – particularly her early titles *Reassemblage* (1982) or *Naked Spaces: Living is Round* (1985) – and, closer to the pres-



Los materiales (Los Hijos, 2009)

ent, Ben Russell – *Let Each One Go Where He May* (2009) – , Chantal Akerman – *Sud* [South] (1999), *D’Est* [From the East] (1995) – , Pedro Ortuño – *La cuna del daiquiri* [The Cradle of the Daiquiri] (1995), *La otra cara de Bollywood* [The Other Side of Bollywood] (2006) – , Lluís Escartín – *Mohave Cruising* (2000), *Texas Sunrise* (2003), *Amanar Tamasheq* (2010) – and Nicolás Rincón Guille – *Those Waiting in the Dark* [En lo escondido] (2007) – . The work of these filmmakers offers tentative approximations that lead, inevitably, to the acknowledgement of

the opaqueness of the Other. Such awareness indexes the crisis of classical documentary and traditional ethnography, which were interested in bringing up close and explaining the exotic Other, perceived as distant and strange.

By contrast, a more

recent brand of ethnography

that registers the epistemic and aesthetic crises of modernity has sought to glimpse from a middle distance while abjuring interpretive authority, preferring to speak alongside rather than for or about others. In the words of Michael Taussig, the point is to communicate “the *graphicness*” of the cultures under observation: “to lift the veil while retaining its hallucinatory quality” (Taussig 1987: 10; 369).⁵ Keeping the distance and maintaining a sense of strangeness in relation to the object under observation is not to surrender one’s cognitive powers, but to be aware of their limits; it is to respect (a word derived from the Latin *specere*: to look at) lives that may only be gazed at, always keeping in mind that gazing does not grant any cognitive purchase on the experiences of others.

This attitude is evoked by Los Hijos in their writings, interviews and press releases. They

place *Los materiales* between the utter detachment of Werner Herzog and the empathy of Mercedes Álvarez, who idealizes her subjects and tends to disappear in them (CENDEAC, 2014; CENDEAC, 2010: 4). Incapable of identifying with subjects who are vastly different from them, but too self-critical to adopt Herzog's self-complaisant remoteness, the filmmaker-protagonists of *Los materiales*—like their real-life counterparts, the members of Los Hijos—prefer to remain tentative listeners and observers. They admit their uncertainty, their slips, distractions, and occasional disinterest, but also confess an intermittent empathy, which does not, however, give them the right to speak on behalf of others or to take up their cause as if it were their own.

Such nihilism may seem a slippery foundation for a film designed to offer a critical perspective on the realities it examines. The film's critical stance derives in part from its exacerbated self-consciousness—an intense self-scrutiny that insists on its being a failure even as it unfolds before the spectators' eyes. This attitude might have resulted in a slightly sterile academic distance were it not modulated, in the last moments of the film, by a vindication of empathy and enjoyment of fleeting moments. Empathy finally arises after Luis and Natalia discuss Javi's desertion. Natalia admits that, despite her detachment, she enjoyed recording a group of women singing; they reminded her of her mother and grandmother, and she came close to tears. As she recorded them, they kept asking: "Who are you?", perhaps an indirect way of asking "What do you want from us?", a more pointed question they may have been too polite to ask. Immediately after this conversation, accompanied by images of sheep grazing on a hillside, barely visible behind a tangle of dried branches—another instance of hindered vision—the women's singing is matched to a frame of an evening sky crossed by storks. The song speaks of the frustration of not finding what one seeks: a woman prays to the

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Virgin for "a good husband who will not smoke or drink and will only go with me", to which the Virgin's response—which Slavoj Žižek would describe as "the grimace of the real" (1992: 122-24; 136-40)—is to grant her a "smoker and a heavy drinker". Right afterwards, in the last sequence of the film, we hear another folk song, now sung by a male voice, about a shepherd besieged by a pack of wolves in the Sierra Morena. The pack sends out an old female to steal a sheep. Like the film itself, "she saw little out of one eye, nothing out of the other." She went around the sheepfold seven times and "could grab nothing", but on her eighth round she managed to snatch a white lamb. The last line repeats the phrase: "she saw little out of one eye, nothing out of the other", although it is not clear now whether this refers to the wolf or to the lamb. Perhaps like the fictional filmmakers in *Los materiales*, and like Los Hijos themselves, the decrepit animal manages to make away with something, if not much. The image, at this point, has returned to black: it is night-time and at the far end of the valley fireworks burst in the dark sky, their ephemeral beauty dissolving the darkness momentarily and their relative poverty recalling the rustic texture of the songs.

Los Hijos have described this final scene as "a reconciliation" that relieves the negativity affecting the project (CENDEAC, 2014). The fireworks suggest that collective celebration offers a momen-

tary respite from natural devastation – the forest fires – and from oppressive modernization – the reservoir and the destruction and displacement it caused. The fireworks are a playful, controlled version of the fire that razed the forest in an earlier scene and a festive counterpart to that other form of light that stems from the reservoir and is one of the reasons for the existence of the new Riaño – electric power. And as they burst in the night sky, they evoke the artifice of cinema – light piercing the shadows. They seem to suggest that, despite the problematic, paradoxical quality of the gaze, it is always possible to see something, even if only in brief flashes. This is not much, but it is more than nothing and, in any case, the film seems to claim that it may be all we can aspire to. If this predicament makes us orphans of history, bereaved of projects capable of fully mapping our lives, it also allows us to cut unpredictable paths through reality, making our passages riskier but also more open and free. ■

NOTES

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- 1 We use the expression “experimental cinema” and, subsequently, terms such as cinematic – or filmic – technology or apparatus as shorthand to refer to moving images. Strictly speaking, *Los materiales*, like most of Los Hijos’s work, is filmed on digital video. While fully aware of the particularity of this medium, we are not interested in exploring Los Hijos’ images as reactions/responses to the affordances and limitations of DV. Instead, we focus on the ecology of images, ideas, and processes actualized by and around the work of the collective and shared across various formats – the celluloid-based avant-garde, video art, television, and commercial cinema. For an insightful reflection on the blurring of the distinction between film and video in recent experimental film practice, see Windhausen (2011).
 - 2 The character of Émile Rousseau (Jean-Pierre Léaud) uses this expression in *Joy of Learning* (*Le gai savoir*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1969), made after the sharp political turn taken with *La chinoise* [The Chinese] (1967) and *Weekend* (1967) and just before the – also politically engaged – works of the Dziga Vertov collective. Rousseau/Léaud’s words are: “We must start from zero... before beginning again, we must return to zero.”
 - 3 Marsh erroneously writes that the Riaño reservoir was built after the Spanish transition to democracy by the Socialist government (2014: 355), but construction actually started in 1965 and dragged on for over two decades. All evidence points to the relative futility of the reservoir. During the expropriation and eviction process, there were numerous confrontations between valley residents and the Civil Guard; the town mayor was arrested repeatedly and several locals facing eviction from their homes committed suicide, a circumstance that made protests even more bitter. According to local witnesses, the police went so far as to use “live munition without fixed targets” on protesters (Moreno, 1987). The dam was finally sealed on December 31, 1987, even though the basin had not been fully conditioned and many of the new roads securing access to the area had not been finished (El cierre, 1988). The bridge crossing the reservoir was not opened until the summer of 1988 and in the spring of that year it was announced that the main waterworks the reservoir was supposed to feed would not be completed until five years later. By the end of August 1988, the low concentration of oxygen in the water raised concerns about the fish in the dam (Moreno 1988).
 - 4 Benjamin had anticipated this formula; the interweaving of history with natural history (and with geology in particular) and the conception of the remains of the past as ruins and fossils are recurring motifs in *The Arcades Project* – see “Materiales C”, “N”, “R” (Benjamin 2005b: 109-126, 459-490, 554-556).

- 5 We are taking Taussig as representative of a trend in contemporary anthropology that also includes James Clifford, George Marcus, Paul Rabinow, Karen McCarthy Brown, and Michael J. Fisher, among many others. For a good overview of this trend, see Marcus (1992).

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**GEOLOGY, HISTORY, AND LANDSCAPE
IN LOS MATERIALES (LOS HIJOS, 2009)**

Abstract

This article analyses *Los materiales* (Los Hijos, 2009) from formal, ideological, and historical perspectives. It places the film within the collective's relatively brief trajectory, as well as within the longer history of structural-material film, directly alluded to in the film's title. It underlines its structural-material features—as these were pioneeringly described by critics P. Adams Sitney and Peter Gidal—and situates the film in relation to recent political mutations of the "cinema of structure", especially in relation to works that use structural procedures to explore the relationship between landscape and history from a critical-political perspective. The film shows that collective action ends up evolving into geological strata and fossilized remains as well as into a memory of place—narratives, often oral, that weave together personal experience and collective becoming. In addition to reflecting on history, the film fictionalizes its own process of production and the filmmakers' mutual rapport. Finally, *Los materiales* also meditates on the politics of vision and visibility both through dialogue and through the deployment of formal resources that insist on disconnection, opaqueness, and the impossibility of seeing in an objective, totalizing fashion. In this regard, the film may be seen as part of a documentary tradition that highlights the limitations of the apparatus and the ambiguity of the moving image, and that seeks to engage the Other—the object of the documentary—in an open-ended, dialogic, and anti-authoritarian manner.

Key words

Structural cinema; Spanish experimental film; History; Landscape; Documentary; Ethnography.

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**GEOLOGÍA, HISTORIA Y PAISAJE
EN LOS MATERIALES (LOS HIJOS, 2009)**

Resumen

Este artículo analiza *Los materiales* (Los Hijos, 2009) desde una perspectiva formal e ideológica. Sitúa la película dentro de la producción del colectivo Los Hijos, así como dentro de la evolución del cine material-estructural—como fue caracterizado en los análisis pioneros de P. Adams Sitney y Peter Gidal—al que alude el mismo título. En particular, conecta el film con la deriva política de mutaciones recientes del «cine de estructura», especialmente las que utilizan procedimientos estructurales para explorar la relación entre paisaje e historia. El film enfatiza el peso material de la historia, la forma en que la acción colectiva deviene, por un lado, sedimento y resto fósil y, por otro, memoria de lugar, transmitida a través de narraciones, a menudo orales, que integran la peripecia personal en el devenir colectivo. A la vez, la película ficcionaliza el proceso de filmación y la relación entre los cineastas, y reflexiona sobre la política de la visión, tanto mediante los diálogos como a partir de recursos formales que inciden en la desconexión, la opacidad, y la imposibilidad de visualizar de forma totalizadora y objetiva. Por ello, resulta un ejemplo de una tradición documental que utiliza las limitaciones del dispositivo y la ambigüedad de la imagen para reflexionar sobre la fiabilidad de la imagen audiovisual como vehículo de verdad y objetividad y para abordar al otro desde perspectivas deliberadamente abiertas y antiautoritarias.

Palabras clave

Cine estructural; cine experimental; historia; paisaje; documental; etnografía.

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