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A Poetics of Subtraction: The Autobiographical Films of Frampton, Tarkovsky, and Álvarez

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A Poetics of Subtraction: The Autobiographical Films of Frampton, Tarkovsky, and Álvarez

A Dissertation Presented

By

ALEXANDER B. JOY

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A Poetics of Subtraction: The Autobiographical Films of Frampton, Tarkovsky, and Álvarez

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iv

ABSTRACT

A POETICS OF SUBTRACTION: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FILMS OF FRAMPTON,
TARKOVSKY, AND ÁLVAREZ

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Contemporary critical discussions of autobiographical cinema have linked the theory, practice, and poetics of autobiographical filmmaking to those of self-portraiture. *A Poetics of Subtraction* complicates the dominant theoretical framework by advocating for the relevance of sculpture and its attendant poetics in the interpretation of autobiographical films. Through a thorough examination of Hollis Frampton's *(nostalgia)* (1971), Andrei Tarkovsky's *Зеркало* (*Mirror*, 1975) and *Tempo di viaggio* (1983), and Mercedes Álvarez's *El cielo gira* (2004), this dissertation argues that an understanding of sculpture's processes and poetics is essential for grasping the methods, materials, and meanings of autobiographical films. In particular, the sculptural approach to autobiographical cinema reveals new ways to represent memory, history, identity, and time through film.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

TOWARD A POETICS OF SUBTRACTION

"A portrait proves whatever one asks of it."

~Henri-Frédéric Amiel, journal entry from Sept. 24, 1857

A. Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation, broadly speaking, is to contribute to the critical discourse surrounding autobiographical cinema. As of this writing, a dominant trend in the analysis of autobiographical cinema is to think of autobiographical film in terms of self-portraiture, the genre of painting wherein the artist's subject matter is his/her own self. I neither refute nor chastise this framework: rather, I complicate it by examining a family of autobiographical films that claim a different art as their forebears – the art of sculpture. In so doing, it becomes clear that these films demand a different mode of reading. By providing the first steps of that mode, and interpreting several relevant films through it, I hope thereby to establish a parallel discourse for the study of autobiographical film – one that can work in tandem with the dominant critical perspective, and offer another fruitful lens through which to view this cinematic genre.

When I invoke sculpture as a paradigm for discussing autobiographical film, I use it in two senses: first, metaphorically. Included in my invocation is the claim that the process of creating an autobiographical film – and, for that matter, an autobiography – is akin to the process of making a sculpture. This similarity validates the critical move to analyze

1

autobiographical cinema using an interpretive apparatus suited to interpreting sculpture. In the second sense, beyond simply asserting that sculpture and autobiographical cinema are linked, the deployment of sculpture theory is also a call for highlighting a set of techniques that sculpture and this family of films have in common. In this regard, the invocation of sculpture is more than a metaphor – it is an acknowledgment of a specific set of techniques that have not previously been used to discuss autobiographical film. Part of my project, then, is to articulate these techniques, and to illustrate how they can be used for film analysis.

B. Autobiographical Cinema: Definitions and Distinctions

I use the terms "autobiographical film" and "autobiographical cinema" in their least restrictive senses. I define "autobiographical film" as any film that takes its creator and his/her life as its subject matter, directly or indirectly. An autobiographical film may explicitly discuss some aspect of the filmmaker's life. Less overtly, it may use fragmentary allusions to the creator's self, or employ formal strategies that direct the viewer's gaze to the creator's self, without necessarily making that self the sole focus of the film. As long as the creator's life furnishes a text or subtext for the film, it can be considered an autobiographical film. "Autobiographical cinema," in turn, refers to the collective body of such films. This is a deliberately broad formulation intended to subsume the various definitions for such films that have been proposed in the critical literature. It is meant to serve less as an exhaustive definition, and more to function as a way to differentiate the family of films under consideration from more obviously fictional cinema. For instance, there is an intuitive difference between Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993), with its rampaging dinosaurs

and hi-tech genetic engineering, and Jonas Mekas's *Walden* (1969), with its home-movie footage and personal meditations. It may not strain credibility to claim that Spielberg's film is a work of fiction, and Mekas's, something else. While *Walden* could be construed as fictitious, in accordance with Paul de Man's claim in "Autobiography as De-Facement" (1979) that all autobiographical works are in some way fictive, it does not share the fictional properties of Spielberg's film, an intuitive difference that warrants acknowledgment.

If indeed the term "autobiographical cinema" subsumes the various comparable definitions that have been advanced, it may serve as a least common denominator among those definitions. The term accounts for what those definitions share, and aims to emphasize that commonality. In order to articulate this term more effectively, an examination of several definitions from the critical literature of autobiographical cinema is useful in elucidating common elements despite the nuances of form and content. Presented chronologically, the order of their appearance in this section is not meant to lend primacy to, nor to suggest the greater validity of, one over the others. Rather, it is done to plot a trajectory for the critical conversation, helping to show how and when the various critical definitions developed, and allowing for easier comparisons among the proposed definitions.

<u>Autobiographical Documentary</u>: In his study *The Autobiographical Documentary in America* (2002), Jim Lane ventures a definition of autobiographical cinema that foregrounds its connection with documentary. Borrowing from an earlier formulation by John Stuart Katz and Judith Milstein Katz, Lane suggests that the baseline for an autobiographical documentary is that the film be "about oneself or one's family" (3). At the same time, Lane claims that this type of subject matter, when presented in the form of film, invokes the

apparatus of the documentary, and therefore must be approached with documentary theory in mind. Lane hints that an "autodocumentary form" occurs "when [filmmakers] turn their cameras and sound recorders on themselves" (4). In terms of what this form entails, Lane is less specific. He does, however, provide some possible metrics:

> The forms that they assume characteristically lack the comprehensive narrative scope of the grand literary autobiographical narrative. The viewer often sees moments of a life captured by a camera and sound recorder that only later may be incorporated into a larger representational scheme that has a beginning, middle, and end. If a literary corollary to the autobiographical documentary exists, it may lie in the less formal diaries, journals, and small portraits of self and family. (5)

For Lane, the autobiographical documentary tends to adopt a more lyrical form than what is commonly noted in literary autobiography (such as Benjamin Franklin's) and narrative documentary (such as Ken Burns's works). This is not to say that autobiographical documentaries preclude narrative structures – indeed, Lane's study of Maxi Cohen's *Joe and Maxi* (1978) states that the film "relies on narrative conventions, including the personal crisis structure" (151) – but rather, that autobiographical documentary is conducive to a less straightforward meaning than conventional narrative. By Lane's account, then, a work of film autobiography is one where filmmaker and subject are the same person; the resultant work, though, is necessarily a form of documentary, and thus must be evaluated using an interpretive apparatus that is mindful of documentary's tropes, conventions, and techniques.

The New Autobiography: Michael Renov's contribution to defining autobiographical

cinema in *The Subject of Documentary* (2004) is to classify film autobiography as a hybrid genre that he calls "the new autobiography." For Renov, the new autobiography is "recent work, which straddles the received boundaries of documentary and the avant-garde, [and] regards history and subjectivity as mutually defining categories" (109). Approaching film autobiography from the vantage of the essay, as characterized by the works of Michel de Montaigne and Roland Barthes, Renov argues that film autobiography should be conceived of as a "writing practice that couples a documentary impulse – an outward gaze upon the world – with an equally forceful reflex of self-interrogation" (105). Renov notes that this kind of discourse "embroils the subject in history; enunciation and its referential object are equally at issue" (105), resulting in a self-reflexive film artifact that questions the person making the film, the mode by which the film is made, and the film's and filmmaker's place in history. "The new autobiography," Renov writes, "far from offering an unselfconscious transcription of the author's life, posits a subject never exclusive of its other-in-history" (110). The "new" part of the new autobiography is thus a combination of technological advancement and theoretical consciousness. Artists who make autobiographical film necessarily employ a technology that is newer than the written word, but they also address – implicitly or explicitly – "the ruse of representation" that, for Renov, remains "the issue for the contemporary artist or theorist" (118). Renov's definition can be conceived of as a slightly more self-conscious refinement of Lane's 2002 formulation. Where Lane suggests that film autobiography comes to us from the documentary, and must be studied with all the trappings of documentary in mind, Renov adds the layers of the essayistic and the avant-garde, in which the maker of the film at hand, the means by which that film is constructed, and the

mode of the film's presentation are subject to additional scrutiny. Film autobiography, by Renov's account, is both outward- and inward-looking.

The Essay Film: Building on the work of Renov and others in her study, Laura Rascaroli*'s The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (2009) argues that the essayistic is not merely a parallel practice of film autobiography, but perhaps even its central practice. Rascaroli observes that the essay format "is the expression of a personal, critical reflection on a problem or set of problems" that "does not propose itself as anonymous or collective, but as originating from a single authorial voice" (32-3). Rascaroli proposes to define certain works of autobiographical cinema as "essay films." For her, the essay film "is the expression of a single, situated authorial 'voice' that enters into a dialogue with the spectator" (37). The dialogue she identifies here is the interplay between an argument that the film in question advances – either through overt voiceover narration, through non-voiceover enunciation (such as repeatedly listening to an authoritative onscreen presence), or through an unaccompanied pictorial register – and the individual viewer's own sensibilities as s/he responds to and evaluates the argument being presented. The key aspect of this kind of argumentative cinema, however, is less that it presents a thesis than that its thesis is delivered from a singular, personal vantage point. As a result, the essay film contains an autobiographical dimension that may or may not be foregrounded. Thus, for Rascaroli, the essay film has two features that are both "essential and characteristic: reflectiveness and subjectivity" (22). That is to say, the essay film is definable by the presence of an argument, and by a subjectivity that wrestles with the selfsame argument it advances.

Personal Cinema: Rascaroli also suggests in *The Personal Camera* that several

subdivisions of the essay film exist that can be conceptualized as having additional literary or artistic antecedents. While the variants of personal cinema she highlights "are best seen as belonging to the field of essayistic cinema" (106), Rascaroli notes that essay films, while "necessarily subjective and personal . . . may not be autobiographical" (106). However, certain types of essay films certainly do contain a pronounced autobiographical dimension, and that these films' "autobiographical nature is key to an understanding of these forms" (106). Rascaroli calls attention to several different sub-genres of essay film, that she collectively terms "personal cinema." Each of these sub-genres merits closer consideration here. Let us now turn toward the three types of personal cinema that Rascaroli identifies in *The Personal Camera*.

The Diary Film: Rascaroli finds that a certain set of films appropriate the characteristics of a diary. The diary may be "a highly heterogeneous text" (Rascaroli 115) that resists ready generic constraints, but Rascaroli finds some structural continuity among diaries that can serve as grounds for classification. She writes:

> While autobiography and memoirs are written at a considerable temporal
> distance from the narrated facts, the diary is composed simultaneously with
> the events, or after a minor interval, and does not anticipate its own ending or
> closure. The quintessential work-in-progress, open and unstable, instantaneous
> and discontinuous by nature, the diary mixes high and low, both in stylistic
> registers and in subject matter . . . (115)

Although a diary qualifies as an autobiographical text, its main difference from autobiography proper is its sense of simultaneity. Where the autobiography discusses life

events after they have receded into the past, the diary tackles those events while they remain relatively close to the writer's present. Consequently, no preconceived narrative arc appears in a diary; it neither predicts nor builds up to a conclusion. Furthermore, whereas an autobiography might tend toward a specifically literary register, and focus more fully upon momentous life events than a life's minutiae, the diary tends to encompass both, and fluctuates among narrative registers[1]. Given its protean nature, Rascaroli offers a basic heuristic for the diary's identification: "Although an erratic genre," she writes, "the diary obeys at least two rules: it must say 'I,' and it must say 'now'" (119). In other words, the diary foregrounds both its autobiographical content and its temporal proximity to its writer. When this genre is approached in film, however, Rascaroli proposes an additional consideration: the difference between a "film diary" and a "diary film." A film diary is "the practice of filming regularly, of producing footage of one's life, for purely personal purposes" (128); the diary film, on the other hand, is "open to others" (128), and "edited from the film diary" (128). The diary film "is twice in the present: it offers both the 'now' of the recorded images (because images are always in the present tense), and the 'now' of the reflection and commentary on them" (Rascaroli 129).

The Notebook Film: Characterizing the notebook as an even more "open and fragmentary" cousin of the diary, with "connotations of urgency, of lack of inhibition and control," Rascaroli finds the notebook to be an artifact of uncertainty and immediacy: "Lighter and more agile [than the diary], the notepad accompanies us, always at easy reach, and allows us to jot down ideas, impressions and projects as they emerge, while they are still

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1   Indeed, Tarkovsky's diary *Martyrolog*, to be visited in a later chapter, confirms Rascaroli's observations. The director includes ruminations on the nature of art, criticisms of his own works, squabbles with government censors, and even complaints about his bills. The variety of topics covered is a testament to the versatility – and unpredictability – of the diary form.

sketchy and magmatic" (146). To this end, the notebook has a more utilitarian function than the diary. The notebook "has the distinct role as a stage of and an instrument in the process of creative thinking, of which it can be one of the primary tools" (Rascaroli 146). If the notebook is something like an exercise, or little more than an inkling that will eventually metamorphose into a first draft, then the notebook film is a similar repository in audiovisual form. For Rascaroli, "the filmic [notebook] indexically records for future use everything that is situated before the camera" (147). A notebook film, then, can be read as a filmmaker's ideas in larval form. If not a prologue to the filmmaker's work, it can at least be approached as a glimpse into his/her creative process; perhaps it can even be considered an autobiography of a technique, where the filmmaker's thematic or technical concerns become the primary focus.

The Self-Portrait Film: Drawing on both the literary and painting precedents for self-portraiture, Rascaroli notes that self-portraiture provides an effective paradigm for considering autobiographical films, given the uncanny similarity between the language used to describe self-portraiture, and the language used in film analysis. Citing a work of Michel Beaujour, *Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait* (1991), Rascaroli highlights Beaujour's evocative vocabulary:

> This genre [self-portraiture] attempts to create coherence through a system of
> cross-references, anaphoras, superimpositions or correspondences among
> homologous and substitutable elements, in such a way as to give the
> appearance of discontinuity, of anachronistic juxtaposition, or montage, as
> opposed to the syntagmatics of a narration, no matter how scrambled, since

the scrambling of a narrative always tempts the reader to "reconstruct" its

chronology. (qtd. in Rascaroli 170-1)

Rascaroli aptly remarks that "The temptation to borrow such description and use it to illustrate the features of audiovisual self-portraiture is too much to resist" (171). Beaujour's description, then, offers a rubric for considering self-portrait films. The self-portrait film is one in which seeming discontinuity is actually a measure of continuity, using a disjointed, lyrical approach that capitalizes on the meaning-making powers of montage to produce a more evocative final product. Given its lyrical nature, however, a precise definition for the self-portrait film proves elusive, and a similarly lyrical description is perhaps the most effective means of conveying what it entails. "A broad and flexible approach to the genre," Rascaroli writes, "would suggest considering all first-person, autobiographical films which involve self-representation (diaries, travelogues, notebooks, letters, poems, and autobiographical documentaries) as instances of self-portraiture" (174). At the same time, this does not seem restrictive enough, as it does not establish "where self-portraiture ends and autobiography begins, or vice-versa" (Rascaroli 175). To this end, Rascaroli "advocate[s] a selective approach" to classifying a film as a work of self-portraiture, "based on an evaluation of the self-consciousness of the director's gesture – as testified, for instance, by the film's title, by its textual commitments and characteristics, or by the author's comments in interviews and other paratexts" (175). A self-portrait film could be any sort of first-person film, but given the broad and inclusive formulation of the self-portrait, texts beyond the text at hand ought to be consulted.

First-Person Documentary: In her introduction to the collection *The Cinema of Me:*

The Self and Subjectivity in First-Person Documentary (2012), Alisa Lebow revisits Lane's strategy of formulating autobiographical cinema as a sub-genre of documentary film, narrowing it down to documentary films that present a first-person perspective. Straightforwardly enough, Lebow calls these works "first-person films" or "first-person documentaries," and notes that they are "foremost about a mode of address: these films 'speak' from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position" (1). Such films raise complex questions about the nature of that subjective position, placing it under heavy scrutiny. Lebow observes:

> When a filmmaker makes a film with herself as the subject, she is already divided as both the subject matter of the film and the subject making the film. The two senses of the word are immediately in play – the matter and the making – thus the two ways of being subjectified as, if you will, both subject and object. (4)

This dual positioning as both observed and observing subject creates what Lebow terms an "awkward simultaneity" (5), which can be envisioned as some kind of eternal feedback loop – looking upon itself, the subject reconstitutes itself, and observes this reconstitution, which leads to yet another. Beyond creating a mise-en-abyme of subjectivity, the dual situation of the subject in these films carries powerful implications for conceptions of subject/object relations:

> In the first person film, the filmmaker's subjectivity is not only brought back into the frame, it permanently ruptures the illusion of objectivity so long maintained in documentary practice and reception. In truth, first person film

11

goes beyond simply debunking documentary's claim to objectivity. In the very

awkward simultaneity of being subject *in* and subject *of*, it actually unsettles

the dualism of the objective/subjective divide, rendering it inoperative. (5)

For Lebow, first-person films reunite the two subjects, revealing the seeming "awkwardness" of the two subject positions as a positivist hangover that was never valid in the first place. No matter what topic the filmmaker chooses for his/her first-person film, the film will always contain this unifying subtext. Therefore, Lebow's otherwise innocuous-sounding formulation for autobiographical film – one that hinges upon a foregrounded mode of address – actually carries potent philosophical undertones.

Autobiographical Cinema: Although the various definitions sketched in the preceding sections represent some fairly specific considerations and taxonomies, they share a certain amount of thematic and structural similarity. Those similarities, if identified and included in a broader formulation than what the individual definitions allow, could serve as useful criteria for differentiating films that contain those common elements from films that do not. In other words, it would furnish a basic vocabulary for justifying the generic divergence between *Walden* and *Jurassic Park* to which I have previously alluded. In turn, this looser definition would enable me to make claims about all the films contained in the taxonomic subsets that the earlier definitions create. Rather than dismantling the specific genealogies that previous theorists have formulated, my intention is to view the larger swath of films to which each of these definitions contribute. While these critics have identified species of film, I seek a kingdom or a phylum.

Based upon the definitions in the literature reviewed here, the subsets of film that

previous theorists have identified hold the following qualities in common:

1) A correspondence exists between the person who serves as the subject of the film and the person who made the film, such that they appear to be, or are, the same person.

2) Given the correspondence in (1), these films express and interrogate concerns regarding the constitution of the subject – what it is, what it entails, and how best to express it.

3) These films tap into generic conventions in order to attain a greater level of intelligibility, and as such, can be approached and understood through the lens of the genre that the film adopts – or defies, as the case may be.

While the foregoing points may not constitute an exhaustive list of all the common elements of the definitions discussed, they emerge as principal elements from a survey of definitional concerns and suffice as a basis to formulate the desired broader definition. Since my primary concern is the category of "autobiographical film" or "autobiographical cinema," these commonalities offer a more complete articulation of my claim that an autobiographical film is any film that contains an autobiographical dimension. In other words, it addresses some aspect of the filmmaker's life, concerning itself with who the filmmaker is, how the filmmaker came to be who s/he is, how that person or process might be made comprehensible or meaningful, and what kinds of interpretive or generic strategies are involved in the process of communication.

While my formulation may not immediately confer new insights, it sets the stage for further critical inquiry. First, it resolves the initial genre problem between *Walden* and *Jurassic Park*, giving a specific theoretical justification for claiming they are two markedly

different types of films. Second, it prescribes a means by which to approach these films. If autobiographical films foreground questions of selfhood and its formation, then we had best pay attention to how these films answer the questions they pose. Additionally, if autobiographical films tend to be in dialogue with generic conventions – borrowing or breaking generic conventions as required – then it is a valid and useful critical tactic to identify the genre that an autobiographical film deploys, and how that genre may leads to a greater understanding of the film at hand.

Keeping these two prescriptions in mind, I now turn to the current critical conversation regarding autobiographical cinema. The brief survey sketched in the following section provides a framework for the current state of the art of autobiographical film criticism while providing a context for applying the theoretical considerations raised.

C. Theorizing Autobiographical Cinema: An Overview

Attempts to theorize autobiographical cinema have progressed considerably since the initial suspicion of – and even hostility toward – the genre in the writings of Philippe Lejeune (1975) and Elizabeth Bruss (1980). Whereas Lejeune and Bruss denied the existence – and for that matter, even the possibility – of the autobiographical film, the profusion of films with autobiographical subject matter that have appeared over the last 20 years, coupled with the emergence of powerful and widely accessible new means of distribution (the Internet and its many opportunities for personal videos: YouTube, Vimeo, Vine, etc.), has prompted theorists to analyze the genre more seriously. Additionally, the contributions to autobiographical cinema by pioneering women directors and theorists of the 1970s (including, but not limited

to, Chantal Akerman, Maya Deren, Carolee Schneemann, and Marguerite Duras), have begun

to receive long-overdue wider critical attention. In this vein, Laura Mulvey's work on theorizing the gaze in influential essays such as "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) has provided valuable tools for understanding autobiographical cinema, especially the early visions of women directors. The contemporary confluence of theoretical

Figure 1: Maya Deren in *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). Casting herself and her then-husband in the lead roles, Deren's film serves as one of the first examples of personal or autobiographical filmmaking.

and practical concerns has renewed the need to study autobiographical film, and the critical conversation has followed suit. Difficulties with taxonomy still persist, as the many definitions in the foregoing section can attest. Nonetheless, the conversation has moved beyond denials of this cinema's existence, and now concerns itself with – among other things – problems of how best to interpret the films of this challenging genre.

My purpose in this section is to furnish a sketch of the critical conversation regarding autobiographical cinema. My aim in doing so is twofold. First, by laying the groundwork for the current trends in the criticism of autobiographical film, I am able to offer a more thorough account of their justifications, advantages, and disadvantages. Second, this conversation provides the backdrop for my own theoretical grounding, and helps to situate my approach to autobiographical film in later sections.

An early move in the theory and criticism of autobiography was to argue against its

generic potential. Lejeune and Bruss offer the first salvos from this camp. These thinkers argue that, if autobiography is defined as the one genre in which the written "I" of the text corresponds to the person whose name occupies the book's authorial byline, in accordance with Lejeune's iconic formulation in "The Autobiographical Pact" (1975), then some intrinsic quality of the cinematic medium renders this correspondence impossible. As Bruss notes in her landmark essay, "Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film" (1980), both the means by which films are made, and the mode of cinematic presentation generally, sabotage film's claim to "autobiographical" status. Summarizing film's autobiographical hurdles, Bruss explains:

> The unity of subjectivity and subject matter – the implied identity of author, narrator, and protagonist on which classical autobiography depends – seems to be shattered by film; the autobiographical self decomposes, schisms, into almost mutually exclusive elements of the person being filmed (entirely visible; recorded and projected) and the person filming (entirely hidden; behind the camera eye). (297)

For Bruss, as for Lejeune, written autobiography hinges on the principle that the textual subject and the person who writes that subject are one and the same. For these theorists, however, cinema does not appear to provide a framework in which this principle of shared identity can be preserved. The camera seems to drive a wedge between the recording subject and the subject being recorded in a way that the pen and page do not. The autobiographical pact cannot be fulfilled if that crucial identity link is severed. Lejeune elaborates on the autobiographically problematic phenomenon of the camera in "Cinéma et autobiographie:

problèmes de vocabulaire" (1978):

> I cannot ask film to show my past, my childhood, my youth, I can only evoke
> it or reconstitute it. Writing doesn't have this problem because the signifier
> (language) has no relationship with the referent. The written memory of
> childhood is just as much a fiction as the childhood memory re-enacted in
> film, but the difference is that I can believe it and make it believable in writing
> because language brings nothing of reality. In cinema, on the other hand, the
> inauthenticity of the re-enacted artifact becomes apparent because a camera
> *could have* recorded the past reality which is instead represented by a
> simulacrum. The "superiority" of language is owed more, then, to its capacity
> to make us forget its fiction, than to any special aptitude it has to tell the truth.
> (qtd. in and translated by Anderst)

For Lejeune, the difficulty for a film autobiography is less the potential for staging, artificiality, or fiction – as written autobiography is guilty of these, as well – and more that

the film's presentation highlights its own artificiality. On film, reconstructions of childhood memories necessitate the presence of actors, lighting technicians, set designers, and all the other machinery of film production – whereas that same memory rendered in text seems to be a more direct transmission of the memory recorded, requiring only that the

Figure 2: Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1967). The first entry in a trilogy of autobiographical films.

17

storyteller offer a verbal or written recollection. Such disparities lead Bruss and Lejeune to suggest that, in principle, a film autobiography should be impossible. Even if a film attempts to cover autobiographical subject matter, the film that emerges would not be autobiographical, given that its presentation would necessarily undermine the premises essential to [written] autobiography.

Far from settling the matter of film autobiography, Lejeune's and Bruss's claims have engendered three general types of responses. The first variety assails Lejeune and Bruss from a historical angle, pointing toward examples of films that certainly are autobiographical, and thus challenging the blanket claim that such artifacts do not and cannot exist. The second kind examines the assumptions regarding selfhood that gird Lejeune's and Bruss's conceptions of autobiography, arguing that their denials of autobiographical cinema hinge on mistaken notions of what constitutes a "self." The third strain targets the specific discursive practice that Lejeune and Bruss label as "autobiography," and suggests that Lejeune and Bruss have erroneously quarantined autobiographical practices within that single mode of discourse. The response types are united in their rejection of Lejeune's and Bruss's overall conclusions, but each type carries different theoretical implications.

The historical approach is perhaps best articulated by Michael Renov in his collection, *The Subject of Documentary* (2004). Renov notes that "autobiographical practices of all sorts have thrived since the time of Bruss's writing" (232), citing personal web pages, blog entries, and online video diaries as prominent examples. The immediate implication is that autobiography, no matter how despairing Bruss's initial reaction, has not died; it has merely repackaged itself. Renov further suggests that Bruss "vastly overstates her case when

she argues for the outright impossibility of filmic autobiography" (232), ostensibly because there exist (and have existed) noteworthy practitioners of the supposedly impossible practice. "[T]he work of cinematic and videographic autobiographers," Renov writes, "such as Jonas Mekas, George Kuchar, Ross McElwee, Lynn Hershman, and Susan Mogul shows that the filming subject can also be the filmed subject, thanks in no small measure to those handy props, the mirror and the tripod" (232). Renov's examples effectively undermine Bruss's notion of the insurmountable division between the person being filmed and the person filming. This first style of rebuttal, then, advocates unearthing filmic artifacts that serve as counterexamples to Bruss's and Lejeune's generic denials, and in addition, examining these artifacts to determine what autobiography has (or will) become.

From the perspective of selfhood, one possible solution to the identity-division quandary that Bruss and Lejeune present has been advanced by Rachel Gabara. In her study of recent Francophone autobiography, *From Split to Screened Selves* (2006), Gabara claims that the "problem" Bruss and Lejeune cite is less a condemnation of film's representational inadequacy, and more an indication of the failure of a certain model of selfhood. The mode of autobiography that Bruss and Lejeune assume, Gabara argues, aligns with the kind that Georges Gusdorf presents in "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (1956), in which "the necessary goal of any autobiography [is] to present a coherent and continuous image of the author's life and identity" (Gabara x). Implicit in Gusdorf's account, however, is the idea that the self is coherent and continuous – a singular, inviolable, essential entity. Adherence to this tacit premise gives rise to Bruss's and Lejeune's problem of identity-division. For Gabara, however, attempting a film autobiography indicates a "hyper-awareness of the

impossibility of coherent selfhood" (xiv), and the autobiographers who embark upon a cinematic autobiographical project "find themselves in the paradoxical position of affirming some kind of controllable identity through a re-appropriation of their own fragmentation" (xv). Denying Gusdorf's conception of the autobiographical self is not to deny the possibility of selfhood, but rather, to reinterpret it. "Knowing that we exist as fragmented bundles of selves," writes Gabara, "does not prevent us from striving to find a consistent meaning, a sense rather than a non-sense, that would bring these parts together to form a whole" (xv). Gabara's approach, and others like it, suggests that autobiographical films can be read as attempts to find and employ a more accurate means of representing a self whose fragmentation and multiplicity resist previous methods of recording and inscription. The responsibility of the critic of such films, then, is to explore what kinds of selves these works posit, and to assess what is at stake in these various models of selfhood.

The third objection voiced against Lejeune and Bruss challenges the assumption that written autobiography is the sole discourse that can be considered autobiographical. Much of Lejeune's and Bruss's concerns regarding autobiographical film stem from an intuition that writing and film are discrete, disparate modes of discourse. For Bruss, one of the core features of written autobiography is the presentation of a subject who has both "the capacity to know and simultaneously be that which one knows" (301). In other words, written autobiography features an "I," who is at once the person being discussed in the autobiography, as well as the person who discusses him/her. This feature seems absent in film, and as such, Bruss concludes that "the autobiographical act as we have known it for the past four hundred years could indeed become more recondite, and eventually extinct" (296-

20

7). The key aspect of Bruss's assertion here is that autobiography "as we have known it" might disappear. When this small clause is considered, some of Bruss's implicit definitions become clearer. When Bruss uses the word "autobiography," she is referring to written autobiography, not autobiography as a broader genre or practice. Bruss's stance thus becomes less drastic than simply saying "autobiographical film cannot exist." By making the seemingly minute concession about autobiography "as we have known it," Bruss's argument advances the weaker, less dramatic claim that a film analogue of written autobiography is not possible. She argues merely that writing and film are two separate discourses that cannot employ the same means of representing an "I." As such, this third vein of responses to Lejeune and Bruss attempts to rethink the broader practice of autobiography, and formulate notions of what autobiography entails outside of written discourse.

Through this third strain of thinking, I intend to make my critical inroad.

D. The Self-Portraiture Paradigm: Motivations and Advantages

If the task at hand is to think of how autobiography can be re-imagined in media outside of writing, Cecilia Sayad offers a valuable heuristic in *Performing Authorship: Self-Inscription and Corporeality in the Cinema* (2013). First, there is the question of what quality a work must possess in order to qualify as autobiographical. Although Lejeune may have been mistaken in some of his remarks regarding autobiographical cinema, his notion that an overlap exists between the subject of a given work and its author is a plausible – and unavoidable – quality of autobiography. How, then, can the concept of authorship be translated to the cinema, if at all? In the wake of the debates in *Cahiers du cinéma* in the

1950s and 1960s, where François Truffaut, André Bazin, and other theorists developed the notion of the "cinéma d'auteur," the concept of authorship in the cinema has been comparable to authorship in the other arts, in which a single figure (the "auteur," literally meaning "author" in French) is deemed responsible for the content of a creative work. Gaining traction with the Nouvelle Vague movement within French cinema in the 1960s, and via its contemporaneous embrace by critics in the United States such as Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris, auteur theory – in which the entirety of the creative vision behind a film is accredited to a single figure, usually the director – has furnished a major model for cinematic authorship that persists unto the present. Cognizant of the *Cahiers du cinéma* arguments – especially those of Truffaut[2] – Sayad notes that the temptation to claim that a film has an author "has been historically tied to the conceptualization of film as art" (33), but observes that the term "author" makes for a

> [P]roblematic . . . literary analogy in the designation of the director as the key artist, for the term 'author' usually describes the creator of a written text (the domain of screenwriters) and presupposes control of production and meaning (a task that directors often share with producers, editors, actors, cinematographers, and so on). (33)

The question Sayad poses, then, is how film authorship can be formulated when the literary heritage of the word "author," and the solitary production model it entails, clashes with the realities of film production, where the final product is the result of numerous contributions from many different people. Sayad suggests that a different art form might furnish a better

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2   See "Une certaine tendance du cinéma français" ("A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema"), *Cahiers du cinéma* 31 (Jan 1954). An English translation is available online at <http://www.newwavefilm.com/about/a-certain-tendency-of-french-cinema-truffaut.shtml>.

notion of authorship for cinematic purposes. "Since film theory has constantly drawn both its descriptions and prescriptions from other arts," Sayad writes, "it is only natural that film authorship should be modeled after other media – chief among them literature and painting, as has been the case" (33). Indeed, painting has furnished an effective means of thinking about cinema. Angela Dalle Vacche in *Cinema and Painting: How Art Is Used in Film* (1996) advances the thesis that "the history of art *is* in film" because "filmmakers often use paintings to shape or enrich the meaning of their works" (1). And, of course, there are films that are about artists, or that attempt to convey the process of making art. Cinema thus channels painting as a vehicle for establishing meaning. If painting already provides a valuable framework for interpreting cinematic content, it can also grant a comparable framework for conceptions of cinematic authorship. In turn, painting should be especially important to autobiographical cinema, where authorship and the relation of the author to his/her work are core concerns.

Painting marks an effective starting point for theorizing autobiographical cinema, as it includes the tradition of self-portraiture – a genre of painting where the artist takes him-/herself as his/her subject – which is itself an autobiographical mode. Indeed, the traditions of self-portraiture and autobiography seem to be linked historically as well as thematically. Shearer West, in her 2004 study *Portraiture*, remarks that "it is significant that the flourishing of self-portraiture in Europe coincided with the advent of autobiography as a genre [i.e., the Renaissance]" (178-9), suggesting that the impulse toward self-portraiture in Europe stems from a fascination with life stories and the recording thereof. Efforts at self-portraiture, however, emerge as a response to some of the complications and inadequacies of

autobiographical writing. West observes that the literary autobiographical mode can embrace fallacious assumptions regarding its subject's unity and cohesion. "Although a human being is a fragmented array of emotions, experiences, behaviour, and knowledge," West writes, "the autobiographical narrative seems to erase these discontinuities and create a unified self that can be conveyed through a genre" (178). The self-portrait responds to this disparity by presenting "a series of frozen moments" (West 178), which, while more limited in scope than a full-fledged autobiographical narrative, at least attempt to encapsulate the reality of the moment at hand. The self-portrait, then, presents a fragment (or a series of fragments) of the subject, and in turn suggests that such fragments

Figure 3: Joyce Wieland's *Water Sark* (1965). The majority of the film's shots focus on inanimate objects, connected by shape or shot composition in lieu of story.

constitute the fundamental unit – if not the whole – of subjectivity. If the painted self-portrait offers a useful pictorial analogue for written autobiographical discourse, then it can furnish a baseline for discussing other pictorial forms of autobiography, such as cinematic representations. Sayad notes how integral self-portraiture should be to the process of reflecting on autobiographical film, observing that "the relationship between cinema and painting is just as ingrained in film theory as the study of the literary in the filmic" (xvii), and that the self-portrait in particular "constitutes also a literary mode (found in texts of St. Augustine, Rousseau, Barthes); it is indeed a sibling genre to autobiography" (36). The paradigm of self-portraiture thus furnishes a useful framework for the study of autobiographical film, as it helps to unify several otherwise distinct discourses, and open up

further avenues of inquiry. The self-portraiture paradigm does not preclude literary readings, as it counts a genre of literature among its ancestry; nor does it sacrifice the image at the expense of the literary, as it invites an analysis of the pictorial register.

The self-portraiture paradigm is also liberating from a structural perspective. Laura Rascaroli comments in *The Personal Camera* that the self-portraiture framework helps to accommodate the lack of clear, linear narrative progressions common in autobiographical films. "Written self-portraits can be seen as a form of autobiography," Rascaroli writes, "but one that does not depend on narrative construction" (170). Gesturing toward Raymond Bellour's 1989 formulation of the self-portrait as "a system of remembrances, afterthoughts, superimpositions, [and] correspondences" that "opens itself up to a limitless totality" (Bellour 8-9), Rascaroli argues that these techniques "are operations that the cinematic apparatus is well able to perform, through framing, camera movement, and montage" (171). Self-portraiture is not bound by the same conventions as other written narratives, and as such, its frequently fragmentary or chaotic contents are not problematic if considered in a non-narrative light. Likewise, cinema does not need to bow to the demands of narrative. Although films can certainly accommodate narratives, and have proven to be effective vehicles for conventional narrative

Figure 4: The final image of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), a masterpiece of non-narrative film.

structures, they are also capable of functioning without narratives as their backbone. Dziga Vertov's concerted – and arguably successful – efforts to free film from narrative conventions serve as one indication. His legendary

Человек с киноаппаратом (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929) is one of the main entries in the pantheon of world cinema classics, and yet it has no clear narrative to speak of, as the numerous monographs on the film published every year will attest. Similarly, Joyce Wieland's *Water Sark* (1965) cannot be said to have a conventional narrative, if indeed it can be said to have a narrative. Viewers can posit a narrative for the film's many shots of water, mirrors, and reflective surfaces, but Wieland's film does not hint at having a narrative as its organizational schema. Instead, *Water Sark* is predicated on different governing concepts: explorations of space, experiments in radical female language divorced from patriarchal overtones, and efforts to make film cognizant of female self-representation and subjectivity. Yet *Water Sark* still "works" – its status as a film is self-evident and incontrovertible, although *Water Sark* does not resort to a narrative to achieve it. Cinema, then, is a sister medium to self-portraiture, for it, too, need not rely upon narrative construction. Furthermore, as Rascaroli has argued, the techniques that free cinema from dependency on narrative are the same as those that liberate self-portraiture. The language of cinema and the techniques that produce it are thus well-suited to the discourse of self-portraiture; this discourse, in turn, provides a solid foundation for discussing autobiographical films.

Indeed, a cursory glance at any number of autobiographical films reveals self-portraiture's conceptual relevance. Consider, for instance, Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2003). Caouette's film is at once an autobiographical work and a kaleidoscopic video collage, compiled from two decades' worth of home movies and photographs, and laced with hallucinatory effects courtesy of Caouette's DIY digital editing. The film explores Caouette's family dynamics, studying the onset and progression of his mother Renee's mental illness,

26

and speculating about the role his grandparents may or may not have played in her deteriorating mental condition. Further, Caouette grapples with his own mental disorders, documenting his ongoing struggles with depersonalization disorder, and the potential future conditions he sees himself developing based on the similarities he shares with his mother. Like many other autobiographical narratives in which mental illness is a major theme, such as Susanna Kaysen's memoir *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) or Lauren Slater's "metaphorical memoir" *Lying* (2001), *Tarnation* resists a straightforward account of person or plot, using fragmented visuals, elliptical timelines, and a lyrical style of presentation to offer a more complicated world view that perhaps mirrors what it is like to endure a mental disorder. The structure of Caouette's film – or the lack thereof – demands an interpretive apparatus that does not rely on conventional conceptions of narrative, and in this regard, the self-portraiture paradigm is a worthy candidate for interpreting *Tarnation*.

A full analysis of *Tarnation* is beyond the scope of this chapter; therefore I limit the film to a brief reading here. Although *Tarnation* is a nuanced and complex film, there is one shot that may be considered emblematic of its thematic concerns, and thus can be seen as a primer for the film as a whole. About halfway through the film (starting at 44:43 on the DVD), a heavily distorted image of a much younger Jonathan lip-syncing the song "Diviner" by Hex appears, while a textual overlay apprises the audience of Jonathan's tumultuous teenage years. The text informs us that, during these years, Jonathan's mother was in and out of mental hospitals, and the ensuing lack of structure in Jonathan's nuclear family caused him to engage in destructive behaviors, from vandalism to self-mutilation to repeated suicide attempts. Meanwhile, the mangled image of Jonathan's singing face warps and multiplies,

27

finally solidifying into a still image once a bolt of electricity arcs across it.

This memorable – and initially baffling – shot becomes far more intelligible when considered in terms of self-portraiture. Despite its numerous distortions, the image is nonetheless a self-portrait, and the conditions under which it is presented to its audience provide clues as to how both the shot and its parent film should be interpreted. The distortion of the face signifies the fragmenting of identity that

Figure 5: Caouette's self-portrait in *Tarnation* (2003).

Jonathan battles throughout the film. Barring cases of prosopagnosia or twinning, the face typically is the most salient marker of one's identity, being a physical indicator of one's individuality. This is why most official forms of identification, including passports and driver's licenses, feature the holder's face rather than any other body part. We have an easier time distinguishing between faces, and associating them with particular people, than we do, say, with hands or legs. The shot in Caouette's film toys with this principle, taking a bodily feature that should be readily recognizable, and transforming it beyond recognition. Its fluctuating appearance suggests that its identity will continue to change every time one tries to pin it down – until a surge of voltage finally fixes it in one place. To include electrical imagery in a place where mental illness has already been explicitly mentioned immediately connotes electroshock "therapy." Since the film's discourse on mental illness has been confined to Jonathan's mother until this point, the application of electrical imagery to

Jonathan's own face indicates an anxiety regarding his own mental condition. Perhaps he, too, is destined for harsh mental treatments as a consequence of his inability to recognize himself.

At the same time, the shot represents an effort toward forging a coherent self-identity, and counteracting the anxiety that the image betrays. Both the image's medium and the action it depicts point toward a possible identity for the beleaguered Jonathan. The image is digitally mediated: it is a piece of home video footage that has been subjected to extensive digital manipulation. While the resultant image is chaotic and confusing, it nonetheless is an attempt at expressing precisely such a mindset. Therefore, the shot suggests that Jonathan's powers of digital editing offer him a chance at coming to terms with himself, and that technological skill constitutes a major portion of his self-identity. Second, the shot shows a younger Jonathan singing someone else's song, and using the song to establish a mood for this particular sequence in the film. The image thus shows him structuring a swath of film around an extant, external artistic fragment. In another context, the inclusion of the song could be construed as a melodramatic technique, using the music to govern what the audience should be feeling while the song plays. In this instance, however, the song serves a different function: it acts as a backbone for Jonathan's identity formation. The singing of the song is a performative moment, where the song itself is appropriated through performance, subordinated to the performer and made a means of his self-expression. In effect, if Jonathan has no means to enact his identity himself, he can assimilate fragments of other works to enact the identity for him in a feat of autobiographical bricolage. Whether this is a hollow kind of self-identity is beside the point: the primary given is that Jonathan has some inkling

of who he is or who he could be, and how to go about making that self a reality. Thus the shot is a self-portrait that demonstrates acute anxiety regarding its subject's identity, but it is also a self-portrait that combats that anxiety, using whatever materials are at hand to assemble a coherent self. An analysis of the film as a whole could demonstrate a similar structure, showing the project *Tarnation* constitutes: synthesizing a unique self-identity via the appropriation and interplay of the fragments of a disjointed, disorienting life.

As this cursory glance at part of *Tarnation* suggests, the self-portraiture paradigm is a worthwhile heuristic for analyzing autobiographical films. Films and self-portraits have enough in common to warrant an overlap in their discourses, allowing film to borrow the terms and techniques of self-portraiture, the better to understand what occurs in an autobiographical film. Even so, the discourse of self-portraiture overlooks some crucial aspects of autobiographical films: namely, what makes a film a film in the first place. I now turn to a related discourse in order to address lacunae in the deployment self-portrait theory.

E. The Sculpture Paradigm: Motivations, Advantages, and Approaches

Despite its many merits, the self-portraiture paradigm is an incomplete account of film autobiography. This statement is not intended to disparage the self-portraiture approach, but rather to complement it with a parallel approach that may ameliorate the deficiencies of the self-portraiture paradigm. In my view, the primary weakness of the self-portraiture model is that it insufficiently considers the process by which autobiographical films are made, opting instead to focus on reception by the viewer and his/her interactions with the finished autobiographical product. While the self-portraiture paradigm's method of highlighting the

viewer and his/her interpretive strategies leads to many productive readings of films, it overlooks the role that film composition might play in effectively interpreting a given film. Similarly, by neglecting the compositional component of the film at hand, the self-portraiture paradigm runs the risk of ignoring the film's aesthetic identity – that is, its status as a unique aesthetic object with a distinct medium. The question, then, is what kind of artifact a film might be. What other kind of art is film like, and how might that likeness aid us in deciphering film?

A hint as to a possible complementary interpretive paradigm appears in the writings of early film theorist Ricciotto Canudo, who links film and painting in his 1911 essay "The Birth of a Sixth Art," but also identifies another of film's progenitors. Canudo suggests that the "sixth art" – film, the then-nascent cousin of music, poetry, painting, sculpture, and agriculture (58) – "will be a superb conciliation of the Rhythms of Space (the Plastic Arts) and the Rhythms of Time (Music and Poetry)" (59). More specifically, film will occupy a niche that can be described as something like the midpoint between the axes of time and space: "The new manifestation of Art should really be more precisely *a Painting and a Sculpture developing in time*, as in music and poetry, which realize themselves by transforming air into rhythm for the duration of their execution" (59; emphasis in original). For Canudo, film is a spatial art with an additional temporal component; a fluctuating visual image with accompanying sound that, since its frames and sounds cannot all be taken in at once, reveals itself over time. The key is that he identifies film as having the characteristics of *both* a painting and a sculpture. It is not exactly clear what he means when he bestows this dual classification upon film – he refers offhandedly to film as "plastic Art in motion" (60,

65) elsewhere in the essay, but he seems more interested in discussing the future implications of film than dissecting its aesthetic roots. Intuitively, his comparison to both painting and sculpture are likely linked to the manner in which cinema presents itself. Like a painting, a film remains confined in a frame; under ideal circumstances, any given still from the film could pass for a piece of visual art. Like a sculpture, a film operates in three-dimensional space: it requires the space for a projector and a receptive screen; also, during the making of the film, the camera can move in any direction around its subject, and display it from all sides. Canudo, then, suggests that we think of film as both painting and sculpture; furthermore, he urges us to think of the two as related, complementary forms.

Canudo's remarks warrant close attention on their own terms. The comparison of film and sculpture is especially fruitful, given the similarities between theories of sculptural interpretation and classical film theory. In effect, one of the major justifications Rascaroli deploys for the self-portraiture paradigm can also be counted in sculpture theory's favor: noteworthy overlap between the interpretive apparatus and expressive potential of both film and another art. In his 1997 study *Sculpture*, for example, Philip Rawson explains the degree to which powers of analogy enable viewers to interpret sculpture. His language in offering this explanation is noteworthy if viewed through the lens of film theory, as Rawson's account of the functions of analogy is suspiciously akin to certain film-theoretical mainstays. First, Rawson defines analogy, and its operations:

> For both the artist to find and the visitor to respond to such correspondences
>
> [between a sculpture and the world outside it] depends on an important faculty
>
> of the human mind: analogy. Our active minds are busy continually scanning

our registered experience and in effect crystallizing lower and higher orders of

similarity into what we call forms. To recognize that two instances share a

common form at some level constitutes an analogy. (6)

In other words, sculpture operates by tapping into the ways human beings consistently

organize mental schema. We each have a register of categories into which we can file objects

or ideas based upon characteristics they share with other objects or ideas. For instance, while

no two people are the same, we nonetheless have a faculty that allows us to grasp some broad

commonalities among them; this faculty therefore gives us the ability to recognize someone

we meet for the first time as a "person," even though we have never seen him or her before.

In this manner, Rawson's concept of analogy resembles Plato's notion of the Forms: those

pure categories, embodying the true reality, from which all other entities derive.

Significantly, the metaphor of Plato's Cave – the fable by which Plato explains his theory of

the Forms and the higher reality they represent – has been well-established in film studies.

The same metaphor that Plato used to describe the reality of spectators watching the play of

shadows on a cave's wall is essentially the same as the cinema and its apparatus[3]. In this

regard, then, sculpture and film seem well-suited to one another, as both rely on the same

mental schema to enable their interpretation. Still more fortuitously for the relationship

between sculpture and film, Rawson specifies the processes of analogic thought, and its

potential artistic uses:

A sculptor makes shapes that refer both to his or her own and to the visitor's

inner range of active analogy linkages, not only between accepted everyday

3   See Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in
Cinema" (1975). This metaphor is also perfectly captured in the Mandarin language. According to scholar
Gina Marchetti, in her survey of the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy, the term for "cinema" in Mandarin is "*dian
ying*," meaning "electric shadows" (8).

objects but between subsidiary parts, qualities, and functions of objects that

may seem to have nothing to do with each other ordinarily. These analogy

links or correspondences that give meanings beyond the text operate through

static visual resemblances as well as through similar properties of energy and

movement that shapes seem to display. (6-7)

What Rawson describes here is nothing short of Eisenstein's formulation of montage – the juxtaposition of two distinct ideas, as represented by two separate cinematic images, in order to produce a new idea. Eisenstein, in "Beyond the Shot," remarks that montage consists of "juxtaposing representational shots that have, as far as possible, the same meaning, that are neutral in terms of their meaning, in meaningful contexts and series" (15). Using Chinese and Japanese calligraphic script as an illustration, Eisenstein observes that simple characters in combination merge to form more complex ideas (such as how a Chinese symbol for "crisis" is composed of the characters for "danger" and "opportunity"). Thus Eisenstein concludes:

The point is that the copulation – perhaps we had better say the combination –

of two hieroglyphs of the simplest series is regarded not as their sum total but

as their product, i.e. as a value of another dimension, another degree: each

taken separately corresponds to an object but their combination corresponds to

a *concept*. The combination of two "representable" objects achieves the

representation of something that cannot be graphically represented. (15;

emphasis in original)

A movement occurs between the simple and the complex in eastern calligraphic writing whereby the abstract – and therefore impossible to represent graphically – is expressed by

means of concrete graphical representations. This movement effectively constitutes montage, whereby two concrete images combine to produce an idea that otherwise resists graphical representation. As Eisenstein later states in "The Dramaturgy of Film Form," montage is "*an idea that DERIVES from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another*" (27; italics in original). Rawson uses slightly different terminology, but the process and results he depicts when describing sculpture are virtually identical to those of montage, the driving engine of film analysis. The sculptor produces a shape or a set of shapes that interact with one another, and also interact with the viewer's own experiences. These different components, as Rawson notes, "may seem to have nothing to do with each other ordinarily" – that is, they may have nothing in common, and signify completely disparate ideas – until the sculptor brings them together, uniting them in a framework that pits them against one another and harnesses the resonances of their collision. Rawson calls this process "analogy," but one could feasibly replace each instance of that word in Rawson's passage with "montage," and still have a coherent and plausible account of film montage. The overlap between how both sculpture and film interpretation function, then, encourages some inquiry into how sculpture theory can help us decipher films, above and beyond what the paradigms of painting grant us.

Although Canudo remarks that painting and sculpture are related art forms, they are different enough media to merit a consideration of their individual poetics, and to recognize that sculpture demands an interpretive apparatus that varies from what one utilizes with painting. Jacqueline Lichtenstein, in *The Blind Spot: An Essay on the Relations between Painting and Sculpture in the Modern Age* (2008), tracks a debate originating during the

Renaissance concerning the primacy of painting over sculpture, or vice-versa. In the attempt to establish a "hierarchy of the arts" (Lichtenstein 3), artists and thinkers throughout the ages have attempted to deduce which of the two forms is the more praiseworthy. Significantly, a large part of the discussion has relied upon the differences between how each medium comes into being, that is, the means the artist uses to produce either a painting or a sculpture. Lichtenstein summarizes what previous arguments have considered the major divergences between painting and sculpture thus:

> The sculptor worked *por via di levare* (by removing matter); the painter, on the contrary, proceeded *por via di porre* (by addition) . . . The sculptor struggles with the resistance and durability of matter whereas the painter needed to apply but one or two touches of a delicate and subtle matter to invent forms that had only the appearance of material existence . . . The painters insisted on the mechanical aspect of sculpture; the sculptors on the greater permanence of their work. (5)

While the two forms could broadly be construed as cousins in the plastic arts, along Canudo's lines, Lichtenstein observes that painting and sculpture are markedly different entities. One takes a piece of matter and strips it of superfluous material; the other takes a piece of matter and adds color to it. This otherwise simple dichotomy results in profoundly varying artistic modes. Sculpture, given its subtractive method and heavy materials, insists upon the physicality of the resultant aesthetic artifact; painting, as a consequence of its additive approach and illusory visuals, attends to the technique and affect behind its works of art. (Of course, this is not to say that sculpture ignores technique, or lacks its own characteristic

36

techniques, but rather that the question of technique seems to be of greater importance in the analysis of painting.) Among the core differences, the question of material seems the most prominent from Lichtenstein's interpretation. Sculpture flaunts its materiality, whereas painting obscures it.

If sculpture and painting vary sufficiently as to merit their own attendant poetics, the question for the present inquiry is how we might put the tools of sculpture to use in the interpretation of films. How does one "read" a sculpture? What does one look for? What techniques, strategies, and assumptions should we ascribe to the viewer and the sculptor? Rawson, in *Sculpture*, offers some valuable heuristics that might give us a few helpful starting points. To begin, Rawson defines sculpture in a useful way:

> Strictly speaking, the term *sculpture* means carving, but nowadays we use it
> for almost any method of translating a mass of material from one area of
> significance to another, from plain thing to meaningful shape and
> arrangement. All such processes involve reaching final surfaces in space,
> either by building out toward them in modeling or cutting back to them in
> carving. (5)

Rawson's definition encapsulates both the literal and metaphorical senses of sculpture while providing a baseline for how to begin thinking about each. Sculpture, as a physical process, refers to the carving of material into new shapes. More broadly, sculpture can refer to any manipulation of material in a way that results in a new shape: a strategic array of objects (such as Damien Hirst's arrangements of animals living or preserved); an existing object that has been shifted to a new context (like Duchamp's infamous urinal); an agglomeration of

37

material that has been heaped into some shape (a metalwork figure, for instance); or even a manipulation of light and emulsion like film. Regardless of the particular material used in the sculpture, Rawson suggests that shape and arrangement constitute the other dimensions of its meaning. In other words, the thing that the material has been made to look like (shape), as well as the way that thing is displayed (arrangement), both contribute to the meaning of the sculpture. For example, a carved dodecahedron will likely mean something different than a human figure; similarly, that human figure would probably have a different meaning if it were shown standing on its own two legs, or suspended upside-down from the ceiling. Thus, to begin reading a sculpture, one must acknowledge three key components: the material of the work at hand, the shape(s) into which that material has been formed, and the manner in which that particular shape or set of shapes is presented.

The next concern is how one goes about reading those three components of sculpture. What do they mean? How does one derive meaning from them? To start, Rawson advocates looking at what is there, as well as what is not: occupied space and unoccupied space are both significant. "[A sculpture] shapes and generates its own inner spatial content along with its environment," Rawson writes, "by articulating rhythmically closed and open volumes, solids and voids for the visitor to respond to" (5). To begin thinking about each of the three main aspects of a given sculpture, then, one can ask how each of them negotiates space. What is present in the sculpture, and what is absent, and why? How and why does it occupy certain spaces, and leave others empty? The interplay between the sculpture's various uses of space, as well as the emptiness whose contours help define each space, serves as the baseline for evaluating a sculpted work. For Rawson, assessing spatial relations is the fundamental tool

for interpreting sculpture because that same faculty of spatial assessment is how we organize, inspect, and make sense of the world generally. It is the faculty that enables the sculptor to create his/her work; and by that same token, it is the faculty that gives the viewer the ability to determine that a sculpture is a meaningful object in the first place. Rawson writes:

> During the creation of sculpture, the artist must be able to make contact intuitively with his or her own inner matrixes [*sic*] of formal relationship, to articulate convergent, divergent, and implied meanings into formal coherence. The visitor has to do the reverse, opening up his or her inner region of responses, deeper than merely recognizing standard facts, to allow the shapes to locate and connect with a whole range of matches beyond the scope of conscious will. With sculpture these memory matches and responses belong to the realm of three-dimensional experience. (6)

Shapes and forms have great symbolic potential, and consequently, may be invested with meanings that extend beyond their initial geometric confines. A triangular pyramid, for example, could be far more than merely a neat tetrahedron by virtue of its potential to connote sharpness, pain, or poignancy if its vertices are pointed; or the dulling of those sensations if the sculptor blunts the vertices. (This insistence upon the deeper significance of shapes and objects is not original, closely resembling as it does the theory of the Symbolic Order as articulated by Lacan and others.) For Rawson, the sculptor's task is to bring about these investments of meaning. The sculptor taps into his/her own reservoir of formal and spatial associations, and then attempts to render these as a concrete object. In turn, the viewer of that sculpture derives its meaning via that same process, but in the opposite direction:

presented with a presumably meaningful object, the viewer is tasked with interrogating what meanings one could associate with the forms and shapes s/he beholds. This meaning-making process is tied to shape, solid, and void – the "realm of three-dimensional experience" – which comprise the basic spatial perceptions we use when interacting with the sculpturally non-diegetic world. We might use an interpretive apparatus divorced from that used in the "real" world when confronting a painting or a poem. Attention to alliteration, for example, is a specialized behavior that may not have much use apart from literary endeavors. When reading a sculpture, however, the viewer relies on the same apparatus as one has been accustomed to using long before confronting the sculpture in question. Recognizing solids and voids is a vital skill for navigating the world, after all, as is understanding the tactile properties of solid objects; it is useful to know whether certain things will be sharp enough to break one's skin, or soft enough to serve as a pillow.

The task, then, is to use the immediacy of our spatial and tactile apparatus to interpret a given sculpture. L.R. Rogers, in the 1969 survey *Sculpture,* offers a few prescriptions for assessing a sculpted work. Focusing on the materiality of sculpture – the first of Rawson's three key ingredients – Rogers observes that "the materials of sculpture have visual and tactual properties of their own" which "become part of the total organization of qualities that is presented to our senses by the work" (189). The benefit of materiality, by Rogers's account, is that "the beauty of its materials is one of the most easily appreciated aspects of sculpture" (189), because the properties of a given material can be discerned at glance – an "immediate" property (189) that lends an intuitive meaning to the work at hand. For example, Rogers points out – with a bit of rhetorical flourish – that "the well-known translucency of marble,

that seems to reflect light from below its surface, giving it a marvellous glow" (189) gives off a fundamentally different impression than the "open-textured grain of elm" or "the dry, warm earthiness of terracotta" (189). The material will have an instantaneous effect on the viewer, simply by virtue of the emotional or instinctive responses to the material itself – whether it looks like something to touch or not, for instance. The chosen material also carries with it certain structural properties that can be interpreted in a similarly intuitive fashion. As Rogers remarks:

> [T]he materials of sculpture have important physical, structural properties which present the sculptor with different opportunities and problems. They may suggest certain ways of forming the materials and discourage others by making some kinds of form easy to achieve and others difficult or impossible. (190-192)

As limiting – or as liberating – as a poem's meter, the material of a sculpture will dictate what can or should be done during the sculpting process. For example, not at all materials have the same tensile strength, which limits the kind of operations the sculptor can perform upon it. A sheet of metal could be heated and stretched to some length, but a block of wood or marble cannot be stretched or pulled beyond its initial dimensions without breaking it. In other words, what the material could have been made to do helps to determine the meaning of what has been done with it.

Rogers argues that, taken in tandem, the tactile and structural properties of a sculpture's material call attention to the technical process used in the sculpture's creation, as they are all "intimately connected" (192). The form of the sculpture, as a result of the

manipulation of a material (that itself determines what kind of manipulations may be performed upon it), naturally invites the question of how it arrived at its current state. Rogers suggests that there are "many features present in the finished work which can only be understood and appreciated as the outcome of a technical process" (192), and offers the following comparison as a rebuttal to the would-be skeptic:

> We can enjoy the sculpture without knowing how it was produced, just as we can enjoy an etching or piece of Chinese calligraphy without knowing how they were produced; but our appreciation would be impaired. Consider, for example, the loosely modelled surfaces of Degas's small bronzes and Epstein's portraits. In these we can sense the smearing and kneading of the wax and clay as the artist builds up the forms or draws detail on the surface, like the brushwork of Rembrandt or the heavy impasto of Van Gogh. (192)

The techniques of all the artists whom Rogers mentions open new ways to consider each of their works, and indeed might be the determining reason as to why each artist is of interest. Would *The Starry Night* (1889) be nearly as magical as it is without the readily apparent brushstrokes and paint residues that seem to swirl all the pieces of the canvas together, making each of its constituent parts appear to be the same stuff of dreams? For Rogers, the technical aspects of a sculpture serve a similar function. They provide the viewer another dimension for interpreting the work at hand, using form as a means of better understanding content. Some sample questions could be: How did the artist make his/her materials serve the purposes intended in the work? Could that end have been reached using a different technique? What kind of choice does the technique used represent? What kind of mood or

ideology might it convey? In the same manner, we might turn this technical awareness toward film. How a film was shot, composed, and edited can help us better comprehend what is happening inside the frame. These are the basic tenets of film production and analysis, which should be acknowledged in any serious study. By asking similar questions as those posed above, we might arrive at new interpretive possibilities for any given film. For example, to what extent does knowing that David Lynch shot and edited *Inland Empire* (2006) using digital cameras and computer editing software help us to grasp the fluid, changing reality in the film? Does digital film's potential for theoretically infinite duplication and distribution reveal anything about the diegesis, wherein elliptical, hallucinatory, and seemingly unconnected scenes tell what appears to be the story of a cursed actress? Would the film be as arresting if it were subject to celluloid's limitations or enhancements?

Beyond granting a greater capacity for appreciating a given film, a materially conscious approach to film also activates a more sensitive historical consciousness of the medium that reclaims and protects film's artistic potential. If the question of material is elided in an analysis of given work, and made to remain invisible, a problematic normative standard ensues. Pavle Levi, in *Cinema by Other Means* (2012), sketches a model of art history that reveals the disadvantages of suppressing materiality in discussions of a given work or medium. He writes:

> Every medium is, from the moment of its inception, a dynamic conceptual
> design: an imagined cluster of (desired, projected, assumed) functions . . . But
> this conceptual circuit also requires – it is perpetually in search of (this search
> being its history) – concrete material-technological support that will give the

medium its operational body. Eventually, operational technology is declared

normative. At that point, however, the Idea of the medium is also substantially

transformed: its immaterial conceptual design acquires a thus far

unprecedented degree of specificity by being forever related to the structural-

material dynamics of the standardized apparatus. (44-5)

Levi here describes the process by which the material behind a medium is rendered invisible,

and how the historical dimension of its development becomes suppressed and overlooked.

When a new medium first appears, it exists as a panoply of possible uses, whose realization

only arrives when some material or technological means come into being to facilitate them.

For instance, it was long understood that a cinematic work could, in theory, display any

image or series of images imaginable. However, it was not until the advent of digital video

editing, which established the pixel as the basic visual unit, and allowed the pixel-by-pixel

construction of any image, that this potential came to fruition. Levi deems all such

material/technological searches the history of a given medium. At some point during that

history, Levi argues, a certain configuration of material and technology will be declared

normative – in other words, will become the standard – for working with the medium. At that

point, the medium becomes chained to that standard configuration. It cannot be thought of as

distinct from that configuration, and as a consequence, the specific material and

technological considerations that led to that configuration become invisible due to their

normative function. An entire historical – and perhaps even ideological – dimension of the

medium is thus obscured. To use film again as an example, the standardized aspect ratio of

1.375:1 was conditioned by the limitations of film cameras and projectors, as well as

conventions within the film industry. The distinctive screen shape that has come to be synonymous with film as a medium is, in fact, more or less arbitrary. Levi indicates why this historical suppression is such a worrisome result of standardized materials and technology, and also explains the importance of material/technological considerations when thinking about any given medium:

> What is more, at the point when the concept and the technology fully coincide, when the new medium has successfully been turned into a working artifact – *the medium would, in some sense, also have been excessively reified (and commodified)*. It is, therefore, only by repeatedly evoking, by enacting, the discrepancy between the idea and its technological implementation that the essential qualities and the radical, noninstrumentalist creative potential contained in any new medium are maintained. (45; emphasis in original)

Linking a given medium to a specific technological configuration, and thereby to the narrow set of materials necessary to produce that configuration, effectively commodifies the medium. The medium and its materials become synonymous; to trade in the material is, therefore, to trade in the medium. This principle reduces the medium to yet another economic plaything, subordinating its aesthetic or philosophical value to its worth as a unit of commerce. Levi proposes, however, that there exists one method for combating the commodification of the medium: referring back to the materiality that enables the medium to exist, and thereby calling attention to the tension between the material itself and what the medium does with it. Doing so reawakens the suppressed historical element inherent in the standardized material/technological apparatus, and combats the subjugating tendencies of the

medium's commodification.

Significantly, Levi's proposal – and his justifications thereof – align with the critical and theoretical tendencies for analyzing sculpture outlined in Rawson's and Rogers's writings. Levi urges us to think materially, that is, to think about works of art in terms of the materials that allow their media, and therefore the works themselves, to exist in the first place. Rawson and Rogers both urge us to remain cognizant of the material element in any given sculpture, and how the artists' material choices aid in forming the meaning of that sculpture. Adopting sculpture theory as a means of thinking about films, then, confers yet another advantage. Since sculpture theory has always upheld the importance of material for its medium, using it as a critical means of approaching film solves the problem of historical occlusion against which Levi cautions. Looking at a given film with sculpture theory in mind automatically invokes the question of the film's materiality, which in turn raises questions regarding its means of production, which demands the historical consciousness that has previously been rendered invisible. In short, a sculpturally-inflected theory of film is a more thorough analytical tool, whose attentions to materiality and historicity are required to sustain the aesthetic and critical health of the film medium.

While sculpture might furnish a useful paradigm for films in general, it also seems well-suited to autobiographical films in particular. Judith Collins notes in *Sculpture Today* (2007) that sculpture is every bit as equipped to deal with the work of memory as other media, if not granted a slight advantage due to its physicality. She writes:

Tender, ephemeral memories disappear if they are not revived and preserved,

and art is possibly the most potent vehicle to deal with collective and personal

memories in a direct and physical manner. Art offers an opportunity to reflect

on the major facts of our lives both ordinary and extraordinary: love and

death, sexuality and spirituality, the innocence of youth and the wisdom and

experience of old age. Much contemporary sculpture deals with these

emotional and psychological states in a rich diversity of ways. (278)

Sculptures that grapple with the artist's memories are their own kinds of autobiographies, and

Collins observes that sculpture enables a "direct and physical" interaction with those

memories. Details from one's life story, when considered from a sculptural angle, are not

immaterial and ghostly – they are part of life's furniture, with their own physicalities and

sensory details. An autobiographical film examined with an eye for sculpture, then, might be

looked at as a physical instantiation of memory, or a memory that has been solidified into an

artifact. The "direct and physical" approach it demands promotes the status of memories not

as ephemeral occurrences, but as persistent entities that continue unto the present, reaching

beyond the restrictive frame of the self-portrait.

As stated above, a purpose of this dissertation is to provide an account of a possible

sculpture-centric interpretive apparatus and its potential applications. At this juncture,

however, it is useful to comment briefly on another autobiographical film – Su Friedrich's

Sink or Swim (1990) – in order to demonstrate the immediately intuitive need for such an

apparatus. This instance alone cannot serve as the primary support of my argument, which is

instead the province of the dissertation as a whole. Rather, it is meant to offer initial thoughts

toward additional sculpture-minded readings of autobiographical films. Friedrich's film

reveals glimpses of her childhood through her fragile relationship with her father, an

emotionally volatile professor who values his career more than his family, and who abandons his wife and children to start anew with a different spouse. The story is told via a series of 26 third-person vignettes, in addition to one scene that serves as an epilogue. Each of the 26 vignettes is narrated by a young girl's voice, and is named after a letter of the alphabet, arranged in reverse alphabetical order beginning with an episode called "Zygote." Unlike the many images of Jonathan Caouette in *Tarnation*, *Sink or Swim* does not feature any prominent visuals of Su Friedrich, despite the fact that her film is as autobiographical as Caouette's. It could be considered a self-portrait in the literary sense, but given the lack of visual self-portraits in the film, an approach other than the self-portraiture paradigm is warranted to assess the shots in *Sink or Swim* – in particular, the last sequence in the film's epilogue.

The final shot of *Sink or Swim* is memorable in that it warps the audio and visual of the film in a way that destabilizes the viewer. While the first 45 minutes of the approximately 48-minute film feature consistently focused images and a single audio track for the narration, the epilogue shatters this expectation, forcing sensory overload upon its viewers. The sequence begins with what appears to be a home movie of a young girl in swimwear, waving happily at the camera. An adult female voice – one that I presume to be Friedrich's – begins to sing the alphabet song (a learning aide for infants whose tune matches that of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"). A few seconds into her singing, another instance of the same audio track is overlaid, but the overlay starts at the beginning of the song. At the same time, another copy of the waving young girl is superimposed upon the extant visual, starting at the beginning of the waving sequence. This process of stacking and staggering audio tracks and

visuals repeats several times, resulting in a foggy, undulating image and cacophonous, indecipherable vocals. Eventually, the overlapping visuals and audio tracks fade out one by one, ultimately leaving behind a single crisp image of the young girl, and one instance of the adult narrator finishing the alphabet song ("...tell me what you think of me."). The film then concludes.

While initially overwhelming, the concluding sequence in *Sink or Swim* becomes far more tractable when considered in terms of sculpture – which, in turn, supports sculpture theory's interpretive relevance for the rest of the film. Like Caouette's *Tarnation*, and in fact like most autobiographical projects, *Sink or Swim* can be read as an effort to turn the chaos and confusion of one's life into a coherent account of one's own self. Whereas Caouette contends with his unorthodox relationship with his mother and its fallout in all other aspects of his life, Friedrich struggles with her unconventional relationship with her father and its attendant repercussions. Friedrich's efforts to make sense of the conflicting currents of her life are reflected in the film's rigid organizational schema. The alphabetical presentation makes her organizational strategy self-evident: with no unifying narrative apparent in her life itself, she turns to a different, external mode on which to graft her many experiences, and render them easier to fathom. If the process of organizing Friedrich's life into a coherent whole – or at least, a less incoherent collage – is the overall project behind *Sink or Swim*, then the final sequence plays out this process in miniature. The multiple overlays represent the chaos and confusion of her emotionally tumultuous life, and indeed force the audience into a comparable state of disorientation. Significantly, the confusion for both the viewer and the filmmaker come from the same source: the convergence of multiple currents that cannot

be processed simultaneously. For the spectator, it is the chaos of the seemingly infinite duplication of image and sound all at once; for the filmmaker, it is the conflicting memories of her father and family life, alternately pleasant and disheartening. The convergence results in chaos that proves extraordinarily difficult to process. Yet Friedrich has a strategy to combat the cognitive dissonance that she shares with her audience during the final sequence. Given a profusion of paralyzing stimuli, Friedrich peels the offending currents away one by one, until they are reduced to a manageable number that can be meditated upon and reconciled into a coherent autobiographical whole. This same method is exactly what she does to her audience in the final shot, bombarding the viewer with stimuli to the point of stupefaction, then reducing the onslaught bit by bit until a coherent autobiography results. After all, the last clear words, "Tell me what you think of

Figure 6: Stills from the epilogue of *Sink or Swim* (1992). Repeated instances of the first image are steadily overlaid atop each other, culminating in the chaos of the third image.

me," indicate one of the most fundamental autobiographical concerns, and could well be instructions for future viewings. Friedrich's approach here is inherently sculptural. She presents her audience with an excess of material – more audio and visuals than they can possibly comprehend – and pares away the surplus material until something intelligible

remains. The excess in this instance, too, draws attention to its own materiality, because it is noticeably filmic. Before the image of the waving girl becomes an undifferentiated reflection, it is obvious that additional film is being placed over the original image. The problem for the viewer in this sequence is that there is an excess of film, and when Friedrich enables her audience to detect this, she also makes it apparent that her task as a filmmaker and autobiographer is to take away what is not essential. She lays bare her method in the final moments of *Sink or Swim*, and shows how necessary her approach truly is as the film concludes.

As this reading of *Sink or Swim* suggests, sculpture theory can open productive pathways for examining autobiographical films. It calls attention to method and materiality in ways that self-portraiture theory does not, and thus helps reveal new dimensions to the films in question. On an intuitive level, sculpture and autobiography are closely related processes; the sculptor takes a mass of material, and pares away superfluity until a work results. The autobiographer takes the aggregate of his/her life, and subtracts that which does not contribute to the story – or to the fragment of that life, or to those perceptions – crafting an account of his/her life out of what remains. To apply sculpture theory to autobiographical film, then, is not only a productive step, but a necessary one, as it provides the wherewithal to discuss both the filmic and autobiographical aspects of the work in question. The remainder of this dissertation, therefore, is devoted to precisely that application, and to setting the stage for future sculpture-centric readings of other autobiographical films.

F. A Prospective Genealogy of Sculptural Autobiographical Films

The task that remains is to apply the theoretical apparatus that I have begun to work out in this introduction to a selection of autobiographical films. The remainder of my analysis will focus on three core filmmakers: Hollis Frampton (USA, 1936-1984), Andrei Tarkovsky (USSR, 1932-1986), and Mercedes Álvarez (Spain, 1966-present). I will center my focus primarily on their autobiographical films: Frampton's *(nostalgia)* (1971); Tarkovsky's *Зеркало* (*Mirror*, 1975) and *Tempo di viaggio* (*Voyage in Time/Travel Time*, 1983); and Álvarez's *El cielo gira* (*The Sky Spins*, 2004). Frampton's *(nostalgia)* depicts the slow combustion of autobiographically significant photographs upon a hot plate, while Michael Snow – standing in for an "indisposed" Frampton (Frampton 224) – narrates in voice-over a vignette about the soon-to-be-ashen image. Tarkovsky's *Зеркало* renders autobiographical details from Tarkovsky's mental life in mesmerizing, eidetic, dreamlike fashion; conversely, *Tempo di viaggio* depicts the filmmaker from the outside, documenting his travels in Italy as he scouts shooting locations for a later film (the 1983 production *Nostalghia*). Álvarez's *El cielo gira* chronicles the director's serene meditations on art, memory, and mortality while documenting a year in Aldealseñor – the town of Álvarez's birth, whose dwindling population indicates a town soon to vanish off the map.

Despite their varying linguistic, cultural, and historical milieux, I believe that these films can be productively placed in dialogue with one another, and that, taken together, they can be said to constitute a "family" of autobiographical films. In part, I group them together because of commonalities among the techniques each employs, and the subject matter each depicts. First, the films share several technical idiosyncrasies: for instance, each film utilizes

extremely long takes, the better to highlight the rich textures present in these films' every shot. Second, the four films foreground concerns regarding aesthetic representation, and the limitations of a given medium: each features (and questions) the use of photographic imagery, painting, sculpture, literature, or film, and does so in a manner that calls attention to what the featured medium can and cannot accomplish. Third, the films link questions of autobiography to concerns of medium and materiality, suggesting that a medium and its restrictions condition what can qualify as autobiographical representation. Fourth, destruction, decay, and transformation emerge as major themes in each film.

Beyond these thematic and technical overlaps, the films I explore offer loci for intertextual reference – perhaps even consciously. Tarkovsky's training at the VGIK may have brought him into contact with Frampton's film, or would have provided him the wherewithal to see it. Álvarez worked as a film editor for many years before beginning *El cielo gira*, pointing to a high degree of film literacy. Even if she never saw a Tarkovsky film, she has almost certainly seen an Erice film – and given that Erice himself is an unabashed Tarkovskiite, to work with Erice's films in mind automatically evokes Tarkovsky in no small measure. The films I propose to examine may also share a common genealogy and lineage.

The thrust of my argument, however, does not hinge on the genealogy I posit here, but is included as another vector for juxtaposing these films from a comparative perspective. The claims with regard to self-portraiture, sculpture, and autobiographical cinema do not require that the filmic texts be mutually referential; rather, they derive from currents I have observed in the ongoing critical conversation. Their shared thematic and technical concerns justify, I believe, the project of examining them in conjunction. Linking works by theme has been a

successful strategy in previous comparative studies, from surveys as early as George Santayana's *Three Philosophical Poets* (1910), to inquiries as recent as Myra Jehlen's *Five Fictions in Search of Truth* (2008). My selection of films, then, can be said to invoke this time-honored tradition in Comparative Literature.

The four autobiographical films in this dissertation invite a reading through the lens of sculpture and its attendant poetics, thanks to the films' interactions with other media, and to theoretical writings that the filmmakers have advanced. Each film's considerations of other media prompts a reading that addresses the medium of the films themselves. While Álvarez has not yet published any works of film theory, focusing instead on her film output, both Frampton and Tarkovsky published theoretical essays that hint at the relevance of sculpture as a metaphor and model for film analysis. (In this regard, Canudo was visionary in predicting the same trends that Frampton and Tarkovsky suggest.) In his 1968 lecture/performance piece "A Lecture," Frampton notes a crucial distinction between the cinema image and the painted image. During the lecture, a projector running no film shines its beam onto the wall, resulting in a rectangle of white light. Frampton then poses a question:

> If we were seeing a film that is *red*, if it were only a film of the color red, would we not be seeing more [than the white rectangle]? No. A red film would *subtract* green and blue from the white light of our rectangle. So if we do not like this particular [white rectangle] film, we should not say: There is not enough here, I want to see more. We should say: There is too much here. I want to see less. (126)

For Frampton, the cinematic image varies from the painted image in that its method is not one of addition, but of subtraction. One does not put an image onto the light, as one places paint on a canvas. Rather, one carves an image out of the light by subtracting wavelengths and reducing the light beam of the projector, much as one crafts a sculpture by paring away the irrelevant parts of the raw material one uses to make it. Tarkovsky reaches a similar conclusion in his 1987 treatise on film art, *Запечатлённое время* (*Sculpting in Time*/*Depicted Time*). In his attempts to define what makes cinema unique, and thereby to differentiate cinema from other art forms, Tarkovsky presents the following analogy:

> What is the essence of the director's work? We could define it as sculpting in time. Just as a sculptor takes a lump of marble, and, inwardly conscious of his finished piece, removes everything that is not part of it – so the film-maker, from a "lump of time" made up of an enormous, solid cluster of living facts, cuts off and discards whatever he does not need, leaving only what is to be an element of the finished film, what will prove to be integral to the cinematic image. (63-4)

For Tarkovsky, as for Frampton, subtraction remains the filmmaker's fundamental technique. The filmmaker does not add material to what s/he aggregates, but rather, chisels out vital portions from that aggregate. For Tarkovsky, however, the cinematic image is not solely a sculpture of light, but also a sculpture of time – a moving, kinesthetic image[4]. Despite the variations in the two filmmaker's conceptions of what the cinematic sculpture entails, the shared aspects of their theories provide a worthwhile starting point for theorizing their

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4   The distinctions between Frampton's and Tarkovsky's conceptions of sculpture will be covered in each of their respective chapters. For the purposes of this introduction, I merely wish to note that such distinctions exist.

autobiographical films. (Álvarez may not supply the kind of theoretical prolegomena that Frampton and Tarkovsky furnish, but since her film seems conscious of Tarkovsky, his theoretical writings serve as a worthwhile inroad to a discussion of her autobiographical work.) If creating a film is best conceived as a process of stripping away, then films can – and ought to be – interpreted and deconstructed in a manner that remains cognizant of their subtractive mode of production. This consideration seems especially relevant when dealing with these autobiographical works in particular, for it is likely that a film that takes its own maker as its subject matter would also emphasize the techniques and aesthetic theories most dear to that filmmaker.

It could be objected that I am treating Frampton and Tarkovsky without sufficient differentiation, given that the projects typically accredited to Tarkovsky (spiritual elevation, artistic purity) and Frampton (experiments with film structure, language, and materiality) can be classified, respectively, as modern and postmodern. Given that modernism and postmodernism represent vastly different philosophical stances, it could seem erroneous to ascribe similar motives and preoccupations to filmmakers whose concerns align with one of the two movements. Such an objection does not seem viable to me, given that my focus is on what occurs in these filmmakers' autobiographical works, not the movements with which they are associated. To this end, Gilles Deleuze's remarks from *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989) are instructive:

> A theory of cinema is not "about" cinema, but about the concepts that cinema
> gives rise to and which are themselves related to other concepts corresponding
> to other practices, the practice of concepts in general having no privilege over

others, any more than one object has over others. It is at the level of the interference of many practices that things happen, beings, images, concepts, all the kinds of events . . . Cinema itself is a new practice of images and signs, whose theory philosophy must produce as conceptual practice. For no technical determination, whether applied (psychoanalysis, linguistics) or reflexive, is sufficient to constitute the concepts of cinema itself. (280)

Deleuze here suggests that cinema, being "a new practice of images and signs" that gives rise to new concepts, resists being partitioned into categories such as "modernist" and "postmodernist." The cinema can engender modes of thinking like modernism or postmodernism, but the cinematic work itself prefigures these modes. It would not be logical to presume that a given film is "modern" or "postmodern," because these aesthetic modes do not inhere in the film. They can be facilitated by cinema, but that does not mean they determine cinema; indeed, no theory or "technical determination" can do so. Following Deleuze, then, cinematic analysis should be thought of as thinking through cinema – in other words, thinking *by means of* cinema – rather than using an extant theoretical framework (such as modernism or postmodernism) to cordon off the kinds of thinking that cinema can engender. Thus, to claim that Frampton's and Tarkovsky's films are incommensurable is problematic; it would be more accurate to conclude that previous discussions of their films are incommensurable. My goal here is not to unite modernism and postmodernism, but rather to examine a series of autobiographical films along the vectors elaborated in this chapter.

By analyzing the autobiographical films of Frampton, Tarkovsky, and Álvarez through a comparative perspective, I provide close readings of each film individually and in

tandem foregrounding the questions of medium and autobiography that each film raises. Ultimately, I aim to interpret the films through a sculpture-minded framework that this dissertation aims to construct. The study I propose promises to yield unique and productive readings of the four films in question, and, more broadly, to open up a new avenue of inquiry for the study of autobiographical film.

CHAPTER 2

HOLLIS FRAMPTON'S *(nostalgia)*

> "A photograph acquires something of the dignity which
> it ordinarily lacks when it ceases to be a reproduction of
> reality and shows us things which no longer exist."
>
> ~Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Vol. II

A. A Hollis Frampton Renaissance

In the two decades after 1984, following the filmmaker's untimely death of lung cancer at the age of 48, it seemed as if the works of Hollis Frampton were doomed to remain among the ephemera of the American avant-garde. While the Anthology Film Archives retain a collection of Frampton's production notes, materials, and records, little of Frampton's oeuvre has seen publication or distribution until recently. His poetry has never been collected. Both his photography and his many intriguing films went years without commercial release. Perhaps Frampton's unique, challenging corpus did not represent a sound investment for would-be publishers: his collection of essays on film and photography, *Circles of Confusion* (1983) – a compilation of essays filled with valuable insights on film theory – went out of print after its first edition.

Fortunately for film scholars and a discerning public, interest in Frampton's inimitable corpus has been rekindled in recent years, as two major, widely-circulated releases of his materials attest. The MIT Press released a volume in 2009 that includes all of *Circles of Confusion*, as well as a sizable sample of Frampton's other writings, entitled *On the Camera*

Arts and Consecutive Matters. The Criterion Collection has produced high-quality digital transfers of several of Frampton's films, and released them on DVD and Blu-Ray in 2012 as the anthology *A Hollis Frampton Odyssey.* On the heels of this new and far greater accessibility of Frampton's works, the elements for a long-overdue critical assessment of his films are at last in place. A film lab, a projector, and original film reels are no longer the prerequisites for viewing Frampton's films. Now, anyone with a DVD player can glimpse some of Frampton's most idiosyncratic films; anyone with access to a library can read his theoretical writings. In turn, the greater availability of Frampton's works calls for fresh approaches to his oeuvre, so that the critical conversation surrounding his films may be reignited and sustained. With any luck, my new autobiographical approach to Frampton's 1971 film *(nostalgia)* will be a timely theoretical contribution toward that purpose.

In this chapter, I will investigate *(nostalgia)*, approaching it not strictly as a structural film (a label frequently associated with Frampton's works, to be defined in the next section), but rather, as an autobiographical film. My contention is that *(nostalgia)* can teach us a good deal about autobiographical film, as well as the process behind crafting such a work, in turn revealing what is at stake in the act of self-representation on film. I argue that *(nostalgia)* is a film that concerns the self-destructive aspects of the autobiographical act, concerning the precarious state of one's memories, and the violent metamorphosis that those memories undergo when recorded in any external capacity. Frampton's film suggests that recording a memory causes it to morph into something different, perhaps obliterating it, and consequently, the film dramatizes the challenge and process of autobiographical filmmaking.

B. A Structural Filmmaker?

Given the limited availability of Frampton's works until recently, it is not entirely surprising that Frampton has not enjoyed the critical attention his work clearly merits. Although he regularly appears in anthologies concerning American avant-garde film, only one book-length study has been made of his work: Rachel Moore's 2006 monograph on his 1971 masterpiece, *(nostalgia)*. Beyond Moore's study, most articles and chapters written about Frampton tend to focus on his "structural" films, particularly his longer works *Zorns Lemma* (1970) and the *Magellan* cycle (1969-1979). More of a descriptor or a flavor than a definition, the term "structural film" was first coined by P. Adams Sitney in the 1960s to characterize a trend within American avant-garde filmmaking. Structural films are works that, unlike conventional Hollywood narrative films, focus on the process of filmmaking. They typically feature experimentation, mathematical construction, and questions of film form. The Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, in a write-up for a 2012 exhibition on structural film, provides an effective characterization of what a structural film is and does:

> . . . [A] simplified cinema in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined, Structural films are driven by formalist explorations rather than narrative content. In other words, these works explore the material nature of film as a medium and the various phases of the production process. They employ calculated manipulations of content that suggest perceptual puzzles are at play, and thus call attention to the film-viewing process. Often, it is the audiences' active participation in thinking about the film's construction that constitutes the driving force behind the work itself.

To phrase it differently, a structural film is a work in which the film's form overtakes its content – or where the form itself is the content of the film. Where mainstream narrative cinema subordinates all aspects of the film to the story it depicts, the structural film does the opposite, calling attention to the material aspects of the film – in other words, to every other component that goes into the making of the film. Frampton's films have been almost exclusively classified as structural, in both historical catalogues and critical writings. As a result, Frampton's works have yet to be analyzed as anything besides structural films. In this regard, it is noteworthy that a recent publication including work on Frampton bears the title *Between Stillness and Motion: Film, Photography, Algorithms* (2011). In the unholy union of mathematics and film, Frampton is adopted as one of the key witnesses. Additionally, a chapter is devoted to Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* in Scott MacDonald's 1993 *Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies*, whose subtitle suggests the long-standing structural flavor of most Frampton criticism.

In pointing out this critical trend, I do not mean to suggest that the fascination with Frampton's structural films is unwarranted. Quite the contrary, for it is difficult to imagine another modality for situating certain entries in Frampton's film oeuvre. *Carrots and Peas* (1969), a depiction of the title vegetables moving about and rearranging themselves into interesting patterns through a

Figure 7: Still from *Carrots and Peas* (1969).

process of stop-motion, is a case in point. There is no readily apparent "story" to *Carrots and*

Peas – an incoherent voice-over commentary, in the form of instructions from an exercise tape played backwards, is all the "help" viewers receive – but quite a bit occurs in each frame in terms of pattern, color, and line. Consequently, an interpretive methodology capable of functioning in lieu of a conventional narrative – such as the form-and-process-conscious strategy one brings to a structural film – is not only justifiable, but necessary when confronting a work such as *Carrots and Peas*.

Similarly, Frampton's *Lemon* (1969) can be rather puzzling if not regarded as a structural film. In a single, silent, seven-minute shot, the film depicts a lone lemon sitting before a black backdrop, while a light slowly rotates around the fruit, illuminating and obscuring portions of the lemon (rather like phases of the lunar cycle) as it moves along. Although comprehensive analysis of *Lemon* is beyond the scope of this chapter, such an exercise would nonetheless require an interpretive approach that remains cognizant

Figure 8: Still from *Lemon* (1969).

of its structural attributes. *Lemon* denies its viewers narrative or sound cues to follow, and instead organizes itself around principles of light, color, and texture. Any valid interpretation of the film, then, must be attuned to these governing principles.

Biographical details, too, encourage a structural reading of Frampton's work. Frampton had forged a close friendship with Canadian avant-garde filmmaker Michael Snow – an artist whom P. Adams Sitney, in *Visionary Film* (1979), once called "the dean of structural filmmakers" (374) – to the point where each appears in works by the other.

Frampton plays a small role in Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), where he portrays a man who enters the film's single room at around the 17-minute mark and collapses, ostensibly lifeless.

Snow's baritone voice contributes to several Frampton works, narrating the 1968 performance piece "A Lecture," and the film *(nostalgia)*. Apart from participating in the production of Snow's films, Frampton regularly

Figure 9: Close-up of Frampton's appearance in *Wavelength.*

praised his colleague for his contributions to world cinema, including a laconic but nonetheless glowing encomium in the journal *Film-Makers' Cooperative Catalogue* (1971). Channeling T.S. Eliot's conception of the artist from "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1917), Frampton says of Snow:

> All that survives entire of an epoch is its typical art form. For instance: painting (in all its enormity) comes to us intact from the New Stone Age. Film is surely the typical art of our time, whatever time that is. If the Lumières are Lascaux, then we are, now, in the Early Historical Period of film. It is a time of invention. One of little more than a dozen living inventors of film arts is Michael Snow. His work has already modified our perception of past film. Seen or unseen, it will affect the making and understanding of film in the future. This is an astonishing situation. It is like knowing the name and address of the man who carved the Sphinx. (190)

Like Eliot's great poet, who modifies the order of existing artistic monuments due to his/her

contribution to world art, Snow's work redefines film for Frampton. When one artist holds another in such high esteem as Frampton does Snow, it is reasonable to assume some degree of shared aesthetic concern. Thus, if Snow is considered a structural filmmaker *par excellence*, then it might seem plausible to consider Frampton in the same conceptual framework.

A brief memoir by Frampton's friend Barry Goldensohn, written shortly after the filmmaker's death, also suggests that structural considerations are Frampton's highest priority, in turn hinting that these considerations should be a rubric for interpreting Frampton's works. Since Goldensohn's memoir is more an attempt at depicting Frampton as a human being and friend than a study of Frampton's work, Goldensohn's observations are not meant to dictate a critical approach. Even so, Goldensohn's memoir has a tendentious bent. Describing Frampton as a creature of near-preternatural intelligence who wields a rapier wit, Goldensohn marvels at Frampton's linguistic and artistic abilities. He recalls a "brilliant parody of [Gerard Manley] Hopkins by Hollis" of such admirable quality that "[he] remember[s] most of it after twenty-eight years" despite not having seen a copy of it since his initial viewing (10). After reprinting the first quatrain of the poem, Goldensohn remarks that "It would be unlike Hollis to 'not write' a sonnet" (10), and thus opts to reprint the remainder of the poem. Though seemingly offhand, Goldensohn's commentary here is telling. No matter how clever Frampton's lines might be, Goldensohn indicates that Frampton needed some variety of rigid structural framework to hold them – in this case, the 14-line, metrically exacting sonnet. For Frampton to adhere to such a structure, and for that adherence to be characteristic of him, hints that structural concerns likely surface in his other works as well. Indeed, Goldensohn

thinks that Frampton's entire identity as an artist was dictated by logical, calculating, left-brained thinking:

> As a very bright and very cerebral young man, [Frampton's] critical standards were far too advanced for his ability as an artist, and the effects must have been paralyzing . . . I don't think he every fully trusted, as a young man, that necessarily more intuitive thing that went into the making of art. He was always critical, conscious, and deliberate. (12)

By Goldensohn's account, whatever faculty Frampton used to produce his art, it was apparently not a faculty readily associated with creativity. For Goldensohn, Frampton is more closely aligned with James Joyce than D.H. Lawrence; like Joyce, he is a thinker for whom the form of a given work overtakes the content.[5] Even Goldensohn's concluding remarks paint Frampton as someone whose themes are more mathematical than humanistic. The final paragraph of Goldensohn's memoir, by far the shortest in the entire composition, reads:

> One night we were standing at the window of his loft looking at the cobblestones on Walker Street, wet after the rain, and jewellike [*sic*] under the streetlights. A car drove over them down the length of the street and he turned to me and said, "That's what I'm interested in – motion." (16)

The last memory that Goldensohn leaves the reader is one in which Frampton professes a decidedly formal concern – a fascination with motion, the shifting in the position of objects from one spatial location or orientation to another. If this principle is meant to be Frampton's major preoccupation, then his work begs to be approached with it in mind. Of course, this is

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5   That is, insofar as the distinction between form and content is meaningful. There is always a case to be made that this is an artificial dichotomy.

nothing short of asking that one treat Frampton's works as structural films, monitoring them for studies of motion, and organizational strategies predicated on motion. As a result, Goldensohn's contribution to the literature surrounding Frampton reinforces Frampton's reputation as a structural filmmaker, and further encourages structural interpretations of Frampton's corpus.

A structural approach to Frampton's films – that is to say, an emphasis on patterns, processes, movement, material, and overall form – may be well justified, given the uncommon foci of his compositions, and the associations commonly linked to filmmakers he admired. All the same, I find myself hesitant to embrace that critical orientation. First, and less interestingly, the structural approach lacks originality within contemporary praxis, and offers no discernible benefit for this project. Second, I find the structural approach troubling in its potential for reductive readings of Frampton's films. While a structural stance may open up important considerations in terms of motion, form, mathematical composition, and other topics inherent in the critical conversation surrounding the American avant-garde, it may also jeopardize an accurate assessment of Frampton's contributions to other, more humanistic discourses. Specifically, Frampton's work can offer useful new considerations regarding film composition, autobiography, and their interrelationships. Third, I intend to focus on Frampton's *(nostalgia)*, which Rachel Moore, in her 2006 monograph on the film, has eloquently divorced from strictly structural interpretations:

> The frames . . . are still pictures, and like fractions of time themselves, we
> never see them as such. In *(nostalgia)* it is only with the burning of the
> photograph that we perceive movement. That a film about nostalgia should be

structured by fire, the unruliest of the elements, not only makes sport of the label 'structural film' with which Frampton was burdened, it replicates both the urgency and the decay that makes getting a grip on the passage of time so fraught. (4)

Whatever the purpose behind *(nostalgia)*, it hardly looks as if the usual structural considerations such as pattern, shape, and overall organizational schema would be sufficient tools for analyzing it. Although the film does follow a pattern – which will be described in the next section of this chapter – its presentation undermines the authority of that pattern. As a consequence, the pattern of the film is not its crux. Rather, structure is subordinate to the central action of the film: the steady, ritualistic burning of photographs.

My analysis of *(nostalgia)*, then, will examine the film with an eye toward what the film accomplishes beyond its patterns and structures. While these aspects will be taken into consideration, they will not be treated as the subtext or subject of the film. Following Moore's cue, and looking at the action and content of the film as a means of destabilizing the film's otherwise stable organizational pattern, I approach *(nostalgia)* as a work rooted in humanistic concerns. For, despite the precedent for reading it as yet another structural film, I contend that *(nostalgia)* is in fact a landmark work of autobiographical film.

C. *(nostalgia)***: A Brief Synopsis**

With a runtime of barely under 36 minutes, and consisting of only 14 shots – the last of which is simply a stretch of black frames marking the film's conclusion – *(nostalgia)* employs a decidedly minimalist style and aesthetic. The diegesis is comparably minimalistic.

In the first 13 shots, a completely stationary camera opens on the image of a photograph. The view lingers in near silence for about half a minute, the only sound being a kind of mechanical white noise – either the whirring of the camera apparatus, or the general static of a microphone that is not actively recording any particular sound. Then, a baritone, barely-inflected male voice begins to speak[6]. The voice narrates a first-person vignette. At first, the vignette appears to concern the photograph displayed before the camera. The narrator discusses the photograph's subject matter, the circumstances of its creation, where he was in life at the time, and on occasion the personal meanings that the photograph holds for him. By the second or third shot, however, it becomes apparent that the vignette does not discuss the photograph at hand, but rather, the photograph that will appear in the next shot. The photograph before the camera is placed on a hot plate's single burner. Partway through the narrator's vignette, the heat from the burner irradiates the photograph, pushing it to the point where it catches fire and burns. Smoke begins to cloud the image, the burner's black coil tattoos the picture, and the photograph warps and deforms until flames engulf it. Finally, the photograph is reduced to a mound of ash and charcoal, still smoldering in the burner's heat. The vignette concludes long before the photograph's combustion completes, and the camera holds on the burning photograph, forcing the audience to contemplate it in the relative quiet of mechanized white noise. This process repeats throughout the first twelve shots.

The 13th shot follows much the same format. The sole deviation is that the narrator continues speaking into the 14th shot – a completely black frame, rendered rather ominous by the narrator's final lines:

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6   Although the film never mentions it, the voice of the film's narrator belongs to Michael Snow. Frampton's voice can only be heard in two extremely brief moments at the film's outset, saying something like "It's alright" and "It's fine" to cue Snow to begin speaking.

When I came to print the negative, an odd thing struck my eye. Something, standing in the cross-street and invisible to me, was reflected in a factory window, and then reflected once more in the rear-view mirror attached to the truck door. It was only a tiny detail.

Since then, I have enlarged this small section of my negative enormously. The grain of the film all but obliterates the features of the image. It is obscure. By any possibly reckoning, it is hopelessly ambiguous.

Nevertheless, what I believe I see recorded in that speck of film fills me with such fear, such utter dread and loathing, that I think I shall never dare to make another photograph again.

Here it is!

Look at it!

Do you see what I see?[7]

The narrator has discovered something undefinable, or even unspeakable, and it has left him in a state where he no longer wishes to pursue photography. Perhaps that is why the film depicts the steady burning of photographs: it could be the dramatization of his vow to quit photography forever. The content of the dread image, though, remains uncertain. Either the craft-ending horror that the narrator witnesses is perpetually withheld from the viewer[8] – the ultimate obfuscation of meaning, in line with the film's strategy of complicating straightforward interpretation – or else the deep, empty blackness of the screen is precisely

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7 Transcript taken from "*(nostalgia)*: Voice-Over Narration for a Film of That Name" in Frampton's *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters*, page 209. All page citations for Frampton's works refer to *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters* unless otherwise noted.

8 Although this ending shares some commonalities with *Blow-Up* (1966), Frampton emphatically denied ever having seen Antonioni's film.

the horror. Thus, although the film ends on an ambiguous note, it is at the same time a disconcerting one.

D. Frampton's Theory of Film

Before undertaking a detailed analysis of Frampton's films – especially the one film, *(nostalgia)*, that I hold to be autobiographical – it will be advantageous to consult some of Frampton's writings on cinema. Although he was taken from us far too soon, Frampton did the world a valuable service before his death by leaving behind a body of film theory that Matt Teichman has called "one of the most important events in the study of cinema" (1). Saturated with his unique prose style – a combination of allusion, dry humor, and insight – Frampton's theoretical works read like quality literature, yet operate at levels of thought deep enough to rival the finest continental philosophy. The closest analogue to – or ancestor of – Frampton's prose is arguably that of the legendary Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein. Unlike Eisenstein, however, Frampton was not his own best critic. Excepting transcripts of his films, the occasional interview, and some brief memoirs about the circumstances under which his films were created, Frampton's theoretical writings do not address or analyze his filmic works. Teichman suggests that, for Frampton, "writing and filmmaking are but two means of pursuing the very same end" (1), and as such, it is not surprising that Frampton does not retread in writing the topics he had already tackled on film. Consequently, in his writing, Frampton focuses on various philosophical and theoretical concerns regarding the seventh art, rather than explications of his own attempts to put these concerns into practice. These philosophical and theoretical concerns thus constitute a substantial portion of Frampton's

71

cinematic thinking, and therefore ought to be considered before advancing any critical commentary regarding his films.

My objective in this section is to construct a reading of Frampton's theoretical corpus that can provide a simulacrum of Frampton's overall theory of film. My reading does not aim to "solve" Frampton's writings – indeed, his subject matter is so varied, his prose so open to interpretation, that such a project would be vain. Instead, I intend to explore common threads throughout Frampton's writing on cinema, and use them to weave an approximation of an overarching theory. My hope is that the reading I provide can furnish a new methodology for approaching Frampton's films, one that might in turn yield fruitful re-interpretations of his cinematic oeuvre.

Like many avant-garde artists before him, one of Frampton's primary theoretical projects involves defining, refining, and redefining his chosen medium. To this end, Frampton's strategy is one of analogues and parallels, using the extant theoretical frameworks of other arts as structures on which to graft his own ideas. Frampton reaches an understanding of film based upon the medium's dialogue with the various art forms that came before it, borrowing their terminologies, techniques, and modes of composition to provide a more coherent account of what film is, and what film can be. His approach is perhaps most evident in the 1974 essay "The Withering Away of the State of the Art," in which his stated objective is "to understand what video *is*" (261). In order to attain that understanding, Frampton feels "a pressing need for precise definition of what film art is" (261). Frampton quickly realizes, however, that definition – an act that establishes a linguistic unit using a linguistic framework – may be an inadequate technique for coming to terms with a visual art

like film, which does not necessarily rely upon language to function. Consequently, Frampton suggests taking a slightly more circuitous route:

> But we know that what an art is, or what it is to be, is to be seen rather than said. I turn, then, to the mournful Aristotelian venture of trying to say, of film and video art, not what they are but what they severally are *not*, and how and what they are *like*. (261; emphasis in original)

Here, Frampton's skepticism with regard to the capacity of language to convey the essence of a given art prompts him to look for alternative methods. He opts to narrow down the possibilities of what film might be using a two-pronged attack: dismissing what cannot be said to constitute film, and examining art forms that are comparable to film. Rather than imposing a strict boundary upon film in the way that a rigid definition surely would, Frampton's indirect style aims to compensate for the representational limitations inherent in language by allowing for a more fluid conception of film. His method encourages thinking about film in terms of what it could be, instead of solely in terms of what it is, allowing for a theory of film that retains the potential for further growth and development. Frampton believes that this consideration "extend[s] to film . . . the hope of a privileged future" (261) – in other words, the chance to evolve along with the times, and thus to remain a relevant art form.

If metaphor and comparison are the engines that drive Frampton's analysis, using similarities among artistic media as vessels for thinking about film, then his responsibility is to furnish an art form through which film can be thought. In this regard, Frampton turns to film's material composition for a source of inspiration. Noting its plasticity – that is, its

dependence upon a malleable, manipulable medium – Frampton likens film to the plastic arts. Sculpture, then, becomes a candidate for his comparative method:

> For the working artist, film is object as well as illusion. The ribbon of acetate is material in a way that is particularly susceptible of manipulations akin to those of sculpture. It may be cut and welded, and painted upon, and subjected to every kind of addition and attrition that doesn't too seriously impair its mechanical qualities. (265)

Frampton's turn toward sculpture carries with it an important aesthetic consideration: given its ties to the plastic arts, film is as much about the material from which it is made as it is about the content it depicts, evoking earlier debates such as those concerning the superimposition of medium and message. For Frampton, any film consists of two parts: its content (the "illusion"), which includes – if applicable to the given case – the script, acting, cinematography, and other constituent elements of film grammar; and the material (the "object"), the physical entity that holds the content and allows it to exist. Therefore, in Frampton's view, a critical interpreter of film ought to keep its material aspects in mind while conducting any kind of analysis, as the artist who made that film surely must have done.[9]

If we are to think about the material aspects of any given film, however, we are obligated to consider the kind of medium film is. Frampton, rightly, points out that film is a rather pliable medium. At the same time, he observes its multiple senses of pliability. In one sense, film is pliable in that it can be made to capture or depict virtually any image. If something can be shot, staged, drawn, or assembled out of millions of pixels, then it can

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9   It is worth noting here that questions of materiality have firmly ingrained themselves in most of the visual and plastic arts, to the point that present-day Modern Language Association citation format advises including the materials used for paintings and sculptures when such works are cited. Evidently, these considerations are important enough to warrant scrutiny in documentation.

appear on film. In a second sense, film is pliable because film itself can be subjected to all manner of physical changes. For example, one can scratch the film to eliminate images or introduce damage into the frame; one can paint the film or process it in various chemicals to produce modalities of color, expected and unexpected; one can remove pieces of the film to cut out unwanted frames entirely, or to subtract portions of frames. (This is, needless to say, far from an exhaustive list of what can be done.) Frampton aptly observes that such interventions and manipulations are "akin to those of sculpture." Sculpture, at its most basic level, is the act of subjecting materials to physical changes, stripping away their excess and reshaping them, until they become something different. A film comes into being via a similar process: taking a "ribbon of acetate," altering it with light and chemicals and whatever else one sees fit, until an acceptable physical object results from all the material changes.

Significantly, the sculpting process that Frampton links to the film object also extends to the film's means of dissemination, and the faculties by which others perceive it. Frampton postulates that the physical processes of screening and viewing a film both rely upon a fundamentally subtractive method that, like the process of making the film, is comparable to sculpture. In his 1968 lecture/performance piece "A Lecture," Frampton notes a crucial distinction between the cinema image and the painted image. During the lecture, a projector running without film shines its beam onto the wall, resulting in a rectangle of white light. (In a flash of acerbic wit, Frampton calls the "film" he shows "incomparably superior to a large proportion of all films that have ever been made" [126].) After introducing the white rectangle, Frampton poses a question:

If we were seeing a film that is *red*, if it were only a film of the color red,

would we not be seeing more? No. A red film would *subtract* green and blue

from the white light of our rectangle. So if we do not like this particular film,

we should not say: There is not enough here, I want to see more. We should

say: There is too much here. I want to see less. (126)

It might be tempting to think of a white screen as "blank," in the same manner we would a

piece of paper or canvas devoid of markings – with "nothing there," in effect. Yet this would

be an inaccurate label, for, as Frampton notes, "Our white rectangle is not 'nothing at all'"

(126). Since film projectors produce images using light instead of paint or graphite or ink or

any other substance for marking paper, they use a different color configuration than that

associated with the paint medium. In paint, the absence of all colors is white, and the

presence of all colors black. In light, however, the reverse applies: black signifies the absence

of all colors, whereas white indicates the presence of all possible color wavelengths.

Consequently, for Frampton, the cinematic image varies from the painted image in that its

method is not one of addition, but of subtraction. As Frampton describes it: "If we want to

see what we call *more*, which is actually *less*, we must devise ways of subtracting, of

removing, one thing and another, more or less, from our white rectangle" (126). Although

one can place a film strip into a projector, one does not put an image onto the light in so

doing, as one places paint on a canvas. Rather, one carves an image out of the light by

subtracting wavelengths and reducing the light beam of the projector, much as one crafts a

sculpture by paring away the irrelevant parts of the raw material one uses to make it. In the

case of film, Frampton acknowledges that the raw material amounts to "only a rectangle of

white light" (125), but notes that this geometric swath of white light "is all films. We can

76

never see *more* within our rectangle, only *less*" (125). In this regard, Frampton's observations prompt a twofold material consideration when thinking about film. Films are carved from acetate and light, and the processes involved in refining both components are remarkably like the ones that bring forth a sculpture from any other raw material.

Frampton's notion of filmmaking as a sculpting process is a crucially important premise when framed within his conception of genuine artistic composition. In his "Notes on Composing in Film" (1976), Frampton analyzes the aesthetic theories of Pound and Eliot with a view toward determining the components of a worthwhile art. Frampton briefly considers Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," specifically targeting "Eliot's celebrated observation that every really new work modifies, however subtly, the equilibrium of every other term in its traditional matrix" (150). Frampton does not disagree with Eliot's proposition; instead, he speculates as to how one of Eliot's "new works" manages to alter the tradition out of which it comes. To this end, Frampton turns to remarks Pound made in a 1914 letter, in which the poet "tells his correspondent that it took him ten years to learn his art, and another five to unlearn it" (Frampton 149). Pound's strategy for learning and unlearning, Frampton reveals, involved studying world literature "with a view to finding out *what* had been done, and *how* it had been done" (149). From Pound's autodidactic method, Frampton distills an intriguing pedagogical discovery: that "one learns to write mainly by reading those texts that embody 'invention,' that is, the vivid primary instantiation of a compositional strategy deriving from a direct insight into the dynamics of the creative process itself" (149). In part, Frampton's findings seem obvious. To become a better writer, one should read – the advice of English and literature teachers throughout the ages.

Frampton's suggestion, though, targets a particular class of texts[10]. One should not necessarily read whatever one can lay hands on, but rather, one should seek out "inventive" texts. But what, in this context, does Frampton mean by "inventive" or "invention?" The truly inventive text – one that "embodies invention" – is one that compels its readers to reconsider what a text is, what it can do, and what it can be. "[A]t its most fecund," Frampton writes, "a drastically innovative work typically calls into question the very boundaries of [its traditional] matrix, and forces us to revise the inventories of culture . . . to find out again, for every single work of art, the manner in which it is intelligible" (150-1). In other words, an inventive work constitutes itself in such a way that it requires new methods of reading or interpretation in order to be made intelligible; in turn, the deployment of these new methods results in a reappraisal of all the works that preceded the inventive work, because we then have new ways of looking them. Whatever the text does to create this demand arises from something that occurs on the level of its composition. It is made in such a way as to stretch or shatter the limits of traditional textual structure. Consequently, Frampton argues that the process of making texts should be central to any textual analysis: "[T]he compositional process is the oversubject of any text whatever: in short, what we learn when we read a text is *how* it was written" (149).

If the process of a text's composition is its focal point, then Frampton's previous commentary regarding film's sculpture-oriented compositional process assumes even greater importance. For Frampton, it is not enough to approach a text and examine its content. One must also interrogate the manner by which the content was crafted and delivered. In

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10 At the risk of equivocation, let me note that I am using the terms "text" and "read" in their broadest, borderline metaphorical senses. Anything that can be subjected to interpretation qualifies as a "text," and "reading" is simply the process by which those things are interpreted.

Frampton's analysis, all films share the compositional aspects of sculpture, and thus, no film can be properly and fully accounted for without paying due attention to the sculpting techniques employed in that film's creation. Frampton's prescription for film analysis is thus a cousin to Pound's advice on effective writing. If one learns to write by learning to read, then – in a curious inversion – one learns to read films by first learning to sculpt.

E. Nostalgia Defined: What's in a Name?

While the title of a given film is usually an important ingredient in understanding it, in the case of Frampton's *(nostalgia)*, the title holds central significance. Its unusual typography calls attention to itself, inviting – if not demanding – further scrutiny. Furthermore, the peculiar title is not some accident of documentation that has ossified into history. Every bit of *(nostalgia)*'s orthographic formatting is intentional. Ken Eisenstein, in "Hapax Legomena" (his
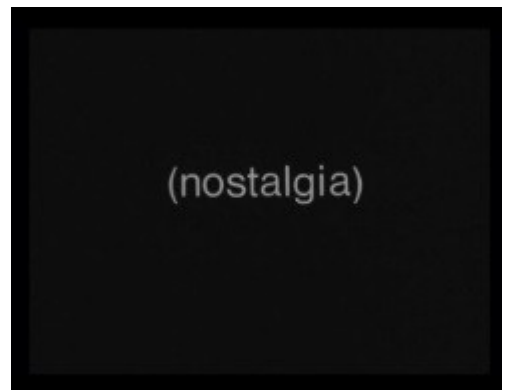
Figure 10: The title card of *(nostalgia)*.

contribution to the Criterion Collection's companion booklet to *A Hollis Frampton Odyssey*), observes that Frampton himself fought off any doubts in a 1970 letter to Sally Dixon, who was then the curator of film at the Carnegie Institute's Museum of Art. Revealing the title of his film in print for the first time, Frampton wrote: "[T]hat's right. Lower case with paren/s [parentheses]" (25). In his usual tone of self-mockery, though, Frampton clarifies what this formatting choice entails: "A bottomless pit of maudlin sentiment, fossilized cleverness, and asynchrony" (25). Elsewhere, Frampton remarked that the typography may have indicated a

skepticism toward including words in the film frame: "As the parentheses in the main title of the first film [of the *Hapax Legomena* cycle], *(nostalgia)*, may have suggested to you, I have abandoned the use of main titles as irreconcilable photographic images" (qtd. in Moore 7). Taking Frampton at his word – an odd move, considering her critical angle ultimately denies the significance of the signifier – Rachel Moore regards Frampton's title and commentary as a gesture of hostility toward the power and presence of words. Moore writes:

> [*(nostalgia)*] is the only title included on any of the actual films in the series
> [*Hapax Legomena*], and its parenthetical use here is evidence of an impending
> struggle between words and photographic images. He kept the word this time,
> but belittled it, made it tentative, made an example out of it. The macho style
> with which he pitted Shakespeare as a victor over words – "he really sapped
> that one [incarnadine] dry"; "we'll never use it again" – suggests not just a
> battle between words and images, but a war. (7)

For Moore, Frampton reduces the stature of words in favor of the image, and *(nostalgia)*'s title stands as the principal example of his reductive technique. Moore's stance may be considered to be the sole misstep in an otherwise impeccable study. Her conclusions here are not as self-evident as her assertive prose suggests. If *(nostalgia)* happens to be the only film in *Hapax Legomena* with a title, I would take that to indicate the opposite of what Moore claims – that the title is not at all *in*significant, but rather, especially significant because of its presence. If Frampton wanted to suppress the title, he could have easily removed it from the film, as he did with all the other entries in *Hapax Legomena*. Similarly, I cannot accept that the lowercase, parenthesized title is evidence of belittling or being tentative. Standard, or at

least more conventional formatting (a capital N and no parentheses) would have made for a more effective downplay of the title, since there would be nothing unusual to anchor a viewer's attention to the title's presentation. As it stands, an uncommon – and therefore arresting – stylistic choice is at play in Frampton's title. There is no way *not* to pay attention to it.

I doubt, consequently, that we need to take Frampton's cynical, self-effacing views of his own title too seriously. His frequent shifts into deadpan humor in both his writings and conversations lend a ludic quality to his every remark, opening virtually everything he ever said to interpretation – a tactic reminiscent of Beckett, whose (in)famous reticence denied and defied any seekers of authorial intent. Even so, we should in all likelihood assume that the initial gesture of naming *(nostalgia)* with such unconventional typography carries some significance. In this section, then, I attempt to answer two key questions pertaining to the film's title. What is significant about nostalgia – not solely as a word, but also as a general concept, and as a medical or psychiatric condition – for the purposes of this film? Further, what does the lowercase, parenthesized presentation of the word "nostalgia" mean? Pursuing the etymology of nostalgia, as well as its evolving uses and definitions, I contend that nostalgia in all its senses furnishes a useful way to conceptualize Frampton's film. Additionally, adopting a reader-response-inflected critical standpoint, I argue that Frampton's formatting choices foreground the manner in which nostalgia functions in the film – as an acute consciousness of loss, amplified by memory.

The entry for nostalgia in the Oxford English Dictionary supplies an etymology that comes straight from the Greek. The word is formed from two classical Greek roots: *nostos*,

meaning "the return home," and *algos*, "pain" or "wounds" (the same root word that gives us "an*alge*sic" and "fibromy*algia*"). Looking at the term strictly from its Greek etymological ancestry, then, nostalgia means "the wounds of returning" or "the pain of return." In this sense, nostalgia identifies something injurious about revisiting familiar places, although the extent and nature of that injury are unclear. Perhaps it connotes the pain of seeing that a beloved place has moved on without you in your absence. Perhaps it is a marker of lost time, when places from one's past are no longer familiar; the Proustian or Gatsbian sense that one feels a painful yearning for times never to return, rather than simply for the place where those times occurred. Or perhaps the term does not identify literal travel, and instead denotes pain associated with delving into one's past, mixing memory and desire in the deleterious way Eliot accurately identified as the cruelest of situations. Whatever the precise formulation, the word "nostalgia" links the two concepts of return and pain, suggesting – if not a causal relationship between the two – a connection worth remembering.

It is possible that the word's ancient Greek connotations are lost to us because the first usage of nostalgia in English had little to do with what its etymology indicates. Nostalgia does not come to us from the Greek; it may not even be a word that the ancients ever employed. The OED observes that the word's first appearance in English dates only to 1756, in a translation where its use is more or less synonymous with "homesickness." Indeed, the first definition that the OED provides is quite similar to the word's initial usage in a 1688 medical publication out of Switzerland: "Acute longing for familiar surroundings, esp[ecially] regarded as a medical condition; homesickness" (n., 1). The word "nostalgia" was coined by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer to describe the condition of listlessness,

82

gloom, and disconnection that displaced persons (such as soldiers and servants) exhibited –

in effect, an attempt to provide a more scientific conception of the Germanic word

Heimwehe, homesickness.

The other two definitions from nostalgia's OED entry appear to be derived from this

first notion of nostalgia, but broaden it to include temporal as well as spatial concerns. Where

the medically-inflected definition of nostalgia ties longing to a specific geographical location,

the two later definitions (emerging in 1900 and 1976 respectively) bind that longing to a time

real or imagined: "Sentimental longing for or regretful memory of the past, esp[ecially] one

in an individual's own lifetime; (also) sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the

past" (2a); "Something which causes nostalgia for the past; freq[uently] as a collective term

for things which evoke a former (remembered) era" (2b). The shift from spatial to temporal

concerns in the two definitions foregrounds a new phenomenon for nostalgia to cover. By

encompassing time as well as space, the word does not solely deal with displacement, but

also with losses conditioned by the passage of time. In turn, nostalgia becomes a

phenomenon perhaps more emotionally devastating than the medical definition suggests.

Instead of yearning for a return home, which is a feasible undertaking, nostalgia indicates a

yearning for passage backward in time – something not yet achievable, if it ever will be. In

this manner, nostalgia shares a link with mourning and melancholia, being symptomatic of a

troublesome connection with one's past that needs either severance or reappraisal.

Elsewhere, Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) considers nostalgia in

terms of its procedural aspects – what nostalgia does, or aims or to do. Boym notes that the

process of enacting nostalgia straddles the temporal and spatial definitions delineated in the

OED, complicating conventional relations to time and space. Boym observes:

> At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and return it to private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition. (xv)

Nostalgia entails a protest against time, or against a way of organizing time. In either case, the goal of the protest is to turn time into space, to make the past into a physical locus that one can revisit as easily as any location on a map. It is at once a moment of synesthesia and transmutation, where the nostalgic's senses of time and space overlap and distort one another, turning past events into physical destinations, and material sites into ossified moments. To this end, Boym remarks that nostalgia "is about the repetition of the unrepeatable, materialization of the immaterial" (xvii). If time could in fact be treated like space, it could never be lost to us; we could return to it like any other site. The attempt – however futile – to convert immaterial time into material space, then, constitutes the process of nostalgia[11].

The multiple senses of the word nostalgia render Frampton's title still more ambiguous. Which of the possible types of nostalgia does he privilege? I hold that, although each of the word's definitions and senses is applicable to the film, the temporal definitions are

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11 In a fortuitous turn of events, Boym offers a visual metaphor for conceptualizing nostalgia that closely aligns with Frampton's project. "A cinematic image of nostalgia," Boym writes, "is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface" (xiii-xiv). A single instance cannot encapsulate multiple moments in time, and the visual analogue for the failure is a scorched picture or film frame.

especially pertinent. For while no Frampton document I have encountered discusses his hometown, or a fondness for any particular geographical site, Frampton has written extensively on time. In fact, he has gone so far as to deny it outright – or at least to deny a certain conception of time – as a passage from a 1962 conversation with Carl Andre asserts:

There is no such thing as time. Time is a set of conventions for bracketing qualitative variation. E-flat does not exist "in time" relative to B-flat, before or after it: we hear them as they are sounded, which is always here and now. The adverbs "firstly" and "secondly" are pegs we use in our sentences when we wish to emphasize that those sentences imitate actions. (Frampton and Andre 41)

Time, in Frampton's view, is little more than an organizational principle that allows us to differentiate among changes in the present moment. There is only ever a "now," and a concept like time helps us account for variations in that "now." (Significantly, cinema itself has often been characterized as being an eternal present.) Although it might seem an extreme stance to adopt, Frampton's notion of time is not as radical at it may first appear. Teichman has observed that Frampton's position amounts to a denial of time as a medium, instead conceiving of time as a process, or a means of establishing coherence. Teichman writes:

. . . [T]o reject the existence of time is not to deny the existence of changes or events, but rather to deny the existence of a Platonic medium through which those changes and events take place. Frampton proposes that it doesn't make sense to say that time exists any more than it makes sense to say that something like perspective or foreshortening "exists," because time is more

like a precondition for perception. (3)

When Frampton claims that time does not exist, he refers to capital-T Platonic Time, an eternal, immutable entity (or "Form") that itself contains all changes and events. For Frampton, the Platonic concept of time does not seem rational. We never glimpse Time; we only experience changes, and end up ascribing them to the passage of time. Time, then, is simply a word we use to account for those changes. It would thus be erroneous to think of time as its own entity, because it is only ever an organizational schema, derived secondhand from lived experience.

The concept of time that Frampton here advances complicates the temporal definitions of nostalgia from the OED and from Boym's writings. The temporal senses of nostalgia both hinge upon the existence of a "past," and a desire to return to it. If Frampton's view is adopted, however, and there is no such thing as the past – if everything consists of one eternal present whose attributes fluctuate and change – then the yearning for the past takes on a delusional quality. It becomes a longing for something that does not – and cannot – exist; something that cannot be retrieved, because it never was there to be retrieved in the first place. Nostalgia thus emerges as either a desire for the existence of Platonic Time ("I wish this thing called 'the past' existed"), or as an insatiable want for changes in the present to revert ("I wish this present were like the one I remember"). Both cases contain traces of a poignant, desperate wish: that reality be something other than what it is. A Frampton-inflected nostalgia, then, presents a more devastating prospect than anything the dictionary suggests. It entails not solely a rejection of the present in favor of the past, but also a denial of reality in favor of misconception, myth, or outright fantasy, rather insidiously disguised as

a better possible world.

If this is the concept with which Frampton wrestles in his film's title, the question becomes what happens to the word and all its baggage when rendered in all lowercase letters and corralled between a pair of parentheses. Moore claims that Frampton "belittled it, made it tentative, made an example out of it" (7), in order to deny the word its significance. While her conclusion is unwarranted, a reader-response approach to Frampton's title supports Moore's premises. First, what do parentheses mean for us as readers of the English language? In other words, what kind of meaning-making practice do they encode? Parentheses in English tend to indicate aspects of the text that are unquestionably *part* of the text, but in some sense differentiated from the "main" portion of it. This document contains multiple examples. It features numerous page citations, encapsulating each one between a pair of parentheses. The numbers contained within are certainly part of the document you read. The header and footer, too, would be considered part of the document. Yet it would not make much sense to claim that those numbers, the header, and the footer are part of the meat of this document – I would be a poor writer indeed if they were among the most compelling parts. Parentheses, then, tend to mark parts of a text that are to be considered in the matter at hand, but viewed as separate from the primary focus, subordinate to or dependent upon whatever lies outside the parentheses' textual barricade. When we encounter the title *(nostalgia)*, a parenthesis is the first thing we meet, prompting us to think of the title as a relevant inclusion in the overall text of the film, but one that should be regarded as operating on a level distinct from the "point" of the primary text – in effect, an addendum to the film's long procession of burning photographs. The title could be "tentative," then, in the sense that it does not belong

to the film's primary narrative trajectory. That does not necessarily mean, however, that the title is offered as a cautious utterance to be brushed aside. Next, we meet the word nostalgia entirely in lowercase characters. This gives the word a diminutive sense. Without a capital letter to begin the word, it lacks the authority or pride of place typically associated with a proper noun, a word capitalized for emphasis (or for Platonic significance), or a word that begins a sentence. The nostalgia we find in the title displays itself like a word that could have emerged mid-sentence – mostly intelligible, but seemingly missing some vital context that would completely elucidate its meaning. This formatting "belittles" the word in the sense that it makes the word smaller, but I am less certain that it depletes the word's gravity in the way that Moore suspects.

Indeed, Annette Michelson, in the 1985 essay "Frampton's Sieve," argues that Frampton uses language in a way entirely different from Moore's conception. Where Moore holds that Frampton seeks to undermine language, and assert the primacy of the film image, Michelson suggests instead that Frampton clung to language, using it as a vital framework on which to build his works. Building upon Stan Brakhage's claim that Frampton "strains cinema through language" (151), Michelson finds in Brakhage's remark "the core of a sound and defining intuition" (152). Tapping into every definition of the word "strain," from the fatigue of being pushed beyond one's limits, to altering the shape or structure of something, to the act of filtration, to the name of a mathematical system for identifying prime numbers (the Sieve of Eratosthenes), Michelson arrives at a way to articulate Frampton's treatment of language in his films. "Embracing cinema," Michelson writes, "Frampton was to bring to the practice of filmmaking, pursued independently of its industrial constraints, an

implementation of language as one system which might extend, reshape, and clarify the limits and parameters of the medium" (152). For Michelson, Frampton's approach to cinema does not involve sapping language of its signifying potential, relegating it to incoherence or meaninglessness. Instead, he borrows language and its attendant structures to help refine and redefine cinema. Language, in Frampton's hand, becomes a tool of contrast and comparison; a backbone on which to graft cinema's expressive potential, and sieve through which cinema's own unique aesthetic identity can be distilled. An encounter with language in a Frampton film, then, should not encourage viewers to neglect what they see. Instead, the appearance of language should place viewers on high alert, for Frampton is about to capitalize on language's extant structures of meaning to produce a distinct and fundamentally cinematic meaning.

Rather than resulting in the empty husk of a word, as Moore would have us believe, the curious formatting of *(nostalgia)* promotes an air of mystery that encourages – if not forces – attentive contemplation. We have a parenthesized clause, but no readily available text to which it can be fastened; we have a subordinated word, but no sentence on which we can graft it. The meaning-making structures that its formatting urges us to think through are left hanging, and thus we are given an incomplete, open-ended system for deriving meaning. In effect, *(nostalgia)* is a title that demands our participation in order to produce coherence, and is written in such a way as to draw viewers in and begin the meaning-making process.

What kind of meaning might the title carry? The structural indeterminacy that I have highlighted points toward, I believe, a creeping uncertainty. The word nostalgia is presented, but isolated in a way that distances it from the main narrative thrust of the film. I interpret

89

this presentation as indicating something felt, but something against which reason inveighs. In other words, the title acts like a confession of irrationality. The film's main narrative seems to be about the systematic burning of photographs, following Frampton's vow to swear off photography forever. The steady, unrelenting follow-through provides the film's sole action, as the photographs ignite before a camera's unflinching gaze, never to be retrieved.[12] The film thus stages a commitment to moving beyond the past, but the title word brings us right back to it, and suggests that the narrator cannot escape the past's pull. The contradictory messages of the diegesis and the title word are enacted in the title's formatting. It is as if the title serves as an admission: "I want to return to the past, even though my better judgment says I cannot and should not."

Yet, considering the exacting logic that he brings to bear on his essays and films, I cannot envision Frampton as one to rely on irrationality or feeling as one of his preferred tools. I therefore suspect that the title of *(nostalgia)* is also meant to lead us away from thinking about nostalgia as a temporal phenomenon. The title still comes to us like a confession, or an acknowledgment of a sentiment that the speaker would rather suppress. The question then becomes what the feeling of nostalgia could entail, if time is not the main concern, and the past and its loss is not the cause of pain. The confession contained in the title could thus be something along the lines of, "I know 'the past' to be a logical impossibility, yet I feel the pain of loss as I burn these photos. Since I cannot be nostalgic for something that never existed, like 'the past,' I must be nostalgic for whatever it is that I am losing." Coupled with Frampton's concept of time, then, the title shifts us away from

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12 Although residual images of the photographs remain on the film reel, it must be noted that these are *not* photographs. They are "film photographs," paradoxical artifacts that appear to be standard static photos at first glance, but in reality are composed of multiple film frames in motion. Frampton's actions in *(nostalgia)* therefore *do* destroy the original photographs, as well as foreground that destruction.

worrying about lost time, and toward a preoccupation with some other kind of loss.

In this case, the materials sacrificed to the making of *(nostalgia)* are the source of nostalgic pain. The laws of physics tell us that matter is neither created nor destroyed, and is instead converted into other phases and forms. The ashen remnants of Frampton's burnt photographs, then, do not reflect a loss of material in a physical sense. The prints are reduced to carbon; the processing chemicals heated to smoke and vapor; the latent energy of the photograph released in a bloom of flame. Although nothing has been physically "lost" – converted or displaced might be the more scientific term – one cannot examine the ashes without suspecting that something has disappeared in the burning process. The photographs' charred remnants share no resemblance to the image they formerly held. The image itself remains a mere memory, soon supplanted by another picture that will quickly go the way of the rest. Despite the edicts of the laws of physics, it is clear that something Frampton put into making *(nostalgia)* is no longer there by the film's conclusion. The loss of this ingredient – whatever it may happen to be – thus operates in the foreground of the film. We are presented with the materials of the film as soon as it begins – including, but not limited to, photographs, memories, and heat – and we witness the removal of one or more of the materials as the film progresses. In this vein, *(nostalgia)* enacts a sculptural process in line with Frampton's conception of film, calling attention to the subtraction-centric method that the film employs.

Per Frampton's earlier prescription, the compositional process of *(nostalgia)* must be its oversubject. I have delineated one component of its compositional process: its fundamentally sculptural approach, actively subtracting material until a film emerges, and furthermore highlighting the action of subtraction – in both the title and the diegesis – to

91

demonstrate cognizance of the loss incurred throughout the process. The second component of *(nostalgia)*'s compositional process brings me to my next section. On some level, the film is about the removal of material. Materiality, then, becomes the name of the game. What exactly is the material that Frampton is breaking apart, and why might that be significant to an understanding of the film? I attempt to answer these questions in the next section.

F. The Question of Materiality in *(nostalgia)*

As is fitting for a filmmaker concerned with compositional processes, Frampton engages heavily with multiple art forms throughout *(nostalgia)*, thereby foregrounding questions of medium and materiality. The structure of *(nostalgia)* suggests that a sculpture-esque process governs the film, but because the film calls attention to the sculpting process, it immediately raises questions as to its medium. What is the film sculpting? In other words, to what end is the film being sculpted, and out of what material is it sculpted? In a general sense, the film could be said to sculpt light (per Frampton's formulation of film art), or to sculpt time (in accordance with Tarkovsky's formulation). While *(nostalgia)* incorporates both of these aspects, I contend that the film goes even further, using the two elements to forge a new material for its composition. Frampton's material in *(nostalgia)* is nothing less than the material of the self.

Shira Segal, in an essay on *(nostalgia)* called "From the Private to the Public" (2005), offers many productive theses regarding Frampton's film. Segal points out that certain material considerations can and ought to be included in the constitution of the self, and these materials can subsequently be classified as "the material of the self." Segal writes: "The

unattainable objects or immaterial experiences of the past which constitute nostalgia are [the] actual material of the self" (39). Although it may seem paradoxical to label immaterial entities like memories as "materials," they are material in the sense that they provide something that can be apprehended and manipulated. For Segal, past experiences, memories, and their contents form the material of the self because their alteration results in an alteration of the self. "Through changing one's relationship to the past," Segal remarks, "one's interiority is also altered, thereby changing one's relations with others" (39). To put it differently, changing one's past changes one's present and future – and therefore one's self. In Segal's view, you are your memories. Your past thus plays a major role in shaping the individual you are and will become. Your memories and previous experiences determine how you will react to your present circumstances, which will in turn influence future outcomes. While your past cannot be altered, your relationship to it can be – how you perceive and interpret particular life events, for instance – and in turn, your life trajectory can be reshaped. Thus, the material of the self proves an especially valuable resource. If you can take hold of it, all stages of time fall within your purview.

I contend that *(nostalgia)*'s ongoing dialogue with other artistic media – photography, painting, sculpture, writing, and virtually all of the other arts – demonstrates the process of mining the material of the self. The film enacts a systematic elimination or rejection of physical media, pushing aside the material in search of the immaterial. By destroying the physical remnants of memories, Frampton separates the immaterial aspects of the memory from any material anchor, freeing it to be molded and sculpted into something new. The fire of Frampton's *(nostalgia)*, then, is not one of outright obliteration, but of renewal; a

necessary step in harvesting the material of the self.

From the film's outset, *(nostalgia)* brings artistic processes to the forefront. The first

sounds heard are those of a dialogue between Snow and Frampton as they perform a sound check. Typically, these sorts of behind-the-scenes sounds would be excised from a completed film – unless, of course, the film in question took compositional processes as
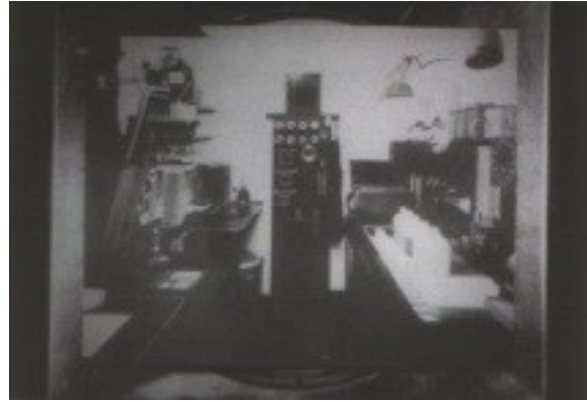
Figure 11: The darkroom photograph.

its focus. The visuals serve a similar purpose, highlighting creative process in a more general

sense. The first shot of the film depicts a darkroom that most likely belonged to Frampton, or

was used by him at some point. These are merely hypotheses, however. The film's voice-over

narration never explicitly mentions the darkroom, and none of the vignettes really seem to

match up with it; Rachel Moore points out that the photo "has no date and is never discussed

in the film for it sets the disjointed narrative in motion" (28). Whether or not the darkroom

corresponds to a time and place from Frampton's life, however, its symbolic potential

remains intact. The darkroom is a site where photographs are brought into being, where

chemicals, negatives, and emulsions combine to produce – in theory – any image that can be

glimpsed through the camera's lens. Frampton's photograph literally highlights this process,

featuring rows of bottled chemicals that stand out white and luminous against the dark

background. Additionally, many other trappings necessary for developing photographs

appear in the picture, reminding the viewer that this is not solely a place of photographic

potential, as the bottled chemicals indicate, but also a place where such potential is put to

94

use. Even a crucible appears in the lower-left portion of the shot, establishing the darkroom as a highly reactive microcosm – both in the chemical sense, and the sociologically hostile sense evoked by Arthur Miller in his 1953 play *The Crucible*. Viewers of *(nostalgia)* are thus prompted to think about compositional processes and the material that goes into them from the moment the film begins rolling. At the same time, the film rejects the medium of photography and its attendant materials. Like all the other photographs in *(nostalgia)*, the print of the darkroom will soon burn to cinders. Yet this photograph, as Moore observes, has some unique points of synchronization with the usually troublesome voice-over that result in a slew of new meanings:

> It is quite plausible that an image of a darkroom would be the first he made, as the narrator claims, "with the direct intention of making art." The timer to the right of the frame stays visible long enough before burning up to mentally rhyme with the word metronome (for they both tick off time), which, the narrator reports, "he eventually discarded after tolerating its syncopation for quite a while." [. . .] The fit with the narration is also plausible in that the photograph of a darkroom would now be "despised," as the narrator claims, by someone who has since rejected photography. (28-9)

While the inclusion of the darkroom photograph invites a consideration of the film's use of photographic material, the manner of its presentation undermines its primacy as Frampton's chosen medium. Photography may be the first thing we witness in the film, but it is also the first to be cast aside. It is acknowledged as an opening foray into serious art, but then it becomes despised, and afterward is torched on a burner. Thus, through the film's treatment of

95

the darkroom photograph, photographic media and its attendant materials face rejection.

The film's second shot plays a similar trick as the first. Its photograph depicts a man crouched behind a table, looking through a picture frame, while one of his arms reaches around the frame's edge and restrains a metronome that sits in front of him. By virtue of including – and then burning – an image of a metronome, Frampton rejects yet another art form, pushing music by the wayside[13]. The rest of the photograph, however, leads to other discoveries. Where the darkroom photograph raises questions about the creation of photographs, the picture frame in the second photograph raises questions as to the borders of photographs. Their frames, and the limitations that frames impose, are impugned. In this second shot, we have a photograph that presents a border (the
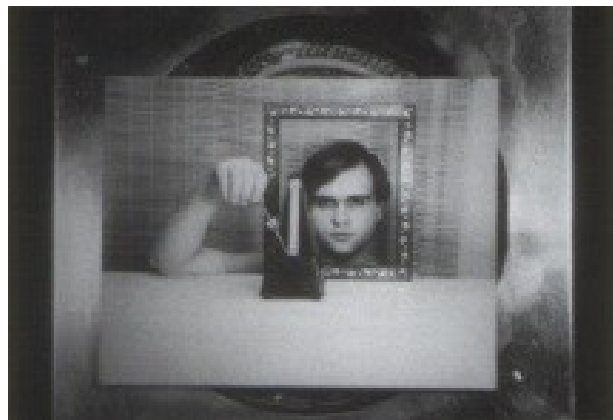
Figure 12: A self-portrait?

picture frame held by the man), and a conspicuous rupture thereof (his reaching hand) that focuses the viewer's attention on the permeability of all such borders. The photograph's composition reveals that quite a lot happens beyond the frame, and that perhaps those happenings warrant attentions. The hand interacting with the metronome somehow seems more significant than the man's stare, after all, considering how the metronome partially

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13 Frampton alludes to – and discards – virtually all of the seven arts in one form or another throughout *(nostalgia)*. It would be tedious to document all of them in the text proper, so I am relegating my observations to a footnote here. Photography and music have been discussed. Drawing and painting receive their treatment through frequent references to Carl Andre and Frampton's painter friends, who often serve as the impetus for the creation of several of the photographs Frampton burns. Film appears, and then disappears, through *(nostalgia)*'s acknowledgment of filmmaker Michael Snow. Poetry undergoes a similar treatment with the film's use of the poet and painter James Rosenquist. Architecture, the ostensible subject matter of the film's two window photographs, also endures Frampton's dismissal. Even sculpture eventually falls away, via Frampton's "Cast of Thousands" effort.

obscures the man's head; additionally, the tableau of hand and metronome seems to convey some kind of action, which draws the viewer's focus more readily than the (e)motionless visage of the man in the frame. Consequently, this shot invites spectators to contemplate events and actions that occur outside of the film frame, and suggests that these happenings are worthier of one's consideration than what one sees within the diegesis.

The play of voice-over and image in the second shot hints at what might be happening outside of *(nostalgia)*'s cinematic boundaries. The disjointed narration from the darkroom shot informs us, by virtue of the film's tactic of separation the spoken text from what seems to be the most pertinent photograph for it, that the man in the second image is the artist Carl Andre:

> I had bought myself a camera for Christmas in 1958. One day early in January
> of 1959, I photographed several drawings by Carl Andre, with whom I shared
> a cheap apartment on Mulberry Street. One frame of film was left over, and I
> suggested to Carl that he sit, or rather, squat, for a portrait. He insisted that the
> photograph must incorporate a handsome small picture frame that had been
> given him a year or so before by a girl named North.
>
> > How the metronome entered the scheme I don't recall, but it must have
> been deliberately.

The vignette that accompanies Andre's photograph, however, works to obfuscate the identities of both Andre and Frampton: "I made this photograph on March 11, 1959. The face is my own, or rather it was my own. As you see, I was thoroughly pleased with myself at the time, presumably for having survived to such ripeness and wisdom, since it was my twenty-

third birthday." An act of transposition occurs here. If you did not know what either Andre or Frampton looked like, you could easily take the narration at its word, and believe that you are, in fact, viewing a Frampton self-portrait. If you could recognize Frampton or Andre, the film would reveal its ploy of narrative disjunction. Both cases share a common outcome: they demonstrate an attempt by Frampton to disembody himself. This is made more explicit in the vignette that joins the Andre photograph, which culminates in an attempt at renouncing the body: "I take some comfort in realizing that my entire physical body has been replaced more than once since it made this portrait of its face. However, I understand that my central nervous system is an exception." Frampton's text reveals some hostility toward his former self, perhaps due to embarrassment at his former actions. Regardless of the motive, the significant aspect is that, to alleviate whatever he feels, he targets his own physical body. He rejoices in the minimal material connection he has to his former self – they have only their central nervous system in common – and appears to wish that even this small link be disconnected. By joining this verbalized desire to a photograph that does not show an image of himself, though, Frampton grants his own wish, separating himself from his own body. Since this action transpires during a shot that depicts things happening outside of a frame, the film hints that Frampton's process of separation may be the main undercurrent of *(nostalgia)*.

Appropriately enough, the film's next shot features Frampton's actual self-portrait, joined to a vignette that has far fewer points of connection to the accompanying photo than the two that preceded it. The photograph depicts a twenty-something Frampton looking off to the left, while the narrator describes his failed efforts to take a satisfactory picture of a cabinetmaker's shop window; he claims that the photo at hand is one of his many abortive

attempts. The pronounced disjunction in this third shot is likely what leads so many commentators to insist that *(nostalgia)* plays some kind of narrative game. For example, Moore argues that "This sequence not only unveils Frampton, but the conceit of the film as well" (33), noting how "He [Frampton] is lying to you, to your face, with his face. This is also where the narration takes a doubtful turn, never to be abandoned. Doubtful about photography's ability to record, and doubtful about the stability of what is actually there" (33). In an even more dramatic response to the disjunction, Kenith L. Simmons argues in "Reconstructing the Code: Subjectivity in

Figure 13: Frampton in his 20s.

Two Films by Hollis Frampton" (1990) that spatial disorientation is to blame for the film's peculiar associations of word and image. The problem is not the film's refusal to align its narratives with seemingly more appropriate photographs, but rather, the location where the film situates it viewers. Simmons writes:

> The film is far more coherent if we posit that the camera is positioned to the
> *side* of action involving two characters within the film's diegesis, although
> only one is represented to the audience – by his voice; the other "character" is
> someone to whom the photographer is showing photographs. In this reading of
> the film, the person whose voice we hear would be showing a photograph to a
> companion, allowing the companion time to look at the image for him or
> herself, and then reminiscing about its production – not primarily describing

the contents which are present before the eyes of the viewer. Then the

photographer discards the photograph into the view of the camera, which is

when the film's viewer sees it. The silent period while we watch the image

burn corresponds to a period of time during which the voice's companion

looks at the *next* photograph before the voice begins to reminisce about it. (56)

Simmons's reading, as inventive an interpretation as any I have encountered, makes sense if

one wishes to maximize the narrative coherence of *(nostalgia)*. The "misplaced spectator"

approach furnishes a plausible enough way to conceive of the film's action, and provides a

method for organizing the otherwise unmotivated division between vignette and photograph.

All the same, I am disinclined to grant the validity of Simmons's reading. Simmons

presupposes that *(nostalgia)* needs to be read as some kind of insular, self-contained story in

the vein of a conventional narrative film. In other words, what happens *in* the film is of

central importance to her, not necessarily what is outside of it. Yet the film shatters any

pretense of being self-contained in its first moments, when the narrator performs a sound

check, and Frampton's voice informs him that the sound levels are adequate. What first

appears to be an editorial oversight becomes, upon closer consideration, a tactic to dispel the

centrality of the film's narrative. This brief exchange forces audiences to acknowledge that

something is occurring above and beyond the film's narration, reducing the stature of the

story in deducing the film's meaning. In effect, Simmons's approach is comparable to a

reading of Bergman's *Persona* (1966) that ignores the images of a projector warming up and

shutting down that bookend the film, grasping at the first appearance of a conventional story

at the expense of the film's obvious – and thematically vital – efforts to complicate it.

It is particularly telling that the image of Frampton's own face should be the moment that undermines the viewer's expectations of a straightforward narrative. There seems to be some semblance of narrative cohesion in the first couple of shots, but the appearance of Frampton himself throws everything into disarray. Frampton thus plays a clever trick: his own body – specifically his face, one's main physical identifier – presents the first, and most salient, obstacle to the viewer's comprehension of the film. Thus, Frampton's corporeality becomes a source of inadequacy. Much in the same manner as the artistic media that he sequentially dismisses, Frampton's body – and the physical identity in which it anchors him – does not enable him to express the material of the self. It, too, joins the ranks of the seven arts on Frampton's obliterating pyre. In this moment of self-immolation, however, Frampton liberates the material of the self from its physical impediments. The body provides a locus around which the material of the self accrues – it is where sensory inputs, experiences, and interpretations combine to produce the self's memories. While Frampton eliminates that locus in *(nostalgia)*, the memories it held survive its elimination, leaving them free to be refashioned into something else.

In a similar vein, the remainder of *(nostalgia)* targets individual memories in hopes of stripping away the physical anchors that trap them, converting them into pure immaterial memories that form the material of the self. We glimpse the beginning of this process in the film's disjointed narration. Each vignette signifies one aspect of a given memory: the circumstances by which Frampton acquired it; Frampton's opinions and reflections about them; in effect, its (hi)story. Each photograph represents another portion of the memory: a visual recollection, as well as a tangible relic of the time and place where the memory was

101

made. By refusing to join his photographs to their most appropriate vignettes, Frampton distances the two parts of the memory. The story loses the material evidence that corroborates it; the image loses its determining narrative. This distancing strategy begins to free the memory's components from one another. The separating technique reaches its culmination, however, when the memory's photograph crumbles in ashes before the camera. The physical remnant of the memory is destroyed, and all that remains of the memory are its immaterial aspects, ready to be re-purposed as Frampton sees fit.

The ultimate expression of Frampton's technique, strangely enough, reveals itself at the film's outset: the inclusion – and pride of place – of Michael Snow's narrating voice. In his "Notes on *(nostalgia)*" (1971), Frampton justifies Snow's participation by means of a humorous anecdote regarding his autobiographical project. Frampton refers to himself and his past self as two different people, and – perhaps as a joke – identifies *(nostalgia)* as a biography of this past person, whom he addresses as "my subject." As Frampton writes,

> The narrative art of most young men is autobiographical. Since I have had little narrative experience, it seemed reasonable to accept *biography* as a convention, rather, however little information was available to me.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Then again, to lend vividness to the circumstances of a subject of no particular general interest, I determined to comment upon the photographs *as if in the first person*. And, finally, to obviate any possible confusion, I decided to have my script read by another party. My subject being indisposed, the narrative was generously read by Mr. Michael Snow, who has been familiar

with my own activities for some years but quite ignorant of *his*. (224)

If Frampton's playful tone and comical turn of phrase are any indication, the complications in his autobiographical process are a series of self-imposed constraints whose justifications border on the ridiculous rather than the philosophical. Because Frampton does not acknowledge a shared identity between himself and his past self, he can only approach this past person through the medium of biography; there is no *autos* involved in the project he proposes. Even so, he writes his vignettes in the first person, from a retrospective vantage that obviously cannot belong to his past self. Further, he cannot persuade this past self to narrate for him, because the past Frampton no longer exists – the ultimate indisposition. Hence, Frampton enlists Snow – who, by Frampton's assessment, has no idea what the past Frampton has been doing. Frampton's silly story, though entertaining, masks a much deeper strategy than the filmmaker admits. Snow's voice, far from being simply a means of overcoming an insurmountable logistical difficulty, provides yet another way for Frampton to drive a wedge between the physical and immaterial components of his memories. By having another voice read the words he has written, Frampton extracts himself from the process by which the words are spoken. Since his voice does not attach itself to the memories presented in *(nostalgia)*, they are freed from their most prominent physical anchor – himself. The absence of Frampton's own audio thus severs the major material bond that ties his memories to the physical plane.

If Frampton has so assiduously harvested the material of the self throughout the film, the next question is what he does with it. I attempt to answer that question in the final section of this chapter. I look at what Frampton does from an autobiographical perspective – that is, I

read *(nostalgia)* as an autobiographical work – and examine Frampton's originality in terms of form, content, and technique.

G. *(nostalgia)*: An Autobiographical Reading

Despite the tricks it plays with image and narration, *(nostalgia)* toys less drastically with its generic markers, telling the story of Frampton's earlier artistic life and his eventual disillusionment with photography. As a result, the film features conspicuous autobiographical emplotment, which Snow's narrating voice does little to obscure. On some level, then, *(nostalgia)* invites an autobiographical reading. Its story is intuitive enough: Rachel Moore observes that, "In one sense, the film is the story of a photographic career from beginning to end" (28), and indeed, *(nostalgia)* dramatizes the end of Frampton's affair with photography through the ritualistic burning of his photographic portfolio. Yet, as is the case with all worthwhile autobiographies, Frampton's work in *(nostalgia)* is about more than simply his life story. The manner in which the story is told activates a new register of meaning, as do the possible effects that telling the story can have upon the autobiographer. To this end, Moore suggests that the film is a gesture toward repairing Frampton's relationship with the present. For Moore, Frampton's project in *(nostalgia)* is to undo, or at least outmaneuver, the pain of loss, and cease living in the past tense of memory – thinking of life in the past tense, after all, is suspiciously close to the perspective of the dead. Moore writes:

> You can look at *(nostalgia)* as a kind of curing trip in which Frampton keeps
>
> the gravedigger at bay by developing and incorporating his own history, opens
>
> wounds so that they might heal, replaces that which is lost or in peril of being

104

so, and burns them in order to activate the present. (15)

If the mental condition of nostalgia is one where the past becomes a morass, trapping the sufferer and causing him or her inescapable pain, Frampton's efforts strive to combat that entrapment and its attendant distress. He revisits the past, and endures the pain it causes him, in order to initiate a healing process. Rather than passively allow his past to do what it will to him, he takes a more proactive approach: he assimilates his own history, thereby crafting a more bearable present for himself.

Moore's autobiographical reading is accurate, but incomplete. What she describes is the *end* of *(nostalgia)*, but, following Frampton's admonition regarding compositional processes, the *means* of the film provide a significant – if not all-important – portion of its subject. I propose then to investigate the fraction of *(nostalgia)* that Moore does not include in her autobiographical interpretation of the film. Moore has established *(nostalgia)* as having an autobiographical dimension, and thus has invoked the significance of autobiography for decoding the film. Inversely, I hope to show *(nostalgia)*'s significance for autobiography, highlighting its process, techniques, and themes to reveal the film's noteworthy contributions to autobiographical form and discourse. I argue that Frampton's film advances two major considerations. First, *(nostalgia)* dramatizes the challenges and perils involved in using one's memories for aesthetic ends. The burning and destruction of the photographs in the film functions as a metaphor for the violent metamorphosis one's memories undergo when one tries to introduce them into an autobiographical discourse. They change in the process of constructing that discourse; they become something else, and their previous form can vanish entirely. Frampton's photographic pyre turns *(nostalgia)* into an

105

autobiographical work that remains firmly aware of the cost of the autobiographical process. Second, *(nostalgia)* demonstrates the incommunicable nature of memories. Despite the intense transformations to which he subjects them, Frampton's memories never quite meld into an optimally coherent and understandable form for his audience – that is, until they have become something *other* than memories. Viewers of *(nostalgia)* cannot reach the level of comprehension that Frampton's spoken narrative seems to want from them, and the film spotlights this communicative failure as one of the core concerns of the autobiographical endeavor.

Despite the certainty with which Moore and I approach *(nostalgia)* as an example of autobiographical film, at least one commentator has made the case that the film is more likely fictional. Kenith L. Simmons in "Reconstructing the Code" has classified *(nostalgia)* as a game of codes, wherein viewers initially perceive the film as one that they should read as an autobiographical documentary, but eventually shift toward reading as fiction, due to the film's multiple feints with interpretive codes. The film, writes Simmons, "is an exercise in spectator decentering – specifically in exhibiting that how the pronouns 'you' and 'I' are understood depends on a broad set of cues that must be interpreted by the viewer – and which can be misinterpreted" (56). The misinterpretation in *(nostalgia)*, according to Simmons, occurs when viewers mistakenly associate the eye of the camera with the viewpoint of the unseen narrator. They approach the film believing that the image they see is one the narrator is looking at and discussing, but the disjunction between word and image perplexes this initial viewing assumption. Simmons thus posits that the camera in *(nostalgia)* belongs to no one in particular – that the narrator is scrutinizing the next photograph in the sequence, that he is

narrating its circumstances to an unseen observer instead of the film's audience, and that the narrator will place the photo he currently discusses on the burner once he finishes (56). The result, Simmons argues, is a feat of generic legerdemain whereby the film reveals its fictive nature, and impugns the autobiographical or documentary expectations of its viewers:

> . . . [W]hile our first reading of *Nostalgia* [sic] is that it functions according to the rules of documentary – with the viewer occupying the position of the pronoun "you" and the narration explaining how we should interpret the visual image – in fact, it functions according to the rules of fiction, with the viewer occupying a voyeuristic position relative to an action which involves characters focused on each other, not the viewer. (56)

The upshot of *(nostalgia)*'s re-positioning of the spectator, writes Simmons, is its implications for the certainty of language in film:

> *Nostalgia* [sic] demonstrates in filmic terms what linguists have demonstrated in terms of language – that the meaning of pronouns shifts in relation to the discourse in which they appear – and that as viewers (speakers), we assume *positions* provided for us by that discourse. (57)

In other words, while viewers may approach *(nostalgia)* believing that the pronouns "you" and "I" refer to themselves and the narrative voice respectively, these positions are not givens, and their meanings hinge upon the discourse in which they are situated. The differences between documentary and fictive discourse are enough to alter radically the referents of "you" and "I" from one discourse to the next, and *(nostalgia)* in Simmons' reading makes this disparity readily apparent. Having argued that Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*

(1970) advances a similar agenda, Simmons concludes:

> What Frampton has done in *Zorns Lemma* and *Nostalgia* [*sic*] is to use the power of traditional narrative conventions to expose the mechanisms by which they operate. The films demonstrate that the meaning of imagery is controlled to a large extent by its position in a pattern; this has been demonstrated before. The films' most important contribution to an understanding of artistic discourse is in revealing the degree to which the pattern which provides meaning comes from the viewer's own mind rather than from the text *per se*. What Frampton's cinematic exegesis demonstrates is that the ability of the spectator to determine the meaning of imagery in a text is conditioned by the processes which *elicit* specific patterns in the mind of that spectator. The "self" which we bring to the text, the subjective imagination with which we confront the objective text, is the one *called for* by the text. (59)

The pattern of the film – the interpretive codes it presents – is what dictates audience expectations, viewing conventions, and ultimately the kinds of meanings that spectators will be able to derive. The genre of a given film, then, becomes a major factor – if not the deciding factor – in how a film may be interpreted. If the film presents interpretive codes that correspond to documentary convention, it will summon the subjectivity of a documentary viewer; if the film presents a set of codes corresponding to fictional fare, a different kind of viewer emerges. For Simmons to claim *(nostalgia)* is fictional, then, is especially devastating to an autobiographical reading, for her stance argues that the film's fictional construction, both by virtue of the codes it presents and the interpretive apparatus those codes furnish,

precludes such a reading.

Although Simmons poses a noteworthy hurdle to an autobiographical reading of *(nostalgia)*, I believe her interpretation of the film relies on a fundamental misunderstanding of how Frampton conceives of and deploys the pronouns "I" and "you." To this end, some remarks by P. Adams Sitney in *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (2008) prove relevant to the discussion. In the chapter "Hollis Frampton and the Specter of Narrative," Sitney examines some of Frampton's comments in "A Pentagram for Conjuring the Narrative." Sitney notes that Frampton "defines the first person" (105) as a bifurcated entity that encompasses both speaker and listener. Frampton writes in "A Pentagram" that:

> "I" is the English familiar name by which an unspeakably intricate net of colloidal circuits – or, as some reason, the garrulous temporary inhabitant of that nexus – addresses itself; occasionally, etiquette permitting, it even calls itself that in public. It lies, comfortable but immobile, in a hemiellipsoidal chamber of tensile bone. How it came to be there (together with some odd bits of phantasmal rubbish) is a subject for virtually endless speculation: it is certainly alone; and in time it convinces itself, somewhat reluctantly, that it is waiting to die. (144-5)

While Frampton, with his trademark elusiveness, will not state whether the "I" is purely the brain or some immaterial soul that inhabits it, he does posit a model for the self based upon how it behaves. "I" is the means by which the self addresses itself; therefore the "I" is both the speaker and the listener. Sitney notes that this mode of address actively splits the self:

"As it waits to die, the garrulous self divides into speaker and listener, telling itself stories; for storytelling is among 'the animal necessities of the spirit,' he [Frampton] concludes, quoting an unspecified source" (106). In other words, because the self knows it is going to die, it feels the need to tell stories to itself; in so doing, it must address itself, and, by virtue of using a mode of address, splits itself into two parts. The key here is that "I" in Frampton's framework is an entity of paradox that exists in an indeterminate Schrödinger state: it is always one and two at the same time. It divides itself to maintain unity and coherence, yet the two divided parts are nonetheless the same entity, and together form that entity.

Sitney's explication of Frampton's "I" proves problematic for Simmons' reading. Even if we grant her suggestion that the camera, narrator, and listener in *(nostalgia)* all somehow occupy separate spatial or discursive positions – and are perhaps different "characters" – it does not necessarily follow from this division that the film operates under the codes and conventions of fiction. The separation of the film's constituent parts into several different viewpoints or subject positions instead corresponds to the self-imposed divisions of the "I" that make the "I" intelligible to itself. This situation hardly calls for a fictional register. While a fictional discourse could wrangle with these concerns, they seem more suited to an autobiographical mode, where questions of memory, subjectivity, and the strained relationship between the two remain central issues. That Frampton's film foregrounds these questions, and does so in a manner that both invokes the artist's own life and renders problematic a straightforward presentation of that life, diminishes the possibility that *(nostalgia)* relies on the machinery of fictional discourse. Instead, it reveals that *(nostalgia)* is an autobiographical work that shows itself fully cognizant of the idiosyncrasies of the "I,"

110

acknowledging the subject's multifaceted vantages, and incorporating that complex subjectivity into its mode of presentation. I contend, then, that *(nostalgia)* is most properly read as an autobiographical work – albeit one of remarkable thematic and structural sophistication, whose complexity threatens to obscure its autobiographical content.

In Frampton's model, the "I" has a fairly consistent trajectory, regardless of whom the "I" belongs to: it develops the capacity for thought, it thinks, and it eventually gains cognizance of its own mortality. As an autobiography, the format of *(nostalgia)* reflects this life trajectory, mimicking the thought process of a matured mind; its form thus matches its content. The narrator in *(nostalgia)* is a divided one – Snow's voice reading Frampton's words – and this division corresponds to the split between speaker and listener that the "I" undergoes. The film thus presents a narration that encompasses the multifaceted subjectivity of the "I" – speaker and listener are shown to be distinct, yet parts of a cohesive whole at the same time. Crucially, however, the mind in Frampton's model reaches maturity once it convinces itself of its own inevitable demise. Since Frampton's narrator is a mature mind, the question of mortality hangs over all of *(nostalgia)*. Hence the burning of the photographs: a gradual disintegration of the memories that go into making the "I" what it is.

Significantly, Frampton connects memory, identity, and mortality in such a way as to reveal what makes a "self." In this regard, Roy Batty's final words in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982/2007) provide an apt parallel: "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die . . . " The most noteworthy consequence of his death, Roy realizes, is that his memories will

disappear. These memories are precisely what constitute and define his being; they are the material of his self. Frampton has reached a similar conclusion in *(nostalgia)*. When he systematically burns his memories, he is demonstrating to himself, through a portrayal of the mature mind, what death looks like: a series of moments lost to the ages. It is especially pertinent that Frampton selects photographs as his means of conveying this message. As Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography* (1977), "All photographs are *memento mori*" (15). Every photograph marks something that no longer exists, or will no longer exist – be it the fleeting moment captured in the frame, the subject, or even the milieu. If the "I" needs to convince itself of its own eventual death, then photographs and their attendant connotations of absence are sufficient to demonstrate the transitory nature of all things – and all living things, by extension.

The link between photography and mortality in *(nostalgia)* invites the question of what kind of process we witness in the film. Why should somebody be talking to him-/herself about his/her own death? Corey K. Creekmur, in "The Cinematic Photograph and the Possibility of Mourning" (1987), suggests that *(nostalgia)* might be best understood as a work of mourning in the Freudian sense – in effect, a reaction to the loss of a loved entity (a person, an ideal, a state of being, a valued abstraction, etc.). Tapping into Sontag's, Barthes's, and Bazin's conceptions of the photograph, Creekmur posits that interactions with a given photograph – especially one that has some correspondence with the life of the photograph's viewer – constitute an act of mourning:

> The experience of viewing photographs, as a reaction to the "that-has-been"
> which simultaneously affirms and effaces the presence of what "has been"

photographed, might be described as a work of mourning, an attempt to negotiate between the past presence and present absence of a loved object. (42)

Frampton's work in *(nostalgia)* mostly fits this model, Creekmur argues, although the film carries with it one major caveat:

As [a] film, that is, as [a] work in ordered process, unfolding in time and thus encouraging narrativity, [*(nostalgia)*] inevitably subvert[s] our tendency to perceive [it] as constructed of "stills" and thus raise[s] questions concerning the possibility of mourning with the aid of the oxymoronic "cinematic photograph," an object that seems to, but of course cannot exist. (42)

The photographs shown in *(nostalgia)* are really *filmed* photographs, which, while visually similar to still photographs, are fundamentally different artifacts. The still photograph consists of a single, static frame that contains an image; the cinematic photograph comprises *multiple* frames that all show identical or near-identical images to give the illusion of a single still image when run through a projector. A photograph in a film like *(nostalgia)* is anything but a still image – it "moves" as much as anything else in the film. For Creekmur, this difference is enough to complicate the mourning process, and pose some difficulty for it:

[F]ilms, like photographs, *preserve*; although film does not freeze motion, it nevertheless records and contains it. And so, in response to the claim that he was destroying some old pictures in *(nostalgia)*, Frampton comments "but you see, they are not destroyed; they can be resurrected by rewinding the film." In other words, the repetition which sustains nostalgia within Frampton's film

can easily be carried without great difficulty or disruption into the activity of reviewing the film itself. (47)

Destroying old photographs could demonstrate that one who mourns has finally moved on and recovered. "Frampton destroys his photographs," Creekmur writes, "suggesting that the preservation of the lost object, whether in this case the subjects of the photographs or the photographs themselves, must not be allowed" (47). In Frampton's case, however, the "destruction" of the photographs may yet be an illusion, for the film of their burning can be rewound to bring them back into being. The possibility of repeated viewing would then correspond to the repetition and entrapment that are symptomatic of mourning. If *(nostalgia)* is to succeed as a coping mechanism, and a way to surmount the melancholy of endless mourning, it must somehow "provide a nonreproducible work of mourning which is not simply a 'getting over' via the defense mechanism of mere forgetting, but rather a demonstration of the willingness to confront, acknowledge, and accept loss" (Creekmur 47). To this end, Creekmur suspects that the missing final photograph in *(nostalgia)* represents precisely such a loss; the withheld image of dread at the film's conclusion "disallow[s] [its] possible aid in sustaining an Imaginary relation to an absent object" (47).

Creekmur's observations provide a helpful heuristic for understanding *(nostalgia)*'s narrative trajectory. As a film about mourning – successful mourning, moreover – it adds another dimension to Frampton's autobiographical narrative. Through Creekmur's lens, Frampton's film becomes a story about the task of moving on, of accepting the departure of who he once was, and allowing his present self to assume its place. Like the most accomplished autobiographies, *(nostalgia)* is the story of how Frampton became who he is –

but his story happens to encompass a difficult and painful mourning process. The film thus tackles two substantial questions: What does a successful mourning process look like, and how does one give an account of such a deeply personal process? Frampton's answer is that an account of one's mourning is possible, but it is not going to be easily conveyed. The experience of mourning, a condition dependent on specific memories, as well as a particular relationship to them, resists straightforward aesthetic rendering. With enough effort and creativity, the story can be told, but it has no guarantee of being comprehensible to its audience. Moreover, the act of telling that story will take quite a lot out of the teller, no matter how ingenious or effortless its presentation may appear. These difficulties are made apparent in two of the most salient diegetic features of Frampton's film: the disjointed narration, and the steady sequence of burnt photographs.

The divergence between word and image in *(nostalgia)* suggests that memories, and the relationship that their holder has with them, retain an incommunicable quality that hobbles the attempt to convey them or their significance. Word and image are two separate registers of meaning[14], and Frampton's film hints that each of the two registers can be tied to a given memory. For instance, Frampton's memory of the unchanging shop window has both an image (the picture of the window), and a word (the account of his experiences with the window). For him, these two registers can be, in a way, "synchronized," made to refer to the same memory in a manner where both registers work in tandem to become more intelligible and meaningful. This technique works well enough in one's own head, but some difficulties

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14 Cf. John Berger, "Appearances" (1982): "In the relation between a photograph and words, the photograph begs for an interpretation, and the words usually supply it. The photograph, irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, is given a meaning by the words. And the words, which by themselves remain at the level of generalization, are given specific authenticity by the irrefutability [sic] of the photograph. Together the two then become very powerful; an open question appears to have been fully answered" (92).

arise when an onlooker attempts to forge the same link. In *(nostalgia)*, audiences cannot synchronize Frampton's memories the way he can – word and image clash and stifle one another – ostensibly because those memories do not belong to them. They can experience them as something other than memories – as an intriguing aesthetic object, perhaps – but that experience will be incommensurate with the target memory. The disjointed narration in *(nostalgia)*, then, is indicative of this failed synthesis, where word and image derived from a memory do not amount to the memory the artist seeks to transmit.

Frampton's exposition of this theme is perhaps most apparent in the final moments of *(nostalgia)*, when the narrator entreats his audience for a moment of identification and understanding that ultimately cannot happen. The narrator, revealing what is perhaps his most dramatic reason for quitting photography, tries to show his audience what he has beheld and felt, asking them whether they can see and feel the same: "[W]hat I believe I see recorded in that speck of film fills me with such fear, such utter dread and loathing, that I think I shall never dare to make another photograph again. Here it is! Look at it! Do you see what I see?" Alas, there is little to look upon: only a single black frame that brings the film to its conclusion. The black frame is a cipher, a blank canvas on which the audience can project whatever visual or sensation they desire. It is no image, and contains no image; it is the absence of Frampton's perfect white rectangle that contains all possible cinematic images. Any overlap between what the audience believes they see and Frampton's dread vision, therefore, occurs due to pure chance. The black frame represents the moment of breakdown between memory and expression, where intensely personal recollection proves an insurmountable barrier for the powers of representation.

If memories themselves resist transmission, why does Frampton bother to make *(nostalgia)*? The sense of futility that accompanies the film's final frame is not its sole theme. Frampton's film is also about the costs and consequences of the autobiographical endeavor – specifically, the fallout for one's memories. If memories cannot be communicated, they must be refashioned into something else in order to be rendered intelligible and meaningful to others. The attempt to turn one's memories into something that can be fitted into an aesthetic framework is a transforming, and sometimes even violent procedure that damages or destroys those memories. Frampton's film dramatizes this process in its fiery diegesis, showing what becomes of his memories as he applies them toward an aesthetic end. First, he presents a photograph, itself a symbol of a particular memory. After that, he attempts to provide an

account of that memory (or else prepares the account of the memory that will accompany the next photograph). The account represents an attempt to place the memory in an aesthetic framework, to make it into something other than a solipsistic sensation so that others might

Figure 14: The final shot of *(nostalgia)*.

understand it. Significantly, the photograph begins to burn long before Frampton's vignette concludes, conspicuously marred or distorted by the monologue's halfway point, and damaged even further as the narrator piles on the words. The timing of these two events (the narration and the burning) suggests a causal link between them. The memory remains intact up until Frampton tries to fit it into an autobiographical framework, at which point it begins to burn, ultimately crumbling into a pile of ash that bears no trace of its former identity. In

117

addition to being a tale of the mourning process, *(nostalgia)* tells the story of that tale's compositional process – an ongoing sacrifice of memories, endemic to virtually any autobiographical endeavor. It is a film as much about the autobiographical process and its demands as it is about Frampton's life story.

Reading *(nostalgia)* as an autobiography, then, yields an avant-garde meta-film, an autobiography about autobiographies that documents its own (de)composition. The film *is* about Frampton, of course, but it also concerns Frampton's condition during and after the autobiographical undertaking. He gathers up the material of the self, only to expend it in a powerful aesthetic gesture that raises pointed questions about autobiography in general, including the feasibility of the autobiographical act, and the tremendous personal cost associated therewith.

H. Conclusion

The foregoing analysis suggests that Frampton's *(nostalgia)* unites the discourses of autobiography, film, and sculpture; further, it intends to demonstrate how Frampton uses each of these distinct discourses to reach a deeper understanding of the others. Frampton treats filmmaking as a fundamentally sculptural project, recognizing that the process of creating a film consists of the gradual subtraction of superfluous elements. In Frampton's case, light is the medium; excess wavelengths are the material to be pared away. Keeping Frampton's methodology in mind – as well as his insistence upon the primacy of the compositional process in all aesthetic artifacts – I arrive at a new way of reading *(nostalgia)*, viewing Frampton's emphasis on subtractive processes as the key to understanding the content of the

film. Rather than being a primarily structural film, as the dominant trends in Frampton criticism would suggest, the sculptural approach shows *(nostalgia)* to be an autobiographical film – one that emphasizes, furthermore, the autobiographical process. In *(nostalgia)*, Frampton indicates that the autobiographical act is itself a sculptural process, treating the constituent parts of one's self – memories, experiences, and histories – as the materials to be carved into a coherent aesthetic product. Frampton betrays some skepticism regarding the feasibility of a truly coherent autobiography, but nonetheless crafts a film about autobiography whose attention to the autobiographical endeavor makes it a classic of autobiographical film. Frampton, therefore, forges strong links among sculpture, film, and autobiography, demonstrating the relevance – and indeed the necessity – of invoking sculpture theory as a means of interpreting autobiographical films.

CHAPTER 3

ANDREI TARKOVSKY'S *Зеркало* AND *Tempo di viaggio*

"Everyday life, which could bear down on us like a foot treading on a head, could also transport us with delight. Everything depended on the seeing eye. If the eye saw the water that was everywhere in Tarkovsky's films, for example – which changed the world into a kind of terrarium, where everything trickled and ran, floated and drifted, where all the characters could melt away from the picture and only coffee cups on a table were left, filling slowly with the falling rain, against a backdrop of intense, almost menacing green vegetation – yes, then the eye would be able to see the same wild, existential depths unfold in everyday life."

~Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle* (Book 2), pg. 369

A. A Portrait Without a Likeness: Tarkovsky's Autobiographical Films

In his 1999 documentary about Andrei Tarkovsky, *One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich*, Chris Marker tells a possibly apocryphal story of an "encounter" between Tarkovsky and the legendary Russian poet Boris Pasternak. Attending a séance, Tarkovsky allegedly came into contact with the ghost of the departed poet. Pasternak's shade, able to see past, present, and future, informed Tarkovsky that he would live to make exactly seven films. "Only seven?" Tarkovsky asked, obviously disappointed by what the prophecy foretold of his creative output – and his lifespan. "Yes," replied Pasternak, "but all of them will be great."

At a glance, the seven great films referenced in Marker's anecdote likely refer to Tarkovsky's seven major cinematic releases: *Иваново детство* (*Ivan's Childhood*, 1962), *Андрей Рублёв* (*Andrei Roublev*, 1966), *Солярис* (*Solaris*, 1972), *Зеркало* (*Mirror*, 1975), *Сталкер* (*Stalker*, 1979), *Nostalghia* (1983), and *Offret* (*The Sacrifice*, 1986). Yet this list is

not an exhaustive survey of Tarkovsky's output, for Tarkovsky directed four other films before his death from lung cancer in 1986. Among them are three short student films made during his studies at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (*Убийцы* [*The Killers*, 1956], *Сегодня увольнения не будет* [*There Will Be No Leave Today*, 1959], and *Каток и скрипка* [*The Steamroller and the Violin*, 1961]), plus one television documentary (*Tempo di viaggio*[15], 1983) commissioned by RAI (Radiotelevisione italiana). This latter film also carries the distinction of being the sole film in Tarkovsky's oeuvre in which he shares directorial credit: Tonino Guerra, the eminent screenwriter and frequent Michelangelo Antonioni collaborator, is credited as both the co-writer and co-director.

Marker's story, besides being an entertaining tale, is indicative of a long-standing trend in Tarkovsky criticism: the tendency to focus solely on Tarkovsky's theatrical releases, ignoring or subordinating his other films in the meantime. A brief survey of the extant literature attests to this oversight. Maya Turovskaya's *Tarkovsky: Cinema as Poetry* (1989) makes no mention of *Tempo di viaggio*, and only briefly discusses one of Tarkovsky's student films. In *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue* (1994), Vida T. Johnson and Graham Petrie devote a mere four pages to Tarkovsky's student films (63-6), and relegate *Tempo di viaggio* to a single paragraph, where it is called nothing more than "a kind of preliminary sketch for *Nostalghia*" (157). Thomas Redwood allots an even more minuscule space for *Tempo di viaggio* – one sentence (172) – in *Andrei Tarkovsky's Poetics of Cinema* (2010), and uses it to discuss the "pronounced degree of stylistic consistency" in *Nostalghia*

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15 The film's title is usually translated into English as "*Voyage in Time*," perhaps to allude to the translated title of Tarkovsky's *Запечатлённое время*, which comes to us in English as the not entirely accurate title *Sculpting in Time*. In keeping with that treatise's unfortunate translation, "*Voyage in Time*" does not quite capture what "*Tempo di viaggio*" means in Italian – I would suggest that it is closer to "travel time" – that is, time spent in transit. Thus, I will refer to the film as *Tempo di viaggio*, although other scholarship may address the film as *Voyage in Time*.

(172). In Nariman Skakov's *The Cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of Space and Time* (2012), *Tempo di viaggio* appears only in the footnotes section, because it is "arguably of chiefly historical or biographical, rather than aesthetic, value" (224). The reluctance to examine Tarkovsky's "ancillary" films – if not the outright hostility toward them – is a trend ultimately damaging to Tarkovsky studies, for it neglects a sizable portion of Tarkovsky's all-too-brief filmmaking career, and limits the potential for synergistic readings of his films. Given the ongoing centrality of Tarkovsky's work within the global film canon[16], these recurrent misreadings and omissions amount to a great disservice to world cinema.

In this chapter, I will make the case that *Tempo di viaggio,* a film relegated to being a mere footnote to *Nostalghia* in most Tarkovsky criticism – if not a footnote in general – has been both unduly neglected and paired with the wrong film in Tarkovsky's oeuvre. Where the majority of critics who bother to look at *Tempo di viaggio* read it as a documentary about scouting locations for *Nostalghia*, I interpret it instead as a companion piece to Tarkovsky's autobiographical film *Mirror.* For *Tempo di viaggio* is itself an autobiographical film, illustrating key aspects of Tarkovsky's aesthetic philosophy that *Mirror* explores, but does not fully discuss on its own. Through this new reading of *Tempo di viaggio*, I also intend to illuminate a new dimension of *Mirror*, demonstrating Tarkovsky's insufficiently explored contributions to the practice of autobiographical filmmaking. When considered as two halves of the same autobiographical project, *Mirror* and *Tempo di viaggio* reveal Tarkovsky's singular approach to autobiography: a systematic stripping away of the individual until only that person's raw experience remains, freeing the memories and sensations and ideas that

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16 Consider, as evidence, the recent (19 October – 29 November 2015) retrospective curated by the British Film Institute, "Mirroring Tarkovsky: The Russian Master and his Director Disciples." Tarkovsky exerts a strong enough influence on contemporary cinema that the BFI saw fit to assemble an entire season of his films, and others inspired by his work.

were once trapped within the individual so that they might be appropriated and used by others. This process, in accordance with Tarkovsky's theory of the ultimate goal of art, portrays the individual artist as an obstacle to the salubrious, elevating effects of the aesthetic experience – an impediment that must be surmounted if art is to accomplish its moral duty. In Tarkovsky's hands, the autobiographical film is an effort to separate the art from the artist, and this is no easy task when the art in question is derived from one's memories and experiences. Each of the two films is a case study in Tarkovsky's unique philosophy of autobiography: *Mirror* demonstrates the process and results of Tarkovsky's method, while *Tempo di viaggio* demonstrates the necessity of his approach. The techniques Tarkovsky uses to achieve these ends are fundamentally sculptural, and his two autobiographical films become far more intelligible if approached with a sensitivity toward Tarkovsky's sculptural sensibilities.

Finished in 1975 after multiple script rewrites and thematic overhauls (it had formerly been called *Confession*, and later, *A White, White Day*), *Mirror* is the film that is "'central' both numerically and aesthetically to [Tarkovsky's] oeuvre" (Johnson and Petrie 111). Occurring near the middle of Tarkovsky's filmmaking career – or slightly off-center, if one includes the student films and *Tempo di viaggio* in one's count – *Mirror* is, by Tarkovsky's own accounts, his "most openly autobiographical, daring, and self-revealing film" (Johnson and Petrie 111). Considering his other films, the labels Tarkovsky applied to *Mirror* are justifiable. As Nariman Skakov explains, "Unlike the director's three preceding and three subsequent films, *Mirror* consists solely of disparate spatio-temporal frameworks which are not unified by a single narrative line" (100). Where Tarkovsky's other films have relatively

straightforward plots (an artist's quest to understand the link between divinity and art in *Andrei Roublev*; a scientist's efforts to study a mysterious planet in *Solaris*; a guide leading a party through dangerous territory in *Stalker*), *Mirror* does not lend itself so neatly to concise summary. Skakov notes that the film seems to be "a series of recollections from a dying man" (100), but finds that this reading is "an oversimplification" (100). To this end, Skakov furnishes a different – and more accurate – summary of the "plot" of *Mirror*:

> Memories of childhood and scenes from the man's present life are intermixed
>
> with dreams and 'unmotivated' leaps into the historical past by means of a
>
> documentary chronicle. This makes any linear reading of the film impossible,
>
> and leads the diegesis beyond the conventions of traditional storytelling. (100)

Consequently, one cannot summarize what happens in *Mirror* so much as describe how it is conveyed. It is some kind of autobiographical work that does not function according to linear principles. There is no straightforward narrative in the film, nor is there a straightforward conception of time or space. The best way to describe the film succinctly, then, is to call it an autobiographical film with an experimental narrative structure, and multifarious registers of time and memory.

Unlike *Mirror*, the later film *Tempo di viaggio* has a less unruly production history, and a more tractable narrative. Johnson and Petrie report that an early version of the film was conceived some time in 1976, a draft of its first version completed in October 1976, and the final version filmed, edited, and completed between mid-July and September 1979 (156-7). The film, then, can be considered a transitional work for Tarkovsky, as it lies between the final film he would make in the Soviet Union (*Stalker*), and the first major theatrical release

he would complete abroad (*Nostalghia*). *Tempo di viaggio* follows Andrei Tarkovsky and fellow director Tonino Guerra in a sojourn around Italy as they scout locations for a future film (which will ultimately be *Nostalghia*), and discuss issues of art, artistry, and philosophy.

The question that must be asked of the forthcoming analysis of these two films is, why join them together? They are not consecutive releases, nor do they document the same location. My justification for linking them is their thematic overlap. In Tarkovsky's entire body of work, *Mirror* and *Tempo di viaggio* are the only autobiographical films. They are therefore connected by an uncommon thread in Tarkovsky's film output, and I believe that connection, by virtue of its rarity, is worth interrogating. In any event, it certainly makes more sense to consider the autobiographical *Tempo di viaggio* in light of Tarkovsky's other autobiographical work than it does to view it as a footnote to a fiction film. Conjoining it to *Nostalghia* betrays a commitment to viewing *Tempo di viaggio* only in terms of its content, whereas the oeuvre of a filmmaker of Tarkovsky's genius warrants formal scrutiny of the highest order. Furthermore, the link between Tarkovsky's two autobiographical films is a valuable locus of inquiry, given the absence of critical analysis of either film in terms of their repercussions for autobiographical film in general. Skakov and Johnson and Petrie readily admit *Mirror*'s autobiographical qualities and experimental structure, but do not explore what that structure means for the practice of autobiography. It is an odd thing to overlook, for if a given work is deemed experimental, surely the results of that experiment are worth documenting and analyzing. Tarkovsky's films may also be read as experiments in autobiography, with autobiographical practice in mind. This critical lacuna is a void that my chapter intends to fill.

B. Tarkovsky's "Self-Less" Theory of Art and Sculptural Method

One of the keys to understanding Tarkovsky's approach to autobiography lies in his philosophy of art. Unlike many aesthetic philosophers, who contemplate art as an end unto itself, Tarkovsky envisions both art and artist as contributing to an ethical project that extends beyond the initial work of art. In accordance with this view, he develops a specific conception of what art does, and what an artist must do to create it. In his treatise on film art, *Sculpting in Time* (*Запечатлённое время,* 1987), Tarkovsky claims that the artistic impulse first arises due to humankind's failure to achieve peace with or understand the world around itself, and an inability to comprehend the forces that brought the world into being:

> Again and again man correlates himself with the world, racked with longing
>
> to acquire, and become one with, the ideal which lies outside him, which he
>
> apprehends as some kind of intuitively sensed first principle. The
>
> unattainability of that becoming one, the inadequacy of his own I, is the
>
> perpetual source of man's dissatisfaction and pain. (37)

In Tarkovsky's view, then, humankind experiences alienation from the world it inhabits. Yet what is crucial about Tarkovsky's philosophy is that this alienation occurs because of problems inherent in the construction of the individual's identity, or "the inadequacy of his own I." The self may be the vessel through which we encounter and experience the world, but it also estranges us from that world by asserting our distinctness from the world we observe. Think of how Descartes found the "I" to be distinct from the rest of the world by virtue of its inability to be doubted or denied. Tarkovsky finds this Cartesian separation to be something human beings intuit as a "first principle," but he also sees it an obstacle. It divides

the universe in two – into the "I" and what lies beyond it – but Tarkovsky believes that human beings crave a reunion with what has been sundered from them. Alas, the Cartesian distinction proves insurmountable, preventing us from "becoming one with" the world – physically or spiritually – and resulting in perpetual heartache for the human species. Fortunately for those who share his view, Tarkovsky believes that we might be able to ameliorate some of this eternal estrangement through artistic experience. The director writes:

> An artistic discovery occurs each time as a new and unique image of the world, a hieroglyphic of absolute truth. It appears as a revelation, as a momentary, passionate wish to grasp intuitively and at a stroke all the laws of this world – its beauty and ugliness, its compassion and cruelty, its infinity and its limitations. The artist expresses these things by creating the image, *sui generis* detector of the absolute. Through the image is sustained an awareness of the infinite: the eternal within the finite, the spiritual within matter, the limitless given form. (37)

The recurrent desire that people have to comprehend the world sometimes emerges as an "artistic discovery," and this discovery is itself a flicker of revelation. The artistic image – be it through cinema, or painting, or some other medium – furnishes an "awareness of the infinite," or, to put it differently, a momentary understanding of the world. A work of art thus provides a means of coping with the perpetual alienation of the human condition. We cannot grasp the world directly, but we *can* grasp art, and if a given work of art does a good enough job of capturing some element of the unfathomable world, we can then draw slightly closer to the understanding of the world outside the self, and the reunion with it, for which we

127

endlessly pine.

In Tarkovsky's philosophy, then, art serves the valuable purpose of obviating our deepest longings. Yet our construction of the self – the individual "I" – poses an obstacle to the palliative functions of art. For Tarkovsky, there is something "inadequate" about the individual self; it limits the way we perceive the world, and bars our comprehension of the "ideal world" or the "spiritual within matter." By extension, the artist presents a similar impediment to our understanding of a work of art if he or she intrudes upon it. If the individual consciousness sabotages our ability to fathom the world by differentiating us from it too harshly, so too does the artist's presence undermine our oneness with the art. The artist becomes a physical manifestation of that ultra-differentiating consciousness, pulling us away from the "infinite" that Tarkovsky cites as the target of all worthwhile art by confining us in the material, the present – and, consequently, the transitory. The artist thus cannot be allowed to interfere with the art he or she produces, lest the art fail to fulfill its purpose. Accordingly, Tarkovsky separates art from the transient realm of the artist, and even dismisses the artist's importance, claiming that the artist cannot be said to satisfy the same demands that art does:

> Art is born and takes hold wherever there is a timeless and insatiable longing
> for the spiritual, for the ideal: that longing which draws people to art. Modern
> art has taken a wrong turn in abandoning the search for the meaning of
> existence in order to affirm the value of the individual for its own sake. What
> purports to be art begins to look like an eccentric occupation for suspect
> characters who maintain that any personalised action is of intrinsic value
> simply as a display of self-will. But in artistic creation the personality does not

assert itself, it serves another, higher and communal idea. The artist is always

a servant, and is perpetually trying to pay for the gift that has been given to

him as if by a miracle. (38)

The artist thus is not a worthy aesthetic object, because his or her individual personality is precisely *not* the concern of a good work of art. Tarkovsky sees little value in the individual, and even less value in enshrining that individual in an aesthetic act. If the artist does his or her job well, his or her personality "does not assert itself," because it is submitting to the "higher and communal idea" that the work of art embodies. In other words, the work of art is not about the artist. Rather, it is about what the completed work of art can do for those who experience it; how much closer it can bring them to spiritual contentment. To this end, Tarkovsky even advocates in *Sculpting in Time* the complete annihilation of the artist in his or her pursuit of high art: "Artistic creation demands of the artist that he 'perish utterly', in the full, tragic sense of those words" (39). The artist has a duty to his or her art – which, as Tarkovsky has expressed, implies a duty to humanity generally – and in turn, the artist cannot be concerned with him- or herself. The artist is better served eliminating him- or herself entirely from his/her art, and expending him-/herself in the process of making it.

For Tarkovsky, the self-elimination that the artist must undergo is not only a necessary step toward aesthetic perfection, but also a moral imperative. Erasing oneself from the aesthetic experience is at once an act of self-sacrifice and self-affirmation, given that, in Tarkovsky's view, the sacrificing of oneself for the sake of others is the ultimate expression of freedom. Thus, if one sacrifices oneself to art, one enables the rest of humanity to attain self-betterment through interacting with the art one leaves behind. At the same time, this

sacrifice constitutes an immense freedom: one at last surpasses the "inadequate I" that plagues the human mind; one frees oneself from the ego and its limitations. Tarkovsky expatiates upon this complex concept in *Sculpting in Time*:

> In order to be free you simply have to be so, without asking permission of anybody. You have to have your own hypothesis about what you are called to do, and follow it, not giving in to circumstances or complying with them. But that sort of freedom demands powerful inner resources, a high degree of self-awareness, a consciousness of your responsibility to yourself and therefore to other people. (180)

Although it might at first appear odd to Western readers to discuss "freedom" and "responsibility to other people" in the same breath, such an approach is justified by Tarkovsky's conception of freedom as less a form of individualism than the potential for decision-making after a point of mental clarity and cogency is attained. If, indeed, freedom means the ability to act without inhibition or external interference, it stands to reason that one cannot act "freely" without first having a full understanding of one's situation. This includes knowledge of one's self and one's milieu – an environment which necessarily includes others. One cannot therefore act "freely" without knowledge of others, too, and of one's ethical obligations toward them. Tarkovsky's stance does not directly freight one with ethical responsibility, then, but rather tasks one with thinking clearly before acting. It would then happen naturally that clear, honest thought tends to reveal the many moral obligations to which one is beholden. In that vein, Tarkovsky laments how rarely those obligations are realized, thus articulating the consequences of that scarcity:

Alas, the tragedy is that we do not know how to be free – we demand freedom for ourselves at the expense of others and don't want to waive anything of our own for the sake of someone else: that would be an encroachment upon our own rights and liberties. All of us are infected today with an extraordinary egoism. And that is not freedom; freedom means learning to demand first and foremost of oneself, not of life or of others, and knowing how to give: sacrifice in the name of love. (180-1)

Tarkovsky contends that one cannot attain freedom without being subject to moral obligation. Although it may at first appear to be a self-contradiction, his theory is internally consistent. For Tarkovsky, freedom gained at the expense of others does not constitute a true freedom, for one could not attain that freedom on one's own, since it is dependent upon the presence of another to exploit, and therefore limits one's own ability to act. Conversely, when one acts for the sake of others, one attains precisely such freedom, because that gesture of generosity can only originate from oneself. In other words, the sole action that one is always free to perform is the performance of moral duty for others. Appropriately, Tarkovsky refers to this condition as "moral freedom," considering it to be the goal to which art and artist must aspire:

I don't want the reader to misunderstand me: what I am talking about is freedom in an ultimate, moral sense. I don't mean to polemicise, or to cast doubt on the unquestionable values and achievements which distinguish the European democracies. But the conditions of these democracies underline the problem of man's spiritual vacuum and loneliness. It seems to me that in the struggle for political liberties – important as these are – modern man has lost

sight of that freedom which has been enjoyed in every previous epoch: that of

being able to sacrifice oneself for the sake of another. (181)

Thus, the aesthetic venture, according to Tarkovsky's philosophy, serves two purposes: advancing humanity toward spiritual enlightenment, and attaining the "ultimate, moral" freedom, which is itself the end goal of spiritual enlightenment. As a consequence, however, a work of art cannot be considered a worthy aesthetic undertaking – or a truly ethical act – unless the artist disappears during the course of it. For if a work of art is to attain its highest level, and elevate its viewers as true art should, it must be the product of a great sacrifice. The only sufficient sacrifice, by Tarkovsky's account, is for the artist to "perish utterly."

The emphasis on selflessness via self-less-ness in Tarkovsky's aesthetic philosophy has noteworthy repercussions for autobiographical works. Namely, it raises a challenging question for the autobiographical genre: What should a properly aesthetic and ethical autobiography look like, when the true work of art is one in which the artist is not present, having been subsumed into the work? Autobiography, after all, is a "self-centered" genre, where focus on the artist's self and life is the norm. It would appear, then, that Tarkovsky's aesthetic vision prohibits autobiographical works from reaching the level of the highest art, and precludes them from giving viewers the spiritual elevation that high art is duty-bound to provide. Yet somehow Tarkovsky made not one, but *two* autobiographical films. Instead of suggesting that he ignored his own aesthetic credo, these films demonstrate what an autobiography that adheres to Tarkovsky's philosophy might be.

It is not so much that Tarkovsky has exiled autobiography from the high arts, but rather that he has deemed no word or concept to be less important to the autobiography than

"I." In order for a work of autobiography to operate according to Tarkovsky's conception of art, it must act selflessly – which it can accomplish by being self-less. It must downplay or ignore the autobiographer in favor of the impressions for which s/he was merely a conduit; it must encourage its viewers to think beyond the self, and demonstrate the errors of prioritizing the self above all else.

Significantly, Tarkovsky's conception of film – and the autobiographical film in particular – relies heavily on sculpture theory. By Tarkovsky's assessment, one cannot make a film without thinking in terms of sculpture; additionally, one cannot hope to produce an autobiographical work in keeping with Tarkovsky's aesthetic theories unless one adheres to the sculptural dicta he prescribes. In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky describes the process of filmmaking, and finds that it shares several key aspects of sculpture. Consider, for example, how the director characterizes the work of filming:

> This is how I conceive an ideal piece of filming: the author takes millions of metres of film, on which systematically, second by second, day by day and year by year, a man's life, for instance, from birth to death, is followed and recorded, and out of all that come two and a half thousand metres, or an hour and a half of screen time. (It is curious also to imagine those millions of metres going through the hands of several directors for each to make his film – how different they would all be!) (65)

Tarkovsky seeks a film that begins with the raw material of thousands and thousands of days captured on film – the entirety of a life – and later chops that tremendous quantity down to only a few hours. Yet this is not a predictable or straightforward process, for there exists an

133

uncounted number of ways those filmed days could be distilled. Tarkovsky himself notes that several different directors would inevitably produce several different films, even though each may have begun with the same raw material. This perspective suggests that, for Tarkovsky, any given film does not find its form in what is filmed, but rather, in what is culled from the overall body of filmed material. In this regard, film and sculpture overlap. Tarkovsky explains:

> The point is to pick out and join together the bits of sequential fact, knowing, seeing and hearing precisely what lies between them and what kind of chain holds them together. That is cinema. Otherwise we can easily slip onto the accustomed path of theatrical playwriting, building a plot structure based on given characters. The cinema has to be free to pick out and join up facts taken from a "lump of time" of any width or length. (65)

For Tarkovsky, it is this process of refining that differentiates film from the other narrative arts. While it might be tempting to construct a film around character and plot like fiction writer or playwright, Tarkovsky does not find this approach acceptable. The playwright's method is fundamentally different from the filmmaker's, for the playwright's work begins before s/he lays hands on any material whatsoever. The playwright can imagine characters and situations long before s/he puts pen to paper and creates his/her work. On the other hand, the filmmaker begins with materials – filmed scenes, performances, and other visuals that constitute a "lump of time" – and then must decide what to do with them. A good director, by Tarkovsky's estimation, will find some way in which certain parts of the "lump of time" cohere, and organize a film around that coherence. Here, again, Tarkovsky finds kinship

between film and sculpture. The filmmaker's task is to give shape to an otherwise amorphous mass of filmed material, and that shaping is achieved by paring away the excess material until a completed work emerges. This principle leads Tarkovsky to define film as "sculpting in time," which he explains thus:

> What is the essence of the director's work? We could define it as sculpting in time. Just as a sculptor takes a lump of marble, and, inwardly conscious of his finished piece, removes everything that is not part of it – so the film-maker, from a "lump of time" made up of an enormous, solid cluster of living facts, cuts off and discards whatever he does not need, leaving only what is to be an element of the finished film, what will prove to be integral to the cinematic image. (63-4)

For Tarkovsky, then, the material that the filmmaker works with is not solely the acetate and emulsion of the film stock, but also the time – and the passage of time – that the film stock captures. (The advent of digital video formats only underscores Tarkovsky's point: in the absence of physical film to work with, the filmmaker handles time directly, having sidestepped the original means of its capture.) The work of the filmmaker remains on par with that of the sculptor, as each has an undifferentiated mass of material to winnow down to something worthwhile. Like Frampton before him, Tarkovsky's concept of film art is inherently sculptural. Instead of manipulating light, however, Tarkovsky sees time as the material the filmmaker sculpts. The challenge for the filmmaker is to cause time to cohere, even when long stretches of it might be elided in search of the chain that joins "bits of sequential fact." An autobiographical work is ideally suited to this mode of production, for an

135

effective account of one's life – especially of the most meaningful parts of it – seldom contains the minutiae of daily living that occupies a substantial portion of one's lived time. Many autobiographies focus on particularly eventful scenes or occurrences, withholding long spans of routine and the time occupied thereby, and still convey a sense of coherence despite the lapses in time presented[17]. For Tarkovsky to describe filmmaking in these terms, then, indicates that his approach to filmmaking is already well-suited to the task of autobiographical artistry.

The main question in an autobiographical work for Tarkovsky, then, is what parts of a life can – or should – be stripped away to make the work cohere, and for it to have the morally elevating effect of good art. If Tarkovsky's theories of selflessness are any indication, the self must be the first thing to go. Selfhood may furnish one means of organizing time and experience, but it is a problematic means, as it induces estrangement from the wider world. Tarkovsky's autobiographical films, consequently, seek other means of organizing time and experience. To understand a Tarkovskian autobiography, one must read it as a self-less art, an autobiography more concerned with life than with the specific person who lived it. Thus I approach Tarkovsky's autobiographical films with an eye toward discovering how his films illustrate the process of their creation, and how they demonstrate the significance of that process.

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17 In this vein, some remarks from Joan Didion – celebrated author of fiction and nonfiction alike – attest to the overlap between sculpture and autobiography. When asked to elaborate on the differences between writing fiction and writing nonfiction in a 2006 interview in *The Paris Review*, Didion explains: "In nonfiction the notes give you the piece. Writing nonfiction is more like sculpture, a matter of shaping the research into the finished thing. Novels are like paintings, specifically watercolors. Every stroke you put down you have to go with. Of course you can rewrite, but the original strokes are still there in the texture of the thing." Nonfiction writing, by Didion's account, is a matter of taking a known quantity of information, and removing the extraneous parts until a coherent narrative results. Her assessment is an apt description of the autobiographical process, as well. Confronted with the innumerable details of a lived life ("the notes" or "the research"), the autobiographer's task is to cast aside all but the most essential components, and shape them into an intelligible narrative of that life.

C. Communicable Memories and Time Beyond the Self: *Зеркало*

One way to begin thinking about Tarkovsky's first autobiographical film, *Mirror*, is to consult another Russian master: Leo Tolstoy. Sean Martin reports in *Andrei Tarkovsky* (2011) that the director "saw himself as being part of the great nineteenth-century Russian literary tradition and felt a close affinity with Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky" (45), indicating that any of those writers would be worth investigating in a study of Tarkovsky. In particular, Tolstoy's theories on art, as expounded in the treatise *What Is Art?* (*Что такое искусство?*, 1897/1904), offer a good starting point for thinking about the problem of autobiography that Tarkovsky's aesthetic theories raise. Tolstoy advances a unique theory of aesthetics, wherein "infectiousness" (заразность) is the fundamental criterion by which art is differentiated from every other class of object:

> There is one indubitable indication distinguishing real art from its counterfeit, namely, the infectiousness of art. If a man, without exercising effort and without altering his standpoint, on reading, hearing, or seeing another man's work, experiences a mental condition which unites him with that man and with other people who also partake of that work of art, then the object evoking that condition is a work of art. And however poetic, realistic, effectful [*sic*], or interesting a work may be, it is not a work of art if it does not evoke that feeling (quite distinct from all other feelings) of joy, and of spiritual union with another (the author) and with others (those who are also infected by it). (152)

For Tolstoy, art is that which transmits one person's thoughts and feelings to another, and

induces the other person to share those thoughts and feelings irrespective of the vantage s/he occupies when encountering the art. Hence Tolstoy's choice of "infectiousness" as the measure of art's quality: art affects people in a pathological manner. Tolstoy's word choice here (заражать, "to infect," as a virus might) does not connote either a positive or negative valence for the aesthetic experience, but rather, is used to model the specific way art works upon a person. One does not voluntarily admit an infection into one's body, but rather, one's body is taken hold of by it, and the infection operates without any of one's input. So too does one react to art, with its transmission taking hold of one's mind like a pathogen claiming its host. The severity of the infection, writes Tolstoy, is proportional to the greatness of the art in question: "*The stronger the infection the better is the art*" (153; emphasis in original). In other words, the more one is gripped by the feelings and thoughts the art conveys, and the stronger the resultant sense of unity among artist and general audience, the better the work of art can be deemed. The artist's duty, then, is to craft a work that produces the feelings and thoughts necessary to infect his/her audience with a particular sensation or idea, and further, to unite his/her audience by virtue of their sharing those sensations or ideas.

From philosophical interest alone, Tolstoy's infection theory offers a fruitful paradigm for assessing autobiographical works. If the quality of a work of art is measured by how effectively it transmits thoughts and feelings, perhaps a similar rubric can be applied to all forms of autobiography if we consider the genre as an art form. When Tolstoy's measurement is applied to autobiography, the imperative of transmission applies to the thoughts and stories that constitute one's life – and the memories that constitute a life's most fundamental unit. Grappling with Tolstoy's dictum, then, the autobiographer's central question is how one can

infect an audience with one's memories. What is the optimal form in which a memory can be transmitted? Should the autobiographer try to compel his/her audience to feel what it is like to be the autobiographer as s/he experienced the memory or memories in question? Or is it more advantageous to pass on a memory without the baggage of the self who initially experienced it – a "pure memory," in other words? In effect, the question is whether the autobiography, in order to attain maximal artistic efficacy under Tolstoy's model, should be about the autobiographer, or the memories that s/he has picked up over the course of a life.

These questions are particularly relevant when discussing Tarkovsky's works, for, as Sean Martin observes, one of the main artistic goals Tarkovsky sought in his filmmaking practice was "a form of cinema based entirely on memory" (45). Compared to the typical proceedings of narrative film, in which various characters are shown interacting with the world around them, and where those actions and interactions constitute the bulk of what is depicted onscreen, Tarkovsky's cinema of memory meant that "What was to be portrayed on-screen would not be external actions, but the hero's thoughts, dreams and memories" (Martin 45). In adopting this internalized, introspective approach, Tarkovsky believed, as he writes in *Sculpting in Time*, that he would "achieve something highly significant: the expression, the portrayal, of the hero's individual personality, and the revelation of his interior world" (29). Appropriately enough, Tarkovsky had a literary antecedent in mind when devising his formulation of the cinema of memory, rendering the invocation of Tolstoy's theories all the more warranted. In the same section of *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky writes, "Somewhere here there is an echo of the image of the lyrical hero incarnate in literature, and of course in poetry; he is absent from view, but what he thinks, how he thinks, and what he thinks about

build up a graphic and clearly-defined picture of him" (29). Tarkovsky does not want the traditional embodied protagonist of film, but rather, he aims to capture something disembodied yet perceptible nonetheless, due to the thoughts and memories shown onscreen. Significantly, this line of thought prompted Tarkovsky to undertake an autobiographical film: "This [question of the lyrical hero]," he recalls in *Sculpting in Time*, "subsequently became the starting-point for *Mirror*" (29). Therefore, *Mirror* must be approached with these principles of memory and disembodiment in mind.

Coupled with Tolstoy's aesthetics – and the questions for autobiography that they raise – Tarkovsky's theory of the cinema of memory helps to reveal exactly what Tarkovsky is after in his autobiographical film *Mirror*. Like any good artist under Tolstoy's metric, Tarkovsky aims to infect his audience with thoughts and feelings, but given that Tarkovsky is pursuing an autobiographical project, the thoughts and feelings in question are his own. To this end, Robert Bird in *Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of Cinema* (2009) suggests that the principle of aesthetic infection is among Tarkovsky's overarching concerns: "Tarkovsky's films seek to become enmeshed in time by attaining memory and hope – in the spectator, by the mediation of the screen" (172). The desired goal of the memories gathered in *Mirror*, then, is to cross into the memories of those who view the film. In order to achieve optimal memory transmission, Tarkovsky separates his physical presence from the film altogether, creating a space where memory can operate unencumbered. The process is markedly similar to the one glimpsed in Frampton's *(nostalgia)*. Frampton's film alchemizes his own memories, separating them from their physical confines (body, brain, photographs) so that they might be considered in a purer form. Similarly, *Mirror* showcases a process of wearing

away the markers of embodiment in search of the cinema of memory. In this regard, *Mirror* is as much about its own process of creation as it is about any given memory. Maya Turovskaya contends that Tarkovsky "intended to create a film in the way that work of literature is created" (61), but the film resists such a reading – as do Tarkovsky's aesthetic theories, as I have previously suggested. The process behind *Mirror* is a sculptural one, where the excess material of the physical self is removed until pure memories remain. The end result is a self-less work of autobiography, consistent with Tolstoy's notion of infection.

One of the more noteworthy aspects of *Mirror*, as previously addressed, is its lack of linear narrative. Events in *Mirror*, like the narrated vignettes in *(nostalgia)*, follow one another and unfold without any strict sense of causality. While the film seems almost random in that regard, this absence of strict narrative logic is a vital aesthetic choice. As Peter King observes in "Memory and Exile: Time and Place in Tarkovsky's *Mirror*" (2008), Tarkovsky's unconventional narrative format enables the film to cross into the realm of pure memory. The non-linear narrative, King writes, "may make the film more difficult to understand, but it also gives it the quality of appearing to the viewer as a personal experience in itself" (68). Unencumbered by the narrative logic imposed by an external organizational schema, the events in *Mirror* – and the memories they stand for – come to the viewer as though they are the viewer's own experiences. In the absence of an imposing directorial presence dictating to the viewer what onscreen events should mean, every scene in *Mirror* is free to be taken in by the audience, and incorporated into their own life narrative. The memory is therefore freed from its original owner, and made communicable. The mode of presentation, then, is one of the steps by which the film enters into the cinema of memory, and allows for the transmission

of memory.

To this end, a major technique Tarkovsky employs is to detach memory from its association with the past, and turn it into a phenomenon experienced in the present time. According to Mikhail Yampolsky in "Тарковский: память и след" ("Tarkovsky: Memory and Trace," 2013), Tarkovsky understood that the faculty of memory is rooted in physical, sensory experience, and exploited this quality accordingly:

> То, что я помню, укоренено в реальность настолько, что может дать всходы на реальном поле. Эта укорененность, эта материальность, телесность памяти очень существенны для Тарковского, который старался преодолеть чисто ментальный образ прошлого. Когда-то Бергсон писал о том, что к нашему восприятию всегда примешиваются память и аффекты. А потому восприятие всегда укоренено в телесность, которая принципиальна для переживания времени как длительности. Тарковский был уверен, что сходный аффективный опыт позволяет зрителю и творцам буквально проникнуть в память другого и пережить время других.[18]

Yampolsky notes that, because "perception is always rooted in corporeality," Tarkovsky foregrounds the sensory details of past memories to "overcome a purely mental image of the past." By reconstructing the aspects of a given memory that tap into the corporeal – such as the rich textures for which his films are famous – Tarkovsky anchors a personal, private, and

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18 Roughly: "That which I remember is rooted in the presence of whatever can generate in the real world. This rooted-ness, this materiality, this physicality of memory is very important to Tarkovsky, who was trying to overcome a purely mental image of the past. Bergson once wrote that our perception is always mixed with memories and affects. And because perception is always rooted in corporeality, it is as fundamental to the experience of time as the duration. Tarkovsky was certain that a similar affective experience allows the viewer – and the artist [creator] – to enter into the memory of another time and the experiences of others."

otherwise intangible memory in the physical, where anyone else is free to perceive it as well. In so doing, Tarkovsky uncovers a viable strategy for sharing memories: to pass along one's memories to someone else, recreate for that person the physical circumstances that forged one's original memories in the first place.[19]

The other major step Tarkovsky takes in this direction is by revealing his own creative processes throughout the film. Much in the same manner as Frampton does in *(nostalgia)*, Tarkovsky allows the rough edges of his film to show, drawing attention to the mode of the film's creation. He thereby alerts his audiences to the significance of that process, and allows the process to form and inform the content of the resultant film. In effect, the film cannot be viewed without paying attention to its form, and the process that led to it. As Stuart Minnis observes in "Roughened Form of Time, Space, and Character in Tarkovsky's *Mirror*" (2008), the film resists a content-based reading. Commenting on the film's "difficulty," Minnis finds that

> . . . *The Mirror* incorporates a number of defamiliarizing devices found in Tarkovsky's previous films and employs them with staggering frequency. *The Mirror* is, in this sense, the culmination of his previous tendencies toward roughened form in the presentation of diegetic time, space, and character. (243)

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19 Multiple accounts of *Mirror*'s reception suggest that Tarkovsky's experiment succeeded. Although Soviet authorities, displeased with the film's seeming individualism and narcissism, attempted to bury it by limiting its screenings and suppressing its reviews (Synessios 116), *Mirror* nonetheless found a sympathetic audience – sometimes even among its censors. Natasha Synessios, in her 2001 monograph on the film, reports that "People of all backgrounds who saw the film sent him countless letters – ecstatic, confessional, and grateful for his art" (3). Significantly, Synessios observes, one of *Mirror*'s most praised aspects was how it connected to its viewers: "The sympathetic ones spoke of the film as an event, as an act, as a direct conversation with the viewer, as an awakening. And the refrain, echoing through all the letters, was 'this is a film about me'" (3). One member of Goskino's otherwise hostile standards committee "even conceded that [*Mirror*] was a film about his own thoughts and memories" (115).

Where conventional narrative films might provide straightforward renderings of time (moving it in a linear, forward fashion), or space (keeping boundaries and perspectives sharply defined), or character (featuring players with consistent presence or persona), Tarkovsky "roughens" all of these aspects of his film, making them less coherent and more resistant to predetermined meaning. As a consequence, this technique prevents audiences from anchoring themselves in familiarity and convention. One cannot cling to the content of *Mirror* as the primary basis for analyzing it. Minnis, therefore, suggests a different approach: "*The Mirror* is a spectacular example of how the form/content dichotomy so easily breaks down. This is a film in which one can clearly see the reliance of the content on the form itself. The two are interwoven and cannot be separated" (250). The form of the film will allow us to more readily apprehend its meaning. In Tarkovsky's case, the form of *Mirror* is inextricably linked to the process of its creation.

Where Frampton begins *(nostalgia)* with an unedited sound check, showing a film in the process of being made and dispelling the possibility of viewing the film passively, Tarkovsky opens *Mirror* with a shot of a boy attempting to activate a television set. The recalcitrant appliance occupies the center of the frame, and the camera's angle is only a few degrees

Figure 15: The first shot of *Зеркало*.

shy of peering directly into the television's screen. The first image in the film, then, is one of

a device that conveys images, and its screen is the focal point of the composition. Tarkovsky thus emphasizes the act of viewing, and ensures his audiences are cognizant of the viewing process. The next sequence depicts the television program that the boy in the opening shot is watching. The scene shows an interaction between a young man suffering from a noticeable stutter, and a professional who seeks to cure him of it. As the professional guides the young man through several exercises and mind games to rid him of his speech impediment, sharp

Figure 16: Note the microphone shadow in the upper left.

shadows crawl across the gray wall behind them. A second glance reveals that the shadows belong to the audio and visual equipment behind the camera. Under normal circumstances, their appearance would constitute a production blunder – by having equipment appear inside the shot, the illusion of an inviolate diegetic world is contaminated, and the content of the frame upstaged. In this instance, however, the appearance of the equipment shadows plays an important role in the film's interpretation. The moment the shadows appear, the machinery of visual production is once more exposed, as it was when the television was made a focal point. As a result, *Mirror* establishes itself as a film that does not abide by classical film rules. Between the image of the television, and the tools of its production in the background of the television program, Tarkovsky, like Frampton, forces his audience to think about the means of production and the apparatus behind the images on screen. Then, to eliminate any

lingering possibility of a self-contained diegesis, the stuttering boy concludes the scene by looking directly into the camera before delivering his final line, "I can speak." He breaks the fourth wall in that instance, and, in so doing, eliminates the division between audience and film that most narrative features strive to construct. The opening scenes of *Mirror*, then, present a film whose primary concern is its own process of creation, and whose audience has a role to play in giving it meaning.

Tarkovsky's process in *Mirror* is borne out through the rest of the film. Over the course of its many dreamlike sequences, the film establishes a concern with materials – both the materials of physical existence, and time when considered as a material. After introducing the materials the film will be working with, *Mirror* sets about pulling them away, and using their absence to reveal the sculpture Tarkovsky is truly after. Following the stutterer sequence, the film pursues a scene in which a young mother and her

Figure 17: The four classical elements. Clockwise from top-left: Water, Fire, Earth, and Air

two children, living in a dacha in the wilderness, await the return of the husband/father. Two aspects of this portion of *Mirror* reveal the film's central concerns. First, the sequence manages to incorporate all four of the classical elements – the materials from which, according to ancient and alchemical philosophy, the entire universe is fashioned. The dacha

scenes include prevalent images of earth through the dirt exteriors of the dacha, water by means of heavy rain, wind as it rifles through the fields in the distance, and fire as it consumes a neighbor's barn. The inclusion of these elements fulfills several functions. First, their presence and prevalence invites the audience to consider the constituent elements of their own lives. The dacha scenes appear to correspond to childhood memories, and consequently, the film urges viewers to think about how their own childhoods contributed to shaping their lives. The childhood years are formative, after all, and the incipient stages of the film are thus indicative of the formation of a larger concern. The presence of childhood here is an invitation to remember, and a reminder that memory is among the film's foremost concerns. Secondly, the four classical elements expose the immense scope of Tarkovsky's project in *Mirror*. He is not toying with mere clay or wood or marble; rather, the stuff of the whole universe is his material of choice. Coupled with the diegetic breakdown of the stutterer scene, Tarkovsky's hint at the breadth of his project once again incorporates the audience. It is not a private filmic universe Tarkovsky is sculpting, but rather, the world that he and his audience share. Whatever he is making out of it, then, has immediate relevance to his viewers, too. At the same time, the classical elements fulfill the additional function of allowing Tarkovsky to work with things *beyond* the material. While his process remains anchored in the material, as all sculpture must, Tarkovsky's choice of material lets him transcend the physical, and enter the metaphysical. In other words, it lets his material art leap from the physical realm to the spiritual realm. Tarkovsky's chosen materials are those that crafted all the universe, and the universe, by definition, is the container which includes both the material and immaterial aspects of existence. The four classical elements therefore reveal

that Tarkovsky is using material means to reach immaterial results. If the elements can produce immaterial phenomena in and of themselves, then Tarkovsky's intervention in *Mirror* will channel them toward a specific metaphysical end.

Here the second aspect of the dacha scenes – one that recurs throughout the rest of the film, as well – is instructive. When Tarkovsky is not including the four classical elements in his crucible of childhood, his camera lingers over empty rooms and vacant spaces. In this early scene, there are prolonged shots of rooms in the dacha after its inhabitants have gone elsewhere, offering an extended view of space without the presence of the human body. Paul Shrader, in his study *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (1972), provides a useful heuristic for

Figure 18: The first empty room, the dacha.

thinking about what these unoccupied spaces might mean. Shrader examines several case studies of transcendental artists – that is, artists who try to express the spiritual, which cannot be perceived through the senses, in a manner that is intelligible to the senses – and finds that these artists tend to share a similar repertoire of techniques to achieve this end. Among their favorite tactics, Shrader counts the following:

Transcendental style *stylizes* reality by eliminating (or nearly eliminating) those elements which are primarily expressive of human experience, thereby robbing the conventional interpretations of reality of their relevance and

148

power. Transcendental style, like the mass, transforms experience into a

repeatable ritual which can be repeatedly transcended. (11)

Tarkovsky's empty room performs a function comparable to what Shrader observes in other transcendental films. An empty room "eliminates . . . those elements which are primarily expressive of human experience" in film, for it removes the actors, the dialogue, and other prominent signposts for interpretation from the scene. Those elements, in their absence, become powerless; the acting, when it is not there, cannot be relied on to tell us what we should be thinking about the empty space before us. The empty room, then, prompts us to think about what *is not there* in the scene, and to consider what that absence might signify. Since Tarkovsky repeatedly exposes his audience to prolonged encounters with empty rooms throughout the film, he engages in the "repeatable ritual" Shrader highlights, which serves the same purpose as a mass: to move from the concrete and the physical to the abstract, immaterial, and metaphysical.[20]

The question, then, is what kind of immaterial concept Tarkovsky tries to convey through his frequent use of empty rooms. As Vlada Petrić explains in the essay, "Tarkovsky's Dream Imagery" (1990), Tarkovsky's method of presenting the empty rooms helps to illuminate why they are shown in the first place. Each of the empty room scenes features a camera that crawls slowly throughout the chamber, allowing ample time for the viewer to scan and scrutinize the room's contents. "Whenever the motion on Tarkovsky's screen is decelerated," Petrić writes, "the action acquires a strong emotional impact, especially in nostalgic recollections, nightmares, and fantasies" (30). The deceleration of the camera in the

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20 The knowledge that Tarkovsky admired Bresson – one of the filmmakers Shrader uses as a case study, and who is thus one of the practitioners of the technique outlines above – suggests that Tarkovsky is attuned to Bresson's own cinematic strategies, methods and practices. Consequently, when Tarkovsky's lens reveals a vacant space, it is probable that something metaphysical is occurring.

empty rooms, then, is designed to raise viewers' sensitivity to what they see on the screen. Yet Tarkovsky pursues this heightened awareness with a particular end in mind. According to Petrić, the goal is to imbue the otherwise neglected background objects with meaning. Comparing Tarkovsky's meandering camera to the lens of Jean-Luc Godard, Petrić notes:

> The function of Godard's camera movement is to intensify the physical action
>
> taking place in front of the camera, for ideological purposes, while
>
> Tarkovsky's is to penetrate the environmental facts, based on the director's
>
> belief that the camera is capable of unearthing the hidden significance of the
>
> material world. (29)

Tarkovsky's camera expects to find something beneath – and beyond – the physical reality it encounters. By lingering over an object or environment for an extended period, "the camera is an explorer rather than an observer" (Petrić 32). Instead of passively taking in the environment, the camera actively dissects the thing in its sights, allowing its subject to attain a register of meaning beyond the mere fact of its existence. As Petrić contends, "The cognitive ambiguity of Tarkovsky's shots is meant to shift the viewer's attention from the representational to the transcendental meaning of the recorded event" (32-3). By focusing its attention on something that would otherwise be passed over, Tarkovsky's camera compels its audience to think of the thing before them – the "recorded event" – as more than a mere background item that the lens happened to catch. Petrić observes that this results in the type of memory transmission Tarkovsky seeks to induce: "Encouraged to search for something beyond the image as an *analog* of reality, allowed to ponder upon the presented events/objects, the viewers engage in their own reflection of what they perceive on the

screen" (29). The memory presented onscreen is thus pried from Tarkovsky, and given over to the viewers. The empty rooms, then, are vessels for the transmission of memory and meaning, indicating the otherwise imperceptible significance behind material presences. The empty rooms are spaces through which something can move – or through which something already has moved – and therefore prompt viewers to consider both what has been there, and what could be. They are spaces of potential, whose potential is entirely a consequence of what cannot be seen inside them.

At the same time, the empty rooms provide Tarkovsky a means of emphasizing the material aspects of time – that is, they provide a physical means of apprehending time in order to help viewers conceive of time as a material that can be sculpted. The rooms, and the unique way Tarkovsky treats them, are the means by which he turns time into a material. Robert Bird notes that Tarkovsky referred to the sets of *Mirror* as "an apartment in which time itself lived" (171), indicating that the set design was intended to capture time and make it known to the viewer. Similarly, Tarkovsky's camerawork assists in the process that the film's sets begin. Petrić notes that Tarkovsky's slow takes, in their absence of cuts, give time a presence in his works that is otherwise lacking in other films:

> Instead of controlling the viewer's attention by cutting from one image to the
>
> other, Tarkovsky emphasizes the temporal nature of reality, by means of which
>
> he transcends the commonplace signification of objects in order to reach
>
> something that the naked eye neglects or is unaccustomed to perceiving. (28)

By maintaining the duration of a shot for as long as possible, Tarkovsky allows time to enter the frame. This approach carries several noteworthy consequences. Bird surmises that

Tarkovsky's "preference for a single shot [during longer scenes] was to create a concrete spatial and narrative matrix within which the stochastic flow of time could interfere at once randomly and meaningfully" (171). Introducing more time into a given shot multiplies the opportunities for time to make itself known, and furnishes it a material presence to aid in its recognition. Shots are lengthy enough that his audience notices their extreme length, and therefore come to consider time as an element of the composition any given shot. Repeated cutting – a practice common in other films – would undermine this revelatory effect, or negate it entirely, for it would reduce time to imperceptible durations. Further, cutting would likely run antithetical to Tarkovsky's autobiographical project. Alfred Hitchcock once observed that "Drama is life with the dull bits cut out" (Robinson, 1960), indicating that the cut is the fundamental unit of dramatic structure. Since Tarkovsky's concern in *Mirror* is not to contrive drama, but to exhibit life without the baggage of the self, it does not follow that cuts would provide the best route toward that end. Besides revealing the presence of time, the incorporation of time in Tarkovsky's extended shots serves an additional function: it lends further gravity to the other elements of the composition. By virtue of being granted more screen time before the viewer, whatever is captured in one of Tarkovsky's long shots is given more opportunities to come under scrutiny, and receive more attention as a consequence. Petrić indicates that this increased exposure is what allows Tarkovsky's work to attain transcendence. Therefore, time and transcendence are linked: when brought to focus on a given object or location, time grants the object of its attention a meaning beyond its physical presence.

Simultaneously, Tarkovsky's technique reveals something about reality that we might

152

have known all along, but have not been able to articulate: that time saturates the world around us, and indeed could be considered the material from which the world is made. When Petrić says Tarkovsky "emphasizes the temporal nature of reality," he indicates how

Figure 19: The decaying room as the ceiling plaster falls.

Tarkovsky stresses that time is an element that exists over and above his films. Time is out there occurring in the world at large, making and unmaking the world, independent of Tarkovsky's camera. Because of that ubiquity, any film captures time in some way, and any film is, at bottom, an attempt to manipulate time. From this principle, Tarkovsky wants us to think of time as a material, and view his film as a sculpture made from it. One aspect of *Mirror* that helps to illustrate Tarkovsky's method in this regard is the scene with the decaying room. Rendered in black and white, the shot depicts an empty room whose ceilings and walls degrade before the camera's lens in slow motion. Water falls from above and trickles down the walls, doubling the downward motion that the collapsing room brings to the frame. In this instance, Tarkovsky links time and materiality, encouraging his viewers to think of time as a material. The diegesis features a twofold attention to time's passage, illuminating time as the primary element of the composition. First, the decaying room, so thoroughly deteriorated that it collapses beneath its own weight, brings time to mind in and of itself. Decay and deterioration are synonymous with the passage of the time, and viewers cannot help but look

153

upon Tarkovsky's decaying room without sensing that time hangs heavily over the scene. Second, the slow speed at which the visuals unfold forces audiences to think about time actively. If the collapsing ceiling were to fall at its expected pace, the focus of the scene would become the action of falling, for it would be the most unusual – and therefore the most eye-catching – part of the diegesis. Tarkovsky, however, arrests its motion; as a result, the unexpected sight of a falling ceiling becomes of lesser interest than the diminished velocity of its plunge. Since time is out of joint in this instance, it is once more emphasized as the focal point of the scene. In the same moment, time is given a physical dimension, so that it can be conceived of as a manipulable material. The collapsing room provides a visual analogue for the process of capturing time: using a commonplace, visible item (in this case, ceiling plaster) to depict something invisible, and depicting this invisible phenomenon via an image of removal. The falling ceiling gives the sense of inferior material being stripped away from something sturdier, something *better*. The ceiling may fall, but other parts of the room still stand; there is something that endures after the ceiling's collapse. Since the ceiling has been linked to time already, it therefore invites the thought that time itself can be divided between the useful and the extraneous, and further, that these two groupings can be separated from one another.

Tarkovsky's pursuit of a transcendent autobiographical film in *Mirror* – that is, an autobiography that can show memories beyond the physical self, and search out what pure memory might look like – relies on two interconnected techniques that are necessary and sufficient conditions for one another. To introduce transcendence into his film, Tarkovsky must allow time to saturate each shot. By incorporating time in this capacity, Tarkovsky

154

posits that there is a material dimension to time. Because time has a material aspect, any manipulation of time in film is a fundamentally sculptural process. Given these inseparable propositions, Tarkovsky's sculptural approach to autobiographical film turns out to be the only method that yields a transcendent autobiography – and therefore, the only method that can create an autobiography that remains concurrent with Tarkovsky's formulation of great, moral art.

While Tarkovsky elevates sculpture as the ideal approach to autobiographical filmmaking in *Mirror*, he also provides a brief glimpse at a framework that does not perform nearly as well, dismissing self-portraiture as a viable autobiographical form. Like Frampton in *(nostalgia)*, Tarkovsky is in dialogue with other art forms throughout *Mirror* – and, like Frampton, finds them similarly lacking in autobiographical potential. Tarkovsky's emphasis, however, is on painting. In one of the film's later episodes, audiences witness the mother and

Figure 20: Vermeer's painting on the far right; two shots of the neighbor on the left.

her young son visiting a neighboring dacha – although "neighboring" is a relative term, as the dialogue in the scene reveals they have traveled several miles from their home to reach their destination. Living in this other dacha is a considerably wealthier neighbor, and the mother – starving for want of food and money – has come sell the neighbor her own jewelry. It is not

an easy thing for the mother to do, for her own dignity is at stake, and her efforts at thoughtful conversation throughout the scene indicate her desire not to lower herself. The neighbor eventually grants the mother's request, but not before subjecting the mother to a humiliating showcase of the neighbor's greater fortunes, flaunting her garments and even her own son as indicators of the superior quality of her life. The worst part of the ordeal comes when the neighbor invites the mother and son to stay for dinner, but confesses that the early stages of her pregnancy make her too ill to slaughter a chicken for their supper. As a result, the mother must slaughter the bird herself – while the neighbor watches – before they can eat. The mother is thus made to behave like a servant, forced to perform an act of brutality that is normally done without onlookers, and as a result, she cannot leave the dacha with her pride and dignity intact. What makes this episode especially significant, however, is that the neighbor is a virtual doppelgänger of Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. The neighbor even adopts the same pose as the woman in Vermeer's painting at one point. The neighbor, then, becomes a stand-in for the promise and limitations of portraiture as an autobiographical mode. While the neighbor originally appears like some resplendent, bountiful patroness, her luster quickly fades. She does eventually provide what is asked of her, but not before demonstrating her shallow preoccupations with surface appearances, and her callous self-absorption. Indeed, for the neighbor – as with all portraits – surface appearances are as deep as one can go. Attempts to delve any deeper, as the mother tries with her son, end in repulsion or disappointment. Thus Tarkovsky demonstrates the inadequacy of painting for autobiographical projects. His concern is with the deeper aspects of memory – what lies beyond the remembered image – and painting proves wholly inadequate for that task.

Painting does have its virtues, as does the neighbor: both will provide some kind of nourishment to those who ask it of them. However, there are certain things they cannot do, and if one is not prepared for those limitations, one will suffer as a result. The mother's humiliation in the scene with the neighbor attests to the consequences of demanding – or expecting – too much from a source that simply cannot meet her needs.

In contrast, the film demonstrates that Tarkovsky's sculptural approach – as made apparent through the frequent explorations of empty rooms – has a salubrious, elevating effect. The penultimate empty room shot concludes as the camera creeps up on a mirror (1:36:33 on the Kino DVD). At first, no image appears in the mirror, and the audience sees only an empty frame of glass. Then the reflection of a boy appears in the mirror's frame. For a moment, he observes his own reflection. After considering himself briefly, the reflected boy takes a drink of milk. Immediately afterward, rays of light, as if from the sun freeing itself from behind a cloud, fall on the boy. The staging of this sequence reveals the core of Tarkovsky's project in *Mirror*. First, the scene's

Figure 21: The final mirror sequence. The camera approaches a mirror. The boy appears. The boy drinks milk. Light fills the frame.

location and execution in one of Tarkovsky's beloved empty rooms brings to bear all the machinery of transcendence from Petrić's analysis: it transports us into a place of transcendent meaning, where the markers of physical embodiment have been cast aside in favor of a space of immaterial significance, and where the conspicuous presence of time via the extended shot length encourage us to view everything before the lens in a transcendent register. Second, the initial appearance of the mirror plays a trick on the film's viewers that urges them to think of themselves in transcendental terms. The expectation when approaching a mirror is that it will display one's reflection as soon as one enters the proper plane for the glass to catch it. The camera's movements in this scene indicate that it is, indeed, drawing viewers closer to the locus of reflection. Yet it foils the audience's expectations, for once we are drawn within viewing distance of the mirror, we do not see our faces in it. Of course, it is logistically impossible for the film to display the faces of its viewers in the mirror, but even so, Tarkovsky has performed a clever metaphysical move. Tarkovsky does indeed present his viewers with a view of themselves, but it happens that their physical bodies are not the selves he presents to them. By dashing the momentary expectation of witnessing one's own physical presence in the mirror's frame, Tarkovsky forces his audiences to think of themselves, however briefly, as being without a physical component – to imagine an aspect of themselves that persists beyond their physicality, and cannot be seen within a mirror's glass. For it is not the audience that ceases to exist when the mirror is approached, but rather, their reflected image; they remain fully cognizant of their own selfhood, but are without the means of validating their physicality. Tarkovsky thus propels his viewers into thinking about their transcendent selves, and to conceive of a form of

158

identity over and above their embodiment.

The rest of the sequence reassures audiences of the benefits of Tarkovsky's disembodying mirror exercise. While the viewers contemplate themselves without bodies, a physical presence suddenly appears in the mirror. We do not see the boy approach the mirror; we only glimpse the abrupt arrival of his reflection within the mirror's frame. Thus, we see a self "materialize" out of nothingness – a visual indicator of transcendent meaning, of a self beyond the physical. We witness the boy inspect himself, engaging, in all possible senses, in an act of "self-reflection." Then the boy drinks milk, and light floods him. These latter two details strip the boy's viewing of himself of any negative connotations. Rather than being a vain, narcissistic act, the process of self-reflection is deemed to be as healthful and nurturing as the milk the boy drinks by virtue of the two actions (self-reflection and drinking milk) occurring in the same instant. To ensure that viewers are not thinking of health in solely physical terms – as the nutritional connotations of milk might do – the radiant light brings us back to the transcendent. Light induces illumination of the physical environ, and connotes illumination of the mind and spirit. In this regard, then, the wash of light as the boy finishes his drink indicates some kind of revelation, and grants it immaterial significance. When done properly, self-reflection, by Tarkovsky's metric, is as good for the body as it is for the soul. Further, it reveals aspects of the self – the disembodied, the immaterial, the spiritual – that otherwise remain imperceptible to our faculties. Sean Martin reports that one critic once called *Mirror* "the nearest anyone had come to filming the soul" (120), and indeed, Tarkovsky's technique reveals something above and beyond the physical self. Even the thoroughly embodied – and often vain – act of looking into a mirror becomes in Tarkovsky's

hands a way to think about the self one's body merely contains.

In the end, Tarkovsky links this process of self-discovery to a sculptural endeavor. Besides including time and its sculptural connotations as a crucial, transformative ingredient in his transcendental method, he pulls his audiences away from the physical anchors of memory, relegating the material indicators of the immaterial to the status of dross – material to be cast aside once the work of self-realization is complete. Lest the notion of the mirror – a physical object that aids in reflecting – become too important, Tarkovsky strays away from making the object the focus of his film. Documents and interviews regarding Tarkovsky's choice of title have reported that he chose the name for his film simply because he liked how the orthography looked in print: ЗЕРКАЛО (Redwood 89). His selection had little to do with the definition of the word, and more with the aesthetics of its appearance. It is not a wise scholarly move, then, to focus upon the mirrors in the film as being its lynchpins. The mirrors are like every other object in the film, valuable insofar as they have a transcendent meaning – and in the case of *Mirror*, the transcendent meaning of the mirror has more to do with what it enables than with the item itself. Similarly, by the end of the film, Tarkovsky refuses to allow his audiences to stay connected to empty rooms. Although they have been vital to the process of self-discovery throughout the film, the empty rooms must not be clung to for their own sake, and must be left behind once they have served their function.

To this end, the film's final sequence depicts one last empty room: the ruins of the dacha from the first half of the film. When we see it for the final time, the dacha looks scarcely recognizable. It has been divested of all its furniture, and has neither walls nor ceiling. All that remains is the foundation of the house, indicated by a square hollow in the

160

sodden earth, and few stray logs denoting its boundaries. It is as if the collapse of the room depicted in the slow, black-and-white scene from earlier has reached its logical conclusion. What might this visual mean? One possibility is that the ruined dacha is Tarkovsky's take on the "chronotope," a concept from Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981). Joining the Greek words *chronos* (time) and *topos* (place), Bakhtin formulates the chronotope as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are expressed in literature" (84). In other words, a chronotope is a locus that is as much a time as a place; it is a site where time is given a physical presence. If an artist deploys the

Figure 22: The dacha in ruins.

chronotope correctly, time and space effectively merge: "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 84). While the chronotope provides a physical means of apprehending time, it also serves as a material confine for memory, lading its visible attributes with the various components of memory: time, plot, and history. The chronotope can therefore be thought of as a place where memory fuses with space, and where memory can be seen as a physical locus. Tarkovsky's fascination with space – and empty space – throughout the film can thus be considered in chronotopic terms. Each location in the film has been a chronotope, producing a physical embodiment of time and memory. The last locus, however, is one that is in the process of falling apart, and is not so much "thickening"

161

or "taking on flesh" as it is doing quite the opposite. In this last scene, then, Tarkovsky is breaking apart the chronotope. In the process, he is performing an elaborate rhetorical move. Throughout the film, space and memory have been coterminous entities by necessity, as Tarkovsky's transcendental approach to memory demands that he address it in spatial terms – at least at the outset. After introducing the transcendental aspects of memory, however, the need for the physical item that has enabled the leap to the transcendent subsides. By the end of the film, Tarkovsky has brought his audiences into the transcendent register, obviating the need for the chronotopes that brought them there. As Peter King concludes in "Memory and Exile," the film distances space and memory as its final flourish: "Places, so [to] speak, just are, and much of their meaning derives from their simple presence. What *Mirror* shows is that we can have this place regardless of (or perhaps even because of) any rationality and any remaining concrete physical connection" (77). Places are valuable insofar as they have meanings ascribed to them, and these meanings depend on the memories associated with those places. By stripping away the place where those meanings reside, Tarkovsky performs the ultimate step of his sculptural process: the extraneous material anchor that binds memories to the physical plane is removed, leaving only the memories. The transcendent register that the film has cultivated is therefore preserved, and Tarkovsky comes away with the cinema of pure memory that he has pursued all along. Maya Turovskaya comments that, for people of Russian descent of her generation, "the film also holds the elusive charm of recognition; since we share so many of the protagonist's childhood memories, it could just as well have been called 'We Remember'" (65). Thus, there is at least one case study indicating that Tarkovsky's mission was successful, spreading a memory from one person to another in a

162

way that gives the memories to another person.

The legacy of *Mirror*, then, is both the sculptural process of Tarkovsky's autobiographical filmmaking, and the results it affords. The film has no "I" through which its autobiographical content is conveyed, sidestepping the complications a self introduces into aesthetic experience. The film is one that regularly raises questions of process and artifice, from the rough edges of the first images of the television screen and the stutterer, to the dialogue with painting that occurs in the scene with the wealthy neighbor. The film introduces and explicates its own creative processes – all of which are shown to be sculptural in theory and in practice – via the many scenes of empty rooms, and gradually reveals and refines the purpose behind them in each successive empty room that the audience beholds. At the film's close, Tarkovsky has delivered pure memories to his viewers, unfettered by excess material – in this case, the physical anchors of space that prevented them from being completely immaterial. Tarkovsky in *Mirror* thus produces an autobiography without a self, a soul without a body, and a collection of memories that are more communicable than any other technique could make them. This, in accordance with Tarkovsky's aesthetics, is what the morally proper autobiographical work should be.

D. The Body as Obstacle: *Tempo di viaggio*

Even though Tarkovsky's other autobiographical film, *Tempo di viaggio*, has clear autobiographical content, few critics have approached it as an autobiography – if they have bothered to approach it at all. Some, like Susan Doll in her introduction to the film's Facets Video DVD release, have spoken of what happens in the film, but have not provided

anything approximating a critical reading. As Doll writes:

> *Voyage in Time* chronicles the making of *Nostalghia*, the penultimate film of
> famed Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky. His partner and collaborator on the
> project was respected Italian screenwriter Tonino Guerra. The film follows
> these two highly creative individuals as they scout locations for *Nostalghia* in
> 1982, but it also focuses on their illuminating conversations about life and art.
> (3)

Similarly, the critical conversation surrounding the documentary within English-language criticism appears to be one of confusion or disparagement. For while it is easy to state what happens in the film, it is substantially more difficult to say what the film is *about*. Critics either do not know what to make of the film, or choose to dismiss it as a footnote to *Nostalghia*. For instance, despite her accurate summation of the film's content, Doll is less capable of offering a critical interpretation – at her most illuminating, she labels *Tempo di viaggio* "a poignant portrait of uncertainty" (4), or simply calls it an "unusual documentary" (5), neither of which offer any attempt at a definitive reading. Alternately, James Macgillivray, writing on Tarkovsky's use of the *Madonna del Parto* in *Nostalghia* and *Tempo di viaggio*, notes that the documentary "as a stage in the technical planning of *Nostalghia*'s artistic image, is almost wholly discarded by the director [because only two of the sets in the film are kept, the 'Russian field' in the first shot and Bagno Vignoni]; it is a negative image" (2,8). For Macgillivray, *Tempo di viaggio* is simply a phase in the genesis of *Nostalghia*, useful insofar as it enables commentary on the later film, rather than being an object of interest in itself. In a similar vein as Macgillivray, film scholar Donato Totaro, although he

calls *Tempo di viaggio* "quirky but fascinating" (1), has little praise for the film or analysis of its content, claiming only that the film "sets a common pattern for the better future Tarkovsky documentaries: they either feature or are made by a fellow filmmaker, in the case of *Voyage in Time* a co-worker, but also colleague, friend, and/or admirer" (1). Thus, for Donato, the film serves as a curiosity – and an inferior precursor to later documentaries by other directors. Even Vida T. Johnson and Graham Petrie, in their study *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue*, limit *Tempo di viaggio* to being "a kind of preliminary sketch for *Nostalghia*" (157), noting that the film's "most impressive sequence" occurs when "*Nostalghia*'s fluctuations between Italy and Russia are anticipated in the closing shots with their photos of the Russian countryside and a Russian folk song on the soundtrack" (157). Nowhere does this suggest that *Tempo di viaggio* has any intrinsic value. Some criticism of the film in the French language, while less dismissive than its English counterparts, still betrays a reluctance to enshrine *Tempo di viaggio* among Tarkovsky's major works. Jean-Michel Frodon, for instance, in a largely positive 2011 assessment of a Tarkovsky archive, characterizes the film as

> une sorte de journal filmé pendant un voyage de repérage avec le scénariste de *Nostalghia*, Tonino Guerra, qui est surtout un beau dialogue entre les deux artistes, *Tempo di viaggio*. C'est très utile et judicieux. Il faut bien dire que cela fait pâle figure, ou plutôt n'appartient pas au même registre, à la même dimension.

Frodon observes that the film functions something like a diary, hinting that the film ought to be considered within an autobiographical context. Rather than pursue this flash of genre

insight further, Frodon instead packages the film as a "useful and sensible" dialogue between two filmmakers that "pales [in comparison]" or "is not the same register, the same size" as Tarkovsky's other works. (Frodon expands upon his "size" metaphor when he admiringly terms Tarkovsky's other films "dragons, immenses et fascinants," in light of their epic scale, runtime, and production quality.) While advancing a more positive reading than many an English-language critic, Frodon nonetheless relegates *Tempo di viaggio* to secondary status among Tarkovsky's film output.

Nor does the scant criticism out of Russia do justice to *Tempo di viaggio*. Dmitry Salynsky, in *Киногерменевтика Тарковского* (*Tarkovsky's Film-Hermeneutics*, 2010), argues that the film is an airing of grievances for Tarkovsky, a somewhat petty account of the slights and irritations incurred while scouting locations for *Nostalghia*. Salynsky notes:

> Все это выглядит довольно тягостно и нелепо, раздражающе, и, мне кажется, Тарковскому важно было вызвать у зрителя как раз подобное раздражение. Ведь эта сцена, конечно, вставлена в фильм не случайно. Режиссеру было важно показать именно отказ и бестолковость, бессмысленность этого отказа.[21]

Rebuffed on one side by his Soviet overseers, and seeing his set design ideas rejected by local Italian bureaucrats with no understanding of his art, one of Tarkovsky's aims in Salynsky's reading of *Tempo di viaggio* is to make his audience share his indignation.

The commentary of these critics hints that *Tempo di viaggio* cannot be read as a standalone film. Perhaps this is because *Tempo di viaggio* is indecipherable on its own;

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21 Roughly: "It all looks pretty ridiculous and painful, even annoying, and, it seems to me, that it was important to Tarkovsky to cause the viewer the same irritation. That [such] scene[s] are inserted into the film, of course, is not accidental. It was important to the director to show the fault, stupidity, and senselessness behind his failures."

perhaps because its quality does not match Tarkovsky's normal output; perhaps because other directors document Tarkovsky more effectively than Tarkovsky depicts himself; or perhaps it is because film scholars would much rather discuss *Nostalghia* instead of this particular documentary. I propose that *Tempo di viaggio* can be – and should be – interpreted as a work of autobiography, intelligible as a standalone film, but enriched via a juxtaposition with *Mirror*. Additionally, I argue that *Tempo di viaggio* should be considered an important contribution to Tarkovsky's oeuvre. Sean Martin hints that *Tempo di viaggio* "is not so much a film about the early stages of making [*Nostalghia*], but a film about art as daily life" (187), yet his intuition about the film halts then and there as he begins to discuss some of Tarkovsky's other "minor" works. Still, that intuition provides a good way to begin thinking about the film: as a meditation on art, life, and how the two connect. Perhaps moreso than *Mirror*, *Tempo di viaggio* expresses Tarkovsky's notions of the nature of art: that a given work of art resists distillation down to its constituent parts; that these constituent parts cannot function on their own, and require some kind of creative sensibility or philosophical motive to synthesize them into a meaningful whole; that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; that the figure who assembles the whole is far less important than the work s/he produces. As a consequence of these beliefs, *Tempo di viaggio* is an exercise in self-erasure, wherein Tarkovsky attempts to separate himself from his work lest his person take on greater importance than the art he has produced. Ultimately, *Tempo di viaggio* serves as a companion piece to *Mirror*, as an anti-autobiography that elides Tarkovsky in favor of his works, and as a compelling rebuttal to any critic who would suggest that Tarkovsky's films amount to a style rather than a philosophy.

167

The project may face some skepticism from the outset on the grounds that one cannot consider *Tempo di viaggio* a strictly "Tarkovskian" film. Unlike his seven major cinematic works, Tarkovsky is not listed as the sole director of *Tempo di viaggio* – he shares that credit with Tonino Guerra. Therefore, it can be tempting to aim praise or scorn for the film in Guerra's vicinity, diluting or downplaying the influence that Tarkovsky had on the film's production. A Radiotelevisione Italiana interview with Guerra, however, suggests that Tarkovsky was the main creative force behind *Tempo di viaggio*, with Guerra adopting a secondary role. When asked how the idea for *Tempo di viaggio* came about, Guerra replies:

> Already, for quite some time, I and my wife [*sic*] had been trying to find a
> solution to get Tarkovsky out of the Soviet Union. The only way that seemed
> likely to work was to insist on the fact that he needed to make an "Italian
> journey," like every great Russian artist had, but also, for that matter, like the
> French or German artists had in the past. After a great deal of insistence, the
> Soviet authorities finally gave him permission to leave on the understanding
> that he was preparing a film. *Voyage in Time is a work totally done by*
> *Tarkovsky*, while I acted as a kind of witness and provocation; it was the
> itinerary for something we were searching for. (5-6; emphasis mine)

According to the co-director himself, then, Guerra's participation in the film hardly indicates major directorial control in comparison to the influence Tarkovsky exerted upon it. Guerra's invaluable support included surmounting the bureaucratic obstacles posed by the Soviet government, conquering the logistical difficulties of bringing Tarkovsky to Italy, and serving as a dialogue partner to help coax the film out of Tarkovsky. It would be a disservice to

Guerra to downplay his contributions to *Tempo di viaggio*. Yet none of these efforts are reminiscent of the roles that a conventional director plays, much less an auteur whose influence would pervade the film he or she creates. Those controlling roles, according to Guerra, were given to Tarkovsky, resulting in a work "totally done" by the Russian master. Therefore, while Guerra also occupies the director's seat in *Tempo di viaggio*, I would claim that the film can nonetheless be interpreted as a work worth crediting primarily to Tarkovsky. While Guerra enabled the film to become a reality, and enabled Tarkovsky to make the documentary, his involvement more closely resembles the watchful ministrations of a devoted producer, rather than the assiduous directorial decisions of an auteur. Thus the work, and the content thereof, belong more to Tarkovsky than to Guerra. I propose, then, that we consider *Tempo di viaggio* a Tarkovsky film, and that we treat it with the same auteurist sensibilities that we bring to his other films, for Tarkovsky's hands shaped this documentary as surely as they molded his major works.

Unique to this film, as opposed to the rest of Tarkovsky's corpus, is that the director's presence takes on an oppressive quality in the diegesis. Rather than enhance whatever is occurring in any given moment, Tarkovsky's physical body overtakes, upstages, or interrupts the mood of the scene. A shot sequence midway through *Tempo di viaggio* is particularly illustrative of this point, in which Tarkovsky and Guerra drive down a lengthy road toward an Italian city (13:27 – 14:29)[22]. The sequence consists of only two shots: a long point-of-view shot from within the car, recording the passing landscape; and a substantially briefer shot of Tarkovsky sitting in the passenger seat. The shot from the car occupies the majority of the

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22 All timestamps for *Tempo di viaggio* refer to the Facets Video DVD release. I will identify scenes and shot sequences by when they occur in the film using this format.

sequence, taking up all but two seconds of its duration. This shot has a similarly hypnotic quality as Tarkovsky's infamous long takes, wherein the low sound levels and continuous image lull viewers into a state of quiet contemplation. In the final two seconds of the sequence, however, Tarkovsky himself sabotages this meditative spell – a squeal of automotive brakes pierces the quiet, and for a two-second span, the film cuts to an image of Tarkovsky sitting in the car. It is highly jarring, and thereby lends an intrusive quality to Tarkovsky's presence. The next scene of the film begins without any reference to the image, amplifying its disorienting effects.

The interrupted car ride sequence thus instructs viewers as to how they should read Tarkovsky in *Tempo di viaggio*: as a roadblock. He destroys the *mise-en-scène* when he appears, upstaging its every aspect even if he surfaces for as little as two seconds. Therefore, Tarkovsky takes on an oppressive quality, antagonistic to the development of the scene he occupies. Given that he ruins the mood of the scene if he appears in it, viewers must read Tarkovsky as being inimical to the artistic experience that the film attempts to instill. The man and the art he produces are incompatible. Since this sequence presents Tarkovsky as an obstacle to the

Figure 23: The interrupted car ride sequence.

170

scene, and not the other way around, *Tempo di viaggio* suggests that Tarkovsky is not the hero of the documentary. Instead, it is the artwork that occupies the role of protagonist: either *Tempo di viaggio* itself, or the burgeoning *Nostalghia*. Either case relegates Tarkovsky to a subordinate role, emphasizing that the creator of the art is far less important than the art itself. Implicit in this principle is that, for the work of art to reach its greatest potential, its creator must face elision; for if the creator's presence intrudes as violently as does Tarkovsky's, the work will be rendered subordinate, and therefore made inferior. This situation is unacceptable to an artist as serious as Tarkovsky, for as he insists later in the film, "You should belong to [cinema], it shouldn't belong to you."

The principle of self-erasure here described seems quite consistent with the aesthetic philosophy that Tarkovsky proposes in his treatise on cinema art, *Sculpting in Time*, given that two recurrent themes in Tarkovsky's aesthetic discussion are the inadequacy of the individual human being – and the artist by extension – as well as the supremacy of the work of art. As explored in a previous section of this chapter, the philosophy that Tarkovsky espouses in *Sculpting in Time* explains the problem – at least on a theoretical level – that he encounters with *Tempo di viaggio*. Namely: how can Tarkovsky make a film about himself, or even *justify* making a film about himself, when he recognizes that the artist should be erased in the name of art and ethics? If Tarkovsky shot a film about himself, it would appear to be a contradiction in terms – he would be "asserting his personality" (*Sculpting in Time* 38), when doing so is inimical to his conception of true art and the betterment it brings. Yet Tarkovsky sidesteps this difficulty by ensuring that *Tempo di viaggio* is not about himself – rather, it is about removing himself from his work, or consistently disparaging his own

171

presence. Viewed in terms of his writings in *Sculpting in Time*, this self-erasure can give us two ways of reading *Tempo di viaggio*. One way is to interpret the film as Tarkovsky fulfilling his ethical obligation as an artist and "sacrificing himself for the sake of another," making *Tempo di viaggio* a master class in how to enact Tarkovsky's ethical philosophy. A second way is to read the film as an act of self-erasure, approaching high art by showing exactly what high art is *not*, and demonstrating the havoc that "asserting one's personality" wreaks on a work of art. *Tempo di viaggio* can thus be read as a companion piece to *Mirror* – the autobiographical film where Tarkovsky himself is absent – and a supplement to *Sculpting in Time*, providing tangible examples of how to carry out Tarkovsky's ethical and aesthetic philosophies. Since the two philosophies are inextricably linked, one need not choose one interpretation over the other.

This theoretical backdrop provides some explanation for Tarkovsky's ubiquitous – and otherwise distracting – presence in *Tempo di viaggio*, suggesting that Tarkovsky places himself in the film only to demonstrate how much better the film becomes when he is featured less prominently. A sequence in which Tarkovsky (the screen actor) gives his advice to fledgling directors, after

Figure 24: Tarkovsky mimicking a crucifixion.

Guerra prompts him to offer his counsel, illustrates Tarkovsky's (the director's) anti-egoist message in both form and content. In this scene, Tarkovsky embarks on a long monologue

172

whose message is cleverly offset by his actions before the camera. He remarks:

> It's not hard to learn how to glue film, how to work a camera. But the advice I can give to beginners is not to separate their work, their movie, their film from the life they live. Not to make a difference between the movie and their own life. Because a director is like any other artist: a painter, a poet, a musician . . . And since it's required from him to contribute his own self, it is strange to see directors that take their work as a special position, given to them by destiny, and simply exploit their profession. That is, they live one way, but make movies about something else. And I'd like to tell directors, especially young ones, that they should be morally responsible for what they do while making their films. Do you understand? It is the most important of all. Secondly, they should be prepared for the thought that cinema is a very difficult and serious art. It requires sacrificing of yourself. You should belong to it, it shouldn't belong to you. Cinema uses your life, not vice-versa. Therefore I think that this is the most important . . . You should sacrifice yourself to the art. This is what I have been thinking lately about my profession. (26:55 – 29:35)

Textually, Tarkovsky's monologue looks like a rehashing of his philosophy from *Sculpting in Time*, but his performance of the monologue complicates – or even undermines – the message behind it. When Tarkovsky urges beginners "Not to make a difference between the movie and their own life," he stretches out his arms and sets them upon two nearby clotheslines. The posture he adopts in this moment bears a striking – and consequently, rather silly – resemblance to Christ on the cross, that famous symbol of self-sacrifice for the greater

good. Tarkovsky maintains this position for a sizable portion of the monologue, drawing attention to his own self-sacrificing propensities as he entreats novice artists to sacrifice themselves. The monologue, therefore, performs a contradiction: Tarkovsky advocates self-sacrifice in the same moment that he cements the image of himself as a sacrificial lamb in the eyes of the viewer. In so doing, he highlights his own importance as an artist, when he should be undercutting his importance in order to remain consistent with his aesthetic philosophy.
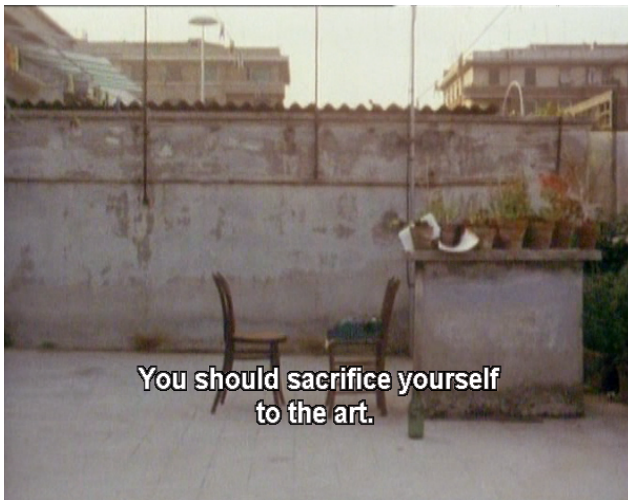
Figure 25: The conclusion of Tarkovsky's monologue.

Yet Tarkovsky's directorial decisions do exactly this, for by the end of the monologue, his physical presence is removed entirely from the frame. When he delivers the overall message of his speech – "You should sacrifice yourself to the art" – Tarkovsky's editing ensures that he is not present in the frame for the delivery of this line. Instead, there is only a shot of a rooftop garden, where two empty chairs facing each other call especial attention to the absence of any human figures. Thus, when new directors receive this instruction, they are confronted with Tarkovsky's art, but not Tarkovsky the man. The contradiction that his presence induces is removed, leaving the audience with the knowledge that Tarkovsky's presence impedes the proper execution of his aesthetics.

If part of Tarkovsky's mission in *Tempo di viaggio* is to eliminate himself from the work, his physical body is not his sole target. His trademark idiosyncrasies, used to great

174

effect in his other films, become in *Tempo di viaggio* objects of derision that must also be effaced in the name of worthwhile art. Sean Martin comments that, "Although a documentary, *Tempo di viaggio* contains many of Tarkovsky's signature devices" (184), and indeed, many of Tarkovsky's favorite visual subjects surface throughout it. Tarkovsky's other films often feature recurrent images such as glass bottles, horses, puddles, and prolonged landscape shots. Each of these appears in *Tempo di viaggio*, but their quality is diminished, and even obtrusive. For

Figure 26: The puddle in *Tempo di viaggio*.

instance, where Tarkovsky's beloved puddle usually lends a sense of wonderment to ordinary objects submerged beneath it, the puddle found in *Tempo di viaggio* only houses a sickly yellow stain. Similarly, the one horse that appears in *Tempo di viaggio* does not move gracefully through distant fields, but rather sits still atop a mantelpiece – it is a porcelain figure, and a thoroughly ridiculous-looking one, at that. Thus, we are presented with a curious situation: Tarkovsky offers us all the typical images that give us such pleasure in his other works, but here they prove unsatisfying. What end could this absurdity possibly serve? Tarkovsky provides some hints regarding his methodology in *Sculpting in Time*:

> [T]he beautiful and the finished in art – what is proper to the masterpiece – I
> see *wherever it becomes impossible to single out or prefer any one element,*
> *either of content or of form, without detriment to the whole. For in a*

175

masterpiece no component can take precedence; you cannot, as it were, 'catch the artist at his own game' and formulate for him his ultimate aims and objectives. 'Art consists of its not being noticeable', wrote Ovid; Engels declared that, 'The better hidden the author's views, the better for the work of art.' (47; emphasis mine)

In effect, if we focus on small elements of Tarkovsky's works, and attempt to hold them up as the pieces of Tarkovsky's "own game," then we are doing something wrong. By Tarkovsky's view, a good work of art cannot be distilled down to its

Figure 27: The horse in *Tempo di viaggio*.

constituent parts, because no one component of it can take precedence – all of its parts contribute a more meaningful whole. To pay attention to those parts instead of the artwork that contains them is to do violence to the work as a whole. Thus, when Tarkovsky offers us these tiny Tarkovskian trademarks, he is reminding us that we should not be so preoccupied with them, because we neglect the rest of the work in question.

Tarkovsky's skepticism concerning the individual constituent cuts two ways – if the audience does wrong in expecting them, then the artist also commits an error when he or she relies upon a set of idiosyncratic signatures. As Tarkovsky observes in *Sculpting in Time*:

In the course of my work I have noticed time and again, that if the external emotional structure of a film is based on the author's memory, when impressions of his personal life have been transmuted into screen images, then

176

the film will have the power to move those who see it. But if a scene has been

devised intellectually, following the tenets of literature, then no matter how

conscientiously and convincingly it is done, it will still leave the audience

cold. In fact even though it may strike some people as interesting and

compelling when it first comes out, it will have no vital force and will not

stand the test of time. (183)

Conscious, conspicuous idiosyncrasy – or, as Tarkovsky puts it, the intellectual devising of a

scene – has something inauthentic about it. There is a coldness to a scene that has been

rationally or logically planned, and that coldness ultimately damages the work that houses the

scene. For Tarkovsky, a particularly idiosyncratic compositional element, such as a horse or a

puddle, risks becoming a marker of this type of rational assemblage. Since the element would

be added to the film for the sake of making it recognizable as a given artist's work, it takes on

a premeditated quality that robs it of the "impressions of personal life" that are vital to its

successful usage in the first place. Therefore, when Tarkovsky includes his trademark

elements in *Tempo di viaggio*, he is treating them the same way he treats his physical

presence, demonstrating how problematic they can be. They damage the work he attempts to

create, and they damage it precisely because they are recognizable as Tarkovsky signatures.

These elements are essentially holdovers of his presence as an artist, upstaging the *mise-en-

scène* as effectively as Tarkovsky himself would. Since *Tempo di viaggio* is Tarkovsky's

attempt at self-erasure, any evidence of himself – even on an intellectual level – must be

undone in order to preserve the primacy of his art.

Appropriately enough, Tarkovsky's self-effacement may achieve the personal freedom

177

that he explains in *Sculpting in Time*. Film critic Alberto Crespi, in his short essay "Voyage in Time" (2004), suggests that the motives underlying the film were entirely personal. Regarding the journey across Italy that Tarkovsky and Guerra embark upon, Crespi writes: "As always, Tarkovsky was not looking for a country, a geographical entity. He was looking for a place of the soul – a location where 'the heart could rest,' to use an evangelic expression that was dear to him" (8). Tarkovsky's travels through Italy are not about finding a physical place to shoot his film or to settle down, but instead they encompass a search for inner peace, or a place of soul. To this end, Crespi contends that, "In his capacity to go beyond the anecdote and to make a parable, Tarkovsky in *Voyage in Time* . . . gives us back his same sense of the absolute, the same desire to rise above the misery of one's existence" (10). Dual images of birdcages in *Tempo di viaggio* seem to bear out Crespi's thesis. Two birdcages

Figure 28: Two birdcages: For live birds on the left, for artificial birds on the right.

serve as the subjects for two fairly long shots in the film, and Crespi's analysis furnishes a compelling means of reading them. The first birdcage appears shortly after Guerra reads a poem about "home," in which the home imprisons its resident; the arrival of the birdcage in the next sequence therefore symbolizes the entrapment that Tarkovsky experiences, oppressed by the "home" in Russia that he was forced to abandon. The second birdcage, however, reclaims this image of "home," and shows how it might be turned into something

178

liberating. This second shot pans across the birdcage, giving us a much closer view than the first. The close-up shot reveals two curious aspects of the cage: first, it contains a pair of wooden birds; second, the door to the birdcage remains wide open. Thus, where the live bird is trapped, the artificial bird is free to escape, suggesting that art provides a means of liberation from the oppressive aspects of life. This would confirm Crespi's contention, for if Tarkovsky was searching for a "place of the soul," he certainly found in it art. To find that place, however, he had to eliminate himself from the art he made.

Indeed, the final sequence of *Tempo di viaggio* shows Tarkovsky's discovery of his "Russia of the soul," yet the intriguing aspect of his discovery process is the gradual diminishing and ultimate erasure of his physical presence. The last shot sequence of the film shows Tarkovsky gazing wistfully through a window, followed by a two different cuts to a photograph: one of a shadowy figure in the snow – a minor detail of the overall photograph – and then a cut to the photograph as a whole. The sequence thus shows a steady shift in focal point: it begins with a well-defined and recognizable figure (Tarkovsky), then moves to a much less recognizable figure, and culminates in a landscape where no person takes prominence over the frame. We can read this as the final stroke in Tarkovsky's portrait of self erasure. The first shot shows the back of his head, suggesting that he is beginning to obscure himself. The second shot, because of how rapidly it follows the first, likens Tarkovsky to the shadowy figure by virtue of its juxtaposition; consequently, it is as if Tarkovsky has "blacked out" his features, and left us only with his featureless silhouette. The third and final shot veers from this shadowy Tarkovsky in favor of a snow-covered landscape, eliding him entirely to show a beautiful winter scene. The individual figure is thus banished from a place

of prominence in the photograph, absorbed by the artistic whole, which displays a scene of familiar calm instead of Tarkovsky's supposed inner turmoil. Thus, the winter landscape serves as both Crespi's "place of the soul" and Tarkovsky's selfless art – and both offer spiritual and moral fulfillment. Since it is the final image viewers see, it leaves a stronger impression than the image of Tarkovsky that preceded it, which in turn suggests that, once again, the art is greater than the man.

If this sequence explains the general trajectory of *Tempo di viaggio*, it may also provide some clue regarding the film's title. The film showcases "travel time," certainly, but the title offers no allusion to the destination of the journey. Perhaps, then, the film is about neither the destination nor the point of departure – for, as Crespi says, *Tempo di viaggio* is not a search for a geographical entity. Instead, the film concerns *the act* of traveling, the process by which one reaches a destination. This would account for why so much of *Tempo di viaggio* feels like a work in progress. It has no pretensions of acting like its sibling films, each of which is a completed product, a destination having been reached. Instead, *Tempo di viaggio* is a work

Figure 29: Tarkovsky recedes in the final sequence as a photograph occupies the frame.

about the crafting of an ideal work – but paradoxically, it functions as a complete film in and of itself. Thus, the film represents the position of paradox that Tarkovsky himself also occupies: as necessary to the production of his art, but not worthy of stealing its spotlight. Additionally, with its focus on the process of developing a film, *Tempo di viaggio* serves as a precursor to *Mirror*, demonstrating the aesthetic antecedent of the truly "self-less" autobiographical film. Where *Mirror* shows us an autobiography where the self has been pared away, leaving only memory and art, *Tempo di viaggio* supplies a view of what must transpire before one can begin making something like *Mirror*.

If *Mirror* is an autobiographical work devoid of Tarkovsky's physical presence, then *Tempo di viaggio* is its inverse – an autobiographical film where Tarkovsky himself stars, and his physical presence dominates the work. In this regard, *Tempo di viaggio* is best considered a companion piece to *Mirror*, for, through an entirely different approach to the subject of autobiography and art, it serves as a defense of the aesthetic and ethical experiment Tarkovsky undertakes in the feature-length autobiographical film. If *Tempo di viaggio* seems to be a less complete film than *Mirror*, or a less satisfying one, then it proves the aesthetic theory Tarkovsky has advanced: true art is at once selfless and self-less, and any work that fails to meet either of those criteria cannot properly be termed "art."

E. Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed Andrei Tarkovsky's aesthetic theories and autobiographical films as a case study to demonstrate the link between autobiographical film and sculpture. The director's observations regarding the process of filmmaking highlight the remarkable

similarities among the methods and results of filmmaking and sculpture, establishing a connection between the two arts. However, Tarkovsky's works allow us to posit an even stronger link between sculpture and autobiographical film in particular. Tarkovsky's thorough aesthetic philosophy establishes ethical imperatives that all true art must follow. In order to meet this imperative, Tarkovsky prescribes an aesthetic of selflessness – in both senses of the word, unselfishness and the absence of the self. The means by which an autobiographical film attains that selfless aesthetic is via a process of steady removal of the self of the autobiographer, until the unfettered memories and experiences of his/her life remain. In *Mirror*, we witness a filmic demonstration of what a "selfless" autobiography looks like, exploring both the memories of a self that has been stripped away, and the process by which that state of removal was reached. In the companion piece *Tempo di viaggio*, Tarkovsky shows his audiences what happens when an autobiographical film fails to adhere to his selfless dicta, revealing a film where sound, image, and message are all subordinated to the self who dominates the work. The two films, therefore, become more intelligible when considered through the lens of sculpture theory. In turn, this new reading of Tarkovsky's autobiographical films indicates the necessity of considering autobiographical films through a sculptural paradigm.

CHAPTER 4

MERCEDES ÁLVAREZ'S *El cielo gira*

"Things have their shape in time, not space alone. Some marble
blocks have statues within them, embedded in their future."

~Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*

A. "Un lujo del cine español"

Shot in only nine months, from October 2002 to June 2003, and premiering at the

Valladolid Film Festival approximately one year later in October 2004, Mercedes Álvarez's

directorial debut *El cielo gira*[23] has reverberated throughout Spanish cinema with a force far

greater than its brief production time would have presaged. Despite being Álvarez's first

feature, the film gained international recognition from garnering top honors at multiple film

festivals, including the Cinéma du Réel in Paris, the Rotterdam Film Festival in the

Netherlands, and the Buenos Aires International Film Festival (Cuevas 84). All told, the film

was screened in some 30 countries in the year after its release. Within Spain, *El cielo gira*

can be said to have laid the foundation for Spanish autobiographical film, for few if any films

like it emerged from Spain in the decades prior to its release (Cuevas 80). Indeed, *El cielo*

gira marks a watershed moment in Spanish cinema, inaugurating a new movement of

autobiographical filmmaking in Spain. Álvarez's film is now so highly regarded in its home

country that one of its glowing reviews even dubbed it "un lujo del cine español" (Navajas

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23 Stateside DVD releases of the film have erroneously translated the title as *The Sky Turns*. A more accurate
title would be *The Sky Spins*, or even *The Sky Gyrates*, as the Spanish verb "girar" indicates circular motion
around a fixed point. To avoid confusion, I refer to the film by its Spanish title.

2005) – a pleasure, privilege, and luxury of Spanish cinema.

The prominent position of *El cielo gira* in recent Spanish cinema alone is sufficient to justify its study, but it is worth assessing the film's context within Spanish cinema history – as well as Spanish documentary and autobiographical film – in order to lay the groundwork for any scholarly inquiry. In particular, the context of the film indicates that a comparative reading of *El cielo gira*, which I furnish in this chapter, is the most fruitful way to proceed. A survey of the state of Spanish cinema before the launch of *El cielo gira* reveals that Álvarez's film emerges from a cinema distinctly lacking its own autobiographical tradition, therefore rendering problematic any attempts to approach the film from within a strictly Hispanist framework. Efrén Cuevas, in his 2012 analysis of the film, observes that "the rise of personal documentaries that was happening in American and elsewhere in Europe [in the early 2000s] had no impact on the Spanish documentary" (80), even though "[t]he artistic and industrial context of Spanish cinema . . . was not very different from those other countries, since during these last decades Spain also experienced a growing interest in documentary, in terms of production, exhibition, critical reception and educational resources" (80). Despite Spain's history of state-subsidized film production, including directorial training offerings at several of its national universities, and the allocation of government funds for use in Spanish films, personal documentaries (one of the many names for autobiographical film, as my first chapter has determined) did not appear in Spain before Álvarez's project. As to why this might be the case, Cuevas advances a pair of hypotheses. Cuevas's first supposition is that many of the major works of autobiographical film from other countries – such as the films of Ross McElwee, Naomi Kawase, and Alan Berliner – did not see their distribution reach Spain

until the 2000s (80), thereby depriving would-be autobiographical filmmakers the vocabulary and methods of a thriving international practice. (This is not to deny the possibility of discerning autofictional elements within Spanish films, but rather, to note that Spain did not have access to more ostensibly nonfictional films with an autobiographical focus.) Yet the second of Cuevas's hypotheses is perhaps the more noteworthy: Spain simply did not have its own tradition of autobiographical film until Álvarez released her film. "Another reason for the lack of this kind of documentary," Cuevas writes, "could be the lack of references within Spanish cinema, since the country's most influential documentary filmmakers have not entered the autobiographical fray or they have done so only recently" (80). While Spain has a tradition of documentary filmmaking, including such celebrated directors as José Luis Guerín (*Tren de sombras* [*Train of Shadows*, 1997]; *En construcción* [*Under Construction*[24], 2001]) and Víctor Erice (*El sol del membrillo* [Quince Tree of the Sun, 1992]), the national cinema had not branched into autobiographical territory until after the appearance of *El cielo gira*. Cuevas blames this widespread reluctance to delve into the autobiographical mode on "a strong tradition of realism in Spanish art and literature" (81), suspecting that the autobiographical film's "foregrounding of subjectivity might seem to clash with that tradition of realism in narrative and representational arts" (81). Thus, one of the many aspects of *El cielo gira* that makes it so remarkable is its seemingly unprecedented genesis: prior to Álvarez, Spanish cinema somehow did not give rise to an autobiographical film.

One of the questions this raises, then, is where Álvarez finds the cinematic vocabulary for her autobiographical project. Although Álvarez began *El cielo gira* with ample cinematic and television experience to her credit already, including editorial work on *En construcción*

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24 This film is given the more fanciful translation of *Work in Progress* in some English-language releases.

185

for the aforementioned Guerín, her training within the Spanish cinematic tradition does not completely account for her groundbreaking film. The absence of a viable autobiographical film tradition in Spain suggests that Álvarez's experience alone could not be the sole source of her film's content – and therefore exposes the need for a comparative approach to *El cielo gira*. If Spanish cinema did not have the wherewithal to furnish the cinematic vocabulary for Álvarez film, within what tradition could Álvarez be working? This chapter will advance one possible answer, exploring Álvarez's synergies with the autobiographical films of Frampton and Tarkovsky discussed in previous chapters. Besides a shared affinity for long takes among these three directors, the themes, methods, and vocabularies of the filmmakers' respective autobiographical works overlap considerably. A comparative analysis of Álvarez's film can thus help to elucidate its cinematic ancestry, as well as provide a more coherent interpretation of the film. Accordingly, my comparison will take place within an international rather than a national context. I propose to read *El cielo gira* as an autobiographical film within the same tradition as Frampton and Tarkovsky, assessing it as a fundamentally sculptural film whose subtractive technique, emphasis on process, and focus on materiality ultimately hold the key to its meaning.

B. *El Cielo Gira*: A Brief Summary

The film follows one year of the life of Aldealseñor, a village in central northern Spain. It is the hometown of Mercedes Álvarez. She reveals that she was the last person born in the village, roughly 40 years prior. The younger generations of the population have all left for Spain's larger cities, and only a small contingent of elderly villagers remains. (In a 2005

write-up on the film for the Spanish newspaper *Diario de Noticias de Navarra*, Alicia Ezker reports that Aldealseñor had a mere 14 inhabitants when Álvarez shot *El cielo gira*.) The waning demographics suggest that Aldealseñor is on the verge of disappearing, and Álvarez returns to the home of her childhood in hopes of documenting the place before it vanishes utterly. The 105 minutes of the film's runtime, Alicia Ezker observes, were distilled from over 100 hours of footage. The film is divided into five chapters that roughly correspond to the four seasons with an added epilogue: "Otoño. Las cosas aparecen" (Autumn. Things emerge/appear); "Invierno en los ojos" (Winter in one's eyes); "Las ciudades sumergidas" (The buried cities); "Primavera leve y grave" (A light heavy spring); and "El cielo gira" (The sky spins). In each chapter, Álvarez records conversations among the villagers, captures points of interest in Aldealseñor and its vicinity, and films what few out-of-the-ordinary events transpire. Álvarez herself supplies voice-over narration to contextualize certain scenes, frequently inserting autobiographical vignettes, but never once appearing before the camera. The efforts to document Aldealseñor are occasionally punctuated by investigations into the work of Pello Azketa, a Spanish painter, whose eyesight is rapidly deteriorating. Álvarez follows Azketa as he explores her hometown, filming the artist at work, and depicting some of his completed canvases while narrating her interpretation of the paintings.

C. An Autobiography of Many Genres

Before analyzing *El cielo gira* as an autobiographical film, it is useful to comment on the appropriateness of treating it as a member of that genre. After all, the varied subject matter of *El cielo gira* might trigger some reluctance to classify it as an autobiographical

187

film. Although she serves as the film's narrator, Álvarez has a smaller line burden than some of the villagers she films, making it appear as though she were not a primary character. One could make the case that the film is more a documentary or ethnography about Aldealseñor than it is an autobiography about Mercedes Álvarez.

Insofar as these generic distinctions are valuable, I have found it worthwhile to consider *El cielo gira* through an autobiographical lens. Previous entries in the critical literature, such as Efrén Cuevas, have designated the film as an autobiographical work (2012); to maintain the continuity of the critical conversation, I propose to adhere to the classification previous established. Apart from deferring to the conventions of other critics, I see a literary basis for treating the film as an autobiography, as its inciting incident corresponds to one of the major tropes of Spanish autobiography. In the 1992 survey of autobiography in Spain, *Apology to Apostrophe: Autobiography and the Rhetoric of Self-Representation in Spain*, James D. Fernández observes that the autobiographical act in Spanish literature tends to be the result of the loss of a "utopian space." Fernández writes:

> These lost utopian situations can vary a great deal; the ideal world could be childhood, the home, the nation, the rural countryside, or favorable public opinion, but they all have one thing in common: within their confines, writing and representation seem remarkably absent. Writing, and particularly autobiographical writing, becomes only possible, or necessary, after the abandonment of that utopian space. (17)

What Fernández discovers is that Spanish autobiography contains a tradition of displacement from an ideal location. Within that favored environment, there hardly seems to be a need for

autobiographical writing, as life itself is already satisfactory. It is only after that place is lost that autobiography becomes an option – either because autobiographical discourse is made possible or enabled by that loss, or because the loss creates a need that autobiographical discourse can address. Given that *El cielo gira* takes as its inciting incident the imminent disappearance of Álvarez's birthplace, the film inscribes itself within the established tradition of Spanish literary autobiography. In order to preserve the film's affinity with this tradition, it is prudent to refer to the film as a work of autobiography.

Another consideration – and perhaps a more pragmatic one – for addressing the film as an autobiographical work comes from Álvarez herself. Simply put, Álvarez thinks of her own film as occupying a slippery space among multiple filmic registers, and as a result, the term "autobiography" might be one of the few coherent generic frameworks for such a film. Regarding her film's participation in numerous film festivals, Álvarez has explained:

> Esta película ha participado en festivales de ficción y de documental y pensé
>
> que el lugar idóneo para ella era este Festival que defiende un tipo de cine que
>
> se mueve en este registro difuso entre el documental y la ficción. Este registro
>
> hibrido es que el más me interesa personalmente y en él que he trabajado en
>
> *El cielo gira*." (qtd. in Ezker)

Álvarez remarks that *El cielo gira* has been admitted to film festivals devoted to either fiction or documentary films, comfortably residing alongside the other entrants in each category, despite documentary and fiction being seemingly opposite modes. As a result, Álvarez does not classify her film as belonging to one genre or the other, but rather, as being part of a "diffuse" or "hybrid" register. Furthermore, she states that this hybrid register holds the

greatest interest to her as a filmmaker, and is indeed the kind of register she sought to attain while working on *El cielo gira*. Taking Álvarez at her word, I suggest that "autobiography" is a worthwhile framework for considering such a hybrid film, given that recent theoretical works concerning autobiography – as well as some landmark autobiographical texts such as Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and Knausgaard's *My Struggle* – have determined autobiography to be a genre in which fiction and nonfiction coincide in a productive capacity. In *Fiction in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985), for instance, Paul John Eakin notes that autobiography always demands to be confronted with a hybrid interpretive apparatus. Eakin's work highlights how "autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and, further, that the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure" (3), indicating that to read an autobiographical work is to observe the fruitful interplay between nonfiction (the historical moment the autobiographical text occupies and explores) and fiction (the self that drives the autobiographical endeavor). Eakin's investigations – as well as the work of other critics and theorists such as Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, and James Olney – suggest that the study of autobiography has supplied us with tools for examining texts that are not quite fiction, and not quite nonfiction, but rather something in between the two. Given that the autobiographical is therefore no stranger to the "hybrid and diffuse registers" that Álvarez favors, I imagine that autobiographical theory equips us well for confronting Álvarez's film.

Building from Álvarez's remarks concerning genre play and film form can offer one way to start thinking about *El cielo gira*. Álvarez introduces her film as one devoted to

investigating the liminal space between genres and types of film, which in turn suggests that the film is actively in dialogue with the conventions and constraints of different genres and media. One inroad for assessing *El cielo gira*, then, is to interrogate those dialogues. With what genres and media does the film engage? What does the film have to say about them? To begin my investigation of Álvarez's film, I propose to follow her interactions with other art forms – that is to say, other genres of representation – and see where they lead. I contend that they point toward a sculptural assessment of the film.

D. In Dialogue with the Arts: Álvarez's Move from Painting to Sculpture

With its numerous shots of the Spanish countryside, and long takes that provide meditative encounters with the landscape or subject in front of the camera's lens, several critics have commended *El cielo gira* for its painterly compositions. Film historian Carlos Losilla has compared the film to the paintings

Figure 30: Bellini's *Agony in the Garden* (c. 1459)

of Giovanni Bellini (1), ostensibly because of the ways in which Bellini's paintings tend to feature figures whose actions are either framed or dwarfed by sprawling, intricate landscapes behind them. Indeed, Álvarez's film does employ a similar technique, enmeshing the villagers of Aldealseñor in the vast spans of landscape surrounding the town, and making the frame function almost as a static canvas courtesy of a protracted average shot length.

191

Consider, for the sake of comparison, Bellini's *Agony in the Garden* (c. 1459). The painting foregrounds a trio of three pained figures, above whom a man kneels on a rock in prayer. Following the kneeling man's line of sight, the viewer is brought to an angel standing on a cloud in the distance. The angel's gaze sends us earthward once more, where a procession of men carries a figure whose arms are bound. The line of the procession reaches only up to the foregrounded figures, returning to the painting's original focal point. The painting's biblical plot – the capture of Jesus at Gethsemane – is therefore dramatized in a series of glances. We begin with an image of suffering, the cause of which is explained the moment we arrive at the sight of Jesus being carried away to the trial and crucifixion that ultimately awaits him. Significantly, all of the visible figures in this painting occur along a single line that diagonally bisects the frame; the majority of the painting's surface is devoted to richly textured hills, rivers, and buildings in the distance. There is a world beyond the action of the painting – and, through the inclusion of the angel, Bellini suggests that perhaps there is a world beyond the one that frames the painting's action, as well.

Multiple shots from *El cielo gira*, while perhaps lacking Bellini's theological message, demonstrate similar techniques of framing, foregrounding, and directing the viewer's gaze. A scene later in the film (1:28:00)[25] follows the daily routine of the village shepherd monitoring his flock within the confines of a stone pen. Álvarez stages most of the shots in this scene so that roaming

Figure 31: A possible Bellini homage

25   All timestamps refer to the New Yorker Films DVD release of *El cielo gira*.

sheep loom large in the foreground, dwarfing the shepherd in the background. A vast expanse of sky occupies the rest of the frame. Álvarez steers the viewer's gaze around the otherwise confusing layout of the scene in a manner reminiscent of Bellini. While the sheep block out a clear view of the space behind them, they stare downward as they shuffle about. Although their gazes seem to lead nowhere in particular, they match the downward stare of the shepherd, whose presence is foregrounded by virtue of his shared positioning. Viewers are then invited to follow his gaze, which leads to the focal point of the scene: a newborn sheep so frail that it cannot even stand, whose small, black frame could easily be mistaken for a shadow. Much in the same way that Bellini guides the viewer's eyes around the canvas, forcing them to take in key details before arriving at a crucial background image, Álvarez conducts her viewers around the various aspects of her compositions before leading them to the focal points.

Elsewhere, Santiago Navajas has observed similarities between *El cielo gira* and the works of Johannes Vermeer. Like the works of Bellini, Vermeer's canvases carry their own

Figure 32: Vermeer's *The Geographer* alongside several of Álvarez's villagers

theological implications: in a perfect world created and ruled by a perfect god, even to view its commonplace aspects is to glimpse a state of grace. Theology aside, the film's shots of the villagers in their homes and about town do bear a resemblance to Vermeer's canvases of people at work indoors and out, capturing the dignity of an ordinary person's life through

193

observing it in its most quotidian forms. A cursory glance at Vermeer's *The Geographer* (1669), for instance, alongside several of Álvarez's frames, does seem to justify Navajas's observation. Álvarez, like Vermeer, relishes the play of light and shadow on contemplative faces, situating her subjects in sunlit windows or against saturated backgrounds to increase the contrast of the composition's palette. Where Vermeer includes flowing, luxuriant fabrics in his paintings to highlight his own technical mastery and deepen the field of vision in his frames, Álvarez situates her subjects among similarly tactile textures, be it grasses swaying in the wind, pockmarked stone walls, or the soft, thick fur of a dog.

Likewise, the equal focus on land and sky in the landscape shots of *El cielo gira* can be detected in multiple Vermeer landscapes, especially *View of Delft* (c. 1660). Among the many noteworthy aspects of Vermeer's masterpiece of landscape painting is how little land is to be found in it. Aside from a quay in the lower-left corner of the canvas, and the line of stone and earth upon which the buildings of Delft are assumed to rest, there is nothing in the way of land to be seen, the majority of the image dominated by a wide vista of partly clouded sky above and a stretch of water from the River Schie reflecting it below. In a similar vein, the overwhelming majority of the shots in *El cielo gira* – landscape or otherwise – feature a prominent sky that at once

Figure 33: Vermeer's *View of Delft* (c. 1660)

shrinks and accentuates the land beneath it. While Álvarez's frames often depict sweeping

spans of open fields and hillsides to rival any landscape painter's, the sky often shares pride

of place with the land, on some occasions even occupying half of the frame or more. A few

outdoor shots in the film even eschew land altogether, training the camera's lens on the warp

and weft of passing clouds. It is as if the sky were its own character – which is perhaps to be

expected, given the film's title.

To linger on the similarities Álvarez shares with painters past, however, is to overlook

the central themes of her work. While Losilla's and Navajas's painting commentaries advance

a useful starting point for thinking about *El cielo gira*, their observations stop short of

offering a way to interpret the film. The critics each note Álvarez's choice of aesthetic, but do not probe what she *does* with that aesthetic, or to what end she might employ it. This results in a limited – and limiting – critical framework, for it neglects the

Figure 34: Álvarez's landscapes resemble Vermeer's

subversive way Álvarez approaches painting. Like Frampton and Tarkovsky before her,

Álvarez is skeptical of many art forms, and enacts this skepticism in her film's treatment of

various media. In *El cielo gira*, Álvarez channels the art of painting in order to demonstrate

its shortcomings for her autobiographical project, and to undermine its authority as a

domineering critical schema. As the film progresses, Álvarez picks apart the expressive

potential of photography, music, and architecture as well, using the same systematic

disavowal as Frampton and Tarkovsky. In the end, the sole art form that remains valid for Álvarez is sculpture – and, in turn, this last form reveals itself as the most advantageous and productive way to analyze *El cielo gira*.

The techniques Álvarez employs to cast aspersion on painting's usefulness range from the understated to the blatant. The subtler end of her move away from painting can be glimpsed in any of her most "painterly" compositions. While Álvarez frequently deploys frames that resemble any number of famous paintings, she never allows for the absolute stillness of the painted canvas – her shots always include some kind of motion, be it the gradual track of clouds overhead, or the slow progress of farmers traversing a distant hill, or the rustle of grass in the wind. The motion in these instances is almost imperceptible, but it can nonetheless be felt, coming to the viewer more like an impression or intuition than a concrete fact. Through this technique, Álvarez marshals two arguments against using painting as an autobiographical framework. First, this tactic exposes how problematic the stasis of the canvas is when it comes to documenting life. For Álvarez, life does not consist of static impressions, but rather, of a continuous flow of time, whose passage is made manifest in the motions of living things. In *El cielo gira*, the only still entities are the nonliving (buildings, gravestones, dinosaur statues) and the dead (shown obliquely through black-and-white photographs). The stillness of a painting, therefore, is antithetical to life in Álvarez's setup, and thus insufficient for her autobiographical work, which has the documentation of life among its objectives. Second, Álvarez's technique of subtle motion within a painterly composition serves to remind viewers that she is not out to make mere images. Whatever Álvarez seeks to accomplish in *El cielo gira*, it extends deeper than the

196

surface level of well-wrought pictures. When her frames resist the stagnation of the painter's canvas, Álvarez encourages her audience to think beyond the surface of the image they see, and envision what else transpires in the film that resists apprehension via the faculty of sight.

To demonstrate the significance of liberating oneself from the image, and to think without relying on vision as one's central faculty, Álvarez introduces the painter Pello Azketa in her film, whose quest to capture the landscape surrounding Aldealseñor serves as another critique of the medium of painting. Multiple shots depict Azketa hard at work preparing his next paintings, whether making charcoal sketches, mixing colors, or drafting horizon lines. Meanwhile, Álvarez's voice-over narration explains that the canvases Azketa tries to produce throughout the film hold a special urgency for the painter, revealing that Azketa is losing his sight, and will be blind before long. The revelation adds poignancy to the sequences of the artist at work, for the audience realizes Azketa labors under the notion that the painting before him could easily be his last. In this manner, Azketa becomes a foil for Álvarez herself, showing viewers another artist who battles the gradual disappearance of something valued, and whose greatest adversary in that pursuit is time itself. While the film treats Azketa solicitously, affording him the gentleness and respect a benign tragic figure is due, *El cielo gira* uses his plight to probe the limitations of Azketa's chosen medium. For although both Azketa and Álvarez seek to combat disappearance, the film suggests that Azketa's methods – through no fault of his own – are not well-suited to the task.

First, there is the obvious problem of the limited means by which a painting can be apprehended: one must be able to see in order to take in a painting, whereas other media could feasibly be appreciated using the other senses, albeit with varying degrees of success.

After all, texts can be converted into audiobooks or braille; films can be subtitled for the hearing impaired, or given a voice-over track to describe what occurs in the diegesis; even music can be sensed without hearing it, for Beethoven learned to "hear" music via the vibrations in the floorboards of his home after becoming deaf. In a way, Azketa's medium betrays him, distancing itself from him as his visual faculties fade. For a film like *El cielo gira*, which concerns itself with the fate of things that do not enjoy renewal, this betrayal cannot be forgiven. Much in the same manner as the film chastises the regional milk and bread merchants for ignoring the few remaining villagers of Aldealseñor, who still need groceries like anyone else, the medium of painting is cast in an irresponsible light for leaving behind those who can no longer meet it on its terms.

Elsewhere, Álvarez demonstrates the inadequacy of painting for her autobiographical mission using Azketa's own canvases, showing how painting cannot rescue that which has been obscured by time from oblivion. Álvarez presents her audience with two of Azketa's completed paintings at opposite ends of the film. The first, shown toward the beginning of the film, depicts children looking out over a pond; Álvarez's voice-over suggests that "something has disappeared [beneath the water] or is about to appear [out of it]." Álvarez mentions having seen the painting many years ago, which indicates that Azketa completed it before his sight began to deteriorate. At the other end of the film, in the final shot, audiences glimpse what might be Azketa's last canvas: a grassy hill, comparable to the site of the oak Álvarez says she thought was "the whole world" in her childhood. Unlike the image of the pond, the Azketa's landscape is a rather unremarkable canvas, whose significance arises not from anything visible within the painting itself, but rather, from the mesh of stories and

forgotten histories that the film has woven around the locus Azketa paints. *El cielo gira* spends two hours expatiating on the now-invisible world of which the tree is the centerpiece, yet Azketa's canvas shows only the hill. If the painting is of any importance, it is because of the discoveries Álvarez's film has uncovered. Álvarez emphasizes this point in the film's final

Figure 35: The Azketa paintings that bookend the film

shot, where a filmed image of the tree on the hill dissolves into Azketa's canvas. The shift from Álvarez's filmed composition to Azketa's painted one is so subtle that it is easy to miss that one is looking at a painting in the waning moments of *El cielo gira*. The film therefore subsumes the painting – which is only fair, given that the painting has little significance beyond the meanings that the film has carefully constructed for it. The two Azketa works thus reveal Álvarez's core objection to the medium of painting: it only ever shows surfaces, only ever shows that which is apprehended visually. The painting of the pond makes for an interesting subject of contemplation, given that it presents a mystery (something sank into the pond; what could that something be?), but it does not show what has disappeared into the water. At best, the painting can show *that* something has vanished, not *what* has vanished; it does not capture the vanished thing, and thus fails to save it from disappearing beneath the surface of the canvas. Similarly, the painting of the tree and the hill cannot show the ghosts

that populate the hillside and surrounding country; history remains buried beneath the canvas's surface world. The problem with painting, then, is that its insistence on the visual limits its powers of representation to that which can be seen. If one wishes to document what can no longer be seen, another medium is necessary.

Besides questioning its physical and metaphysical limitations, Álvarez's skepticism toward painting may also indicate of critique of its suitability for women's autobiographical works. Wendy Everett, in "Through the I of the Camera: Women and Autobiography in Contemporary European Film" (2007), notes that one of the major aspects of autobiography's appeal to women writers and filmmakers is that it "enables women to recognize that their marginalization is the result of dominant patriarchal perspectives" (127). An implicit corollary of this observation is that certain modes of self-representation must replicate that deleterious "dominant patriarchal perspective." In other words, there are certain ways of thinking, certain modes of constructing the gaze, that perpetuate patriarchal ideologies. E. Ann Kaplan has persuasively argued that the mode of viewing observed in classical and contemporary Hollywood films denotes an objectifying, patriarchal, male viewpoint in

Figure 36: Goya's *La maja desnuda* (c. 1795-1800)

"Is the Gaze Male?" (1983/1990). More recently, Bernadette Wegenstein in *The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty* (2012) has traced that mode of viewing's pernicious evolution into the "cosmetic gaze," which "perceives all bodies in light

of some potentially transformative completion" (x); that is, a gaze which not only objectifies the female body, but views it in terms of imperfections demanding correction. Historically, painting has presented a similar species of male or cosmetic gaze when women serve as its subject matter – or rather, when painting uses the female body as a spectacle. Even within the tradition of Spanish painting, the female presence has all too frequently been reduced to a mere body, treating the woman as an object rather than an individual with her own subjectivity. Goya's *La maja desnuda* (c. 1795-1800) is one such example. While Goya's famous canvas does grant its female subject her own gaze, showing her peering intently at the painter, her subjectivity is subordinated to the spectacle of her nude figure; we see her eyes, but we do not see through them. Perhaps to avoid this reduction of the female presence and experience, Álvarez never once appears before the camera in *El cielo gira*. As a result, Álvarez's presence in the film is that of a pure subjectivity; we always see through her eyes, without seeing the eyes themselves. As Everett observes, "filmic discourse is grounded in the visual, and thus able to reflect the fundamental correlation between eye and I, between seeing and identity" (128). Álvarez's maneuver could be interpreted as a means of evading the male gaze herself, and restoring her own female identity to prominence by asserting her gaze in its place. In turn, this mode of positioning herself could indicate a turn away from painting, and the patriarchal manner of representation it has historically carried.

At the same time as she criticizes the relevance of painting, Álvarez distances herself from photography through a series of monochrome photographs that are put to curious use. A sequence at the outset of the film's fourth section, "Primavera leve y grave,"[26] shows several

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26   Roughly, "Springtime, light and heavy." The words "leve" and "grave" can be used to indicate either mood or weight, so the section's title could be read as "Springtime, lighthearted and serious," as well.

lonely scenes around Aldealseñor, including an elderly man playing a game like horseshoes alone in an alley, and an abandoned water fountain (starting at 1:08:40). Álvarez presents these scenes by first showing a black-and-white photograph that was clearly taken in a more populous time, depicting groups of people gathered together for social occasions. Each of
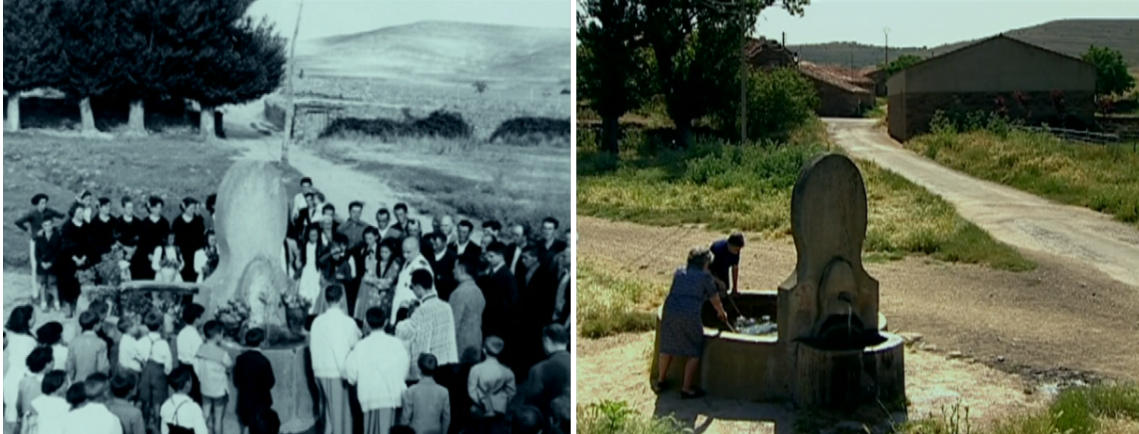

Figure 37: Two different times in the life of the village

these photographs fades away after being shown for a few moments, revealing one of the lonely present-day scenes, and Álvarez's staging makes it apparent that the scene viewers witness occurs in the exact same location they glimpsed in the photograph. The juxtaposition of the photographed and filmed scenes thus emphasizes the jarring contrast between the thriving town Aldealseñor used to be, and the incipient ghost town it has become. Significantly, however, the manner in which Álvarez deploys the photographs downplays the power of the photographic medium. Theorists of photography, such as Barthes and Sontag, have seized upon the photograph's unique ability to mark absence, considering that quality to be the defining characteristic of the medium. Barthes cites the "that-has-been" (77) quality of the photograph – its capacity to show something that we know to be gone already – as its most essential characteristic. Sontag notes how "all photographs are *memento mori*" (15), highlighting the capacity for disappearance that photographs expose in whatever they depict.

Yet, in Álvarez's hands, the photograph proves incapable of signifying absence without some substantial assistance from other media. Álvarez grasps that the photograph does not connote absence as readily as theorists claim unless one is situated in an environment where that absence can be felt. Barthes's photograph of his mother resonates with her absence because he must always be a man whose mother has died, and whose mother is encapsulated in that photograph; for the rest of us, that image will not carry the same meanings, for we are not the ones whose lost mother is in the photo before us. As Mark Ingham, in his 2005 dissertation, explains:

> . . . [E]ach type of photograph and context for photographs will act differently with each type of memory system and process. A familiar photograph will act differently with autobiographical memory than and [sic] an iconic photographs acts with semantic memory. The differences maybe [sic] subtle but because different types of memory are being used, which have different properties, then what we remember and the way we remember are significantly different. (96)

Ingham argues that our faculty of memory is divided into several different subsystems that each have their own focus. As a result, a person's response to a given photograph changes depending upon how its subject matter relates to that person. If it has something to do with that person's own life, then it will evoke a response from his/her autobiographical memory; if not directly related to that person's life, it will be processed via his/her semantic memory, treated as an impersonal aesthetic artifact. The implication of Ingham's distinction is that a photograph's content, if autobiographical in the sense that it corresponds to its photographer's

life, does not evoke the same recognition of genre that a book or film might. Where other forms of autobiographical text might be able to depict absence or loss in a manner that resonates with its audience, a photograph, by Ingham's analysis, cannot establish that same empathetic connection by virtue of how our memory processes it. Álvarez exposes and exploits this phenomenon in her use of the monochrome photographs. The photos used in *El cielo gira* must indicate absent times and people to her, for these photographs are the stuff of her hometown and its history. Without context, if we look at her photographs, we might be aware that the subject of each photograph is no longer living, but it is a vague absence we feel. Álvarez ensures that her audiences feel the same absence she does when the photograph fades, and reveals to us precisely what that absence looks like: a lonely, vanishing village from which the passing years have taken more than they have given. The potency of Álvarez's technique in this instance highlights the core weakness of photography as an effective autobiographical medium. Her story concerns a history that threatens to disappear, whose loss would open a profound absence. While it might seem that photography would be good for chronicling a story of absence, Álvarez demonstrates that the photographic medium cannot meet her needs on its own.

Amidst Álvarez's many cautions regarding the visual arts, music receives its fair share of skepticism, as well. Nondiegetic music is conspicuously absent from *El cielo gira*, and aside from Álvarez's narration, no premeditated sound has been inserted into the film. Álvarez instead opts for quiet, meditative spans in which the sole noises – always diegetic – are the natural sounds of wind or animals, punctuated by the occasional conversation among villagers, or the noises of daily chores and labors being performed. Once and only once does

204

music creep into *El cielo gira*, and its appearance is met with ridicule. One scene depicts the peace of a sunny afternoon, in which dogs nap in the middle of the infrequently-used streets, and villagers drowse in the comfort of shaded chairs. The pleasant scene is interrupted when a car outfitted with loudspeakers comes rolling through town. The car belongs to the motor fleet of a politician seeking election, and the loudspeakers blare an energetic political anthem through the otherwise silent town. A recording of the politician's voice issues empty, generic promises over the din. A villager eyes the car apathetically, remaining in his seat as two campaign volunteers emerge from the car. They quickly install a poster on an empty wall, climb back into their vehicle, and vanish back up the road from whence they came, their anthem growing steadily less coherent as it fades into the distance. Hardly having stirred, the villager closes his eyes, and resumes his siesta. Besides making for a humorous interlude, the scene serves to diminish the value of music as an art form. For Álvarez, music does not move people; it annoys them, dispelling quiet and contemplation in a blast of noise. Further, the use of the political anthem demonstrates how easily music can be co-opted for base purposes like political gain. If art is supposed to elevate people, in line with Tarkovsky's thinking, then music as it appears in Álvarez's film is shown to be poorly-suited to the task.

If architecture is frozen music, as Goethe once claimed, then it should come as no surprise that Álvarez is equally as skeptical of architecture's artistic potential as she is of its aural cousin's. Although *El cielo gira* devotes substantial narrative time to documenting the progress of several construction projects around Aldealseñor – including the assembly of a massive windmill, and the renovation of an old castle into a luxury hotel – the film hints that these endeavors are transient and misguided. Architecture, broadly construed is typically

205

associated with permanence, or something approximating permanence. As Dean Hawkes writes in *The Environmental Imagination* (2008), the work of architecture at its most basic is "to establish a defined and constrained set of conditions of heat, light and sound within a building" (xv) – in short, to design an enclosure to withstand the elements and the passage of time. When compared to the brief span of a human life, a building's duration seems eternal.

Figure 38: Two species of dinosaurs

Álvarez's film respects this aspect of architecture, regularly featuring shots of buildings that have endured for centuries. Ruins of Celtiberian villages dating to the time of the Roman Empire appear in the countryside surrounding Álvarez's hometown, and medieval buildings still stand in the town's vicinity. At the same time, Álvarez finds a certain lifelessness in architecture's longevity. Old buildings in and around Aldealseñor more readily attest to the absence of inhabitants than to the permanence of the structure they once lived in, highlighted by a number of abandoned houses in town that feature prominent (and unread) signs advertising that they are for sale. Meanwhile, the newer construction projects – and the impulse to pursue them – are shown to be misguided on multiple levels. The film cleverly rhymes two shots of a piece of construction equipment and a plaster brontosaurus from an ineffective local tourist attraction, depicting both of them encased in fog. At first, the rhymed

206

shots make for a whimsical comparison. The slow, heavy movements of the construction vehicle resemble the plodding motions of a massive dinosaur, and for a moment, the vehicle does seem as though it is some kind of great beast. Yet there remains the uncomfortable reality that dinosaurs no longer exist, having faced extinction long ago. The construction vehicle – and the architecture it connotes – is thus likened to an extinct creature, and therefore aligned with an outdated mode of living that is ill-suited to changes in the world and time. Indeed, the various empty buildings around Aldealseñor could be read as the life cycle of all architectural effort: first it is new (like the hotel), then it is abandoned (the houses), then grows uninhabitable (the castle), and finally becomes a ruin marking a bygone age (the Celtiberian village).

More disconcerting still, architecture seems unaware of this limitation – or else willfully ignorant of it. Another scene depicts a construction worker assisting in the renovations of the old castle. The static camera peers through a room in the castle, resulting in a mise-en-abyme that gazes through several chambers whose walls have collapsed. At first, the shot closely resembles a similar mise-en-abyme from earlier in the film, when Álvarez follows two elderly women through the castle as they discuss the legends and ghosts associated with it. Off-camera, they speak of a girl who used to play in the castle, and wonder whether her spirit stalks it in the present. As if to spot that errant shade for herself, Álvarez trains her lens on a shaft of light that streams through an empty room, resulting in a beautiful set of nested frames. This earlier shot, and the history and curiosity that suffuse it, echo through the shot of the construction worker. Yet, as the scene with the construction worker plays out, the arresting composition his shot shares with the earlier scene is slowly undone by

207

the act of renovation. The worker methodically hefts and installs sheets of walling material, and in so doing, obscures the camera's view into the other rooms. By the end of the scene, what was formerly a stunning study in lighting and depth becomes a flat, uninspiring surface. The scene thus demonstrates another one of Álvarez's criticisms of architecture. While its products may be more likely to see future days than a painting, architecture attains this longevity at the expense of the past. The renovation of the castle reveals how this occurs: a work of architecture must occur in a given space, which has its own past and history before the work of architecture arrives, but which the architectural effort suppresses as it

Figure 39: Architecture obscuring the past

takes over that space. As the construction worker hangs the walling material, he blocks out the view of the old castle, and in so doing erases the (hi)stories that go along with it.

What occurs is this scene is reminiscent of Louis Kahn's objection to modern architecture in his seminal essay "Monumentality" (1944), in which he tacitly decries the

paucity of form and variety in contemporary construction practices, blaming the bland homogeneity he observes on an ignorance of the past. Kahn defines "monumentality," the most desirable characteristic a building might possess, as "a quality, a spiritual quality inherent in a structure which conveys the feeling of its eternity, that it cannot be added to or changed" (21), of which the Parthenon is the most quintessential example (22). Although a monumental building represents the zenith of architectural achievement, Kahn notes – with some impatience – that contemporary architects "do not believe we are psychologically constituted to convey a quality of monumentality to our buildings" (22) because "we are living in an unbalanced state of relativity which cannot be expressed with a single intensity of purpose" (22). In other words, modern times are considered too chaotic and confusing to yield anything timeless that could help define the era, and be expressed in its architecture. Kahn reads this stance as a surrender that ignores the value of the past, and in turn imperils the future. "[W]e dare not discard the lesson [monumental] buildings teach," Kahn writes, "for they have the common characteristic of greatness upon which the buildings of our future must, in one sense or another, rely" (23). In effect, architecture exposes itself to weakness when it neglects the past, as it thereby overlooks the histories, cultures, and traditions that help define a building's aesthetic value, as well as neglecting the principles of material usage and engineering that made those past buildings timeless. The renovation scene in *El cielo gira* thus showcases the worst of architecture in action as it actively cordons off the past, and buries it beneath a dull modern façade. However, Álvarez does not settle the question of whether architecture has some idea of its history-suppressing methods, or whether it does, and simply does not care.

The main problem Álvarez finds with regard to architecture is consistent with Kahn's cautions. Like the dinosaurs she compares it to, modern architecture appears unable to accommodate time. (The same criticism – an unacceptable relationship to time – applies to all the other forms she rejects, as well.) By its nature, architecture seeks to resist the passage of time and the changes that accompany it. However, as Proust or Gatsby or Faulkner can attest, time always wins in the end. Architecture thus proves to be an unsuitable model for autobiography, as well. It obscures history in favor of the new, but thereby ensures that it, too, will be consigned to oblivion after enough time has passed. Álvarez's film suggests that history – even the history that dates before one's years – is an essential component of one's life. Since the imminent disappearance of that history is the exigence behind *El cielo gira*, it stands to reason that Álvarez would find any form that fails to account for history lacking in autobiographical potential.

The question, then, is which form – if any – Álvarez finds suitable in the end. Like Frampton and Tarkovsky before her, sculpture is the one medium that escapes her systematic criticism and disavowal. In fact, sculpture even receives a positive treatment, indirectly broached through another encounter with the blind painter Pello Azketa. One scene finds Álvarez's camera observing the remains of a blighted elm tree – a hollowed-out trunk that looks as though it could be a fossil. In former days, when the tree was healthy, it grew in the center of Aldealseñor, and served as a meeting place for picnics and festivals. Conversations with the villagers reveal that the tree contracted some kind of disease several years ago, and none of the town's efforts to save it proved successful. As a result, the elm was pulled down and dragged off to the edge of town to await its decay, where Álvarez and her camera find it.

Azketa joins Álvarez as she films the fallen tree, and an important scene ensues: while Álvarez trains her lens on the elm's trunk, capturing its knotted exterior and varied texture, Azketa is seen running his hands over the tree's remains. Unable to fathom the elm's texture by sight, Azketa turns to his sense of touch, and lays his palms and fingers over every bit of the tree he can access. By means of its shift from the sense of sight to the sense of touch, this scene establishes the central importance of sculpture in

Figure 40: Azketa touching the elm

Álvarez's autobiographical film. What occurs in this scene is a turn toward the haptic, as Laura Marks describes in her 1998 essay, "Video Haptics and Erotics." Marks argues that there exists a technique whereby filmmakers can cause audiences to fuse their senses of sight and touch, resulting in a mode of interaction she terms "haptic visuality." As Marks explains:

> Haptic *perception* is usually defined as the combination of tactile, kinaesthetic [sic], and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies. In haptic *visuality*, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch. Haptic visuality, a term contrasted to optical visuality, draws from other forms of sense experience. primarily touch and kinaesthetics [sic]. Because haptic visuality draws upon other senses, the viewer's body is more obviously involved in the process of seeing than is the

case with optical visuality. (332)

Haptic visuality works by causing viewers to feel with their eyes, emphasizing the tactile aspects of what is filmed, and producing the sensation of touch through visual contact. As a result, a haptic encounter in a given film is a bodily experience, felt in additional loci besides the eyes, channeling the viewer's physicality. Álvarez invokes this technique by joining the otherwise straightforward image of the elm's husk to an image of somebody actively running his hands over that same elm. Seeing Azketa touch the elm at the same time as they are looking at it, Álvarez's audiences are made to touch the elm themselves. By Marks's account, the invocation of haptic visuality entails a "critique [of] vision, to show the limits of vision" (333), and indeed, Marks further contends that "haptic works . . . spring from this suspicion of vision" (333). Marks summarizes the impetus thus:

> . . . [T]he desire to squeeze the sense of touch out of an audiovisual medium, and the more general desire to make images that appeal explicitly to the viewer's body as a whole, seem to express a cultural dissatisfaction with the limits of visuality. This dissatisfaction might be phrased by saying that the more our world is rendered forth in visual images, the more things are left unexpressed. (334)

In other words, whenever a filmmaker makes his/her audience rely on haptic visuality, that move is made because the filmmaker finds vision an inadequate faculty for whatever s/he seeks to convey. Specifically, the move toward haptic visuality emphasizes what the visual alone normally obscures or silences. For Álvarez, this means restoring the invisible – the ghosts of history and memory – to prominence. Her first step in accomplishing this task is

212

bringing the other senses into play. Much in the same manner as Proust, through his madeleine, realizes that his underutilized sense of taste can spur an eruption of memory where his other senses cannot, Álvarez turns to the overlooked faculty of touch in an effort to awaken lost or vanishing memories. Significantly, Álvarez's shift toward touch – and the bodily, per Marks's analysis – necessitates the intervention of a sculptural interpretive apparatus. As I have explored at greater length in the introductory chapter, theorists of sculpture such as Rawson and Rogers have emphasized the vital role that of the corporeal in interpreting sculptures, as the body is the vessel through which we come to understand spaces, materials, and textures – three of the core components of sculpture. By orienting spectators via the elm toward a more bodily manner of comprehension, Álvarez encourages them to interact with the film in the same manner as if they were confronting a sculpture. Audiences do not merely see *El cielo gira*; like Azketa touching the downed tree, they feel it, as well.

An immediate consequence of shifting the interpretive apparatus is a reconfiguration of how time is perceived in the film, and an unlocking of the film's core themes regarding the nature of time and memory. In a brief meditation on *El cielo gira* from 2005, Víctor Erice – the same Erice behind the landmark Spanish film, *El espíritu de la colmena* (*Spirit of the Beehive*, 1973) – declares Álvarez's work, in what is perhaps an overstatement, to be among the cinema's few genuinely creative works. By granting the film this label, Erice posits that the film performs a specific aesthetic maneuver that elevates it above less artistic pursuits:

> *The Sky Turns*, as an authentic creative work, encourages an interesting
> reflection on the use of the cinematographic form in the documentary

experience. It confirms, once again, that in the margin of its nature, all the images and sounds exposed to the contemplation of the spectator must go through a process that allows them to come to life as a piece of cinematographic art. If not, the result, even if valuable at times, belongs more to the fields of journalism, sociology, or anthropology, rather than to cinema. What is this process about? Basically, the ritualized representation of time and space. (3)

For Erice, one of the cardinal virtues of *El cielo gira* is that it makes use of time and space in unique ways that cause its otherwise commonplace documentary qualities to ascend to the realm of high art. Before Álvarez's lens, simple sights like houses and fields become something greater than their appearance first suggests, because Álvarez demonstrates a singular, idiosyncratic way of depicting the space they occupy, and the time in which they occur. By Erice's metric, this is no small task, for skillful arrangements of time and space are to him the heart of the cinema: he notes that the "ability to record and re-record in both time and space is the key to the essential quality present in filmmaking since its origins" (3). Like Tarkovsky, Erice sees the manipulation of time as the fundamental tool of the cinematic arts. (It should come as no surprise, then, to learn that Erice himself is an unabashed Tarkovsky enthusiast.) If a filmmaker manages to channel that tool effectively, his/her films become unique art by virtue of their approach to time, which in turn results in a new way to conceive of the cinema. Erice notes that this is precisely what Álvarez accomplishes: "In the line of this primal experience, *The Sky Turns* is one of those films, so rare nowadays, through which the cinema, that fantasm of reality . . . escapes from the limits of conventional cinematic

214

language, is reincarnated, and comes back to life" (3). Erice finds in *El cielo gira* a film that speaks a new variety of cinematic language, spoken through its particular manner of representing time and space. In Álvarez's case, her singular mode of representation is found in her sculptural approach. Taking into account Erice's assessments, it becomes apparent why the move toward sculpture ultimately proves necessary for the success of Álvarez's autobiographical film. Whereas all the other art forms Álvarez rejects have some problematic drawbacks for her history-conscious autobiographical project, sculpture affords Álvarez a medium that is able to encompass and interact with time in a productive capacity. By Erice's measurement, it is precisely this interaction that constitutes the primary merit of Álvarez's film. As a consequence, the way Álvarez uses sculpture to define and reshape time deserves further investigation.

The question, then, is what a sculptural approach allows Álvarez to accomplish. I contend that, by structuring her film like a sculpture, Álvarez engages in a process of uncovering lost time. When she encourages her audience to read *El cielo gira* like a sculpture, Álvarez also attunes her viewers to the sophisticated techniques she uses in order to make past time visible. In the end, *El cielo gira* turns out to be a sculpture made of memories, where the present is pulled aside to expose the past at its core.

E. Sculpting in Memory: Empty Spaces Filled with Time

Having established Álvarez's predilection for sculpture, the next task is to explore how an awareness of Álvarez's sculptural techniques allows for a deeper understanding of her autobiographical film. The fallen elm tree discussed in the prior section provides the first hint

as to where this line of inquiry should begin. The elm is central to the film in more ways than one, doubling as a marker of spatial centrality and a technical centerpiece. In its heyday, the elm served as the former center of Aldealseñor, denoting the point around which the entire town developed, and where many individualized memories accrued. To this end, the tree could be considered a twist on one of Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, as articulated in his 1989 essay, "Between Memory and History." Nora observes that memory and history tend to be bound up with particular physical loci. One thinks, for example, of monuments, memorials, or holy sites, whose primary functions are to establish the significance of a specific location, and to ensure its continued relevance in the future. Nora terms these types of locations "*lieux de mémoire*" (7), or sites of memory, to denote the role they play in individual and communal remembrance. In a way, the elm tree serves a similar function, acting as a physical site whose most salient purpose is to aid the retention of the past. Yet, when Álvarez documents both the current state of the fallen tree and the stories the remaining villagers tell about it, she reveals that the elm becomes a paradoxical landmark, in that it is not bound solely to its physical confines. The tree's rather unceremonious deracination causes it to occupy two places at once: as the decaying trunk at the edge of town, and as a memory in the blank space it leaves in the center of Aldealseñor. The elm thus complicates a straightforward concept of place, creating an environment in which the space an entity exists in extends beyond its physical dimensions, and reaches back into time, as well. (This phenomenon could well be termed "dis-place-ment," a somewhat playful construction emphasizing both the resultant spatial paradox and the process by which that state is induced.) Álvarez, therefore, uses the elm to reorient the viewer's concept of the boundaries

of a physical object. Objects for Álvarez do not exist in space alone, with their limits defined by their physical presences; they also exist within time, and the temporal dimension of a given object is as important as its physicality. Since Azketa's interactions with the toppled elm instruct us to think about the tree as a type of sculpture, its dis-place-ment forces us to consider sculpture in terms of its temporal components, as well. The fusion of time and space in a single sculptural entity enables Álvarez to sidestep Nora's binary between history and memory. In Nora's analysis, *lieux de mémoire* are of critical interest because they help to illustrate the divergence of memory and history; Nora even asserts that "Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear . . . to be in fundamental opposition" (8). In characterizing the two as discrete phenomena, Nora claims, "Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself exclusively to temporal continuities, to progressions and relations between things" (9). The elm, through Álvarez's treatment of it, satisfies both sets of Nora's criteria, providing a concrete aspect – conveniently uniting space, image, object, and even gesture via Azketa's touch – as well as a temporal dimension. Unifying the spatial and the temporal, the material and the immaterial, the elm tree reveals Álvarez's sculptural medium. Her domain is history and memory taken in tandem. Where Frampton conceives of filmmaking as sculpting in light, and Tarkovsky thinks of filmmaking as sculpting in time, Álvarez finds filmmaking to be a process of chipping away at the present until the past – be it either personal memories or national histories – becomes perceptible.

To borrow a phrase from Patricia Keller (2012), Álvarez's film can be read as "a text dedicated to the poetics of visualizing what we cannot see" (367). At the same time as the old

elm tree reveals Álvarez's hand, exposing her project and process, it also provides a primer for making sense of her technique. The main question, after realizing Álvarez has set out to restore the past to our perception, is how she attains this goal. Keller argues that "the film concentrates primarily on the *process* of the 'has been' turning into the 'will be'" (365; emphasis in original), suggesting that the methods behind Álvarez's project are at least as important as their results. We ought to consider, then, what methods Álvarez uses to make the invisible past visible again. Furthermore, it is worth investigating how she moves from the material anchor of sculpture to the immaterial level of time past. In a rare interview from 2007 in which Álvarez discusses her own work, she offers some insight into her approach:

> Filmar el tiempo es un ideal, un gran ideal, pero sólo un ideal. Lo que se obtiene en todo caso es la huella que el tiempo deja sobre las personas y las cosas, su rastro, su sombra. Y me gusta pensar que hay lugares, quizás un tanto apartados del mundo, donde es más fácil registrar esas huellas. (175)[27]

Álvarez is fully aware that, despite the filmmaker's dream of recording time directly, that such a dream cannot directly be made reality. The best that the camera can do is record the traces time leaves as it flows – its "footprint" or its "shadow." (Incidentally, both footprints and shadows figure prominently in *El cielo gira*, between the fossilized dinosaur tracks glimpsed near the film's outset, and the slow track of the shadows of clouds as they pass over the fields.) Álvarez's strategy, then, is to seek out "places . . . where it is easier to register those traces." The hollow core of the elm tree is one such place. The elm guides viewers toward a solution to the earlier questions of method and medium by encouraging them to

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27 "To film time is an ideal, a grand ideal, but it is only an ideal. What is obtained in any case is the trace that time leaves about persons and things, its footprint, its shadow. And I like to think that there are places, perhaps so long removed from the world, where it easier to record those traces." (My translation.)

ponder the implications of – and unseen presences within – hollow, seemingly empty spaces. Among the fallen elm's defining characteristics is its hollow core. Voice-over narration in *El cielo gira* explains that the tree had become hollow even before it was uprooted, for trees die from the inside out. The center of the trunk of any given tree is where new growth occurs, pushing outward as the new plant cells increase in number and harden. If the tree is no longer living, new material is not being generated in its innermost section. The softer inner tissues of the tree decay first, leaving the sturdier outer rings – the solid wood and tough bark – to fall apart much later. On one level, the fallen elm serves as an apt metaphor for what befalls the town of Aldealseñor: the young have disappeared, and the prospect of growth and renewal with them, leaving only the old. On another level, however, the tree provides a heuristic for thinking about what hollowness means in Álvarez's film. The hollowed-out portions of the elm tree have a specific temporal connotation. Not only is the elm's hollow core a product of decay, thereby connoting the passage of time, but what is missing from the elm is the biological engine that would propel it into the future. The empty center of the elm, then, indicates a space where the future has not taken hold, and that the past inhabits. When we peer into the elm, we are not seeing nothing. Rather, we are glimpsing a past that is not perceptible by our eyes alone.

The elm is therefore instructive regarding how to interpret Álvarez's film as a whole. Efrén Cuevas suggests that *El cielo gira* "stands out for its dense articulation of the temporal and spatial axes, around which the filmmaker proposes a fertile reflection on time, memory and history" (89). What Cuevas overlooks, however, is how space and time complement and illuminate one another in the film. The numerous empty spaces within *El cielo gira* evoke the

same temporal awareness as the core of the elm tree. Like Tarkovsky before her, Álvarez uses empty spaces as a material portal to the immaterial – and the otherwise ineffable. History, for Álvarez, is invisible, and resists straightforward sensory apprehension as a consequence. However, by scouring the places history inhabits – to wit: empty, hollow spaces – we might come to sense history's presence. Whenever her lens lingers over a space where emptiness or hollowness seems to prevail, Álvarez is in fact drawing our attention to the time that has passed through that space, and making us aware of past time that we would not otherwise see. Vlada Petrić's characterization of Tarkovsky's camera applies equally well to Álvarez's: "the camera is an explorer rather than an observer" (32). Her lens turns sights into sites, exploring their hidden aspects rather than passively observing them. Given her objective of discovering past time, and making it visible once more, *El cielo gira* could be called a film about excavating history, and demonstrating how the present accrues around it, while history waits to be detected within.

Multiple scenes throughout *El cielo gira* serve the dual function of illustrating Álvarez's technique and illuminating the significance behind it. In turn, the profusion of such scenes highlights the importance of process in Álvarez's autobiographical project – always a central tenet of a sculpturally-oriented film – and thus reinforces the case for interpreting her film with a sculpturally-minded critical apparatus. To begin with, there are several instances of unintentional exhumation that serve as concise metaphors of Álvarez's autobiographical practices. Early in the film (0:10:47-0:14:00), Álvarez documents a conversation between two of the remaining villagers as they tend the local cemetery, pruning unruly plants and maintaining the grounds. One of the villagers then tells the story of his aunt's burial years

220

ago. As her grave was being prepared, he says, the skull of his deceased uncle was inadvertently pried from the earth, somehow still covered in hair. Amidst the astonished cries of his relatives, the villager deposited the skull in the cemetery's bone pit, where "it was the custom to throw away all the bones that came out." A parallel story occurs later on (0:43:10-0:43:24), when another villager recalls the day the blighted elm tree was pried from its original location in the town square. The villager mentions that several sets of human remains were discovered beneath the tree, and Álvarez supplies three monochrome photographs of the surprised villagers handling the bones they unearthed. Taken together, these two scenes of "unburial" explore the way time congeals into space, hiding history within the present, as well as indicating how that history can be examined. Each of the two instances of accidental exhumation demonstrates how the past lays claim to the same space as the present. Both scenes feature attempts in the present to make use of a given space (the burial site, the town center), only to find that the past has beaten them to it: what appears to be an unused, empty space in the present turns out to be the hallowed ground of prior days. The frame composition of each scene further emphasizes the unseen potential histories of empty space by prominently featuring opened spaces, inviting viewers to consider their significance. In the cemetery scene, the two villagers have carved ruts in the ground as if tilling a field for planting, and the upturned soil echoes the image of the accidentally opened grave from the villager's story. Similarly, the scene discussing the hidden mass grave features images of the rut where the elm tree once stood, as if to encourage audiences to think of what else might be hidden there. In these scenes, then, space becomes the material equivalent of time gone by, having been built upon a foundation of times past. The true character of this material is made

221

apparent through its manipulation, for once it is carved up and reshaped, the texture of the past reveals itself, and history is uncovered. As Antonio Gómez López-Quiñones explains in his 2007 essay, "Más álla de la nostalgia" ("Beyond Nostalgia"), the film is about revealing the history within every history, and using physical traces to make that history visible:

> [La] ampliación del marco temporal se produce mediante breves y constantes digresiones narrativas que, a partir de huellas físicas de otras epocas, cuentan la trayectoria de este pueblo y de esta comarca como una historia de constantes desposesiones y pérdidas . . . Todas estas fugas narrativas crean un *mise en abysme* [sic] bastante relevante. Cada origen remite a un origen previo, cada pérdida supone el eco de otra pérdida acontecida con anterioridad, cada fundación primigenia se trata de una simple refundación más. (367-8)

Gómez López-Quiñones observes that, every time Álvarez deploys a marker of the past in *El cielo gira*, that marker immediately connotes a past even further behind the one the marker initially reveals. The film is thus one constant *mise-en-abyme* of time, peering backward into the past whenever a trace of prior times surfaces. What occurs in the pair of unburial scenes, then, is roughly the reverse of the process witnessed in the scenes of palace renovation. Where the renovation scene depicts a worker in the present time covering up the past, and obscuring history from view, Álvarez's camera pulls away the present so that the past can be seen once more. Once again, Álvarez's kinship with Tarkovsky surfaces. Vlada Petrić's observation that Tarkovsky's trademark long, uninterrupted take "emphasizes the temporal nature of reality . . . in order to reach something that the naked eye neglects or is

222

unaccustomed to perceiving" (28) could easily apply to Álvarez's own long takes. Where Tarkovsky's protracted shots admit time into the frame to make his shaping of it perceptible, Álvarez deploys long takes to make her audiences cognizant of time, and to alert them to the hidden histories they are not typically equipped to see.

The two unburial scenes also help to explain the social approach Álvarez takes to her autobiographical project. Despite *El cielo gira* being an autobiographical film, Álvarez trains her lens on other people much more frequently than she does herself; in fact, she never once appears before the camera. Further, Álvarez herself utters fewer words throughout the film than many of the villagers. It is as if she were a minor character in her own life story. The unburial scenes, however, indicate why the recording of and emphasis upon other people is essential for her particular autobiographical work. Each of the exhumation scenes conflates the past with the interpersonal, as each grave is noted to contain the remains of multiple people. As a consequence, the past in Álvarez's model cannot be made intelligible without also reaching an understanding of those who populated it; similarly, one's memories are less easily fathomed without a grasp of those who shared them. Additionally, since the preservation of Aldealseñor in some form is one of her objectives in *El cielo gira*, Álvarez realizes that this cannot be attained unless she examines the people who helped constitute the town. For in Álvarez's schema, every space is also a time (as emphasized by how the past occupies the opened spaces in each scene), and all times are made of those who came before oneself (as the multiple human remains in each instance attest). Álvarez thus has no autobiography without her hometown, and no hometown without the neighboring villagers. As exemplified by the two unburial scenes, then, Álvarez's method could accurately be

termed *inter*-rogation, questioning what has been buried, and asking for its help in determining her own history and identity.

Although Álvarez emphasizes the personal component of her sculptural technique, selecting her hometown and memories as the primary loci of her investigations, her film hints that her methods carry implications extending far beyond the personal sphere. For what is at stake in Álvarez's mission is nothing less than the entire present's relation to the past. Álvarez suggests that the fate of Aldealseñor – to disappear into obscurity unless someone intervenes and remembers it – is not an exceptional case, but rather, the standard fare for any town, or even any civilization. The film devotes some attention to the Celtiberian ruins surrounding Aldealseñor, using the ruins as both a cause of worry and a sign of hope. While the ruins may first appear to be an uncommon sight – who, after all, has acres upon acres of conspicuous ancient ruins within walking distance of one's childhood home? – Álvarez links the ruins to the world's modern civilizations through rhyming shots and trenchant vignettes, revealing that ruins already surround us, either unseen or pending. One of the shots that introduces the ruins shows the

Figure 41: The windmill channel and the ruins

224

foundations of collapsed houses running like veins through a foggy landscape. The powerful image suggests that the bygone Celtiberian civilization is doomed to be forgotten, the fog settling over its remains like a physical embodiment of amnesia. Álvarez reuses this type of composition later in the film when she documents the efforts of the modern-day Spanish government to build a windmill in the fields near Aldealseñor. Álvarez trains her lens upon the channels carved into the earth, into which power lines are lain and covered. The geometry of the channels resembles the lines of the Celtiberian settlements, echoing the ruined village's ghostly connotations. To add to the effect, the shot of the windmill channels is also blanketed in fog, further tying it to the Celtiberian ruins and all they symbolize. Álvarez thus inverts the image of progress and renewal that the modern construction project otherwise carries: today's new infrastructure development is simply tomorrow's archaeological discovery.

Lest Álvarez risk confining her observations to Spain alone, she includes another image to indicate the universality of the ruination she describes. One scene depicts a fighter jet flying overhead – ostensibly a US war plane, on its way to a base in eastern Europe, where it will later be deployed in George W. Bush's foolhardy invasion of Iraq. In the meantime, a trio of villagers discusses the Iraq War, while a news broadcast about the initial Iraq invasion appears in the following scene. The military superpowers of the West and the nations of the Middle East are thus brought into the purview of the film – and subjected to the same ruinous forecast as the Celtiberians and the Spanish. Álvarez, in a voice-over vignette, speculates that the fighter jet is going off to bury another city, Baghdad, thus placing the Iraqi capital on the same level as the Celtiberian settlement. Similarly, the conversation about Bush the idiot conqueror equates the US with the Roman Empire, the

225

power that subjugated the Celtiberians only to collapse under its own weight as history unfolded. Every civilization that appears in *El cielo gira* is thus mentioned in the same breath as the ruin it will someday become – a theme Álvarez is keenly aware of, given that this discussion occurs in a chapter called "Las ciudades sumergidas" ("the sunken cities," or more idiomatically, "the buried cities"). All cities, as well as the civilizations that erected them, will eventually be buried beneath the gradual accumulation of time.

Yet, in Álvarez's hands, the cognizance of this universal ruin becomes less a nihilistic surrender and more a call to action, for Álvarez offers a provision for resisting the pull of oblivion: the sculptural method she employs in her film, the uncovering of the past within the present. Although the Celtiberian ruins are images of a city's decay – a *memento mori* on a town-sized scale – they are also joined to scenes of remembrance. At the outset of "Las ciudades sumergidas," Álvarez includes a sequence in which a historian lectures a group of tourists on the civilizations that once occupied the ruins (0:49:02-0:52:23). The historian recounts how the civilization resisted the military force of the Roman Empire, as well as their final defeat at its hands. He also shows the tourists a series of artifacts recovered from the site, to help them better envision the scenarios he describes. The lecture gives new life to the ruins, in that it ascribes a story to them: rather than a configuration of geometrically-arranged stones, the ruins transform into objects with a history, and the empty space they enclose becomes suffused with the past. What Álvarez demonstrates in this scene is that history, once uncovered, can imbue otherwise empty spaces with meaning, and preserve some trace of collapsed civilizations. The Celtiberian ruins, then, serve as sites where Álvarez's unburial technique is performed on a larger scale, and with wider implications. If Aldealseñor is one

226

small town comprising one woman's memories, it is also a microcosm for the play of larger forces of decay and forgetting. By extension, the Celtiberian ruins are themselves the product of several Aldealseñors, and the Roman Empire is multiple Celtiberian ruins. By featuring the Celtiberian ruins in her film, Álvarez shows that the same process that salvages her own hometown from disappearing completely can be applied on a larger scale, as well. For if the town is the fundamental unit of the civilization, then the repeated application of historical unburial to those units can eventually excavate the entire civilization. Álvarez's method thus doubles as instructions regarding how the present must learn to relate to the past. To guard against being forgotten, one must guard against forgetting.

One of the major implications of Álvarez's stance, then, is learning to see and respect the past even when it is not readily visible. To this end, the film trains viewers to develop that kind of sensitivity, using long takes and empty spaces to evoke the past while appearing to view only the present. Phrased another way, Álvarez's technique instructs and equips her audiences to view the present in terms of the past, to look upon the immediate as a portal to a well of memories.

Álvarez puts her technique to uses both grave and lighthearted. In a moment of understated humor, Álvarez manages to rein in images of futurity, and use them to evoke the past instead. The windmill construction project that coincides with her visit to Aldealseñor sees completion during her stay, and Álvarez dutifully monitors its progress. Audiences witness the installation of underground power wires, the surprisingly delicate act of placing the heavy components of the windmill's main column, and eventually the swooping blades of the finished windmill. Were they to appear in a socialist-realist documentary, these scenes

might make for a paean to progress, a preview of the future and the hope it brings. While Álvarez does not preclude this reading, she tempers it by including another image: a skyline full of windmills glimpsed from over the distant plains (0:48:00). The result is a lightly humorous scene, for no Spaniard can look upon a sparse, windmill-populated landscape without realizing that the composition alludes to one

Figure 42: A skyline full of windmills

of the most famous scenes in all of Spanish literature: Don Quixote tilting at windmills. At the outset of Chapter VIII of Cervantes's immortal novel, Don Quixote and his squire Sancho Panza catch sight of a cotillion of windmills across a plain, which Don Quixote mistakes for a horde of marauding giants, and thereupon vows to slay them:

> En esto, descubrieron treinta o cuarenta molinos de viento que hay en aquel campo; y, así como don Quijote los vio, dijo a su escudero: La ventura va guiando nuestras cosas mejor de lo que acertáramos a desear, porque ves allí, amigo Sancho Panza, donde se descubren treinta, o pocos más, desaforados gigantes, con quien pienso hacer batalla y quitarles a todos las vidas, con cuyos despojos comenzaremos a enriquecer; que ésta es buena guerra, y es gran servicio de Dios quitar tan mala simiente de sobre la faz de la tierra.

228

¿Qué gigantes? dijo Sancho Panza. Aquellos que allí ves, respondió su amo, de los brazos largos, que los suelen tener algunos de casi dos leguas. Mire vuestra merced, respondió Sancho, que aquellos que allí se parecen no son gigantes, sino molinos de viento, y lo que en ellos parecen brazos son las aspas, que, volteadas del viento, hacen andar la piedra del molino. Bien parece, respondió don Quijote, que no estás cursado en esto de las aventuras: ellos son gigantes; y si tienes miedo, quítate de ahí, y ponte en oración en el espacio que yo voy a entrar con ellos en fiera y desigual batalla. (49-50)

What makes Álvarez's composition so humorous is twofold. The geography of her landscape closely aligns with the scene Cervantes draws, the sole difference being the smaller quantity of windmills depicted. It makes it seem as though Álvarez, and the viewer by extension, has wandered into a 16th-century novel – which might be precisely the feeling one has as one experiences the many antiquated sights of Aldealseñor. Associating the windmill construction project with the exploits of Don Quixote also adds a level of comedy to the scene. Much of the humor in *Don Quijote* stems from the protagonist's absurd fantasies and his unwavering commitment to them. By invoking the machinery of the novel, Álvarez questions whether the government's efforts to modernize Aldealseñor belong to the same family of quixotic ideas. At the same time, there is something noble about the sight. In the same manner that Don Quixote himself is respected rather than ridiculed, regarded fondly for his chivalrous behavior that simply happens to be centuries out of date, the windmill construction project outside the depopulated Aldealseñor comes across as a benevolent and admirable pursuit, if not an especially timely one. Besides casting the construction project in a new light,

Álvarez's channeling of *Don Quijote* redefines how time functions in this scene. Where the windmill begins as an image of the future – being a sign of renewable energy, long-term planning, and the unquestioned belief that there will be many more tomorrows – Álvarez's staging causes it to double as a backward-looking image. Spain's past and future therefore inhabit the same space. Álvarez thus demonstrates that the past will "live on," continuing to exert its influence in the spaces of the future. The questions of temporality raised during Álvarez's survey of Aldealseñor, then, are shown not to be unique to that particular milieu. What happens to time in this scene is what will always happen to it, no matter where – or when – one travels.

In more serious moments, Álvarez focuses her history-revealing techniques on individual mortality, and uses it as a gateway to thinking about how the past lingers in the present. This approach is perhaps most readily apparent in how the film treats the death of Eliseo, Álvarez's uncle, a resident of Aldealseñor who passed away during the film's shoot. Patricia Keller suggests that a repeated displacement of time marks one of the major themes of the film: "things . . . never really exist in one state or another but always and only in multiple times at once, which is to say in a time of transition, an interval period not only between past and future or between place and politics, but also a temporal state that occupies both simultaneously" (365). The indeterminacy of time in *El cielo gira* is at its most dramatic when applied to people instead of places, and Eliseo serves as a prime case study in Álvarez's temporal displacements. Conspicuously, every aspect of Eliseo's illness and eventual death occurs offscreen. Álvarez mentions his falling ill in a voice-over vignette while the camera lingers over the exterior of his house. A few more scattered scenes of life in Aldealseñor

follow. Then Álvarez introduces a sequence wherein distant bells are heard tolling, and the camera observes various buildings and fields around the town, with no signs of conscious life but some dogs wandering the area. The final shot in this sequence is another prolonged view of the exterior of Eliseo's house, virtually unchanged from its earlier appearance, save for the removal of a chair that once sat outside the door. It

Figure 43: Eliseo's "death scene"

is not clear what has occurred in this sequence until the next shot, when we are brought to the village cemetery, and see a single figure working among the graves. Álvarez's narration offhandedly mentions that Eliseo recently died, and instead of having that be the subject of the sentence she utters, it is used as a marker of context to punctuate the approach of winter: "After Eliseo's death, after the departure of the painter, things began to change. As it happens in winter, the first signs of change came from the north, from the far side of the hills." Only the first clause in the quoted narration explicitly states Eliseo has died; nothing onscreen specifically depicts his passing. Álvarez thus plays a trick on her audience: they might have seen the moment when Eliseo died, given the external shot of his house, but there is no certainty. Her viewers are deprived the visual confirmation of Eliseo's demise. As a result, Eliseo comes to occupy a liminal space in the film, straddling the boundaries between past

231

and present, immediacy and memory. Linda C. Ehrlich ventures this explanation for what transpires:

> The saddest moment – the realization of the death of Mercedes' uncle Eliseo – is reported only by a specific tolling of a church bell, the appearance of a fox and the removal of the uncle's favourite chair from the yard. In this way, the director ties images together to help us see – or, even more, to immerse us in that fertile place between the present and the remembered past through her specific inner gaze (*mirada interior*).

In the absence of concrete visuals of Eliseo alive or dead, the man exists in the film as something not quite a ghost, a presence that haunts particular venues around Aldealseñor by virtue of Álvarez having associated it with him. To look upon those places in *El cielo gira*, then, is to witness time enfolding itself. Viewers see places Eliseo used to occupy, and that he still might, never having pinpointed the time he stopped being there; places they were formerly certain Eliseo occupied become more slippery, as there was never any confirmation he walked through them. The effect this uncertainty achieves is to force audiences to see all the times a scene might contain by virtue of having mixed up the time they thought they beheld. Eliseo's wavering presence causes the past and present to cohabitate, and reveals that this confluence of times pervades every site – and every sight – in the film. Álvarez thus teaches her viewers to look upon the present in terms of memory, thinking of what any given venue formerly held, and to consider the past that this present moment will soon become.

As a result of Álvarez's repeated contortions of time and space throughout *El cielo gira*, the film ultimately fuses the two, dictating that each be conceived in terms of the other.

Space is material time in Álvarez's hands, and time is made comprehensible and perceptible by means of space; whenever Álvarez presents space, she is also making us see time. Linguistically, Álvarez alludes to this method through her choices of spoken vocabulary. Describing a hillside on which a dolmen and a shepherd's hut are situated, she notes how, "If anyone walked from one place to the other on a misty day, they could pass through thousands of years without a problem" (0:36:00-0:36:13). Elsewhere, following a chance encounter between a shepherd and a marathon runner in training, both of whom happen to hail from Morocco, Álvarez comments that "in an instant they were separated by 1,000 years of distance" once the two part ways (1:26:54). In each instance, Álvarez synthesizes time and space, measuring time in spatial units as if it were distance, and quantifying distance in terms of temporal measurements. As a consequence, the step becomes a unit of both space and time, a measurement of both the distance and the years traversed in a single movement. A visual metaphor for this phenomenon occurs in the first three minutes of the film, when an elderly woman leads Álvarez up a rocky hillside to a series of fossilized dinosaur tracks embedded in the stone atop it (0:02:37). Given their early appearance in the film, the dinosaur tracks can be read as a means of foreshadowing Álvarez's fusion of space and time. The fossilized footprints depict the transmutation of time into space, and vice versa: they are physical examples of steps across spatial distance and bygone time. The dinosaur tracks also serve as an illustration of the sculptural means through which Álvarez attains and makes use of the spatio-temporal fusion. Each of the tracks is a hollow space, a form given shape by an absence instead of a presence. They are, in effect, sculptures of their own. Since the fossilized footprints are the most long-lived thing glimpsed in *El cielo gira*, the film suggests

233

that their sculptural composition may be the key to their longevity. Defined by what is not there as much as they are defined by what still remains, the footprints endure throughout the eons by means of their dual associations with the material (the stone) and the immaterial (the empty space therein). A similar heuristic applies to all sculpture. For a film concerned with the preservation of a vanishing village, the durability of the sculpture thus offers an outlet for resisting outright disappearance. The fossilized dinosaur tracks, then, expose Álvarez's core methodologies in *El cielo gira*. To grapple with questions of time, permanence, and decay, Álvarez turns to sculpture, the medium best suited to such issues; to craft a sculpture that illustrates these concerns, Álvarez selects time and history as her materials; to show time and history onscreen in a visual capacity, Álvarez converts them into visible space, drawing attention to them through seemingly empty spaces.

Álvarez's history-revealing techniques reach their culmination in the film's concluding shot when audiences receive one last glimpse of the oak tree that used to be "the spot that was the world" in Álvarez's childhood. As mentioned in a previous section, the last sequence of the film consists of a long take of said tree alone on its hill, which then dissolves into a Pello Azketa painting of

Figure 44: Dinosaur tracks in stone

the same view. In terms of frame composition, the shot is of interest only insofar as it rhymes with the initial shot of the tree from earlier in the film (0:05:11). Álvarez essentially

234

duplicates the shot of the tree seen at the film's outset, the sole difference between the two instances being the season in which the tree is filmed: autumn for the first shot, summer for the second. The question, then, is what purpose the duplicate image serves. While the images in the two frames are nearly identical, Álvarez causes the final image of the tree to take on a resonance lacking in its first appearance, performing an emotional coup-de-grace to conclude her film. When viewers first see the image of the tree in *El cielo gira*, they see only its surface: a rather desolate-looking hillside, a stretch of sky, a lonely tree. In other words, during this first instance of the tree, the audience is prepared to see only that which is already visible. Yet, as *El cielo gira* progresses, Álvarez trains her audience to look beyond the surface of things, and develop a sensitivity toward the past that all empty spaces contain. As Ehrlich describes it, "In a landscape on the verge of disappearing, memories hover above the ground, not touching down, in a weightless

Figure 45: The oak at the film's outset (top) and conclusion (bottom)

manner like mist." Álvarez has spent the entire film uncovering the past of Aldealseñor, bringing to light its rich collection of stories, memories, and historical confluences, so that by the time the tree recurs in the film's final shot, viewers are equipped to see it for what it really

235

is. The tree truly *is* a whole world by the film's conclusion, and instead of appearing to be the sole landmark on a sparse landscape, it becomes a visible locus around which history gathers. The final shot of the tree is thus a shot of memory made perceptible, a frame teeming with the vibrant history that Aldealseñor once risked losing. In the end, Álvarez's sculptural approach causes the film's last glimpse of the present time to be seen as a potential past waiting to be excavated. Lost time is therefore regained in the triumphant final shot of *El cielo gira*, for it is shown to have been preserved all along – one merely need learn how to carve it out of the present, as Álvarez has done.

F. Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed Mercedes Álvarez's *El cielo gira* as a final case study in the connection between autobiographical film and sculpture. While Álvarez has not yet produced a work of film theory expounding upon her own aesthetic theories as Frampton and Tarkovsky have done, a close reading of her film coupled with comparative readings of Frampton's and Tarkovsky's reveals that Álvarez has the same preoccupations and methods as the other two filmmakers. Like Frampton and Tarkovsky, Álvarez's film systematically highlights the limitations of multiple artistic media, ultimately finding sculpture to be the most effective paradigm for thinking about her autobiographical film. Interpreting *El cielo gira* through a sculptural lens reveals many of the film's previously unobserved nuances. By paying attention to the film's sculptural qualities, I hope to have demonstrated that *El cielo gira* relies on a subtractive method, much in the same manner as Frampton's *(nostalgia)* and Tarkovsky's *Mirror*. Studying Álvarez's particular subtractive efforts reveals one of the keys

to the film: she works to pare away the present, and its obscuration of the past, in order to make history perceptible again. Like Frampton and Tarkovsky, Álvarez accomplishes the task of rendering the invisible visible by enacting a shift within the film from the material toward the immaterial. In a similar manner as Tarkovsky uses the material qualities of empty space as a vessel for the transmission of immaterial memories, Álvarez uses empty spaces to summon the past, and thus indicate immaterial histories which could not otherwise be expressed through material means. A sculptural critical apparatus is thus indispensable to an understanding of *El cielo gira*, as it brings to light both the methods and successes of Álvarez's autobiographical film. In turn, sculpture theory proves itself increasingly valuable for the interpretation of autobiographical film in general.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND OTHER PARTING THOUGHTS

"The chicken has an inside and an outside.
Remove the outside and you find the inside.
Remove the inside, and you find the soul."

~Jean-Luc Godard, *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962)

To conclude, I review the discoveries my dissertation has unearthed, beginning with chapter summaries, discussing the contents and results of each. From there, I explain the broader implications of each for autobiographical film generally. Lastly, I advance some hypotheses regarding possible applications of my findings and ideas for future scholarship to develop the work I have begun in this inquiry.

Chapter 1, "Toward a Poetics of Subtraction," explores several reasons why sculpture theory should be introduced into the study of autobiographical film, offering early hypotheses as to what a sculpturally-conscious theoretical approach might include. After a review of the current critical literature surrounding autobiographical film, I highlight one of the major trends in autobiographical film criticism: the analysis of such films in terms of self-portraiture. While noting that there are circumstances in which self-portraiture offers a useful theoretical framework, I argued that it is inadequate in some cases. Specifically, when the makers of autobiographical films emphasize their materiality, or their production process, self-portraiture theory becomes inadequate, lacking an established framework for assessing materiality and process. Observing that autobiographical filmmakers Hollis Frampton and Andrei Tarkovsky have alluded in their critical writings to the ways in which filmmaking is

comparable to sculpture, I advocate an investigation into sculpture's techniques and modes of reading to see how they might complement an understanding of autobiographical film. Theoretical works regarding sculpture suggest that a thorough reading of any given sculpture demands attention to its materials, the techniques used to produce it, and the subtractive nature of the sculptor's art, paring away extraneous materials until a finished work emerges. Further, confirming and enhancing the intuitions of Frampton and Tarkovsky, I find a noteworthy overlap between critical assessments of how both sculpture and film function, bolstering the case for thinking about films through a sculptural lens.

In Chapter 2, "Hollis Frampton's *(nostalgia)*," I analyze the critical writings of Hollis Frampton, along with his autobiographical film *(nostalgia)*. Based on his writings, Frampton's account of cinema conceives of film in terms of sculpture, recognizing that any film is, at its core, a projection of light. As a consequence, the medium with which the filmmaker works can be thought of as a rectangle of white – that is, light in its unadulterated form – from which various wavelengths can be taken away to produce different colors and images. For Frampton, then, the process of filmmaking is like that of sculpture, beginning with an undifferentiated mass of material, and paring away what is unnecessary until a completed work results. Coupling his observations regarding film's sculptural qualities to his emphasis on medium and process in film art, I set about reading *(nostalgia)* with these principles in mind. A sculptural approach to *(nostalgia)* suggests it to be not a structural film, as dominant critical interpretations would have it, but an autobiographical film that emphasizes the act of making an autobiographical work. In *(nostalgia)*, Frampton indicates that the autobiographical act is itself a sculptural process, treating the constituent parts of

one's self – memories, experiences, and histories – as materials to be carved into a coherent aesthetic product, although he appears skeptical of the possibility of a truly coherent autobiography. Nonetheless, Frampton produces a film about autobiography whose attention to the autobiographical endeavor makes it a classic of autobiographical film. Frampton thus forges strong links among sculpture, film, and autobiography, demonstrating both the relevance and the necessity of sculpture theory for interpreting autobiographical films.

Chapter 3, "Andrei Tarkovsky's *Зеркало* and *Tempo di Viaggio*," explores the theoretical writings of Andrei Tarkovsky, joining them to a critical reading of Tarkovsky's two autobiographical films. Like Frampton before him, Tarkovsky finds reason to equate film and sculpture, noting the similarities between the two processes. For Tarkovsky, the film is not so much a sculpture of light, per Frampton's formulation, as it is a sculpture of time: both an aesthetic artifact that depicts time's passage, and an object formed from distilling a mass of collected time down to its most essential parts. While this formulation constitutes Tarkovsky's notion of film in general, his works also allow us to posit an even stronger link between sculpture and autobiographical film in particular. Tarkovsky's aesthetic philosophy establishes ethical imperatives that, in his view, all true art must follow. In order to meet these, Tarkovsky prescribes an aesthetic of selflessness in both senses of the word: unselfishness and the absence of the self. The means by which an autobiographical film attains that crucial selfless aesthetic is via a process of steady removal of the self of the autobiographer, until the unfettered memories and experiences of his/her life remain. In *Mirror*, we witness a filmic demonstration of a "selfless" autobiography, exploring both the memories of a self that has been stripped away, and the process by which that state of

removal was attained. In the companion piece *Tempo di Viaggio*, Tarkovsky shows his audiences what happens when an autobiographical film fails to adhere to his selfless dicta, revealing a film where sound, image, and message are all subordinated to the self who dominates the work. The two films become more intelligible when considered through the lens of sculpture theory, indicating the necessity of considering autobiographical films with the aid of a sculptural paradigm.

Chapter 4, "Mercedes Álvarez's *El cielo gira*," examines the film début of the Spanish director Mercedes Álvarez, reading it as a work that draws upon the philosophies and techniques of Frampton and Tarkovsky to produce an autobiographical film in their tradition. While Álvarez has not yet written a work of film theory expounding upon her own aesthetic theories as Frampton and Tarkovsky have done, a close reading of her film coupled with comparative readings of Frampton and Tarkovsky strongly suggests that Álvarez incorporates the same preoccupations and methods as her fellow filmmakers. Like Frampton and Tarkovsky, Álvarez's film systematically highlights the limitations of multiple artistic media, ultimately finding sculpture to be the most effective paradigm for thinking about her autobiographical film. With this in mind, interpreting *El cielo gira* through a sculptural lens reveals many of the film's previously unobserved nuances. It relies on a subtractive method, much in the same manner as Frampton's *(nostalgia)* and Tarkovsky's *Mirror.* Álvarez works to pare away the present, and its obscuration of the past, in order to make history perceptible again. Like Frampton and Tarkovsky, Álvarez accomplishes the task of rendering the invisible visible by enacting a shift within the film from the material toward the immaterial. In a manner similar to Tarkovsky's use of the material qualities of empty space as a vessel for

the transmission of immaterial memories, Álvarez uses empty spaces to summon the past, and thus indicate immaterial histories which could not otherwise be expressed through material means. A sculptural critical apparatus is thus essential to an understanding of *El cielo gira*, as it brings to light the methods and successes of Álvarez's autobiographical film. In turn, sculpture theory proves itself increasingly valuable for assessing autobiographical film in general.

While the preceding chapters have produced close readings of the four major films under consideration, they have also brought to light overarching themes that are worth revisiting. To start, my analysis has helped to assess and articulate some of the limitations behind the self-portrait paradigm of autobiographical film, one of the leading critical schema for interpreting the genre. As a framework concerned with product rather than process, the self-portraiture paradigm is not an ideal critical instrument to account for the filmmaking process, nor is it sensitive toward the material aspects of film. These two lacunae overlook two of the key components of film art; the process of making a film, as well as the medium used in that process, are central considerations in film criticism. To interpret an autobiographical film using a framework that cannot account for process and materiality does not give the film in question the attention it warrants. The works of the three filmmakers I have examined present other criticisms of the self-portraiture paradigm. Hollis Frampton's *(nostalgia)* shows how easily words can take hostage the self-portrait, subjugating its contents to external narratives that have little to no bearing on the image at hand. Frampton's work also denigrates the potential capacity of the self-portrait as an effective vessel for memories. Andrei Tarkovsky's two films critique the shallowness of the painted image, and

242

self-portraiture by extension, finding little value in the image of the artist and the distractions it carries. If an autobiographical work is to convey mind, memory, or spirit, Tarkovsky's films suggest that the highly externalized imagery of self-portraiture is inadequate for presenting the introspective and internal. Mercedes Álvarez's film highlights the limited sensory reach of self-portraiture, noting that its reliance on the visual alienates the other senses. Further, Álvarez's work underscores the patriarchal ideology involved in depicting the female subject as an object to be regarded rather than a subject, casting aspersion on self-portraiture as an ideal – or even a suitable – means of expression in autobiographical works by women.

In the wake of these criticisms of self-portraiture as an interpretive lens, my research has assembled a preliminary tool kit for conducting sculptural readings of autobiographical films. The sculptural theoretical apparatus draws attention to a different set of techniques the filmmaker might deploy than those traditionally associated with the filmmaker's craft – all of which evolve from the acknowledgment and investigation of film's material aspects. First, the sculptural mode of reading encourages one to interrogate the shape and arrangement of the film; in other words, to think of the film as a physical object first and foremost, and to examine how it organizes and negotiates the space it occupies. Second, to read a film sculpturally is to deploy one's sense of the tactile as well as the visual and spatial; to study the ways a film engages one's body as well as one's sight. Third, the sculptural reading demands an attention to the materiality of the film at hand: whether it invites or discourages handling, what it can be made to do, what has been made of it. Fourth, the sculptural mode invites questions of the source of the film's materials: what was its mode of production, and what historical or economic circumstances converged to generate it? These questions of

243

form, history, and materiality can then be used to inform one's reading of the film's content. How are memories and life events in an autobiographical film given a physical, spatial presence, for instance, and what does that tell us? How are memories made material in the autobiographical film, to what purpose, and what is being done with them? The sculptural paradigm unites the form and content of an autobiographical film via an emphasis on the materiality of each, and allows for illuminating readings that would otherwise go unnoticed in previous theoretical accounts.

The attention to materiality that sculpture theory prescribes has led to one of my more surprising and perhaps paradoxical findings: that an emphasis on materiality in autobiographical films offers filmmakers a means of filming the immaterial. All three filmmakers skillfully manipulate the presentation of ordinary objects and spaces to allow viewers to grasp the invisible phenomena at play behind them. Hollis Frampton's incendiary use of photographs enables him to show audiences memories that have been liberated from their material confines, and in turn serves as a depiction of an otherwise imperceptible essential self. Andrei Tarkovsky's audiences come to perceive memories, and visualize consciousness, by means of repeated encounters with unoccupied rooms. Mercedes Álvarez makes time, history, and memory visible in her attentions to sparse landscapes and empty spaces. Far from anchoring autobiography in the physical plane, material fixations can serve as gateways to an immaterial, transcendent realm. In this regard, a sensitivity to the material choices of autobiographical filmmakers leads one to consider what that material obscures; thinking about the sculptural method of removing that material allows one to discover what – or whom – the autobiographical filmmaker is attempting to bring into existence.

A further thematic consideration my inquiry has broached, however indirectly, is the nature of the autobiographical act itself. What is needed to produce an autobiographical work? What, if anything, does that production do to – or for – the autobiographer? My analysis of Frampton, Tarkovsky, and Álvarez argues that commonalities among their films might point the way toward an answer. Frampton's *(nostalgia)*, Tarkovsky's *Mirror*, and Álvarez's *El cielo gira* suggest that the making of an autobiographical work involves the transformation of one's memories into something different from what they were prior to the undertaking of the autobiographical act. The burning of the photographs in *(nostalgia)* dramatizes the way one's memories undergo a violent transformation in the service of an aesthetic end. The gradual retreat of human figures – and the disappearance of the first-person autobiographer altogether – from Tarkovsky's *Mirror* hint at the dissolution of the self as one's memories shift from the private to the public sphere. The alchemy Álvarez performs in *El cielo gira*, converting empty vistas into loci of vibrant recollection, indicates that memory can be both dissolved with the passage of time and restored with concentration and reflection. Each of these approaches indicates that memories are not inviolate, and are in fact prone to conversion and manipulation like any physical material. To undertake an autobiographical project, then, is to subject one's memories to manipulation, resulting in a memory that is a different entity from the one perceived at the outset. In this regard, the autobiographical act may also entail a transformation of the self, for if one's identity hinges upon one's memories, the alteration of those memories – the building blocks of the self – entails an alteration of the edifice they construct, perhaps even a destruction thereof; a suicide of sorts that might be more properly termed autothanatography than autobiography.

How drastic a transformation the autobiographical act could thus embody is a topic for another study. If the filmmakers addressed here serve as any indication, however, it would appear that the autobiographical work tends to invoke the specter of mortality by highlighting the transience of one's memories, and, by extension, the self they constitute.

Apart from the aforementioned thematic findings, these chapters also suggest some methodological notes for future inquiries. Chiefly, my research here is intended to prompt future scholarship to consider – and reconsider – film in relation to the other arts. Although film has long since become a respected art form in the century or so following its inception, which perhaps diminishes the necessity of justifying its aesthetic merits, the need to revisit its exchanges with other media remains continually important and particularly fruitful from a comparative perspective. Cinema is not done influencing the other arts, nor are extant and emerging art forms done redefining what cinema is and might yet become. In this regard, my study demonstrates the significance of being mindful of the techniques and poetics of other art forms, the better to detect their use within cinema art, and to explore the many layers of nuance and complexity they add to an already sophisticated aesthetic field, as current practices intermingling museological, filmic and other screen-derived arts would suggest.

My work here is also meant to offer further considerations for the study of autobiographical film, and of autobiographical works in general. The films I have explored in this dissertation present fascinating strategies of self-representation that could offer valuable interventions in the critical conversations surrounding other autobiographical works. My reading of Frampton's *(nostalgia)* uncovers a link between the process of autobiographical composition and the assembly – or dismantling – of a coherent self, raising the question of

how other autobiographers make or unmake themselves as a direct result of their own autobiographical processes. Tarkovsky's *Mirror*, as I have interpreted it, demonstrates the possibility of creating an autobiography without a self at its center; in short, a work that dynamites the fundamental organizational schema of autobiography. This raises the exciting possibility of autobiographies that are less about solidifying the self as a locus of discourse, and more about pulling apart that same locus. Imagine the philosophical implications of assembling a coherent discourse in which the traditional unit of subjectivity, the self, is effectively erased! Álvarez in *El cielo gira* offers up an autobiography that disperses the self across time and space, to be salvaged among history and ruins. Álvarez provides one way of thinking about a fragmentary self, or of taking the first steps toward the unmaking of the self toward which Frampton and Tarkovsky strive. To investigate these claims further is well beyond the scope of this concluding chapter; I advance them as observations, and as potential hypotheses for future research. While these filmmakers may not necessarily be innovators within the world of autobiography, their individual works showcase thoughtful and thought-provoking ways to conceive of the self and the autobiographical process – and whether one necessarily follows the other. In this regard, these filmmakers merit inclusion in a wider conversation on autobiographical practices.

In the end, should readers emerge with a single primary benefit from my research, I suggest it should be a greater cognizance of – and appreciation for – the debt that autobiographical film owes to other art forms and discourses. At first glance, the autobiographical film seems a simple proposition: tell a story about one's life, and do so in a visual format. In this light, it is tempting to dismiss the autobiographical project as an easy

task. We all have lived, and thus have a story to tell; we have recourse to the use of the first-person, and use it with such frequency in our daily conversation (in this sentence, even) that talking about ourselves hardly appears new or difficult. Yet this act of accounting for oneself is, in truth, far more complex than our conversational habits or our shared life trajectories reveal. To tell one's story is to invoke a number of genres, traditions, ideologies, politics, and identities, whether consciously or not. These systems of meaning are what make the autobiographical work intelligible, and it is through the codes of representation and interpretation associated therewith that the autobiographer forges an account of his/her life. Nowhere is this more apparent than in film – perhaps the most synthetic of the arts – where sound, image, and script all come into play, along with the various apparatuses we use for interpreting them. Adding an autobiographical dimension to film multiplies the medium's inherent complexity. It is appropriate that it should, for we are complex, complicated beings, and our efforts to come to terms with ourselves ought to reflect that richness. Since the autobiography – much less the autobiographical film – would not be possible without the supporting frameworks of its attendant discourses, the study of autobiography must always be receptive to them. I hope that my dissertation has demonstrated the need to include other art forms, and especially sculpture, among those discourses. My research here has led me to believe that exploring further connections among genres and media is vital to the continued study of autobiographical film. There, too, I find a worthwhile heuristic for the field of Comparative Literature more generally: the comparatist should be prepared to investigate all the world's art forms in search of productive sources and analogues, and furthermore, should welcome the opportunity to conduct such investigations.

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