

LOIS PATIÑO'S LANDSCAPES: AURA, LOSS, DURATION

PATRICIA KELLER
Cornell University

ABSTRACT: This essay is a reflection on Galician landscapes through a close reading of Lois Patiño's experimental documentary film, *Costa da Morte*, and has two parts. The first is about temporality and the concept of duration, and asks how duration intersects with certain modes of deceleration in cinema, understood as an aesthetic but also as a structural mechanism of slowing down and capturing stillness. Here, I am particularly interested in photographic stasis when channeled through film, as well as the use of photography and stillness in cinema as an evocation of death. The second part explores landscape as an ecstatic, auratic, and sublime force; as a space of encounter, or «living tapestry»—a place in which the emergence of and absorption by the visible is always uncannily predicated on a poetics of disappearance, invisibility, and loss.

KEYWORDS: Landscape; temporality; photography; cinema; duration; loss; visibility; movement; immobility; Lois Patiño.

AS PAISAXES DE LOIS PATIÑO: AURA, PERDA, DURACIÓN

RESUMO: Este ensaio ofrece unha reflexión sobre as paisaxes galegas a través dunha lectura do documental experimental de Lois Patiño, *Costa da Morte*, e ten dúas partes. A primeira trata da temporalidade e o concepto de duración, preguntando como se relaciona o tempo con determinados modos de desaceleración no cine, entendéndose como unha estética, pero tamén como un mecanismo estrutural para ralentizar e para capturar así a inmovilidade. Aquí teño un interese particular na inmovilidade fotográfica do filme, e como o uso da fotografía e da quietude é unha evocación da morte. A segunda parte examina a paisaxe como unha forza estática, «aurática», e sublime. No espazo de encontro, ou «tapiz vivente» —un lugar no que a aparición e absorción por parte do visible sempre é un desacouganado paradoxo, proxectando unha poética de desaparición, invisibilidade e perda.

PALABRAS CHAVE: paisaxe; temporalidade; fotografía; cinema; duración; perda; visibilidade; movemento; inmovilidade; Lois Patiño.

PART I. TIME AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography is allied with a 'thisness,' a certainty in the absolute representability of things and moments. The promise of indexicality is, in effect, the promise of the rematerialization of time—the restoration of a continuum of space in photography, of time in the cinema.

MARY ANN DOANE, «The Representability of Time» (2002: 10)

Time, printed in its factual forms and manifestations: such is the supreme idea of cinema as an art, leading us to think about the wealth of untapped resources in film, about its colossal future. Our starting point [...] should be [...] in the essential principles of cinema, which have to do with the human need to master and know the world. I think that what a person normally goes to the cinema for is time: for time lost or spent or not yet had. He goes there for living experience; for cinema, like no other art, widens, enhances and concentrates a person's experience—and not only enhances it but makes it longer, significantly longer.

ANDREY TARKOVSKY, «Imprinted Time» (1987: 63)

At its core, Tarkovsky's theory is quite simple: cinema makes the experience of time possible, actual, and real. Its capacity to materialize or fuse together multiple temporalities goes hand in hand with what, for Tarkovsky, is «the one precious potential of the cinema—the possibility of printing on celluloid the actuality of time» (1987: 63). In this way, just as the film director «sculpts time» out of the «enormous, solid cluster of living facts», and just as the artist, in the words of Bill Viola, «creates events that are going to unfold on some kind of rigid channel that is embodied in a strip of tape or celluloid, coiled up as potential experience to be unrolled, [...] like a scroll», we, as spectators, become witness to what we live but can never truly perceive or fully contemplate as we live it.¹ Cinema illuminates not only how time imprints itself on us,

¹ From exhibition notes to the show «Bill Viola». Paris: Grand Palais (5 March to 21 July 2014).

which is to say how it endures, leaving a lasting if ineffable impression, but also reciprocally, how we come to understand, relate to, and ultimately represent time. Whereas the former—the question of time's imprint—tends toward an awareness of how time «marks» or «wounds» us, the latter is a question of how we visualize time—that is, how we see it but also how we make time visible, and inversely how it is made visible to us. With Tarkovsky's words in mind, I would like to pose a slightly different yet related question: How does photography inform and reflect upon cinematic time?² This is to ask not what technical or technological role photography holds in the making of film, or how it contributes to the construction of the cinematic image, but rather how an aesthetic of photography, or how a photographic logic, understood as a certificate of death (following Barthes, Benjamin, and Bazin) changes our experience of time, how it alters our expectation of temporal synthesis and fluidity, and likewise how it shifts or molds our sense of duration. Ultimately, this line of inquiry invites us to consider what «living experience» the photographic image within a film allows us to access.

In order to address these questions—admittedly large in scope—this essay examines the relationship between cinema, photography and landscape in conjunction with the experimental and conceptual works of artist Lois Patiño. In particular, focusing on one of the most poignant examples to emerge from the contemporary Galician context in recent years: Patiño's exquisite experimental documentary film from 2013, *Costa da Morte* (*Coast of Death*). Achieving notable success on the international film festival circuit, much has been written about Patiño's debut feature film as well as his aesthetic approach to landscape. Whereas scholars like Marta Pérez Pereiro and Xan Gómez Viñas have situated Patiño squarely in the small but budding indie *nova onda* that constitutes New Galician Cinema, others have focused attention on the film's explo-

² Here, Tarkovsky's own relationship to photography is worth noting. In an interview with Maria Chugunova, originally published in *To the Screen*, 12 December 1966, and reprinted in *Time Within Time*, he says: «Above all I try to achieve maximum truthfulness in all that happens on screen, in terms of photography. For me that means being as close as possible to life. [...] Cinema must record life with life's own means, it must operate with the images of actual reality. I never construct a shot, and I always maintain that cinema can only exist by being totally identified with the images of life itself. That is what makes it different from other art forms, that is how it affects the audience. If you start to sketch shots, to compose them intellectually, it will mean adulterating the principles of art» (Tarkovsky 1994: 355).

ration of the relationship between human/nature, place/time, and creation/experience. For the former, Patiño's films, avant-garde in every imaginable way, participate in the «collective vocation» underlying this new wave movement to defend the most artistic filmic innovations possible without compromise to commercial trends or industrial and economic pressures (Pérez Pereiro 2014-15: 87). In this regard, *Costa da Morte*, in breaking with traditional genre and film form, exercises a certain authority of experimentation that allows the work, like so many others that pertain to this Galician vanguard, to use film as a medium for a new epistemology, an extended social and self reflection, the aim of which is not box-office success but knowledge born from meditative forms of expression, forms that explore the «interstitial spaces between documentary film and fiction» (Gómez Viñas 2014: 153). This knowledge stems importantly not only from breaking with genre but also from experimentations in real and synthetic landscapes, and from what Aaron Cutler has referred to as a form of assemblage that mixes distance with immediacy, and gives a «curious sense of the past being assembled [...] in the present» (2014). Such assemblage is what, for Gonzalo Enríquez Veloso, in his Lefebvrian spatial analysis of *Costa da Morte*, allows the film to shift away from mere representation and toward a highly mediated («interpenetrated» is his word), poetic production of space. Veloso aptly describes the film principally as a search for something «experientially unsettling», by which I understand him to mean that the film taps into the personal, subjective and intimate levels of viewing experience where the spectator may feel either situated *within* or dislocated *from* the place she sees (and feels immersed in) on screen. The experiential is indeed a crucial component to what Patiño establishes with each shot, which I want to suggest here is a kind of intimate proximity of distance but also an unsettling—a constant shifting—of our relation to time. In what follows, I analyze the film through my own medi-



FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2

tation on cinematic time, and in conjunction with the phenomenological, ontological, and temporal qualities of landscape. I will return to the idea of intimacy, proximity and distance later on, but for now, and before delving deeper into this extraordinary work, allow me to take a step back for a brief moment, in order to contextualize further Patiño's cinematic orientation.³

As a kind of precursor to *Costa da Morte* are several of Patiño's experimental shorts, «landscape sketches», in the one to five minute range, which use fixed frames that open for the viewer a window onto different landscapes.

These shorts follow a visual formula: they present seemingly static, at times abstract, images in which the landscape changes extremely gradually, almost imperceptibly, until some detail clues us into the «real time» of each place—a shadow of an unseen cloud passing overhead, the sudden visible presence of wind, rain or snow, for example. The landscape's natural evolution, or what Jean-Luc Nancy might call the landscape's subtle «unfolding» lends the film movement just as it gives life to the otherwise static, lifelessness of the places featured in each frame. There is always an immobile figure (usually a man) standing before these «scenes», and the scenes themselves, in many ways, appear as slowly shifting tapestries, large format photographs, and even, occasionally, they simulate paintings.⁴ This completely motionless figure, which can be seen in the stills from *En el movimiento del paisaje 1* & *2* in Figure 3, is always



FIGURE 3a



FIGURE 3b

³ © Lois Patiño and © Zeitun Films for all images.

⁴ For an insightful reading of the phenomenological possibilities and the notion of «becoming with» landscape the viewer, see John Wylie's extraordinary essay «Landscape, Absence and the Geographies of Love». In conversations with Lois Patiño, I learned that the man embedded within each landscape is almost always himself. This technique of self-insertion produces a kind of double consciousness, wherein the artist figures as both maker and object made; subject viewing and object viewed.



FIGURE 4

placed center frame as the unidentifiable or non-descript focal point, as if a miniature statue frozen in awe of the sublimity of the wavering landscape before him.

In another short, *Paisaje - Duración. Carretera*, we see an inverse example that hinges on a different approximation to the landscape's movement (and to *being in* the landscape's movement) as a way to give visibility to the subtle shifts in place that mark time's passage. Here Patiño's fixed camera captures the landscape as an inactive, semi-legible image—a blurred, fogged over scene, which is presented almost as an impressionistic painting. What lends movement to this otherwise static scene-turned-painting are the cars that enter into frame roughly halfway through the film.⁵

Across these works, then, narrative or any kind of documentary-style commentary are obviously secondary components to the film's cinematographic, and especially its photographic techniques; we could say, even its «painterly» approach. This tactic of taking the narrative out of film, in order to substitute it with «feeling» (what Deleuze might call «affect», and what for Tarkovsky is the «imprint» or «living experience»), in turn, illuminates certain flows or rhythms of time, turning the entire frame into one sustained meditation on temporality.⁶ I want to suggest here that it is not just a meditative or reflective

⁵ In interviews, Patiño has discussed these shorts as a kind of search for the «poetic image» in landscape. For him, the video works are both «contemplative films» that «reflect on how our vision builds landscapes from a distance» and experiments in perception and in the audiovisual language of landscape that mixes media—combining cinema with painting. In *Paisaje-Duración* the blurred effect is a deliberate move towards distortion and abstraction. Patiño has noted the use of paint and Vaseline as filters on the camera lens as a technique to «break with seeming objectivity of the camera» and thus to establish another view, closer to «the painter's». See interview with Cutler in *Cinemascope*. Other examples where the landscape is rendered static and movement is given through barely perceptible and/or delayed «action» are Patiño's experimental films *Montaña en sombra* (2012) and *La imagen arde* (2013), both of which underscore movement in the landscape through the exchange or symbiosis between a human presence and the elements of snow and fire, respectively.

⁶ See *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, in particular the translator's note and introduction for a discussion of Deleuze's use of «affect» in relation to «action», «perception» and

practice, but also the exploration of time through a kind of re-animation of photographic images that lies at the heart of Patiño's works. But, whereas the photograph freezes the moment by condensing time into one single, materialized instant, participating in what Mary Ann Doane refers to as the technological «aspiration for instantaneity», or what Siegfried Kracauer, decades earlier, would call the «spatial reconfiguration of a moment», in cinema, we are normally drawn under the spell of multiple instants each assembled in concert with the preceding or succeeding one (2002: 14; 1995: 56). Or, we are drawn into the plurality of the moment wherein multiple temporalities are mutually constitutive of one another—forming the illusion of movement and continuity born out of stillness and discontinuity. This illusion can be neatly summed up in the memorable title to Laura Mulvey's collection of essays on the relationship between stillness and the moving image: *Death 24x a Second*.⁷

As if a kind of re-imagined *tableaux vivant* or perhaps a still life in reverse, these films also capitalize on the dynamic status and fleeting temporality of landscape in order to create «scenes» not from a sequence of shots, images or narrative components, but from the very stasis of place. They seem to disrupt the spectator's expectation of cinematic movement and temporal fluidity through extreme long holds by confronting us—indeed, holding our attention—with the very origins of the illusion of cinematic movement, which is the medium of photography itself. Thus, it is not montage or plot, but photography that operates as the driving force in the creation of these *tableaux*. In all of these films, what the camera illuminates then is not the fact of landscape as a beautiful place or natural location but rather the possibility of land-

«image» (and as a concept distinct from «feeling»). In the chapter on the «crystal image of time», Deleuze discusses «affect» in relation to time. And in a subsequent chapter on «thought and cinema», Deleuze drawing on Jean-Louis Schefer summarizes the following proposition: «the cinematographic image, as soon as it takes on its aberration of movement, carries out a *suspension of the world* or affects the visible with a *disturbance*, which far from making thought visible, as Eisenstein wanted, are on the contrary directed to what does not let itself be thought in thought, and equally to what does not let itself be seen in vision» (1997: 168).

⁷ See Chapter 4 «The Death Drive: Narrative Movement Stilled»; Chapter 8 «Delaying Cinema» of Mulvey's book. In these chapters, she looks at the ways in which we experience film differently with new technologies. Part of Mulvey's main interest lies in thinking through the tensions between stillness and movement that coincide with the cinema's ability to capture the appearance of life and preserve it after death.

scape as a living entity, as a body, space, and even a staging of time. The effect is the cinematic expression of landscape as a place of embodiment—a «lived, embodied experience» in which «eye and land rest in each other's depths», capturing for us a double vision, that of the director's gaze and the «visible land» emerging and slowly revealing itself in the space where screen and eye meet (Wylie 2007: 3).⁸ Juxtaposed to this life force or this *being of* and *in* landscape that each film highlights, the human figure, despite occupying center stage, is featured as a sort of inanimate, «dead» object. This double movement within each *cortometraje* (short) is key. At once, suggesting the vitality and fluidity of landscape, and evoking the idea of death, by arresting the human subject as a way to embed stasis and frame time's immobility within the ebbs and flows of the landscape.

In *Costa da Morte*, however, the insertion of the photograph into the moving picture, not as object but as method, or better said, the turn to photography in the film performs a different function. Unlike the experimental *études*



FIGURE 5

that precede it, *Costa da Morte* is an eighty minute feature-length film comprised exclusively of long shots and long takes, all of which partake in a sort of dual expansion/compression of both time and landscape—one that slowly shifts from frames of movement to static images emulating

⁸ This is only a small part of cultural geographer John Wylie's broader discussion of the phenomenology of landscape. Here Wylie discusses philosopher Merleau Ponty's reading of Cézanne's perception of landscape in the introduction to *Landscape: «Cézanne's art sought "to make visible how the world touches us"»*; these landscapes «became the visual expression» of the notion that «observer and observed, self and landscape, are essentially enlaced and intertwined, in a "being-in-the-world" that precedes and preconditions rationality and objectivity» (2007: 3). The point, for Wylie, is that the artist is not a «detached spectator» but a body whose gaze «enters the landscape, and is entered by landscape» (2007: 3). There are notable resonances with Dorsky's text, discussed in detail in the final section of this essay: «If the filmmaker is not cognizant of the fact that a shot must express both the seer and what is seen, then the film's view isn't totally conscious. [...] it doesn't admit *that vision is a meeting ground of ourselves and the world*. The filmmaker and what is seen are not in union. The basic ingredients for alchemy are not present» (2005: 45, my emphasis).



FIGURE 6a

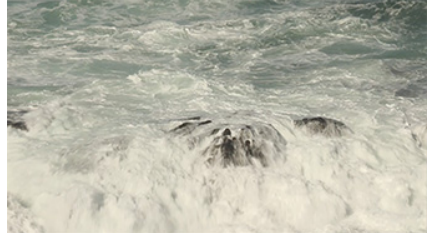


FIGURE 6b

large-format photographs. The opening scene, for instance, consists of one single, uninterrupted long take in which we see a man cutting down a tree.

Though movement contained within this opening shot, albeit minimal, lacks context at the outset of the film, it nonetheless gestures towards some vague semblance of a narrative—the quotidian serenity of life in Galicia interrupted by man, whose presence we might not easily detect at first if not for the audio track—a mix of heavy breathing and chainsaws.⁹ Or, perhaps the gesture toward narrative speaks more to the labor of everyday life, a labor which in this case wields a certain violence against the land. Interestingly, as the long takes accumulate and gain momentum, they also build resistance to the logic

⁹ Patiño has commented that he wanted the film to suggest, «the breathing we hear to be the breathing of landscape». See interview with Cutler. Numerous examples of Galician life are shown throughout the film, from fishing and hunting practices, to religious traditions and local festivals, to leisure time in towns, forests, and beaches. Most notably I would argue, however, is the constant oscillation between a certain culture of death detectable in the everyday and the persistence of life. Indeed, death is both a major landmark and a pervasive force throughout the work, which is indicated from the outset with the film's title, *Coast of Death*, which borrows from the region's proper name given to it because of the coast's long history of deaths at sea, namely by shipwreck. The film's overt exploration of how the historical, the mythical, and the contemporary all are intertwined in the landscape also speaks to this bridge between life and death, or to what we might call the «vitality of death» culturally associated with Galicia. For an insightful reading of how contemporary Galician artists, such as Patiño and others in the Novo Cinema Galego, produce compelling, original work by channeling the so-called «peripheral visions» linked to Galicia's «rich ancestral culture», which would include local myth and folklore related to death, as a tactic for artistic invention that resists marginalization and assimilation in the global arena of cultural production today, see José Colmeiro's work *Peripheral Visions, Global Positions: remapping Galician Culture* and also his recent monograph *Peripheral Visions/Global Sounds*.

of narrative and movement. In other words, as the window of time widens with each successive shot, the movement within each frame fluctuates—accelerating, then decelerating alternately. Such that the shots themselves slowly become increasingly invested in the measuring of time. A good example of such fluctuation is another nearly five-minute-long take of the ocean's waves crashing over a rocky jetty.

In this scene, the men in frame, presumably *percebeiros*, are faced with the immensity of the sea; as the waves dictate their movement into a choreographed mass, they collectively become part of the landscape, huddling into the rocks, as the water washes over them. We could almost say this scene presents a kind of *mise-en-abyme* of the entire work: nature's domination over man, man's succumbing to and becoming one with the land, and here specifically, physically merging in synchronicity with the flows of land and sea.

The camera's extreme distances matched with the extended duration of each landscape «scene» enables a kind of «stretching» of time and place and is always complemented with a proximity of sound—the claustrophobic closeness of birds chirping, the reverberations of crickets or seagulls, raucous windscares, or cacophonies of branches cracking and breaking, waves crashing, and occasionally whistling, singing, or even dialogue. And, in some cases, it is the audio cues that stand in as a kind of landmarking device that identifies the human presence within the monumentality of landscape, a landscape which becomes at times miniaturized and visually rendered infinitesimal to the point of invisibility and thus eventual absence. Here, the audio becomes the supplemental device that adds presence to what we perceive to be a visual absence.

We might best read the composition of such scenes, especially when assembled together through montage, as a dialogue with time. Taking the stillness of photography as a way to give the duration of the shot a kind of slow, gradual, lasting fullness. A fullness that deepens with repetition and which might counterbalance the fact that many of the shots detail very little or no action at all. Laura Mulvey reminds us that «return and repetition necessarily involve interrupting the flow of film, delaying its progress, and, in the process, discovering the cinema's complex relation to time» (2006: 8). In *Costa da Morte*, it is often the case that no real discernible event takes place, and as such these are, in effect, shots which often feature «uneventful time» (the opening sequence being perhaps the clearest exception to this). For what duration lends itself to throughout Patiño's work is not the time necessary or



FIGURE 7a



FIGURE 7b



FIGURE 7c



FIGURE 7d



FIGURE 7e



FIGURE 7f



FIGURE 7g



FIGURE 7h

even desired for one to continue doing something (or even to finish doing something), but rather the time that one can both *measure* and *lose*—in a sense, the time in which one loses oneself by becoming totally immersed in and potentially overtaken by the landscape. This feeling of watching/studying/observing/and taking in the landscape, in effect, «being consumed» by the living tapestry «unrolled like a scroll» before us, results in losing sight of the landscape itself, but is paradoxically predicated on the very act of keeping the landscape in sight in the first place (Viola 2014).

With this mind, Patiño's work replicates yet another paradox: for shots such as the ones in Figure 7 are neither photograph nor moving image, but somewhere strangely, but beautifully, strikingly, in-between.

In a two-shot sequence, lasting just over a minute, we see the tension between the visible and invisible: a fire on a dock in the distance is put out and as it extinguishes, the residual smoke fills the entire frame. This scene, like so many in *Costa da Morte*, is situated between arresting time and developing it; between holding time in place and revealing its passage. We could say, in this way, that Patiño's work is not (or at least not only) interested in capturing time as it moves forward, or as it stands completely still, but somehow in seizing both simultaneously.¹⁰ *Costa da Morte* neither fully folds time into movement nor fully unfurls time through stillness, but rather engages with time as it is, in the present moment. Unlike the interplay between time's capture, dislocation and subsequent relocation underlying all montage, what Patiño presents here is a portrait of time in its poetic fluidity and openness, «exactly» as it is, which at times appears unwavering, uninterrupted, and static yet is always in

¹⁰ This idea of tending to or capturing, cinematically, time as still and as something in motion, breaks with a conventional notion of time that excludes what Suzanne Guerlac, writing on Bergson, identifies as the «heterogeneity of the real» (2006: 2). We spatialize time, and map it as forward-moving, in defense against its incommensurability with language. Bergsonian thought falls outside the scope of my essay, but clearly his influential ideas are echoed in various threads running throughout my readings, ultimately leading back to the question of how cinematic language makes possible the direct experience of the heterogeneous real, or in Sobchack's words «the expression of experience by experience» that allows for cinema to «transpose, without completely transforming, those modes of being alive and consciously embodied in the world that count for each of us as *direct* experience: as experience "centered" in that particular, situated, and solely occupied existence sensed first as "Here, where the world touches" and then as "Here, where the world is sensible; here, where I am"» (1992: 3-4).



FIGURE 8a



FIGURE 8b



FIGURE 8c



FIGURE 8d



FIGURE 8e

constant, even if imperceptible, motion. In the aforementioned shots, the movement of fire and the fire being extinguished is entirely perceptible, but its perceptibility crowds the scene, overshadowing it, as it were, to the point of making the visible both unseen and unseeable.¹¹

It is worth noting that *Costa da Morte*, though at times may feel like one continuous shot, is in reality a series of long takes stitched together through seamless editing. However, the cut also plays an important role in Patiño's photographic compositions of the moving landscape—that is, the moment when we notice his change of frame, per-

¹¹ The smoke filling the entire frame in this sequence is reminiscent of the quality of fullness that the screen image can adopt and project, such as in the moments when clouds fill the frame and thus the spectator's entire field of vision in experimental films such as Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982) and Bruce Conner's *Crossroads* (1976).

spective, shot or scene—is always the moment when we are reminded of time’s slippage not only forward but also always backwards in time. Indeed, in a sequence in the middle of the film, Patiño briefly breaks the pattern of the long shot/extreme long take in order to represent the cyclical nature of time by assembling images of the same landscape in different seasons over the course of an unspecified length of time (a month? several months? a year? perhaps longer?). Here we see the co-presence or intertwining of photography and cinema, through a kind of reversal of temporal expansion and duration by weaving in a kind of interlude dependent on temporal compression, to artificially simulate time’s lapse.

If the fullness of time comes into being to the extent that it becomes visible in Patiño’s employment of duration, then I wonder what this comingling, this bridge between the cinematic and the photographic—and with it the dual gesture of enabling *and* losing sight—might reveal about landscape itself? Could we think of duration in Patiño’s film as the point of departure or even the core element of the process of entering into knowledge of being *in* and *with* landscape, itself always engaged in a process of becoming something else?¹² A process of absorption and transmutation? It is not only a matter of what duration does in *Costa da Morte*, but what it *reveals* about time and cinema; about time and landscape. So far, I have been attempting to make a case for how duration allows the imperceptible to become perceptible; how the unseen can come to light. How duration, drawing on Nathaniel Dorsky’s language, «aerates life, and suffuses the “solid” world with luminosity» (2005: 31). In the context of cinema, this line of inquiry invites us to contemplate how extensions of time, slowness, and stasis, become entangled with loss and light, how such an entanglement is inextricably linked to losing sight but also to questions of vision and gaining both sight and insight. With these ideas in mind, I now turn to the question of loss in relation to landscape and aura.

¹² For a poignant reading of landscape always becoming other, see Wylie’s aforementioned «Geographies of Love» essay. See also the interview with Patiño and Cutler for a brief but beautiful discussion on the ontology of landscape, the notion of the «voice» in landscape that reveals layers of the past, and the idea of time embedded within place. Patiño also discusses the concept of immersion, which relates in several ways to both Wylie’s and Nancy’s notion of «becoming landscape».

PART II. LANDSCAPE AND AURA

A landscape is always a landscape of time.

JEAN-LUC NANCY,

«Uncanny Landscape» (2005: 61)

Vision is a system whose finite encounter
with and in the world meets in the act of see-
ing at the axes of the visible and the invisible.

VIVIAN SOBCHACK, «The Act of

Beingwith One's Own Eyes» (1992: 87)

Whereas duration may be one mechanism by which such access to being and time becomes possible, aura may constitute another mechanism, when understood not as a property of but rather a medium of perception that structures vision. That is, a medium of perceiving such expansiveness, such continuance, endurance and being. Miriam Bratu Hansen, writing on Walter Benjamin's conception of aura, elaborates the typically cited definition put forth by Benjamin—the «unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it [the art object or work of art] may be» (518). She suggests that the primary aspect of aura is its «essential inapproachability and unavailability, related to an irrecoverable absence or loss» (2008: 344).¹³

¹³ Hansen goes on to argue that, in Benjamin's writings on Proust, the link between aura and involuntary memory (*mémoire involontaire*), which «not only suggests that the "unique distance" that appears to the beholder is of a *temporal* dimension; it also inscribes the entwinement of distance and closeness with the register of the unconscious» (2008: 344). The question of memory falls outside the scope of this essay, but I mention it here since the very concept of aura, in these texts, is associated with the question of accessibility to the past, and to a concept of history that dislodges past events from the notion of a prior time and places them back in the present moment, continually. Obviously the «entwinement of distance and closeness» as well as the dialogue between the immensity (of space) and the intimacy (of perception and experience) are all key elements in Patiño's films, ones that here raise the question of how his works approach and frame the past. That is, how cinema reveals the layers of the past and, as T.S. Eliot would say, «the pastness of the past», inscribed and held within the landscape, understood not as a «view» but as a *being* that views, the ontology of which the film medium, through duration, unfolds for the spectator.

Thus, aura is not a phenomenological mystery or aesthetic luminance but a structuring of perception made possible precisely because something is or has been lost. This association of aura as linked to the re-surfacing or return of something lost is key and finds resonances in Nancy's theorization of landscape as a place that begins where one «loses sight». This idea also, interestingly, connects to his idea of the landscape as surface and a poetics of surfacing. He writes that «the landscape is the contrary of a ground: the “land” in it must be entirely surface» (2005: 58). One possible understanding of Nancy's idea is that landscapes constitute a plane in which the shifts between appearance and disappearance are played out. This would inevitably mean conceptualizing the landscape-as-surface idea as a line or relation between the visible and the invisible, between a concrete materiality and an ambiguous spectrality. Just as the term «surface» suggests a zone of non-intervention, staying above the ground, or «on the face of things» (from the Latin etymology *superficie/superficie*), my readings here have attempted to explore the ways in which surfaces unfold, illuminate, or even excavate—that is, the way they are situated between concealment and revelation, and thus the ways in which they mediate and potentiate loss and sight.

In an extraordinary passage from *The Ground of the Image*, worth quoting here at length, Nancy elaborates on his concept of loss by articulating landscape as an opening onto dis-location (and as a phenomenon or gesture of dislodging us from place). He writes:

The landscape opens onto the unknown. It is, properly speaking, place as the opening onto a taking place of the unknown. It is not so much the imitative representation of a given location as the presentation of a given absence of presence. [...] instead of depicting a «land» as a «location [*endroit*]», it depicts it as «dis-location [*envers*]»: what presents itself there is the announcement of what is not there; more exactly, it is the *announcement* that, «there», there is no presence, and yet that there is no access to an «elsewhere» that is not itself «here», in the angle opened onto a land occupied only with opening in itself. That is why the landscape is not a view that «opens onto» some perspective. *It is, on the contrary, a perspective that comes to us, that rises from the picture and in the picture in order to form it*, that is, in order to conform it in relation to an absolute distance and according to the spacing and distancing from which, rather, an *unknown light* «opens onto» us, *placing us* not before it but *within* it (2005: 59, my emphasis).

Nancy's language is striking. Theorizing that landscapes hold a kind of enunciative aspect in that they «announce» a «taking place of the unknown», what Nancy claims is that they are not so much representations of places but enactments or stagings of ghostliness—«the presentation of a given absence of presence». What «comes to us»—the «unknown light» that places us within the landscape rather than before it—is the duration of the image, or the time the image endures, evidenced through holding the image still in a kind of suspended state, while simultaneously revealing the passage of time. Nancy articulates this idea by drawing on the language of stasis and flow, arrest and movement: «A landscape is always the suspension of a passage, and this passage occurs as a separation, an emptying out of the scene or of being: not even a passage from one point to another or from one moment to another, but the step [*le pas*] of the opening itself» (2005: 61).

It is as if Patiño activates this suspension; as if he visualizes the suspended subject, paralyzed by—because completely immersed in—the landscape. But it is in this suspension that, I want to suggest, a space for thought is opened. Nancy beautifully describes this as «the marking out of a measure according to which a world can be laid out» (2005: 61-2). For the suspended moment is a moment of immobilization wherein the walker stops and «his step becomes that of a compass, the angle and amplitude of a disposition of space, on whose step—at whose threshold, at whose point of access—a gaze presents itself as a gaze» (2005: 62). In pausing rather than passing through, the walker may grasp «a “footing”, a span of the hand» (he may «reach» the other side, or immerse himself completely in the landscape) from which the visualization of time becomes possible and accessible. To suspend the step, to suspend the gaze, thus, does not mean to stop looking, but to keep on searching and seeing. It means to allow one's gaze to present itself to the landscape, just as the landscape brings to presence things that catch—and hold—our sight.

CODA: CINEMATIC REVELATION AND THE ALCHEMY OF DURATION

That the ineffable quality of vision can be expressed by projected light within darkness gives film great power.

NATHANIEL DORSKY, *Devotional Cinema* (2005: 51)

There is an extremely subtle but significant difference between an image that is itself a manifested act of seeing and one that uses vision to represent the world.

NATHANIEL DORSKY, *Devotional Cinema* (2005: 29)

I look to establish a dialogue between two temporal experiences: the horizontal, outer time of space and Nature, and the vertical, inner time of consciousness, static and ecstatic within the poetic experience.

LOIS PATIÑO, Interview with *CinemaScope* (2014)

From cinema to photography, and from duration to suspension, I have been considering Lois Patiño's landscapes not as representations but as constantly shifting, ever-evolving sites of embodiment, transformation, and revelation. Throughout my readings, I also have been suggesting that his landscapes bring together not only forms of attention related to distance/proximity, deceleration/stasis, but also ways of seeing that are connected to loss and invisibility, to new forms of looking and things *unseen*. These landscapes, from the experimental shorts to *Costa da Morte*, weave together auratic experience—which is to say, they bring together illuminated but ephemeral possibilities of the surface, and through such possibilities, an opening onto perceptions of time through cinematic expressions of landscape that visualize a kind of continuous, immersive alchemical experimentation. On this last point, I wish to take pause and think through the relationship between such a poetics of aura and alchemy.

Indeed, the experience of aura, in Walter Benjamin's writings, seems to share an affinity with alchemical processes in that it has the unique ability to transport (and transfix) us, presenting us with the illusion of intimacy, an illusion of our proximity to the world. For Benjamin, photography's auratic force lies in a sort of beautiful semblance—the infinitely reproducible images

of life that the medium is capable of generating, which allow us, even if only for a fleeting moment, to feel as if we are holding the world in our hands.

But unlike aura, alchemy is not merely a process of technological reproduction, but importantly a process of *material* transformation, the «transmutation of matter» that both wields its power from under the guise of a mysterious and illicit practice, and brings to the fore fundamental questions surrounding the stability of signification (Pinkus 2016: 82). Through alchemical processes, the singularity of «prime matter» is called into question—in making gold from a base substance, or making photographic images from light and silver halides, the very materiality of the end product is always, necessarily plural; which means that meaning, in this context, takes on a kind of liquid, porous quality.

Discussing the relationship between alchemy and aesthetics, Karen Pinkus tells us that while alchemy has been «overused as a rhetorical figure for “magic” or “magical transformation of materials”», it also has been «conjured by contemporary critics and artists to describe work that involves material mutations or a certain disposition to experimenting with temporality» (2010: 2). In this way, alchemy «bears a privileged relationship to painting but also to photography, cinema, and earlier, printmaking» (Pinkus 2010: 2). Drawing on Roland Barthes' discussion of photography as a medium much closer to chemistry than to painting, Pinkus contends that photography is «itself an analogue to alchemy» (2010: 53). Indeed, in the conversion of light and time into the image (what she calls the «nobility of the image»), the photographic process «takes the focus away from the object that is being represented—the “imagery” or iconology of the photograph—and turns it to the organizational pattern of energy that causes the image to emerge before the eye» (Pinkus 2010: 53-4).¹⁴

Emergence is, indeed, a key concept here and finds particular resonances with filmmaker and preeminent thinker of «light», Nathaniel Dorsky's writings on cinematic transcendence and what he calls the «devotion» of cinema. Dorsky writes:

¹⁴ For in-depth discussions of photographic indexicality oriented not toward representation but to something outside the frame (temporality and perception), see Doane on indexicality in *Emergence of Cinematic Time*; see Hansen on indexicality and pastness in relation to aura in *Cinema and Experience*; see Sobchack on the relationship between indexicality and visible and invisible signs in the title chapter of her book «Address of the Eye».

I began to experience film as a direct and intimate metaphor or model for our being, a model which had the potential to be transformative, to be an evocation of spirit, and to become a form of devotion. [...] The word 'devotion,' as I am using it, need not refer to the embodiment of a specific religious form. Rather, it is the opening or the interruption that allows us to experience what is hidden [...] When film does this, when it subverts our absorption in the temporal and reveals the depths of our own reality, it opens us to a fuller sense of ourselves and our world. It is alive as devotional cinema (2005: 18).

In order to achieve «devotion», film, according to Dorsky, must engage in an act of alchemy, a transformative but also transcendental process that happens when the external world and our innermost selves «meet», in the union of the centrifugal pull of the outward gaze and the centripetal push of internalized vision (2005: 45). Images—whether moving or still—should balance these perspectives, not in order to illustrate, but to reveal «the poetic order of things» (2005: 47). For Dorsky, we should note, the film's «visual fabric» is alchemical when that fabric participates in the *nowness* of experience, and reveals time in and through that experience.

In key passages throughout his short but evocative text, he identifies time as one of «the essential elements in film's alchemy» and addresses the significance of using film to connect to (and here with echoes of Tarkovsky) what he refers to as the «plasticity of time» (Dorsky 2005: 32). Though Dorsky does not use the word, «deceleration» seems vital to visualizing such temporal plasticities, and to achieving such a balance between two types of time central to his concept of devotional cinema: on the one hand, relative time, or how the film progresses horizontally from first to last shot; on the other hand, absolute time, or film's radical and vertical «nowness».

These otherwise opposing temporalities come into a kind of symmetrical relation when the photography (of a film) «doesn't observe, but rather *is*» (Dorsky 2005: 35 my emphasis). That is, when photography presents itself as a piece of «light sculpture in time»—alive within and beyond the frame, «suffusing the solid [factual] world with luminosity» (2005: 31). When this unity occurs, when the relative and the absolute coalesce, film's liveness emerges and «reveals things for what they are rather than as surrogates for some predetermined concept» (Dorsky 2005: 37). The immediate context for these passages, which I am quoting here with some liberty, is Dorsky's discussion of Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) and Yasujiro Ozu's

The Only Son (1936), two films that, by creating images that refer to nothing but themselves and thus sustain the direct experience of «poetic mystery», craft the kind of «newness» impossible to express in ordinary language (2005: 40). Dorsky's analysis, of course, is grounded in specific examples from classic cinema, but he repeatedly and emphatically circles in and around, and always arrives back at the underlying principles of photography—cinema at its most decelerated, most saturated point, we could say.

Bearing this in mind, alchemy—the prerequisite for devotion, the necessary condition for experiencing time—occurs in cinema as a transmutational process that allows for an immersive experience of temporality and place, a kind of embeddedness constitutive of attention and absorption. I cannot help but conjure up certain photographs (and landscapes), in my mind, as I read Dorsky's prose: «the screen or field of light on the wall [...] alive as sculpture, while at the same time expressing the iconography within the frame», or «the screen, in union with its subject matter, becom[ing] a luminous square—a reflecting pool of surface tension and depth» (2005: 44 and 49).

This essay, through a close reading of Lois Patiño's 2013 experimental film *Costa da Morte*, has explored the concept of cinematic time in relation to the experience and perception of landscape, or what might be called, following John Wylie's work, the phenomenon of *being in* and *being with* landscape. In doing so, I have focused specifically on three aspects of cinematic time: *duration*, time's extension and expansion, but also its ineffable «nowness»; *aura*, understood in Walter Benjamin's thinking as the «strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of a distance, no matter how close it may be», but equally understood as a structuring of perception and vision; and *loss*, time's ability to be felt but its fundamental inability to be kept, captured, or seen (1999: 518).¹⁵ While landscape studies have long concentrated

¹⁵ This definition of aura comes from Benjamin's «Little History of Photography» essay, originally published in 1931. In his well-known «Work of Art» essay, originally published in 1936), he refers to aura as simply «the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be» (1968: 222). For a brilliant analysis of the line «strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance of a distance», see Hansen's chapter «Aura» in *Cinematic Experience* (2012: 104-131), where she parses various (and variously misinterpreted) meanings of aura across his writings from *The Arcades Project* to *Gesammelte Schriften*, including a discussion of aura as an «experience that inscribed itself as long practice» (2012: 107).

Also, for a wonderful reading of aura in relation to the notion of «photogénie» see Christophe Wall-Romana's *Jean Epstein: Corporal Cinema and Film Philosophy*. «Epstein's

on the ontology of place— notions of being and presence that emerge from and are legible within a particular geography or terrain— recent shifts in the field have tended to look more at absence, loss, and the spectral echoes (proximate distances) that can be encountered in the landscape; things that «emerge in the field of the beholder’s compulsively searching gaze» (Hansen 2012: 107). Thus, this essay participates in this discussion of absence and loss, articulating both as critical concepts not only for how we come to define landscape, but also for how we sense it— or, drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy’s ideas, how we envision, create, and «become» with landscape. My main objective here has been to think through the ways in which cinema and the origins of cinema— photography— share certain affinities with landscapes (understood as sites, bodies, screens, containers, images, perspectives, embodiments, and projections), and to contemplate how such affinities, when linked to perception and vision, aura and loss, create new possibilities for relating to and experiencing *time*. The final part of my analysis incorporates the concept of alchemy, an integral component of understanding photography as a site of affect and encounter, as an event and a place of action, as well as a form of illumination and revelation— a «light sculpture», that can simultaneously suspend us in *and* dislodge us from time; a place where, quoting Dorsky one last time, «in a flash, the uncanny presence of this poetic and vibrant world, ripe with mystery, stands before us» (2005: 37).

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photogénie also shares central features with one of the most celebrated concepts of the 1930s: Walter Benjamin’s aura. *Both photogénie and aura stage a scene of beholding between a subject and an object-field in which a crucial qualitative change results from cinematic mediation and nothing else»* (2013: 29, emphasis in original).

and favorite interlocutor on all things related to experimental cinema and photography. Many thanks also to Silvia Bouzas for her keen Galician eye. I am forever grateful to the participants of the 2014 Screen Studies Conference on «Landscape and Environment» held in Glasgow, especially Isabelle Freda and John Woodman for their enthusiastic interventions. Finally, I am indebted to my good friend, colleague, and fellow landscape nerd, Joshua Bonnetta, who first introduced me to Lois's work.

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