

“The Postman’s Coming:” *La Morte Rouge (soliloquio)* and the Limits of Essayistic Thinking

Positioning the essay film as a form of cinematic thinking enables a reconsideration of its different modalities, formal operations and philosophical influences. At the same time, it prompts us to reflect on its engagement with those elements of human experience that mark the limits of thought. Taking Víctor Erice’s *La Morte Rouge (soliloquio)* (2006) as its focus, this paper considers the ways in which Erice’s film explores elements of personal and collective experience that trigger an undoing of thought. What does the film’s rendition of this undoing imply about the nature of cinema? How do we register its effects in the images and sounds that characterize the director’s body of work?

Keywords

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George Kouvaros

g.kouvaros@unsw.edu.au

orcid.org/0000-0002-4299-6390

Professor of Film Studies in the School of the Arts and Media, University of NSW, Australia. He has published five monographs on various aspects of cinema, photography and visual culture. His most recent book is *The Old Greeks: Photography, Cinema, Migration* (UWAP, 2018).

I

"That's the way it is," the celebrated Spanish director Víctor Erice recounts in an essay on his relationship to cinema, "by writing, one day I began to think cinema—discovering a way to prolong its vision, of realizing it too" (Erice 2007, 267). He links this discovery to the experience of viewing François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*) at the 1959 San Sebastián Film Festival. "I left the theatre, moved. And that same night I felt the need to put down in writing the ideas and feelings that [the film's] images had awakened in me." My interest in this paper is not in tracing the continuities between Erice's writings on cinema and his films, but in the activity that links writing and filmmaking: thinking.¹ To put the matter as directly as possible: what does it mean for Erice to "think cinema"—or to use cinema as a space for thinking? How is this thinking registered in his films? The context in which these questions will be pursued is the film that locates the articulation of thought within its very title, *La Morte Rouge* (*soliloquio*) (2006). Produced as part of the exhibition *Correspondences: Víctor Erice and Abbas Kiarostami* first staged at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, this film recounts the director's initiation as a cinematic spectator and the impact on his five-year-old consciousness of Roy William Neill's 1946 murder mystery *The Scarlet Claw*. In *La Morte Rouge* thinking cinema involves thinking about forces and events that bind our histories to a larger collective history. More challengingly, it also involves thinking about something that can't be thought or realized in our experience of the world—a suspension of thought that is expressed through cinematic images and sounds. This paper will trace some of the ways in which this suspension of thought links *La Morte Rouge* to the forms of thinking that have come to define the essay

film. Viewed through the lens of this extraordinary film, the essay film is less a distinct set of techniques than an engagement with the capacity of cinematic images and sounds to traverse the limits of our thinking.

II

In *La Morte Rouge* Erice's reflections on cinema emerge from a cluster of thoughts on the passage of time and the uncertainty of history. The catalyst for these musings is the fate of the ornate building that once graced the stretch of road overlooking Gros Beach in San Sebastián: the Gran Kursaal (Fig.1). Drawing on archival photographs and newsreel footage showing the building in its heyday, Erice's voice-over recounts the ambitions that drove its construction and the events that led to its demise. The decision by the Spanish government in 1924 to ban gambling brought an end to the building's operations as a casino. But the building itself continued life as a cinema, and it is here, among "the ghosts of gamblers and croupiers, of waiters and cooks and musicians and variety artists," that on 24 January 1946 the director experienced cinema for the first time. In the preamble to the film's re-creation of this moment, we are shown photographs of the halls of the casino through which one had to pass to reach the cinema as well as the paintings on the domed ceiling of the magnificent auditorium where the screenings took place. We even hear a re-creation of the sound of the bell that was rung inside the auditorium to announce the start of the evening's entertainments that, as was the custom, began with the screening of a "No-Do"—the name given to the heavily propagandistic newsreels produced by the military dictatorship. The narrator describes these newsreels as the "substratum of reality" on which his experience of the fictional world of *The Scarlet Claw* was overlaid.



Fig. 1: *La Morte Rouge (soliloquio)* (V́ctor Erice, 2006)

But if Erice's words suggest an overlay of distinct elements, elsewhere he proposes a mutuality between contiguous forces. And it is this mutuality between the unsettling feelings inspired by Neill's film and his recollections of the life outside the cinema that the filmmaker's softly spoken voice-over endeavors to parse. Produced as part of a series of fourteen Sherlock Holmes films released by Universal Studios between 1939 and 1946, *The Scarlet Claw* concerns the attempts by Holmes and his associate Dr Watson to get to the bottom of a spate of grisly murders that have terrorized the inhabitants of the fictional Canadian village of La Morte Rouge. Looking back, Erice wonders if the film's rendition of life in the Canadian village echoed the feelings of dread that characterized the world outside the cinema, a world ravaged by the lingering trauma of the Spanish Civil War and the global devastation of the recently ended world war. "Did that universal sorrow weigh somehow on the heart of the boy, who, together with his sister, seven years older than him, walked towards the penumbra of the cinema to see the first film of his life?"

Erice's wording here is crucial. The connection between the disturbance generated by Neill's film and his recollections of the devastation that characterized the world outside the cinema is determined as much by shadow as by light. The formal challenge that drives the film is: how to give this partially illuminated connection a cinematic rendering? Three elements distinguish the director's response. The first is the capacity of the voice-over to weave together a host of different types of images: archival photographs of the Gran Kursaal and the scarified nature of Spanish society in the years leading up to and immediately after the Second World War; a movie poster advertising Neill's film; a map of Canada; a

silhouette of the familiar profiles of Holmes and Watson; publicity stills showing key players and scenes from *The Scarlet Claw*; a grainy black and white photograph of a small boy looking back at the camera that we recognize as the director, himself. Commencing in the first person yet shifting to the third person to describe the impact of Neill's film, the director's voice-over links these images to an overarching narrative about the fate of the Gran Kursaal, the large-scale social ruptures that marked his childhood and the cinema's capacity to lend itself to a certain type of troubled thinking.

The second element involves the use of reenactment to depict the moment when the young boy, sitting in the darkened auditorium, sought guidance on how to process the terrible events rendered in Neill's film by scanning the faces of the adult viewers. Erice also reenacts the disturbance generated when the light filtering through the balcony doors in the young boy's bedroom triggers a continuation of the fears experienced in the cinema. The shadows cast by this ghostly illumination are accompanied by an array of sounds that convey the permeability of the young boy's state of mind: the bell of a passing streetcar, the chiming of a church clock, the revving of a car engine and, most insistently of all, the plaintive notes emanating from a piano located in the apartment above the bedroom. Just prior to this sequence, Erice stages the arrival of the figure that mediates the passage between the crimes committed on-screen and the young boy's off-screen world: the neighborhood postman, whose shrill whistle acts as a counterpart to the bell that is rung inside the auditorium.

These two elements are supplemented by a third element that points to a realm of meaning that exceeds the story of cinematic initiation told through the voice-over

and the reenactments. I'm referring here to the associations drawn directly from the images, themselves. Three times during the first part of the film a publicity still of Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, AKA Holmes and Watson, peering down at something out-of-frame, slowly dissolves to an image of the devastated world into which the director was born (Fig. 2). The first dissolve links the gaze of the two detectives to a photograph of two children with their backs to the camera saluting a poster of General Franco. The second has the famous sleuths surveying aerial footage of a bombed-out European city. The third brings their viewpoint to bear on slow-motion footage of a concentration camp inmate walking toward the camera. Traditionally, the establishment of an eyeline match that links a shot of someone looking to a shot of the person or thing being looked at is used to maintain continuity across a cut. It aligns the camera's view of a scene with the perspective of a particular character who serves as a proxy for our own view. In the sequence described, our engagement with the events on screen is not bound to the perspective of a character per se. More reflexively, the connection is with an image. In *La Morte Rouge*, we see what images see. The look that the two detectives cast onto the world both doubles our gaze and displaces its priority by affirming the capacity of images to look for themselves and form connections on their own terms.

III

To say that in *La Morte Rouge* images look for themselves is to align its operations with those of the essay film, a form of cinema located between fiction and documentary that places the activity of thinking at the center of its operations. Timothy Corrigan clarifies that one way in which this occurs is through the inscription of

a subjective voice or perspective. The aim is not to arrive at a definitive position or claim about the world, but to render visible and audible the travails of thought: "Essayistic subjectivity [...] refers then not simply to the emplacement or positioning of an individual consciousness before and in experience but to an active and assertive consciousness that tests, undoes or re-creates itself through experience" (Corrigan 2011, 31). In films such as Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1955) and Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (*Lettre de Sibérie*, 1957) this involves an off-screen voice addressing the challenges posed by the images. How should we understand these images? What is it that they show? What can they not show? Near the start of Resnais' film, the camera tracks along an abandoned train line built to transport detainees to a concentration camp. "Today, on the same tracks, the sun shines," observes the narrator. "We go slowly along them, looking for what? Traces of the corpses that fell to the ground when the car doors opened? Or perhaps of those driven to the camps at gunpoint amid the barking dogs and glaring searchlights, with the flames of the crematorium in the distance, in one of those night scenes so dear to a Nazi's heart?" Once inside the camp, the narrator ponders the impossibility of conveying the horrors committed within its confines: "The reality of these camps, despised by those who built them, and unfathomable to those who endured them—what hope do we have of truly capturing this reality?" The cumulative effect of these reflections is to alert us to a disjunction—between what is seen and what is spoken, between the image's capacity to reveal the world and what must be brought to light through other means.²

In *La Morte Rouge* the director's voice-over also encourages the spectator to ponder the relationship



Fig. 2: *La Morte Rouge (soliloquio)* (V́ctor Erice, 2006)

between images and the traumas of history. "To the public, *The Scarlet Claw* was, above all, just a 'scary' film," the narrator recalls. "Except that, in this instance, the fear spread far beyond the screen, its echo resounding in the atmosphere of a devastated society. On the one hand, due to the bloodletting typical of a civil war; on the other, due to the effects of a recently ended world struggle." Like the narration in Resnais' film, Erice's voice-over prompts us to look again at the image. But this reengagement is not driven by a distrust of the image's ability to convey the traumas of history. Rather, it is part of an activity of thinking that endeavors to approach the image on its own terms. This is to say that, in Erice's film, images operate as seers whose gaze alerts us to those aspects of the past that remain still-to-be-thought. Where else can we find evidence of this type of pictorial agency? In a discussion of Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–1998), Jacques Rancière proposes that the director's project of drawing out of the images of the previous century a virtual history is comprised of two stages. The first involves separating images from their narrative arrangement. In the chapter entitled "Le contrôle de l'univers," for example, we are presented with a collection of moments from Alfred Hitchcock's films separated by black screens: the bottle of Pommard smashing on the ground in *Notorious* (1946); the slowly turning windmill in *Foreign Correspondent* (1940); the yellow handbag tucked under the central character's arm in *Marnie* (1964); the illuminated glass of milk carried up the stairs by Cary Grant in *Suspicion* (1941). The second stage involves using the resources of video editing to combine these images with a range of other images, written text, musical phrases and spoken elements. The outcome is a shift in the operations and purpose of montage,

from something principled on the clash of seemingly incompatible elements to "attesting to a more fundamental relationship of co-belonging, a shared world where heterogenous elements are caught up in the same essential fabric, and are therefore always open to being assembled in accordance with the fraternity of a new metaphor" (Rancière 2007, 57).

In *Histoire(s) du cinéma* montage has a dual agenda: it initiates a clash between seemingly heterogeneous elements and uses this clash to attest to a continuum. "The space of these clashes and that of the continuum," Rancière concludes, "can even bear the same name: History. History can indeed be two contradictory things: the discontinuous line of revealing clashes or the continuum of co-presence" (2007, 60). Erice's rearrangement of images operates on a much more modest scale than that found in Godard's grand project. And rather than moving across a multitude of different contexts, Erice focuses on the time and place of his own childhood. Despite these differences both directors use the disjunctions between heterogeneous images and between images and spoken narration to reveal a co-belonging of artistic forms and collective life. In Erice's case, this endeavor is aided by the capacity of his softly spoken voice-over to link the assemblage of images to his childhood memories. But as is the case with Godard's voice-over in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, the purpose of these words is not to disclose something hidden. Rather, they strive to illuminate something more mysterious: the experience of a shared world that binds our fate to the fate of images. The larger issue here is cinema's capacity to render a particular type of thinking drawn directly from the material properties of images and sounds. The matter that requires further elaboration is: on what basis is this thinking

established? How do the visual and sonic elements that comprise the film's account of the director's initiation into cinema render a disturbance of thought that is tied to an individual history yet is also inextricably bound to a larger collective crisis? What does the film's rendition of this disturbance imply about the nature of cinematic experience?

IV

We can begin to address these matters by considering those moments when the camera pans across a photograph or film still showing us figures from the past, for example, the photograph of the well-heeled denizens of the Gran Kursaal Casino dressed in tuxedos and evening wear smiling at the camera (Fig. 3). Erice's voice-over underlines the sense of pastness associated with these images. But the affective power of these moments is drawn as much from the manner in which the scanning movement of the camera brings this plangency into engagement with the material qualities of the images. "Another space is opened up," Garrett Stewart writes about these scanning movements, a "photo-chemical rather than narrative space—absent, past, flat (or flatter)—an optic plane giving upon an illusory scopic field that is held at an untraversable remove from the scanning eye" (Stewart 1999, 10). Like the gaze cast onto the world by the image of Holmes and Watson, this photo-chemical space is bound to the camera's view of the world, a view that we are invited to share, but from which we are also excluded. For André Bazin this exclusion is a consequence of the automatic nature of photographic images. "For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent," he writes in "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." "For the first

time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man" (Bazin 1968, 13). In *La Morte Rouge* the scanning movement of the camera is an attempt to take stock of the implications of the photograph's ability to show us an image of the world in which we play no part. It restores what has been removed from the scenes depicted in the photographs or stills—movement, duration—and triggers a type of anxious thinking about something that poses a challenge to thought, or that pushes it to a limit: our absence from the world.

For Erice, then, to "think cinema" is not to look at images from a safe distance and puzzle their meaning. Nor is to find aspects of our own history embedded in the history of images. Rather it is to encounter something that unsettles our thinking. This something is bound to an experience of history, its collective traumas and lingering silences. But it is also bound to a disturbance in our subjectivity. Perhaps the most direct rendition of this disturbance occurs near the start of the director's first film, *The Spirit of the Beehive* (*El espíritu de la colmena*, 1973), when, from among a mass of bodies crowded together in a rundown village hall to watch a screening of James Whale's 1931 version of *Frankenstein*, the camera picks out Ana (Ana Torrent), the young girl who serves as the film's central character. Cutting between the scene from Whale's film that shows the first meeting of Frankenstein's monster (Boris Karloff) and the little village girl (Marilyn Harris) who befriends him and a hand-held shot of Ana gazing intently up at the screen, the film captures that "unrepeatable moment" when the stunned reactions of the young actress watching the movie for the first time become indistinguishable from the reactions of the character that she plays. "I sincerely believe that it's



Fig. 3: *La Morte Rouge (soliloquio)* (V́ctor Erice, 2006)

the best moment I've ever captured on film," Erice confesses in Carlos Rodríguez's *The Footprints of a Spirit* (*Huellas de un espíritu*, 1998). "It was an actual screening. She was really seeing the movie. He [Luis Cuadrado, the film's cinematographer] captured her reaction to the encounter between the monster and the little girl. So it was an unrepeatable moment, one that could never be 'directed'." In the same discussion, he observes that, in a film made in "a very premeditated style," the key moment is one that escapes this premeditation: "I think that's the crack through which the aspect of film that records reality bursts through into every kind of fictional narrative. [...] But without the substratum of fiction, it too would fail to acquire its fullest sense as an image recording reality."

Erice's account of the young actress' reaction forefronts a fundamental aspect of his understanding of cinematic images: their capacity to impose themselves on our thinking. This is why childhood is so important in his films: it designates not a phase in our lives that we return to and ponder. More enduringly, it exemplifies a way of being connected to images and sounds. Erice clarifies the nature of this connection by referring to Jean Louis Schefer's proposition in *The Ordinary Man of Cinema* that cinema's power lies in its ability to connect with an "unfinished" childhood that inheres within the subject. "It seems as if a part of ourselves is permeable to effects of meaning without ever being able to be born into meaning through our language," Schefer proposes at the start of his book (2016, 12). The cinema aligns these unexpressed meanings to the operation of visible figures—bodies, gestures and actions—whose purpose is to reacquaint us with what remains still-to-be-understood in our relationship to the past. "Something of our own knowledge is in them," Schefer writes of our attachment to

these figures, a knowledge that speaks of "our unfinished and now nearly invisible childhood" (2016, 61).

In *The Spirit of the Beehive* Ana's response to the encounter between the monster and the little girl embodies the affective openness that Schefer associates with the figure of the child. It also positions her alongside other cinematic figures identified by Gilles Deleuze whose capacity to see exceeds their capacity to react and whose task is to confront "something unthinkable in thought" (Deleuze 1989, 169). Later in *The Spirit of the Beehive* the camera scrutinizes a collection of photographs of Ana's mother and father. The matter of to whom this scrutiny belongs is only clarified half-way through the sequence when we are presented with a low-angle shot of Ana leafing through the pages of a large album. The first three photographs are hand-colored images of Ana's mother, Teresa (Teresa Gimpera), as a schoolgirl. These images are then replaced by a series of portraits of her as a young woman that appear in the album alongside photographs of Ana's father, Fernando (Fernando Fernán Gómez), at a similar age. "To my dear misanthrope," reads the dedication written on the front of another one of the photographs (Fig. 4). On one level, these images provide a glimpse of an earlier period in the lives of Ana's parents, one less burdened by a sense of loss.³ But on another level, the camera's scrutiny of the photographs prior to Ana's appearance binds our view, once again, to a photochemical rather than a narrative space, a space in which we are free to contemplate the implications of cinema's ability to give us an image of the world in which we play no part.

"The presence of the photograph permits me to invest more freely in what I am seeing," writes Raymond Bellour in his account of the disturbance brought on by the inclusion of a still image in a film. "It helps



Fig. 4: *The Spirit of the Beehive* (Víctor Erice, 1973)

me to close my eyes, yet keep them wide open" (Bellour 2011, 89). This contradictory condition captures the sense in which the still image is both part of the fictional world rendered in a film and the trigger for a different type of audience engagement—one in which we "find the time to add to the image" (2011, 92). Such is the nature of Erice's film that, in doing so, we find ourselves retracing the conundrums explored by the film's characters. Ana's reaction to the encounter between the little girl and the monster; the long moment when she stands on the train tracks while the sound of the on-coming train increases in intensity; her gaze down at the body of her sister, Isabel (Isabel Tellería), who is pretending to be dead; her scrutiny of the poisonous mushroom identified by her father: each of these scenes dramatize Ana's struggle to contemplate something that, by rights, can't be contemplated, only experienced: our absence from the world. In Erice's film this impossible contemplation is central to the encounters that constitute the story of Ana's engagement with the mysteries that are part of her childhood—at the same time as it opens the door to another film operating at the edges of the fiction, one in which the implications of cinema's photochemical dimensions form the basis of a sustained reflection on the allure of images.

V

The questions that drive Erice's thinking about cinema can be put quite simply: where does the cinema reside? How does it connect to us? In the years leading up to the production of *La Morte Rouge*, these questions were spurred by the realization that cinema's primacy as a cultural form had been taken over by an array of other technologies—television, video, electronic images. "Not only does cinema lack a future, in a certain

way it has already stopped existing," he pessimistically observes in the essay on his relationship to cinema referred to at the start of this paper. "Now, what one must talk about is the audiovisual" (Erice 2007, 267). A decade and a half since the film's release, these questions are just as pertinent to our contemporary musings about cinema's place. In *La Morte Rouge* the closest we come to a direct answer occurs in the narrator's account of the young boy's attempts to make sense of the events portrayed in *The Scarlet Claw*. The thing that he finds hardest to deal with is less the grisly nature of the murderer's methods—slashing the throats of his victims with a metal claw—than the fact of death, itself. "It was there in the midst of what the vast majority thought of as a pastime, that the boy discovered that people died; and furthermore, that men were able to kill other men." Searching for a way to process this grim realization, he scans the faces of the adult spectators seated around him in the auditorium. Instead of seeing a reflection of his own fear, he encounters something more puzzling: a type of attentive passivity. "This fact aroused a suspicion in the boy: the unanimous attitude of the adults had to be the consequence of a pact they had all agreed to, and which involved staying quiet and continuing to watch. Because all of them possessed one feature in common: they knew something he didn't, a secret that explained everything." Unlike the identity of the murderer terrorizing the Canadian village in Neill's film, the nature of this secret is not disclosed. Instead, it is apprehended as an experience of something unknowable that both distances the young boy from the adult world and draws him closer to cinema.

Where does the cinema reside? How does it connect to us? In *La Morte Rouge* the answer is that the cinema is "already in us."⁴ Not as

a secret knowledge that we might recover. Nor even as the memory of a once dominant cultural form. But as the index of what will always remain unknowable in our lived existence. The impact of this unknowability on the young boy's thinking is evident in his response to the revelation that the perpetrator of the terrible crimes in *The Scarlet Claw* is the seemingly inoffensive Potts (Gerald Hamer), the village postman, who is not actually Potts, but Alistair Ramson, a resentful actor bent on revenge. The actor's deception unleashes in the young boy's mind a conundrum: "What he deduced was that [an actor] was someone who didn't have a soul of his own; and, furthermore, by means of false beards, hairpieces, and moustaches, changes of clothing and of voice, he was capable of choosing an identity at will. And if Potts could be anybody, then by the same token anybody could be Potts." Potts' deception echoes the deception to which we all acquiesce when we view a film: that something can be both there and not there, that existence can be affirmed as a form of absence.

The matter to stress is that the implications of Potts' deception pertain as much to ourselves as to the world out there. "The image speaks to us, and seems to speak intimately to us of ourselves," Maurice Blanchot clarifies. "Let us say [...] that the image intimately designates the level where personal intimacy is destroyed and that it indicates in this movement the menacing proximity of a vague and empty outside, the deep, the sordid basis upon which it continues to affirm things in their disappearance" (Blanchot 1982, 254). Blanchot's remarks are not directed at cinematic images per se. Rather they designate a crisis in our ability to maintain what Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier calls "the reassuring distinction between the thing gazed upon and its aesthetic elaboration, which would succeed it"

(Ropars-Wuilleumier 1996, 140–41). Understood accordingly, Blanchot's account of the image extends a line of thinking about the implications of the cinematic image's automatic qualities. It does so by affirming the cinematic image's capacity to reveal a world founded on our own absence. For Blanchot, as it is for Erice and Bazin, the image is where we confront the fact of our own absence, or, more accurately, where this absence confronts us as a series of projections, suspended just far enough in front of us to allow us an element of control, even a degree of pleasure.

VI

How the young boy learns to manage the disturbances triggered by Neill's film constitutes the final part of *La Morte Rouge*. Convinced that letters are emblems of death and that all postmen are its agents, the young boy is traumatized by his older sister's taunts: "The postman's coming, the postman's coming..." Her words help to transform the film's rendition of his bedroom into a type of proxy cinematic space in which the light from passing streetcars projects terrifying shadows along the ceiling. But whereas at the start of *The Scarlet Claw* it is the ringing of the church bell that signals the enactment of Potts' crime, in the space of the young boy's bedroom it is the chiming of the nearby church clock that contributes to his state of panic. Sensing the murderous postman's approach, he seeks refuge by applying the lesson learnt from Potts' deception: "Playing dead was perhaps the only way death wouldn't notice him, as if he were already one of its victims, and so it would pass by without stopping in search of other sleeping bodies." So, in the end, the young boy becomes what he has been all along: an image, whose function is to bring together a set of experiences that constitute the story of the director's childhood and

enable the contemplation of something that cannot be contemplated directly. The young boy, the Gran Kursaal, the murderous Potts: in *La Morte Rouge* each of these figures (or, in Blanchotian terms, "images") does double duty. Each one enables Erice's thinking about the past and gives shape to what remains still-to-be-thought about this past. Taken together, they mark the point where the autobiographical aspects of Erice's story of cinematic initiation assume a necessarily allegorical dimension.

VII

The concluding sequence of *La Morte Rouge* commences with a series of still images that, in time-lapse fashion, pass from the period of the Gran Kursaal's operations as a cinema, to the period of its demolition and, finally, to its replacement by the Modernist-inspired buildings that now occupy the site. The film then returns to the spot where it commenced, looking toward the headland at Gros Beach. The final shot is of the late afternoon waves rolling onto the beach. "It could be said that only the sea endures," the narrator ponders right at the start of the film. "The rest is different or has been effaced with time, like footsteps in the sand." This emphasis on the unstoppable forces of time and erasure links *La Morte Rouge* to the ending of Erice's previous film, *The Quince Tree Sun* (*El sol del membrillo*, 1992), which documents the attempt by the renowned Spanish painter Antonio López to capture the ripening of quinces on a tree in the yard of the house that serves as his studio. The use of title cards allows us to track the progression of this endeavor—from its commencement on 29 September 1990, when the artist began by constructing his canvas, establishing a plumb line in front of the tree and hammering survey nails into the ground to mark the exact spot from where, each day, he would

stand in front of the canvas, to its end on 10 December 1990. In between, he covers the tree in a transparent plastic canopy to protect it from the rain, abandons the oil painting in favor of a pencil sketch and recruits his friends to prop up the sagging branches of the tree with a long stick while he continues to work on the drawing. All this comes to naught, when, one morning, he discovers, among the discarded cigarette butts at the base of the tree, a fallen quince. A week later, after contemplating the fruit scattered on the ground, he breaks the plumb line and dismantles the remaining structures.

The implications that this failure has for Erice's own practice is alluded to in the sequence that occurs near the end of the film when López's voice-over recounts the details of a dream in which he is standing with his parents in front of the house where he was born, looking at the rapidly decaying fruit on a group of quince trees across the square: "Nobody seems to notice that the quinces are rotting under a light I can't really describe. Clear, yet dark, that changes all into metal and dust. It isn't the night light. Neither is it that of twilight. Nor of dawn." The artist's account of this mysterious light triggers a series of close-ups of the decaying fruit gathered at the base of the quince tree. Each shot progresses the decay a step further. The penultimate shot shows one of the walls in the courtyard of his studio (Fig. 5). It's nighttime. Silhouetted on the wall is the outline of an unmanned camera attached to a tripod. The manner in which the camera's lens is tilted down at the ground suggests that it has been set up to record the drama of decomposition occurring at the base of the quince tree.

"Everything saturnine points down into the depths of the earth," writes Walter Benjamin. "For all the wisdom of the melancholic is subject to the nether world; it is secured by immersion in



Fig. 5: *The Quince Tree Sun* (Victor Erice, 1992)

the life of creaturely things" (Benjamin 1998, 152). For Benjamin, melancholy is primarily a creative disposition that is based on an immersion in the life of things. Its devotion to what has passed gives rise to a work whose structure is determined by an awareness of loss. In *The Quince Tree Sun* the silhouette of the unmanned camera peering down at the decaying fruit furnishes a fitting emblem of Erice's thinking about cinema—its disposition and abiding concerns. His films echo Bazin's assertion that at the heart of the cinema's appeal is its ability to restore not the past, but rather the trace of its passing.⁵ And just as Bazin in his writings is drawn to analogies and metaphors that emphasize the coming together of preservation and the inevitability of change, Erice in his films is drawn to scenarios that trace the legacies of people, events and structures that stand in for what will always remain still-to-be-thought about the past. For both, it is a matter of doing justice to cinema's duality as a medium that restores the world and affirms its passing.

"Death is *neither* the opposite of life *nor* the passage into another life," Jean-Luc Nancy writes in an account of Abbas Kiarostami's films. "It is itself the blind spot that opens up the looking" (Nancy 2001, 18). The type of looking he has in mind can be found in the work of other filmmakers, for example, Edward Yang and Claire Denis: "In each instance one deals with a cinema opening onto its own image as onto something real—or meaningful—that can only be taken by images, aiming from somewhere beyond any 'point of view,' with a look devoid of subjectivity, with a lens that would aim for life from the vantage point of the secret of death as the secret of something evident" (2001, 52). In Erice's films, as well, death is the blind spot that determines a certain way of looking at things. In *La Morte Rouge* this is evident on two

levels: in the story of the narrator's initiation as a cinema-goer and in the manner in which the film affirms the capacity of cinematic images to render a world in which we play no part. This is the other side of the state of childhood that is so central to Erice's films: a particular way of managing the disturbances that bind us to the cinema and that, in *La Morte Rouge*, has as its analog the close-up shots of the adult spectators seated alongside the young boy in the auditorium (Fig. 6). Attentive yet oblivious to the horror on screen, proximate yet fundamentally removed, animate yet frozen in place, these hard to parse faces render a way of peeping into the space of our own absence while saying nothing and carrying on.

In Erice's films, this is the moment of cinematic thinking par excellence: the moment when the distinction between presence and absence is suspended, when those nearest to us are apprehended as if from an insurmountable distance. Embedded in this moment is the activity that is central to the challenge of thinking cinema: writing. The activity of writing referred to here is not concerned with critical evaluation. Nor is it an exercise in self-reflection—about film history and the director's place within its unfolding. To put it as plainly as possible, the trope that governs its operations is not self-reflection, but a displaced encounter with those elements that render the reflecting consciousness incomplete and, ultimately, other to itself. This is a form of writing drawn to cinema's capacity to enable a confrontation with what remains unknowable within us. "The thinking subject can only apprehend itself as 'already born' and 'still alive,'" Vincent Descombes observes about the blind spots of self-reflection. "The limits of birth and death elude it" (Descombes 1980, 71). In *La Morte Rouge* the various movements between



Fig. 6: *La Morte Rouge (soliloquio)* (Vittorio Gassman, 2006)

and across images are an attempt to map these limits as they impose themselves on the filmmaker's thinking. Framed accordingly, Erice's film continues the essay film's emphasis on the rendition of a subjective consciousness that tests and recreates itself—and marks the point where this effort results in an undoing of the subject. How do we register this undoing? What emotion distinguishes its affective pitch? The simple answer

is fear—a fear in which the silences that marked post-Civil War Spanish life are inextricably linked to the cinematic image's capacity to render a world founded on our own absence. Thinking cinema, writing cinema: for Erice, both strive to turn the memory of this fear into something other than fear: a form of knowledge in which identification and self-estrangement work hand-in-hand.

1/ For a discussion of the continuities between Erice's writings on cinema and his films, see Zunzunegui 2014.

2/ Emma Wilson characterizes this disjunction as a "suspicion of visibility" (2006, 7). She draws this phrase from Laura Marks' discussion of nonvisual knowledge in *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000).

3/ In one of the photographs the Spanish scholar, writer and poet Miguel de Unamuno can be seen standing next to Ana's father, thereby establishing the glimmer of a backstory of his life prior to the commencement of the film's narrative.

4 This phrase is taken from Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener's *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (2010, 158). The authors are discussing the implications of Deleuze's understanding of cinema: "The cinema is a reality and a way of thinking, which might be translated into saying that, as we speak about the cinema, we are already in cinema and the cinema is always already in us."

5 In "Objects Suspended in Light," Linda C. Ehrlich claims that Erice reread Bazin's essays during the filming of *The Quince Tree Sun* (Ehrlich 2007, 19). The director himself refers to Bazin's writings in a number of the interviews found in the same volume.

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