SUBJECTIVITY AND THE FANTASTIC IN CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF TOTALITARIAN STATES

by

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(Under the Direction of Dorothy Figueira)

ABSTRACT

Individuals forced to submit to the mechanisms totalitarian states employ to control their citizens find their identities, sense of reality and ability to act threatened. The expressive potentials afforded by the fantastic prove invaluable as they strive to articulate the surreal atmosphere and states of mind manifesting in such environments. Defamiliarized representations of the mundane similarly allow them to "re-enchant" social and physical landscapes against which they have had to protectively anesthetize themselves. This analysis will explore the balance maintained between the mundane and the fantastic that filmmakers develop to portray the living environment and subjective inner life of those experiencing totalitarian rule. Focusing on films that utilize science fiction and magical realism, it will concentrate on the states of consciousness invoked in viewers by these techniques, and experienced by citizens of regimes as they make sense of the forbidden aspects of their natures in a re-imagined space.

INDEX WORDS: Totalitarianism, magical realism, science fiction, reverie, subjectivity, the fantastic, Arendt, Bachelard, Morin, Diaz, Erice, Marker, Weerasethakul

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> "In some ways living in Santo Domingo during the Trujillato was a lot like being in that famous Twilight Zone episode…, the one where the monstrous white kid with the godlike powers rules over a town that is completely isolated from the rest of the world…The white kid is vicious and random and all the people in the 'community' live in straight terror of him, denouncing and betraying each other at the drop of a hat in order not to be the person he maims or, more ominously, sends to the corn."
>
> (Junot Diaz*, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*)

In his 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Diaz contends that life in the Dominican Republic felt unreal under the dictatorship established by Rafael Trujillo. An immigrant to the United States, Diaz works in his writing to make sense of the impact the Trujillo regime, stretching from 1930 through 1961, had on Dominicans. He has claimed that the prosaic nature of realism does not permit him to establish an atmosphere evocative of the unsettling power Trujillo's regime wielded. The simple ability dictatorships have to make citizens disappear, banishing them to an uncertain oblivion, is for instance eerily tantamount to sending them "to the corn" (224). In order to adequately depict the surreal terrain and states of mind that evolved in the society Trujillo incepted, Diaz found it necessary to write a work of science fiction, and pepper it with constant references to other fantasy and science fiction pieces. This novel stands as a telling example of the kinds of work that have been undertaken in recent decades to depict the impact oppressive regimes can have on the psyches and imaginative lives of their citizens. Writers, artists and filmmakers focused on the subject may adopt a stark, if not harrowingly realistic style to confront their audiences with the concrete

reality of life within such regimes. However, others choose to work within less conventionally realistic genres in order to depict the subjective inner reality and bizarre extremes their citizens come to know.

The expressive potentials that the fantastic affords prove invaluable to those striving to articulate the ways in which people are called on to sacrifice and abjure that which renders them individual.[1] Stating in vivid yet conventional terms, for instance, that Trujillo "aspired to become an architect of history," Diaz describes how the dictator, "through a horrifying ritual of silence and blood, machete and perejil, darkness and denial, inflicted a true border on the countries, a border that exists beyond maps, that is carved directly into the histories and imaginaries of a people" (224). The use of science fiction imagery is key to his analysis of this situation; in the question he subsequently poses, he acknowledges how absurdly comparable futuristic technologies can seem to the forces that tyrannical regimes command, and cannily deploy. Asserting that "homeboy could not have had a more private realm had he thrown a force field around the island," Diaz asks, "after all, who needs futuristic generators when you have the power of the machete?" (225). However, in stating that the border Trujillo sought to establish was focused in part within the "imaginaries" of citizens, Diaz also speaks of the manner in which the subjective mind is commandeered and manipulated within totalitarian states. Regarding this tendency, political theorist Hannah Arendt observes in *Totalitarianism* that, "after a few years of power and systematic coordination, the Nazis could rightly

[1] Tzvetan Todorov's standard breakdown of fantastic works will be used in this analysis, in terms of the classifications given to the works under analysis. In his 1975 work *The Fantastic,* Todorov situates fantastic works in which mysterious events occur without an ultimate explanation in the category of the marvelous. Science fiction and magical realist pieces are classed within this grouping. Works in which a logical explanation is eventually provided for seemingly supernatural occurrences he situates in the realm of the uncanny.

announce: 'the only person who is still a private individual in Germany is someone who is asleep'" (36-37). In societies of this ilk, individuality and subjective awareness are considered uncontrollable, and therefore relatively illicit. They are in certain ways new forms of the "unsayable." It has proven necessary therefore to have recourse to the fantastic to portray them, in a wry yet poignant commentary on the difficulty now inherent in acknowledging the place of individuality and subjective states of being.

This analysis will thus explore the techniques individuals develop to portray the skewed reality that citizens of totalitarian states endure. It will focus on cinematic works that utilize the fantastic in the representation of life within such regimes, concentrating on films of a magical realist or dystopian science fiction nature. Controversy has existed since the birth of cinema regarding what constitutes realism within the parameters of the screen. It therefore stands as a unique territory within which to consider questions that have been raised in contemporary society regarding how one might represent the inner lives of those enduring totalitarianism. As will be discussed later in the introduction, writing on the political dimensions of fantastic cinema is scarce, making this topic valid, if not timely.

However, rather than simply attending to the fantastic elements of these films, an equal focus will be placed on their evocation of mundane reality. Attitudes towards quotidian realities themselves transform under totalitarianism, as citizens find it necessary to numb themselves to the daily potential for violence, imprisonment and surveillance. Forced to hide evidence of, if not abandon their own innate individuality, they must close themselves as well to the unique textures and profundity of everyday existence. Those portraying life within such societies frequently utilize the technique of

defamiliarization to provoke a renewed appreciation for the mundane within audiences numbed in this manner. Introduced by Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, this term refers to the practice by which something commonly perceived as banal can be depicted in a poetic manner, to remind readers or viewers of its essential nature. Aware that "as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic," Shklovsky alleges in his 1917 essay "Art as Technique" that a familiar object can be "in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it" (13). He finds that people prove incapable of perceiving the full nature of what they fleetingly name, as they routinely refer to objects, events and individuals in what become abbreviated, coded symbols. Claiming that existence is thus "reckoned as nothing," he observes that "habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things" (12). The use of poetically "attenuated" lighting, pacing and sound in film renders that which is being depicted suddenly unfamiliar and ends the "automatism of perception" (Shklovsky 23, 13). Describing art as a poetic means of depicting reality, Shklovsky sees that the type of studied perusal it demands slows the process of perception, forcing individuals to focus on the essence of the pieces they survey.

The application of this technique to the depiction of political realities is perhaps indispensable. The kinds of symbolic images that are utilized and the manner in which they are deployed disrupt typical modes of perception, and force those exposed to them to engage directly with the grim realities being depicted. Diaz's literary portrayal of the tactics that permit totalitarian societies to evolve allows him to simultaneously provide readers with a relative experience of them. By employing narrative devices that rupture

the traditional space of his narratives, he jolts his readers, establishing a sense of the compromised nature of the cultural terrain and the space of the individual. In one of the humorous yet sobering footnotes he provides regarding Dominican history, Diaz visually deforms the space of the narrative to express how disruptive and overpowering Trujillo's policies were. Explaining that Trujillo renamed pivotal landmarks in the Dominican Republic after himself, Diaz relies on capitalization to write "ALL THE NAMES OF ALL THE LANDMARKS" (11). This visual deformation of the narrative space highlights the sense of shock and outrage Dominicans felt at the loss of resonant, symbolic cultural markers. Yet a steady run of capitalized letters can also create an aggressively invasive, if not overwhelming tone. The spate of capitals also embodies the loss of subtlety and variation that occurs when a culture loses its ability to signify freely; in naming key cultural symbols after himself, Trujillo insinuated that there were no limits or boundaries, and no meaning without him. By using stylistic devices of this sort to lament and warn of dictatorial practices, Diaz provides readers with a visual, visceral experience of Trujillo's presence and impact. However, he utilizes humor as well, almost aggressively and in novel ways, to celebrate the raw strength and will of the subjugated. Trujillo's efforts to claim the cultural space of the Dominican Republic parallel the hold he tried to establish over his citizens. He preferred that they be remade according to his dictates, no longer functioning as private individuals but as citizens effaced of their identities and ability to act independently. By provoking readers alternately with the absurd humor and awkward pathos of the situation his people knew, Diaz forces them to experience the strength and vulnerability he finds intrinsic to humanity.

The defamiliarizing stylistic devices and use of the fantastic initiated by those such as Diaz demonstrate how agile and innovative one must be when representing the citizens, histories and sociocultural terrain of totalitarian regimes. Inherently experimental, the three films that will be surveyed provide ready examples of these techniques. Re-enchanting the landscape of daily life with sublime, spirited evocations of the fantastic and the mundane, they remind audiences of what might easily be sacrificed to forces predicated on violence and domination. Their innovative use of lighting, sound, color and pacing work to jolt viewers and reacquaint them with the nature of lived reality, and the forces levied against a spirited, full experience of it. The protagonists of these films frequently enter into states of reverie, attuning themselves to the subtler aspects of their natures, communities and the world. Objective physical reality and the experience of emotional rapport are in this way celebrated. Each film moves at a meditatively slow pace, one engineered specifically to make viewers register images and events on a deeper level than they otherwise might. They move into a defamiliarized space, in an equivalent state of thoughtful reverie. In this sense these films offer a challenge to those who might deny the worth of the individual and the reality of subjective, internal states. They celebrate the state of wonder individuals can experience when interfacing thoughtfully with their environments, by bringing viewers into these spaces as well.

The Spirit of the Beehive, a 1976 film crafted by Spanish director Victor Erice, presents the contemplative awakening of a young girl in early Franco-era Spain. Embedded in the somber realities of 1930s Spain, it possesses a meditative pace and internal silence that grant it an otherworldly atmosphere. Yet it does not deviate from a classically realist style until its end, and the occurrence which could cause it to be

categorized as fantastic derives from what some might class a hallucination. While it can be termed magical realist, for those who view ambiguously dreamlike, hallucinatory passages as such, Erice defines it simply and relevantly as poetic. *La Jetée*, released in 1967 by Chris Marker, follows a man as he travels in time from the apocalyptic landscape of World War Three to secure materials needed for humanity's survival. This science fiction piece consists somewhat notoriously of a series of still photos shot in black and white; it capably registers the stunned momentum of those witness to the destruction of their society, and their coercive imprisonment by the war's relative victors. The 2010 film *Uncle Boonmee Who Recalls His Past Lives*, by Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, recounts the final days of a man living in a culture in which the spiritual realm steadily interfaces with mundane, objective reality. An immersion within the field of this magical realist piece grants an awareness of the tensions active within the rural and urban landscapes of societies in which traditional numinous understandings of reality subtly confront militaristic, consumerist ways.

An initial exploration of the nature of totalitarian regimes should help establish a sense of the reasons the directors of these films chose to depict them in a fantastic, uniquely stylized way. By considering the tactics employed to make individuals question their identities and potential, in an incessantly public state, a context for the analyses that follow should be provided. A subsequent analysis of the manner in which reality has historically been conceived of and depicted should establish grounds for a study of the use of the fantastic in films depicting the subjective experience of totalitarian rule.

Totalitarianism is defined as a "form of government that theoretically permits no individual freedom and that seeks to subordinate all aspects of the individual's life to the

authority of the government" (Hoiberg). While political analysts can differ when determining what types of regimes may be considered totalitarian, the analyses Hannah Arendt provides of societies such as Nazi Germany and Communist Russia provide a sound breakdown of the basic characteristics of modern totalitarian states.[2] Absolute power and the willingness to wield it extravagantly and ruthlessly are hallmarks of totalitarian states. Considering the means by which power is established within them, Arendt notes that "it is in the very nature of totalitarian regimes to demand unlimited power. Such power can only be secured if literally all men, without a single exception, are reliably dominated in every aspect of their life" (154). Compelled to engage in ideological affirmations of the state, citizens are simultaneously forced to accommodate constant observation, inordinate displays of power, and extremes of violence and cruelty. Concentrating on the stages by which totalitarian rule is cemented within a society, Arendt claims that it is only at the inception of a regime's rule that clear opponents are tracked down and eliminated. Implicit in the human "capacity to think" is the fact that all people thus become "suspects by definition" (128). As they witness or take part in violence and surveillance activities, they find that they become increasingly suspect themselves. Once a regime's power has been cemented, potential dissidents and activists, referred to as "objective enemies," are regularly ferreted out (130). By trying to locate and then eliminate or recondition them before they act or even conceive of dissent, regimes work to engineer the nature of their citizens. However, locating and eliminating potential dissidents is not considered sufficient.

[2] In her 1947 work *Totalitarianism*, Arendt focuses attention on the socioeconomic forces that lead mass numbers of citizens to advocate for specific regimes, considers the nature of totalitarian propaganda, analyzes the stages by which such states assert control over their citizenry and examines the role of concentration camps in the institution of totalitarian rule.

Totalitarianism "aims at…the transformation of human nature itself" (156). Whether a regime relies upon religious fundamentalism to excuse its extremes, engages in ethnic cleansing to cement its national identity, establishes a cult of personality to fixate the attention of its citizens, or hypocritically purports to follow socialist tenets, it invariably works to alienate citizens from the subtle aspects of their private selves. Rather than relying solely on the surveillance of their citizens' movements and thoughts, such societies require instead that a different brand of consciousness evolve within humanity. While a certain vigilance is expected of all citizens, these states are engineered so that rather than simply policing one another or oneself, the capacity for independent thought and action is gradually eliminated. The borderline between individuals and the state is essentially removed, and citizens' status as beings with private lives and identities revoked. Focusing attention on the kind of individual totalitarian regimes seek to craft, Arendt finds that they demand complete loyalty, to be achieved by isolating individuals from themselves and their communities. As she observes, absolute "loyalty can only be expected from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, derives his sense of place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in the party" (21-22). Rather than learning how to cultivate a sense of solitude, which can renew and inspire, individual citizens are meant to endure disruptive, alienating states of loneliness in communities focused on surveillance and suspicion. Pointedly addressing the place of spontaneity, Arendt claims that "no ideology which aims…at mapping out the course of all events of the future can bear the unpredictability which springs from the fact that men are creative, that they can bring forward something so new that nobody ever foresaw it"

(156). In the spontaneously creative, philosophical states that can evolve in solitude, they might otherwise begin contemplating the possibility of dissent, and reenter their communities driven to unite others in opposition against the inhibiting forces seeking their suppression.

With the worth of their intrinsic natures threatened and placed in question, individuals navigating such environments come to experience an acute sense of disconnection from reality. They are not alone in experiencing this; the extreme behavior engaged in by those called on to institute psychological and physical controls over fellow citizens can provoke a comparable sense of dissociation. Discussing, for instance, the propensity certain regimes had to make use of concentration camps, Arendt states that "it is not so much the barbed wire as the skillfully manufactured unreality of those whom it fences in that provokes such enormous cruelties and ultimately makes extermination look like a perfectly normal measure" (143). The experiences and states of mind faced by those enforcing or enduring such circumstances are simply so bizarre that they come to seem unsayable, if not unreal. Uncertain how to even define such experiences, "if the speaker has resolutely returned to the world of the living, he himself is often assailed by doubts with regard to his own truthfulness, as though he has mistaken a nightmare for reality" (137). While Arendt relies upon extreme instances of totalitarian rule such as the Nazi state to focus her analyses, it may be said that even without establishing concentration camps, the methods by which various regimes assert control over the daily lives and consciousness of their citizens prove overwhelming.

The isolation, lack of boundaries, constant surveillance and sense of vulnerability most regimes rely on conduce to a similarly severe sense of dreamlike dissociation.

Arendt's descriptions of concentration camps in fact eerily parallel Diaz's depictions of the capricious and absurd manner in which Trujillo toyed with the citizens of his island stronghold. She writes for instance that in concentration camps "a place has been established where men can be tortured and slaughtered, and yet neither the tormentors nor the tormented, and least of all the outsider, can be aware that what is happening is anything more than a cruel game or an absurd dream." (143-144) That controversy exists regarding how one might reliably depict life within such states is logical. To grasp the importance of discussions about the need to distort traditional narrative forms or appropriate aspects of the unreal in such attempts, an exploration of the history of realism and the depiction of subjective experience in cinema is necessary.

Possessed of both literary and artistic branches, the realist movement itself originated in mid-nineteenth century Europe, as people responded to shifts in thought brought on by the rise of science and industry. Focused on the ideal of progress and the objective scientific ordering of facts, members of Western society began to find romantic or religious-minded renderings of reality absurd. Hoping to depict life from a more rational standpoint, members of the realist school of art and literature crafted works critical of the unstable socioeconomic landscape being fostered by the rise of industry and its inevitable relation, the bourgeoisie. While early realists staunchly believed that art must depict the objective truths of reality in formal mimetic or verisimilar terms, in time they grew sensitive to the potentially stark, severe nature of their work. Aestheticized subjective modes of representation came increasingly to the fore, as critics, artists and writers tried to clarify what might constitute genuine realism. Individuals found depictions of the internal realities they experienced to be essential, recognizing that

symbolically dreamlike, abstract and surreal works might provide a more comprehensive representation of subjective realities.

Although realist theories had fallen out of favor in certain respects by the time cinema began developing, they proved essential to early filmmakers and theorists. The focus realism gave to mimesis proved particularly relevant, for instance. Having become accustomed to the objectively realistic art of photography, people were fascinated by the evolving medium of film. Film's ability to provide even more palpable images of reality was lauded; it was seen as taking objective realism a step further by depicting the fourth dimension, temporal duration, through the recording of physical movement. In his phenomenological analysis of cinema, *The Imaginary Man*, Edgar Morin claims that movement in film helps to establish a sense of authenticity. Observing that "the photograph was frozen in an eternal moment," he pointedly asserts that in film, "movement is the decisive power of reality: it is in it, through it, that time and space are real" (118). Film was in fact seen as a unique match for the experience of modernity. Ultimately, the intense spate of change characteristic of modernity could create a sense of unreality within the consciousness of those experiencing it. Aware to this phenomenon, cultural theorist Walter Benjamin asserted that film aped the tempo at which life had come to move, its volley of shifting images providing shocks and distractions comparable to those met outside the cinema. Asserting that "perception in the form of shocks" has become "established as a formal principle of existence," Benjamin claims in his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" that "a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by the film" (175). However, while film proved able to match if not intensify the experience of

shock modern individuals underwent within their rapidly changing societies, controversy existed as to how film should present the realities it had access to.

The question of how film might adequately depict the experience of modern life is complex, yet the situation becomes increasingly vexed when a filmmaker must portray the warped nature of totalitarian societies as well. In order to grasp why the directors focused on in this analysis chose the specific styles they work with, we need to consider how early avant-garde film theorists conceived of the cinematic art form. In opposition to those intent on advocating realist cinematic techniques stood theorists who realized that various shooting and editing options provide an opportunity to represent dreamlike, illusory terrains, and the workings of the psyche and spirit. In his 1945 essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," film theorist André Bazin highlights the fact that since Da Vinci's introduction of the *camera obscura*, "painting was torn between two ambitions: one, primarily aesthetic, namely the expression of spiritual reality wherein the symbol transcended its model; the other, purely psychological, namely to duplicate the world outside" (138-139). An advocate of realist cinema, Bazin celebrates the objectivity inherent in the act of shooting, the idea that no subjective elements intrude between a camera and its focus. Yet some critics question the claim that naturalist camerawork is inherently objective; they contend that the simple act of setting up a shot and establishing the angle from which it will be taken already expresses the nature and intent of a photographer. Absolute objectivity appears to be an illusory goal, and some find it to distract from the focus on the spirit within form that Bazin claims art has historically sought to capture.

Early avant-garde theorists and directors reflected therefore on the specific aesthetic potentials afforded only by cinema. The ability to distort or defamiliarize mundane reality, to concoct a fantastic

scene, and evoke the more numinous aspects of human experience are unique potentials afforded by film. Drawn from French Impressionist cinema, the term *photogénie* for instance refers to the potential transformation an object can undergo when caught on film, the mysteriously subtle, if not poetic aspects of it that can be revealed in a photograph or cinematic work. The fact that basic images possessed of such a charged presence can be cast in a uniquely telling array through the use of editing techniques introduces questions regarding the degree to which inner realities might be represented, and how. Addressing the historic dichotomy highlighted by Bazin, Riccioto Canudo asserts in "Reflections on the Seventh Art" that it is incumbent upon a filmmaker to move beyond the seemingly objective, to utilize film experimentally to express interior states and spiritual realities. As he avers,

> the truth lies fundamentally in the artist's mind…To be content with pointing the camera at some characters or a landscape arranged more or less artfully is not doing the work of an artist, but is a vulgar and mediocre act…Acquiring a style means not just photographing something as an objective document, but working with the light it captures to evoke the states of the soul (298).

Canudo recognizes that the medium of film affords those minded to experimentation an opportunity to create on another level, to work with light, movement and sound in uniquely expressive ways. Observing that "the *écraniste* paints, sculpts, composes with light," he states that "never was a painter's palette at the same time so rich and ineffable" (302).

While certain standards for the depiction of reality are basic to most realist theories, the struggles faced by filmmakers and theorists regarding how to depict internal states realistically demonstrate that realism must be viewed as malleable in certain respects. A statement made by Canudo presents a certain key to the analyses that will be undertaken here: "cinema permits, and must further develop, the extraordinary and striking faculty of representing immateriality" (301). The aspect of being Canudo refers to as the soul possesses the quality of immateriality, and is thus generally represented in

allusively symbolic or fantastic ways in film. However, films concerning life within totalitarian regimes must work along similar lines just to depict the emotional lives of their citizens. The nature of subjective experience cannot be depicted easily or safely in such societies, making an unadulterated representation of an individual's psychological state a vexed proposition. A depiction of someone's spiritual nature becomes an even more charged political act, in regimes that assert control over the nature of citizens' spiritual practices and beliefs. What is already elusive or possessed of a certain immateriality is often ironically forbidden and censored in such societies, and thus rendered doubly invisible. Attempts to represent the emotional and spiritual aspects of individuals therefore benefit from the kinds of artistic innovations that are afforded by magical realist or dystopian cinema.

Writing on the political aspects of such works is scarce, however, particularly where magical realist film is concerned; few texts devoted to the subject exist. Frederic Jameson's 1986 essay, "On Magical Realism in Film," stood for many years as the sole source of writing on the topic. Addressing the place of magical realism as a "possible alternative to the narrative logic of contemporary post-modernism," he focuses on the historic elements of magical realist films, directors' unique deployment of color in relation to "the opening or foreclosing of certain narrative possibilities," and the manner in which "the dynamic of narrative has somehow been reduced, concentrated, and simplified, by the attention to violence" (Jameson 302, 315, 303). Maggie Ann Bowers' 2004 work *Magic(al) Realism* and Robert Stam's 2005 book *Literature through Film* each devote a chapter to cinematic adaptations of magical realist texts, while a chapter by Bart Keunan and Sascha Breu on French and Belgian magical realism appears in

Alexander Graf's 2007 collection of essays, *Avant-Garde Film*. A small assortment of journal articles published in the past five years address the critiques of postcolonial or totalitarian societies that a select group of West African, Polish, Chinese, Spanish and Latin American magical realist films deliver. Beyond these analyses, Aga Skrodzka's 2012 book, *Magical Realist Cinema in East Central Europe,* explores the balance maintained between mimesis and the fantastic, and cinematic representations of the Other in Eastern European magical realist films. *Cinemagic,* Ludmila Popovich's dissertation on cinematic magical realism, provides the most grounded, contemporary analysis of the film genre to date, however. Published in 2009, it focuses on characterizing a genre that is by its nature difficult to define.

The literary magical realist style founded in South America stemmed from a post-World War I German art movement formulated by art critic Franz Roh, who sought to promote art capable of depicting the enigmatic aspects of the mundane. In his 1925 foundational essay "Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism" he addresses the manner in which depictions of objects in physical reality provide viewers with access to a deeper, more spiritual experience of the world and being. Declaring that "humanity seems destined to oscillate forever between devotion to the world of dreams and adherence to the world of reality," he claims that, following the "roughshod and frenetic transcendentalism" of Expressionism, its "flight from the world,…an insatiable love for terrestrial things and a delight in their fragmented and limited nature has reawakened" in art (17). After a translation of this text entered the literary circles of South America in the 1940s, a style of writing emerged in Latin American literature in which aspects of the supernatural consistently interface with the real. In magical realist writing, folklore,

dreams, and fantastic tales balance in with accounts of the mundane; the enigmatic and curious unexpectedly mix with what is unnerving or absurdly charming within the social and political landscape. In this way contemporary magical realism differs in essence from the form initially advocated by Roh, which he intended to celebrate the mystery inherent within that which could objectively be perceived as real.

However, in many cultures that have adopted this mode of creative expression, mystical experiences considered supernatural in the Western reality paradigm are regarded as a perceptible aspect of normative reality. A decided political dimension thus exists in magical realism; much of it is written by individuals hailing from ethnic or racial groups that have been colonized or enslaved, and forced to adhere to the reality paradigm espoused by the West. Having freed themselves from colonial rule, they often still struggle to assert their unique cultural identities and rights in an environment compromised by the corrupt regimes that then take power. Although their work is often labeled escapist, they find that magical realism allows them to depict the traditional cosmologies and ways of their people, reclaiming them in an affirmation of their collective cultural identity.[3] In their works the seemingly marvelous, absurd and grotesque coincide with the modern urban, industrial landscape, and the political and social systems evolving within them.

Like Diaz, Popovich points to another political aspect of this genre: "in the works of the magic realist writers of the so-called Third World,…the political, economic, and general social destitution of their countries verges on the unbelievable and can only be told in a magic realist manner" (27). In *The Traumatic Imagination* Eugene Arva

[3] African-American writer Toni Morrison somewhat famously rejected the use of the term magical realism, insisting that anyone labeling her depictions of traditional African practices and beliefs as magical realist was attempting to colonize her reality.

addresses the space magical realism provides for individuals to tell of violence and degradation so shocking it seems unreal. Viewing the use of magical realist narratives as a survival strategy, he asserts that magical realism allows individuals "to reconstruct events whose forgetting has proved as unbearable as their remembering" (5). Balancing between objective and subjective depictions of reality, this genre "gives traumatic events an expression that traditional realism cannot, seemingly because magical realist images and traumatized subjects share the same ontological ground, being part of a reality that is constantly escaping witnessing through telling" (Arva 6). Rather than sensational or escapist, such depictions represent an attempt to accurately demonstrate the extent to which the mind must sometimes work to make sense of its surreal reality.[4]

The key difference that Popovich points out between magical realist films and written narratives concerns the presence of the fantastic. Where a steady concatenation of fantastic, marvelous details often accumulates in a text, in tandem with a droll, absurdist rendering of the society being surveyed, in film the amount of time given over to the fantastic is not comparable to that reserved for the real. Rather, "the supernatural and the unrealistic in film is typically saved for special, defining moments, employed for framing the realistic story, or contained within one character whose key presence in the narrative unavoidably marks it as magic realist" (33). Popovich considers the sensory element of film when determining why this is so; she finds that the plenitude of sensory stimuli available in film heightens the experience of the magical, making it essential that

[4] While much of magical realism is classed as anthropological, drawing as it does from the cosmologies, rituals and myths of specific peoples, other pieces are better described as sociological (Popovich 16, 18). The fantastic elements employed within works by writers such as Czechoslovakia's Milan Kundera may lack an ethnic component, yet they act as a liberating counterforce to the numbing, coercive propaganda developed under dictatorships (18). The fantastic and poetic, defamiliarizing aspects of *The Spirit of the Beehive* would cause it to be classed in this branch of the genre.

fantastic occurrences transpire only intermittently in order to retain their necessary charisma.

Science fiction is a somewhat vexed genre insofar as it is also commonly considered escapist. Imaginary travel journals recounting voyages to the moon have been published since the seventeenth century, and pulp tales of adventure constitute their own branch of the genre. However, a focused survey of the more celebrated works of what is also termed speculative fiction demonstrates that it possesses an innate potential for social criticism, as well as a uniquely philosophical aesthetic. The tradition of penning utopian narratives has been in place since Thomas More's 1516 work *Utopia*, while the introduction of technology and modern science in the eighteenth century saw speculative works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* emerge. Events of the twentieth century led to the depiction of increasingly dystopian futures, as the critical aspect of science fiction developed. The genre has become varied and complex in its offerings, in both literature and film, as well as in the theories developed by critics and practitioners such as Darko Suvin, Christine Brooke-Rose and Stanislav Lem.[5] While the genre does supply simple escapist fare, many science fiction writers consciously differentiate their works from pulp offerings. In reaction to pieces focused on the exploration of space, J.G. Ballard asserts for instance in *A User's Guide to the Millennium* that "the biggest developments of the intermediate future will take place, not on the Moon or Mars, but on Earth, and it is inner space, not outer, that needs to be explored" (197). Claiming that "the only truly alien planet is Earth," he highlights the need to address humanity's estrangement from its own

[5] See Darko Suvin's discussions of the poetics of science fiction and the practice of cognitive estrangement in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, (Yale University Press, 1979), Christine Brooke-Rose's analysis of fantastic literature, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal,* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), and multiple works of science fiction and essays on the genre by Stanislav Lem.

nature and potential, as well as from the social and psychological realities it has incepted (197). Those of his ilk seek to make sense of what it is to be present within a physical body ridden by its own compulsions, and to possess minds capable of holding memories and visions. The inner space of the individual being and its ability to interface on a sensory, experiential level in an increasingly technological space draw their attention more than, or at least in tandem with epic heroics.

Rather than finding science fiction to be an awkward, juvenile by-product of modernization, science fiction writers, filmmakers and critics find it essential. Addressing the curious, alienating landscape of modernity, Ballard claims that science fiction provides "the only medium with an adequate vocabulary of ideas and situations" to assess its developing nature (197). He points in *Re/search 8/*9 to the experiential, aesthetic aspects of the new mundane that steadily impact the psyche, and deserve a certain recognition: "the subject matter of science fiction is the subject matter of everyday life:…the contours of a wife's or a husband's thighs passing the newsreel images on a color TV set, the conjunction of musculature and chromium artifact within an automobile interior" (99). He sees that an immersion within the aesthetic and conceptual field of science fiction permits a more nuanced and conscious integration with mundane reality. Individuals learn how to modulate the shocks Benjamin speaks of by accustoming themselves to the contemporary or futuristic landscapes portrayed within the genre. Often focused on shifts in technology and science, science fiction frequently explores the implications of the developing relationship between humanity and its technological creations. Intent upon examining the implications of the beliefs, social systems and scientific trends of the contemporary world, it attempts to project current trends into a

future landscape, to evaluate the potentials inherent within our present state. Beyond this, a consistent focus is placed on the dimension of subjective experience; uncommon psychic and spiritual potentials, the fate of the individual and community, and fundamental psychological realities are explored by individuals given to asking what humanity might become.

The techniques used to explore such topics are uniquely matched to the nature of modernity. Those working in the genre do not provide clear-cut introductions to the worlds they create. Elliptical, ambiguous neologisms couple with the casual depictions of obscure events and technologies, as narratives unfold. By defamiliarizing language and the typical social and technological landscape, writers and film-makers prod their audiences to move into a more dynamic, charged mindset. They are not given all of the information they need to understand the societies and events being presented, and must instead work to make sense of them. When they return to the mundane from a survey of these carefully crafted societies, the work they have done making sense of their terrains has rendered them less passive; they prove capable of reevaluating contemporary society in relation to the concepts and events encountered in the former.

While magical realist and science fiction works might seem dissimilar and perhaps unsuited to the same study, the specific focus upon totalitarian states maintained by the films being surveyed unites them. Apart from utilizing the fantastic to evoke the inner life of their subjects, these works, again, employ unique defamiliarizing techniques that render their subject matter somewhat more palpable. Confronting individuals with a methodically contemplative exploration of repression and subjectivity, they challenge

audiences to assess their own manner of relating to self and other, and the place of the imagination in social discourse.

CHAPTER 2

"EYES OF A BLIND MAN"

Victor Erice's 1973 film, *The Spirit of the Beehive*, ostensibly depicts a young girl's confused response to her first experience of the cinema. At an age at which the borders between reality and the imagination lack a clear demarcation, five year-old Ana exists in a contemplative dream world. When a traveling cinema visits her small Castilian town, she finds that a viewing of *Frankenstein* both troubles and inspires her. Disturbed by the monster Frankenstein's accidental murder of a young girl and his subsequent execution by retaliatory villagers, Ana asks her older sister Isabel to explain these deaths. Insisting that such instances in film do not genuinely occur, Isabel asserts that neither the girl nor Frankenstein died, and that she has in fact seen his spirit near their own small town. Engaging thenceforth in an effort to interact with Frankenstein's spirit, Ana proves unable to grasp when it is logical for her imagination to function readily, and when stories naturally end. As she comes to terms with the compelling events and characters in *Frankenstein,* she begins making sense of her personal identity and the nature of reality. Yet while *The Spirit of the Beehive* can be regarded as an exploration of a child's inner life, it must be read within the context of the society in which Ana lives. Set in an isolated Spanish town in 1940, as citizens began adapting to the rule of the dictator Francisco Franco, the film possesses a decidedly political subtext. Having taken power following a civil war that lasted from 1936 to 1939, Franco instituted a fascist regime in which

contact with the international community was restricted, individuals found their personal liberties limited, and the arts and writing were highly censored. Filmed near the end of this regime, *The Spirit of the Beehive* critiques the society engendered by Franco's protocols without explicitly mentioning Spain's recent past. Erice's symbolic, enigmatic filming style permits him to depict the tumult and exhaustion of Franco's Spain while evading censors who might otherwise restrict access to the film.

The Spirit of the Beehive has historically been read as a representation of the attempts that citizens of fascist regimes make to develop a sense of self and other in societies that do not easily recognize the worth of either. Ana's fellow citizens exist in a liminal space, regularly jolted by their living conditions and the meager evidence they find of the world beyond Spain's borders, yet incapable of altering their circumstances. Erice situates Ana at a liminal threshold of awareness as well. While sensitive to the unspoken tension present in her home and village, she exists in a near-constant state of reverie. She finds her world enchanted and full of potential, yet simultaneously dangerous and uncontrolled. Her attempts to integrate her imaginative life into the bleak reality her village and family endure can be taken allegorically; the mingled sense of discomfort, inspiration and awe that her gaze steadily conveys speaks of the inner life that citizens of dictatorships might seek to hide. The atmosphere maintained within the film is key, when considered in relation to the nuanced, enigmatic inner life that it simultaneously documents. After considering how the film gives evidence of the stagnant, dour atmosphere developing under Franco's regime, this analysis will consider the manner in which the still, barren setting is both relieved and intensified by Ana's inspired interactions with it. Erice has claimed that his film was created to remind those who

matured under Franco's rule of the place and worth of the imagination. By exploring how Ana interfaces with her environment, making sense of herself and the world, we can observe how Erice worked to re-enchant reality and question a system that fragmented and deadened awareness rather than encouraging its free play.

In order to understand the plot focus Erice develops, it is necessary to address the place cinema held within Spanish culture under Franco. In his writings, Erice describes his childhood and adolescent encounters with film as having been acutely formative. Born in 1940 and exposed to films in covert or makeshift local cinemas, he asserts that the children of his generation were "orphans, real or symbolic,…adopted by cinema" (Darke 157). Claiming that film "offered us an extraordinary consolation, a sense of belonging to a world," he observes that it provided "precisely that which, paradoxically, Communism, in its present state of maximum development, does not offer" (Ehrlich *Objects* 157). Growing up in what he describes as "a bombarded reality," his postwar generation found in smuggled films a sense of freedom and release (6). In his adolescence however, through the clandestine viewing of the films of Italian neorealists, Erice was exposed to the political uses to which art can be put. Films that focused on the responses the Italian resistance made to Nazi invaders or on the situations faced by impoverished, working class Italians had a significant impact on his generation. As he observes, the viewing of such films "was a radical experience,… because of what we were living through under Franco. It confirmed my feeling that a film could be an act of resistance…In my own way I try to continue to resist and use film in that way" (Andrew). Censorship prevailed in the film industry; propagandic films glorifying the ideologies and standards of the fascist state took precedence over any depictions of the lived realities of

the Spanish. Members of the film industry faced exile, if not incarceration and death if they veered from the guidelines put forth by state censors. To comment on the climate and situations present in Franco's Spain, filmmakers such as Erice found it necessary to depict the realities they faced in a more circumspect manner. Erice's metaphorical use of the film *Frankenstein* is a case in point.

In choosing to present the story of a child shaken by her first encounter with fantastic foreign cinema, Erice uses an experience he had as a child as narrative fodder. Taken at the age of five to a screening of a Sherlock Holmes film, he found himself overwhelmed. As he notes, he was "of an age when fiction and reality were the same thing" (Darke 158). For both him and Ana, the early experience of cinema represents what he terms an "episode of initiation," provoked by a film whose "scariness spread forth beyond the screen, prolonging its echo in the atmosphere of a devastated society" (158). In a remote town in which her father still travels in a horse-drawn carriage, Ana's experience of *Frankenstein* proves to be so profound that she begins evaluating all that she surveys within the context of the reality established by it. While overwhelmed by the raw potential and profound complexity implicit within modern technology, she also grows aware that a world beyond the reality she daily observes in Spain can provide new forms of stimulation. She therefore begins asking what is rational and what illusion, but more so, what forces and beings move beyond the borders of her mundane reality, and whether she might commune with them in her isolation. In observing her struggle to integrate multiple versions of reality, *The Spirit of the Beehive* describes the tension that isolated societies and individuals can face as they struggle to accommodate the fact that a reality beyond that which they have been conditioned to accept exists.

While distantly aware of the technology that makes the film and its screening possible, Ana is nonetheless overwhelmed by the figure of the monster Frankenstein and by the film's portrayal of death. Her awareness alters, due to the sense of shock she experiences at the ambiguous, relative nature of reality symbolized by the fantastic events evoked on screen. Intriguingly, Ana Torrent, the young actor playing Ana, had never seen *Frankenstein*; the sense of awe, fear and curiosity that moves over her face during its screening is a genuine record of her experience of the film. Her response to the deaths, and even to the existence of Frankenstein, is genuine and unchoreographed, caught by handheld cameras in a documentary style of filmmaking not used elsewhere in the film. Erice counts these as the most important and poignant images captured in any of his films, due to their ability to demonstrate the impact that imaginative storytelling and the film medium can have on individuals living in a repressive society.

The narrator of *Footprints of a Spirit,* a documentary on *The Spirit of the Beehive,* states that "in these images of a magical encounter that defies reality from Ana's point of view, time stops…Fantasy storms the banks of reality, shattering the constricting boundaries of daily life and pushing Ana's learning process and her adventures in knowledge to their furthest limits" (*Footprints*). Ultimately, Ana may be said to undergo an experience of the modern sublime. In an essay on the sublime aspects of the film, Chris Darke claims that she experiences what is referred to as an "'epiphanic moment' of spectatorship," in which "what is being seen is in excess of what is being shown" (152, 154). Finding her world defamiliarized, she attempts to come to terms with the liminal terrain into which her consciousness has been thrust. Eventually rather maddened, she moves into a plane of reality in which she survives an encounter with the being whose

existence she is attempting to make sense of. An experience of the sublime is typically held to manifest when one is exposed to an intense image that exceeds one's ability to describe it. Faced with striking, vast forces within nature or with the overwhelming and dislocating chaos of modernity, those who experience the rupture of the sublime can move into an experience that is "fundamentally transformative" (Morley 12). Finding their ability to articulate and even fathom the intense fear and wonder they simultaneously experience, they confront "the relationship between disorder and order, and the disruption of the stable coordinates of time and space" (12). Ana, for instance, refrains from giving in to her terror, and remains focused on making sense of the subtler forces she finds immanent around her. The film's predominant focus on her gaze shows how exclusively her being centers on gaining an understanding of, and a more refined access to the threshold realm forming at the juncture of her imagination and the mundane. The setting and atmosphere Erice establishes capably evoke the liminal, rupturing borderline region she comes to inhabit.

The terrain her gaze surveys is refreshingly still. Settings featuring her family or the villagers of her town often possess an atmosphere of stillness that seems stagnant in comparison to those focused around her. Yet for a film that opens with a screening of *Frankenstein* and closes with what amounts to a nervous breakdown, and Ana's vigilant awakening from it, the film's first truly enigmatic moments occur with the first glimpse Erice provides of the children's father. The camera shifts abruptly from the screening of *Frankenstein*, in which a famed horror actor has introduced the film, stating that it concerns "the mysteries of creation, of life and death." Erice jumps to a shot of a man ensconced in a cumbersome, thick suit. Staring out from a mesh screen cut into the suit's

heavy material, he observes his surroundings as fumes rise past his face. A canister releases clouds of gas and the interior of a hive is revealed, as bees crawl over a honeycomb. The man carefully extracts a frame from the hive, assessing the amount of honey present on it, as the camera pans back to reveal a set of boxed hives on a hillside. Subsequent shots find a woman seated at a desk, writing a letter beside a stained glass window. Set with hexagonal shapes acutely reminiscent of a honeycomb, the window radiates a full yet staid golden light. Discussing the impact of the war, the woman appears to address a former lover. With her opening statement, "I pray that God will grant me the joy of seeing you again," viewers might assume her words are directed at the man onscreen (*The Spirit of the Beehive*). The camera cuts away from him however to center upon her, and her voiceover continues with the statement that " I still pray" for a reunion "in this remote spot where Fernando, the girls and I try to continue surviving" (*Spirit*). Her obscure statements, coupled with her deliberate, somber air, induce a sense of uncertainty regarding the beekeeper's identity and role in her life. The identities of the man and woman become clear as each enters the gates of a manor alone as evening approaches. In time, two young girls who have been watching *Frankenstein* run through the gates as well. The members of Ana's family are in this fragmented manner introduced, and are never shown together in a single shot at any point within the film.[6]

In introducing the family in this disjointed manner, Erice underscores the sense of fragmentation its members experience as a unit and as individuals. Essentially, he

[6] Only when Fernando, the father, attempts to determine who has given his watch to a fugitive resistance member is the family even shown gathered together. Until then, individuals are shown in isolation, or the sisters together, at one point accompanying Fernando to pick mushrooms. Fernando is generally seen in his study, resting or contemplating the bees he keeps in a glass hive. Similarly, his wife Teresa is most often depicted alone. The only direct interaction with her children that occurs sees Ana asking if spirits are good or bad. Her cursory, rote response seems designed to regulate Ana's behavior rather than engage with her.

explores the psychological impact of the Spanish Civil War and Franco's regime through his depiction of the anxiety, discomfort and loss weighing at the parents. Immobilized by memories and taunted by the regimented, closed system being put into place around them, they tenaciously persist in living, though they ultimately seem to lack a sense of purpose. Discussing the manner in which the children of his postwar generation perceived their parents, Erice asserts that "for those whose childhood contained an inherent vacuum, for those of us born immediately after a civil war, the elders were often just that: a vacuum, an absence" (Arata 99). He accounts for their veritable "absence" by stating that they had been "radically deprived of their most elemental means of expression. Having finished with what they considered to be a nightmare, many returned to their homes,…but something remained ingrained in them, something deeply mutilated that reveals an absence" (99). The sense of loss and devastation the children's mother Teresa endures becomes clear with her assertion to her distant lover that she does not write of their past out of any sentimental leanings. Declaring that "it's hard to feel nostalgia after what we've gone through," she states that when she "sees so much that's destroyed and also so much sadness, something tells me that we've lost, with those things, our capacity to feel life" (*Spirit*). The ability the Spanish might have to feel or experience a basic sense of vitality is thus placed in question. The enigmatic, close atmosphere surrounding them is based in the void in which they dwell.

The landscape, communal and domestic environments of the film speak obliquely of this state. The film takes place in autumn, in an isolated village on the Castilian plains. Casting locals as extras and using the village of Huyuelos as his setting, Erice captures the texture of life in an agricultural community only reluctantly given over to political

concerns. Little is revealed of the village in which the family lives, apart from the children's school, a train station and a town hall. Streets might show intermittent patches of grass, yet few trees stand against the repetitive array of box-like mud brick buildings. The stark nature of the space establishes the impression that the villagers and, by proxy, the Spanish, necessarily give their lives over to their labor. In *Landscape and Film*, Martin Lefebvre observes "how much a film can gain in complexity from the use of an historically and culturally layered…landscape" (*xviii*). Representative of the history of those living on it, landscapes contain "an implicit underground reservoir of meaning, memory, history and death" (*xviii*). The dominant sense established by the locals and their traditional ways in *The Spirit of the Beehive* is that life simply goes on, the work of surviving now requiring adherence to certain social and political codes as well.

Shots of the landscape typically offer up bleak vistas, of fields devoid of color and of pale, drained skies. In *The Spirit of the Beehive*, plains stretch to the horizon, and are either stripped of their harvests or set with low grass. Typically set against a cloud-laden grey sky, these plains contribute to the development of a still, empty atmosphere. Rectangular, evenly divided plots of land establish a sense of order and control similar to that created by the manmade, boxlike hives the children's father Fernando tends. The barren, stubbled land seems exhausted and eerie in its vacancy. The setting is ultimately desolate; individuals moving within it either alleviate this sense of emptiness and scarcity or deepen it. Through the use of such shots, Erice perhaps asks what occurs after a harvest, who profits from it, and what remains.

Riding a bicycle to post her letter at a distant train station, Teresa for instance makes her way along an empty avenue lined with scrubby dark fields. The deep grey and

green colors in the shot establish a subdued atmosphere, matched to her driven, quietly anguished state. A set of paired poplars stands out, rising in isolation along the avenue beneath a layered, somber sky. Centered within the shot, they stand out anomalously like sentinels or gatekeepers. The sense of dignity and elegance they convey within the dour, empty terrain seems to mock the recent history of those who chose to rise up against the conservative forces arrayed against them. Only a few buildings dot the landscape, the most prominent one standing inaccessibly at the distant horizon. In sum, the varied elements of this shot create a sense of estrangement and grief. Later posting her letter at the small train station in town, Teresa meets the watchful eyes of a soldier waiting onboard. The knowing look they exchange is ambiguous; their eyes speak of the grim realities they have endured, but perhaps also of the likelihood that she tries to escapes her current state by writing a lover.

A basic sense of entrapment and alienation similarly prevails within the family's home. Having fled to the village in response to the civil war, Ana and Isabel live with their parents in a large, echoing stone manor. While the home is the sort that children might ideally favor, Ana and Isabel are steadily confronted within it by the weight of their parents' past and present. The building itself is curiously symbolic of a beehive, due to its golden, hexagonally-paned glass windows. The atmosphere within it seems thick, augmented by the golden light passing inside. This heavy light simultaneously illuminates and weighs upon the space. While full and radiant, it seems to gel almost at times, creating a dense substance through which the home's inhabitants must pass. French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard speaks perhaps naively in *The Poetics of Space* of the nurturing, secure space of the home. Claiming that it provides a source of

"protected intimacy," he asserts that within it, children can begin the liberating practice of engaging in daydream and reverie (3). While Ana does indeed enter into extended states of reverie within this space, her experience ironically suffers from the inevitable taint of its claustrophobic atmosphere.

Dangerous games that the sisters engage in point to their need for some form of escape from these strained circumstances. Standing on the tracks of a rail line, Ana becomes mesmerized by an oncoming train and the greater world its presence speaks of. She barely realizes she must clear the tracks before it reaches her and Isabel. While accustomed to listening to the humming rails that announce a train's approach, she and Isabel also appreciate the intense sense of movement trains impart rushing past them. Taking in a train's visceral movement, they seem to imbibe the force of its presence; they bolster themselves by drawing in the intensity of its speed and the promise it gives of a world beyond their immediate borders. Their almost ceremonial attendance of this event sees them displacing or at least intensifying their awareness, by participating vicariously in the train's frenzied rushing. Yet the intensity of the train's motion and its ability to awe onlookers seems potentially absurd when the bounded regularity of its action is considered. Ultimately, the sisters seek a means of rupturing the confining framework of their days, yet this seemingly chaotic machine following a circumscribed route symbolizes the limited nature of their means. The plaintive tone of the train's low, departing whistle therefore stands out as decisively as the stillness manifest in their initial hushed awareness of its approach.

In order to gain an understanding of the forces responsible for this pronounced sense of entrapment, it is necessary to consider how beehive symbolism foregrounds the

sociopolitical and psychological realities faced by the Spanish. Fertilizing plants, bees help establish an environment that makes it possible for life to continue. They ensure that wild, organic growth is maintained in the natural world, yet are themselves ironically regulated in terms of role behavior. Beehive symbolism thus alludes to the state of Spanish society following the chaos of the Civil War. At this time most citizens of Spain succumbed to the demands imposed by Franco's regime, finding an awkward safety and logic within them. Made to participate in a rigid, closed system that permitted them to live if they refrained from contesting the political hierarchy, they ensured their continued existence by sacrificing personal freedoms.

However, when considering the first shots Erice provides of bees, it is their random, uncontrolled movements that stand out. Seen first as flashes flying past the mesh screen of Fernando's suit, they soon appear with greater clarity swarming over their hive's honeycombs. Their random, seemingly chaotic movements contrast ironically with the placement and structure of the hives. Several rectangular wooden boxes stand in sequential order on a dusty tract of land overlooking a valley. The concave, receptive shape of the valley contrasts with the strict, linear shape of the hives. The apiary itself hugs the side of a ridge, creating a sense of liminality. A dichotomy is established therefore; the open space of nature contrasts steadily with the focused yet chaotic actions of the bees, and the dangerous efforts made to regulate and access the fruits of their labor.

Regarding this sense of chaos, Fernando describes a guest's response to the glass beehive he maintains. Writing in his study, he notes that the man saw

> the constant agitation of the panels, the perpetual buzzing, enigmatic and maddened,…the diverse and unceasing activity of the masses,… the ruthless and useful effort, the comings and goings with feverish intensity, the ignored sleeplessness that announces tomorrow's work,

> the final repose of death…in a place that tolerates neither sickness nor tombs (*Spirit*).

Having observed "these things, after staring in awe," the man "quickly looked away, showing a nameless sad horror" (*Spirit*). Significantly, Fernando crosses out these final lines after deliberating over them, as though fearful they may be unsafe to retain should a censor discover his work. His language is pointed, as he chooses to emphasize the observer's perception that the bees are maddened. While bees are noted for their tendency to self-regulate, maintaining a cohesive community at the cost of their personal wills, Fernando's journal entry characterizes them as having been driven mad by their efforts to survive such a system. His entry thus develops the idea that although the bees and, allegorically, the Spanish persevere, as individuals their minds and spirits warp due to the demands placed upon them. Pushed to a feverish point at which they can no longer function logically, they drain themselves to maintain the structure of the regime. Arendt repeatedly makes the point that citizens of such states are essentially superfluous, and intentionally so. Rather than abide in a society that develops in accordance with their needs and visions, they are to be replaced in a system geared towards their exhaustion.

Passing the hall in which *Frankenstein* is being screened, after the opening beekeeping sequence, Fernando stares at a poster for the film with a certain skeptical appreciation. Lines from the film reach him as he later stands between the honeycombed doors that open onto the balcony of his study. Asking a friend, "What lays beyond the limit of the known," Dr. Frankenstein says, "Tell me, haven't you ever been curious?" (*Frankenstein*). Fernando appears to be stimulated by these questions, as they rise in the evening air. Yet after Dr. Frankenstein states, "If you speak like that, they call you mad," Fernando resignedly places his hand in his pocket (*Frankenstein*). Dr. Frankenstein

asserts however that “If I could answer one of those questions, what eternity is, for example, I wouldn’t care if they called me mad” (*Frankenstein*). His friend, refusing to respond to this statement, insists rather that the ethical nature of the doctor’s undertakings be addressed. The scholarly philosophizing Fernando longs for, and that might underlie the doctor’s initial interest in animating a corpse, seems to him perversely out of place. Describing the being Dr. Frankenstein has created as “a demon,” he tries to address the nature of the brain procured for it (*Frankenstein*). Stopped by Dr. Frankenstein’s insistence that “it’s a perfect brain,” that it came in fact from his interlocutor’s laboratory, he is compelled to say, “The brain stolen from my laboratory belonged to a criminal” (*Frankenstein*). The scene closes with this statement, intoned with a dry, firm sense of finality.

As Fernando appraises this dialogue, the evening light moving into his study develops an unnatural, jaundiced tone. The embedding of these lines allows Erice to ask whether the system in which the Spanish are enmeshed has developed naturally and is in any way safe. Dr. Frankenstein’s manipulation of the natural order is matched to Franco’s willful attempts to engineer the development of individuals and Spanish society. On a symbolic level the actors’ conversation asserts that those fashioning the regime are criminal themselves, and utilizing treacherous and unlawful methods. Behind the lofty visions the regime espouses are the hard facts that it utilizes violence and propaganda to cement its base of power, and that what it produces might prove as uncontrollable and dangerous as Frankenstein.

The opening lines of *The Spirit of the Beehive* take on a haunting resonance when Fernando’s writing and this dialogue are taken into account. Again, stating that

Frankenstein addresses "the mysteries of creation, of life and death," the actor introducing the film encourages viewers to "prepare" themselves, as they "may feel shocked, even horrified" at what follows (*Frankenstein*). The society being engineered under Franco, linked symbolically to the hives Fernando monitors, manifests a quality of frenzy capable of unsettling those who witness it. The introduction to *Frankenstein* closes with the actor's statement that "I advise you not to take it too seriously" (*Frankenstein*). Erice toys with his viewers here, as well as with censors. Using an embedded narrative that is fantastic in nature to prepare viewers for his own film, he encourages them to ask how many stories will be told within the film, and to consider what realities they may in fact symbolize.

Yet as disturbing as these images and ideas might be, a curious sense of potential develops simultaneously over the course of the film. Directly related to the sense of wonder and reverence Ana maintains, this sense of potential is stimulated as she moves through scenes in a contemplative, entranced manner. The ability individuals have to imagine, invoke and explore a deeper reality, to find a realm of subjective experience immanent within their mundane environment, is thematically central to this film. The persistent unfolding of Ana's imaginative inner life is therefore its chief focus, however pointedly Erice underscores the sense of trauma that governs her parents' lives and overshadows hers. In her efforts to make sense of and transcend the dense atmosphere of repressed emotion dominating life in her village, Ana opens to an ongoing state of meditative reverie. Asserting that she is "at a stage preceding the use of reason," Erice claims that she "has a spontaneous sense of the sacred" (Miyaoka). He contends that her ability to navigate and interface with an aspect of reality beyond the mundane relates to

the fact that she's "at an earlier stage, on the threshold of the grown-up world, of society at large" (Miyaoka). Declaring that "she's still a wild creature, and her alphabet is the true alphabet," he finds her capable of interfacing with a primeval spiritual realm (Miyaoka). Yet as she opens to her innate sense of the sacred and mysterious, she is simultaneously shown what humanity is capable of.

Before addressing the manner in which her imaginative life confronts the reality established by Franco's fascist regime, it is necessary to consider the film's plot in greater detail. After informing Ana that the monster Frankenstein still lives, Isabel informs her that to meet him, she must call out to his spirit, telling him her name. Ana does so, seeking him in her family's garden and an abandoned herding shed surrounded by bare, stripped fields. Subsequently encountering a fugitive member of the Spanish resistance in the shed, she tends him, thinking she has indeed summoned Frankenstein's spirit. Having already had her sense of reality tested by the capricious tricks Isabel plays on her, Ana suffers a break with reality when the fugitive is later killed by agents of Franco's regime. Fleeing the space of society, she wanders through a forest and encounters Frankenstein ultimately beside a stream, in a magical realist representation of the altered state of consciousness into which she has shifted. While she is found the next morning, the doctor tending her asserts that her recovery will be prolonged, as she learns how to accustom herself again to the nature of mundane reality. The film closes as Ana walks from her bed at night to look out into her family's garden, as a train's whistle sounds in the distance. Her sister's instructions regarding how to call Frankenstein play quietly; as Isabel's voice murmurs "I am Ana," Ana herself stares beyond the boundaries of her room (*Spirit*). Eyes shifting acutely at the sound of the train, assessing the

existence of a world beyond the borders she is kept to, she turns inside to confront the reality of her home.

The monster Frankenstein could represent multiple things to Ana. In terms of his political associations, Robert Miles refers to Erice's apt "choice of Frankenstein's monster, with all of the associations such as exile, illegitimacy, overreaching, conflict and amnesia" (201). In his essay "Reclaiming Revelation" he asserts that "this monster was the perfect metaphor for the sense of absence and oblivion" experienced by Spain's citizens (201). Claiming that "it is the quintessential representation of Franco's artificially homogenized patchwork nation," he observes that "regional identity was sometimes violently ruled out in favor of a monstrous monoculture" (201). However, the monster simultaneously recalls the fugitive resistance fighters that children of Erice's time often discovered hiding on the outskirts of their villages. Director Manuel Aragón states for instance that Spanish films "show the freedom fighter as elusive, glimpsed only briefly, because that's how…Erice and myself experienced them…They were out there but we never saw them, and they grew in stature from the anecdotes and legends that circulated" (*Footprints*). Erice draws further parallels between legendary, mysterious resistance fighters and Frankenstein through the figure of the fugitive Ana tends. Using the symbol of Frankenstein, Erice asks who or what the Other is in Spanish society, and how that Other is characterized, depending on the teller of the story. Ana's attempt to make sense of this simultaneously legendary and monstrous Other results in her need to break with both society and reality, as she hauntingly comes to identify even herself as alien.

The landscape through which she passes over the duration of the film proves acutely representative of this essential otherness within her being, in both its positive and

isolating aspects. Erice develops a hushed, almost reverential atmosphere of stillness within all scenes featuring Ana, one that intimates the presence of thresholds letting on to another reality. Moving within autumnal, often barren plains, Ana seem to partake of absence as much as she does of the objects surrounding her. The desolate, crumbling farm building in which she seeks Frankenstein's spirit is set in isolation amidst an exhausted range of stubbled fields. Ana longingly circles the well beside the building, as if from within its obscure, still depths another being might emerge. Her movements seem ritualistic, as though the circular well and vacant building serve as a consecrated space within which she might summon evidence of the alternate reality she has been exposed to. Her fascination with the well and the invocations she delivers to the air beside it make sense if one considers what she may find within its depths. In *The Poetics of Reverie*, Bachelard speaks of the compelling presence wells maintain in childhood. He describes a well as "an archetype, one of the gravest images of the human soul," and states that "the face that comes back" reflected from its depths "is a face from another world" (101, 114). Surmising that "already in his image living beneath the earth, the child does not recognize himself, he declares that a well's "black and distant water…reflect[s] an astonished face" (114). Ana feels appropriate seeking Frankenstein's spirit beside the well as she has perhaps already seen herself reflected as an Other within its waters. In her effort to make sense of and transcend mundane reality, she engages a much deeper mystery within; forced to ask what is real and what imagined, she ultimately finds that she must make sense of who she herself is.

Yet however solitary and alienated from her familiar self she becomes, Ana does not seem alone in a true sense. While she seeks contact with a specific being, she appears

to interface continually with a world beyond physically objective reality. A dry, quiet wind often rustles over the fields as she moves purposefully through them. The wind seems almost to rise in response to her presence and willingness to venture into a space beyond the village. The sense of stillness basic to the film is not eliminated by the wind; it deepens rather, taking on nuance, and intensifying the overall silence of the scenes. In this sense it compares uniquely to an enigmatic statement made by the filmmaker Robert Bresson, in *Notes on the Cinematographer*: "Silence, musical by an effect of resonance. The last syllable of the last word, or the last noise. Like a held note" (98). An exchange seems to occur between absence and presence within the film, of which this reverential stillness, this "held note," is the product.

Ana's presence ultimately helps transform scenes of barrenness into scenes replete with a sense of hidden, immanent potential. Her firm, open gaze has the ability to simultaneously transform and re-enchant viewers' experience of the landscape. Rare sunlight shines upon the abandoned shed, when she and Isabel first look out upon the plain. As they run impetuously down the hill leading to the shed, light and slender clouds of dust sweep along the land. The clouds, light and dust create a sense of momentum, curving and wandering in a natural environment that has been divided in a linear manner. What might seem tired fields are given symbolic meaning by the sisters' presence, and by Ana as she later ventures to the shed alone. In his essay "The Invention of Place," Jacques Aumont claims that "besides the evocative power of the land and its history, beyond the metaphoric power of the landscape, a place is also determined by the way in which bodies and figures are inscribed in it" (10). The sisters' wary yet open stances help develop a sense of anticipation within viewers accustomed to the lethargic atmosphere of

other scenes. As Ana stands alone at a crest overlooking the herding shed, determinedly holding the small red briefcase she carries to school, a sense develops of her ability to function in the field of the unknown, and to in time make sense of it.

The nature of the light that passes through the windows of her home possesses a similarly transcendent, yet unrelentingly forceful presence in shots in which she appears. The atmosphere created by moonlight as it filters through the honeycombed windows functions differently from that established by sunlight. Shining through windows, it imbues the space of the home with a sense of stillness, and the potential for a silent, internal transformation. Dwarfed, Ana's form is periodically silhouetted at night before the tall glass doors that give on to her bedroom's balcony. Yet however slight, before the windows she seems to stand poised at the threshold of a rather austere, distant mystery. Compelled by the cool, enigmatic field of light into which she moves, she finds herself forced to contemplate the reality beyond her balcony, the forces interfacing with her subtle internal world.

The actions Isabel undertakes within their home speak of some of the underlying forces pervading their lives. She tortures the family cat within the confines of her bedroom, then paints her lips with blood drawn by it in a crude parody of a child's experimentation with cosmetics. She also uses the space of the home as a terrain within which to toy with Ana's perceptions of reality. In one scene Isabel sprawls on the wooden floor of a room, bathed in the golden light of the honeycombed glass doors that let on to a balcony. A potted plant lies on its side in the doorway. With a chair rocking behind her, from which she presumably fell trying to reach the plant, she implicates domesticated nature in the scenario she has constructed. Her attempt to access the natural world, in an

environment attempting to domesticate or at least bring nature inside, has triggered her fall. After finding her, Ana runs into the garden behind the home. Calling for the family housekeeper, she stands in isolation in the center of the frame, dwarfed by the tall evergreen bushes lining the walls. This death scene crafted by Isabel symbolically declares that attempts to introduce natural forces into a controlled domestic environment might prove dangerous. The terrain of the garden, in keeping, is barren and unreliable, offering no aid.

Alone, Ana ventures back into the room in which she left Isabel, and finds that she has vanished. The honeycombed balcony doors move in the wind; their yellow shadows shift over the floor as the wind passes tentatively into the room. Sitting beside the potted plant, Ana holds a damaged leaf with curious reverence, aware that Isabel's trickery has resulted in damage to a living thing. Staring pensively beyond the windows to the garden, she finds Isabel's hands, encased in an adult's cumbersome gloves, covering her eyes. Having clothed herself in Fernando's beekeeping suit, as though trying on the persona of the adults of her world, Isabel laughs spitefully. Where Ana is prompted by her viewing of *Frankenstein* to contemplate the nature of the spirit world, Isabel fixates upon death, seeing if she can deal it out to her cat or use it to toy with Ana. Striking out in response to the implicit tension beneath the strained silence on which their lives are predicated, she appears corrupted by the close atmosphere in which she is embedded.

Having had her sense of reality jolted severely by Isabel's feigned death, Ana slips outside one night. In her flight she encounters an array of forces symbolic of the dangers and mysteries present in her home and society. Lit upon by moonlight, the

garden hedges seem to conceal a compelling reality within their shadowed leaves. Shadows of plants trace evocative patterns on the walls of the corridor Ana moves along, manifesting a presence the house cannot provide. A point-of-view shot allows the viewer to stare into the sky with her at an unseen moon, whose glow breathes a cold vitality into the clouds. Though lightly clouded, the sky seems open in an essential way, matched to Ana's receptivity; her eyes emit a certain grim longing for a reality beyond that which she knows. Closing them, she slips into what seems a trance, invoking Frankenstein's spirit.

On her eventual flight into the forest bordering her town she reaches ultimately for a poisoned mushroom, if not to eat it, then to at least make sense of its existence. It seems possible that she may indeed imbibe some of it, although the camera only shows her hand withdrawing from its surface. This ambiguity is quietly central to the imminent climax of the film. Finally gazing into a stream, she finds her reflection replaced by Frankenstein's as she confronts that which is ultimately other within her own being. His sobering, melancholy expression reveals the bittersweet nature of self-awareness. As his reflection skims the water's trembling surface, imposed against the depth of the reflected night, the fragile yet knowing nature of the individual self is made clear. Ana might be hallucinating in her state of nervous overwhelm or poisoned, or she may indeed have summoned his spirit in a magical realist bridging of realities. Erice does not intrude with any explanation, so that the stillness and silence of this encounter can stand as the paramount focus of the scene.

In representing this trajectory, hee asks after the potential forms madness can take. The frenzied passage of bees through the hives stands in sharp contrast to Ana's

solitary hallucinatory journey. She is prone to the kind of creative, thoughtful solitude that Arendt finds likely to prompt a liberating sense of inspiration. However, circumstances that inevitably taint her experience of solitude drive her to it. She thus finds herself exhausted by what is a harrowing yet salvific vision of her own innate alterity. While she cannot ultimately escape her circumstances, she can recognize the knowing, contemplative spirit within that renders her inherently separate from her society. The slow, momentous approach Frankenstein makes to her in the forest seems like a gathering of the forbidden, haunted aspects of her being, and of Spain's people, that have been denied and sent into a veritable exile. She confronts the sorrow of a being pieced together out of disparate parts, who must discover the full extent of its nature and sometimes dangerous power. Finding that which represents mystery, self-awareness, victimhood and a naively violent resilience reflected in the waters, she is forced to flee again, to be retrieved, unconscious, the following morning. Ana is much like the wandering holy fools that many cultures celebrate for their eventual ability to share the wisdom gained in madness; her break with reality occurs because she sees too clearly, not because she has sacrificed herself to the demands of the hive. Her firm yet haunted stance in the moonlight of the film's end shows her willful determination to appropriate the vaster, more sublime aspects of her reality and being, however arduous such a task might prove.

In conclusion, Victor Erice's film *The Spirit of the Beehive* possesses an atmosphere that is simultaneously austere and desolate, active and still. His decision to film in a subjective, hauntingly poetic manner is specifically political. Prone to creating works of a dreamlike, spiritual nature, he struggled as an early filmmaker with his need to

represent the social realities his countrymen faced. As he states, “on a film, we have to become related in a very intense manner with the social surroundings in which we live…We must dye our dreams with the proof of reality” (Ehrlich, ”An Interview” 37). Yet the reality he finds it necessary to depict is of a subjective nature; he cannot settle for a simple representation of historical events capable of defining Spain. Rather, he must represent the inner spiritual life of its people. One critic for instance finds that his films have “an almost sacred tendency toward that which cannot be embraced…which is infinite” (Ehrlich, “Objects” 5). Erice believes that if he chose to present objective realities alone, he would collude with a regime that suppressed the expression of the subjective self. In response to a regime that denied the individual’s right to create and communicate freely, he evoked the nature of the imagination and inner life, and the manner in which they can simultaneously be stimulated and wounded. His poetic, enigmatic filming style depicts the beauty of the human spirit that he saw being threatened and twisted. Regarding this, Erice claims that “the cameraman kept saying the film looked very beautiful, but I was never trying to achieve a beauty of the image: I was aiming for the beauty of truth” (Andrew). A statement made by Bresson is again relevant, when considering the aesthetic of this film: “not beautiful photography, not beautiful images, but necessary images and photography” (92). Erice’s work demonstrates that that which is depicted out of sheer necessity can possess a severity and grace that conduce to a disarming beauty.

The imaginative life that children such as Ana possess presents a very specific danger to regimes such as Franco’s. She is in line to inherit a certain fugitive status, as one of the objective enemies Arendt finds targeted once totalitarian regimes finish

eliminating their immediate opponents. Claiming that "the aim of totalitarian education has never been to instill convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any," Arendt declares that in such dictatorships "intellectual, spiritual, and artistic initiative is…more dangerous than mere political opposition" (166, 37). As Bachelard observes in *The Poetics of Reverie*, "in our childhood, reverie gave us freedom" (101). Asking "what other psychological freedom do we have than the freedom to dream," he states that "the child dreamer is alone, very much alone," in "a childhood… already possessed [of] human nobility and seriousness" (108, 130). He sees meditative reverie as capable of separating an individual from the matrix of society, while uniting that individual with the greater world. As he notes, "in his happy solitudes, the dreaming child knows the cosmic reverie which unites us to the world…All these images of its cosmic solitude react in depth in the being of the child; aside from his being for men, a being for the world is created under the inspiration of the world" (108). Accustomed to contemplating a reality beyond that offered by society, and of finding within that realm profound ideas and states of consciousness worth defending, individuals given to reverie can attempt to transform the maddening beehive model of society that Erice decries.

This potential for transformation requires an eventual move beyond silence. A classroom scene in which Ana reads along as a fellow student recites a poem best exemplifies this. Firmly stating that she feels "now neither malice nor hatred, not even the fear of change," the student claims, "I only feel thirst, a thirst for I know not what. I have the eyes of a blind man who stares at the sun's face" *(Spirit*). Willing to take on an unknown future, she adopts a decisive, almost fierce expression. She, and Erice, confront

their respective audiences with a commitment to invoking a reality in which the spirit and will can become immanent, and speak from a place of dynamic stillness.

CHAPTER 3

"HE REMEMBERS THERE WERE GARDENS"

The singular nature of Chris Marker's 1963 French film*, La Jetée*, derives not simply from its unique stylistic features, but from its storyline as well. A dystopian photo-roman rendered in black and white, *La Jetée* consists of still photographs depicting the struggles of a man forced to travel through time by the victors of World War III. Intent on gaining access to energy sources impossible to develop in the ravaged postwar terrain, scientists working under the winning regime conduct time-travel experiments using their prisoners. A notably contemplative film, *La Jetée* explores borders of a temporal and conceptual nature, asking what role memory and image play as we navigate the boundaries between past, present and future. However, the film is also pointedly political in nature. Examining not only the boundaries that must be negotiated between the individual and society, the film explores subjective boundaries that can be ruptured between the individual and reality by a society. Riveted by memories and desires while prodded to doggedly test the limits of his consciousness, the prisoner finds that he moves between states of reverie and a warped sensation of dreamlike confusion and dread. In its exploration of memory, time and desire, the film provides Marker with a terrain within which to reflect on the place of subjectivity within totalitarian regimes, and the impact of authoritarian practices on individual consciousness.

On a cinematic level, *La Jetée* is structured in a unique manner. The austere yet tumultuous space of the film coheres on the basis of the dichotomous juxtapositions Marker employs. Scenes possessing an air of the ineffable vie with subsequent, more ominous scenes. An atmosphere of awed or wistful reverie couples consistently with a darker, more confusedly oneiric element. A sense of instability and unanticipated order is established simultaneously, as the strikingly sequenced still shots develop a momentum capable of displacing yet anchoring the viewer. In sum, a haunting sense of fragmentation and liminality predominates. By considering the foundational cinematic and narrative elements evoking this atmosphere, a sense of the subjective consciousness evolving in this dystopian society should develop. Troubled by memories of the past while subjected to the surveillance even of their dreams, individuals such as the prisoner possess a fragmented, anxious awareness. Always at a threshold, testing the nature of reality and self as they mourn their lost civilization and freedoms, they live in a perpetually liminal state.

An initial look at the film's plot structure should help provide a deeper sense of the reality envisioned in *La Jetée*. The prisoner's ability to travel through time is predicated on his lifelong fixation with an ambiguous childhood memory, an image of a woman's face. Administering drugs capable of making him bilocate, the scientists of this postwar regime demand that the prisoner track down this woman and thereby train himself to travel within time and space. While he does locate her within the Paris of his youth, prior to the outbreak of the Third World War, he is not permitted to remain with her. Forced instead to use the skills he has honed to contact beings from the future, he requests from them technologies capable of supporting human life. Disturbed to find that

he is henceforth considered expendable by his captors, these more enlightened beings from a future Earth encourage him to join them. However, drawn by his longing for the woman and his fascination with a society otherwise lost to him, the prisoner chooses to return to her. A resolution to the mystery surrounding his obsession with her image is provided, as he runs to meet her on an observation pier at Paris's Orly airport. An agent of the postwar regime, having tracked him to the point in time of this meeting, shoots him as he hastens to her. Falling, he realizes that as a child balanced on the jetty's railings, watching airplanes lift off, he witnessed his own death unknowingly.

The irony underlying this plot structure concerns the fact that the war's victors find that they rely on the experience of subjectivity to survive. Arendt repeatedly observes that totalitarian states focus upon "transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not," in an attempt to destroy their citizens' sense of personal agency (136). Due to the nature of the time travel process the regime has have developed, however, the prisoner must move into an experience of emotionally driven subjective time to access alternate timeframes. Humanity's survival depends on whether he can achieve some degree of cathartic liberation from the static reality the regime has imposed on what is left of human society. Inherent in this situation is the ironic fact that a regime that denies individual rights and freedoms relies on one man's ability to experience intense emotion and determine his own course within the field of time and space. By examining the implications of this governing irony, in terms of the manner in which it calls the regime's repressive practices into question, Marker's commentary on the logic of totalitarian tactics of governance can be explored.

Again, he deviates from traditional filming styles in terms of the manner in which he presents this narrative. The film progresses as a series of still shots, which nonetheless cohere on the basis of their compelling imagery. A narrator provides a commentary on the war, the nature of the regime and the prisoner's efforts, in a neutral, almost journalistic tone. However, his spare, elusive statements frequently prove poetic, and the stark landscapes and evocative imagery within which they emerge establish an enigmatic atmosphere. An alternating array of sounds, from low murmurings in German to striking choral pieces, heartbeats and a bank of white noise, play off of alternately harsh or effulgent lighting. A sense of displacement and uncertainty is maintained through the use of these features, yet it couples with a peculiarly spiritual, near sublime element of the film to produce a concurrent sense of hope.

The fact that the film is composed of static shots proves central to the development of this impression. Movement is basic to cinema, helping to establish a sense of reality for viewers. Films are traditionally edited to mimic the process by which events are perceived, allowing viewers to entrain their awareness to the screen's doings without excess effort. *La Jetée* disrupts this technique by removing a certain element of motion from the film. In choosing to rely on still shots, Marker establishes a field in which movement must be sensed differently in order for viewers to establish a sense of meaning. He forces them to reconsider the elements that make up our experience of space and time, and to ask how meaning is assigned to experiences had within this field. He does so by demonstrating that movement can be conveyed in subtle ways. Asserting that "every film…is a cathedral of movement," Morin notes for instance that "cinema brings other movements: camera mobility, rhythm of action and editing, acceleration of time,

musical dynamism. These movements, rhythms, tempos, themselves accelerate, combine, superimpose upon one another" (99). By observing such cinematic elements in relation to the actual narrative and imagery employed by Marker, it should be possible to develop a sense of the kind of movement he depicts taking place in the society he warns of.

The tone that the still shots establish varies, in a provocative manner. The simple sense of stillness implicit within a static shot often takes on multiple meanings. While at times creating an impression of quiet wonder, it frequently conduces instead to a sense of warped stasis. As viewers are led to an experience of timelessness and reverie, other cinematic forces intrude, placing the stability of this state in question. A brief consideration of the opening sequences of the film can help develop a sense of this aspect of the film. *La Jetée* opens with an initially ambiguous establishing shot. An aerial view of planes resting beside a public observation deck at an airfield could momentarily confuse a naïve viewer; the camera pulls back from the far horizon of this still shot, panning down the length of the observation jetty in one of only two moving shots in the film. This opening movement seems initiatory almost, as viewers are brought into the field Marker has established by this slowly graded adjustment of their vision. As the camera's motion finally halts, with the observation jetty diagonally centered in the shot, viewers realize they must begin tracking a different kind of motion. They will need to accustom themselves to the singular momentum Marker has incepted, in his focus on the nature of subjective reality and time. In this way Marker effects an estrangement from the traditional modes of cinematic storytelling.

While the cold, metallic sound of a plane's engines lifting off initially predominates, it gives way in time to music. After the camera comes to a stop, a chorus

of voices rises. Though initially gentle, the song proves chilling, due to the series of rising crescendos the voices undertake and the provocatively mournful nature of their song. This opening scene essentially displaces the viewer; with the absence of physical movement after the camera stops panning, the rising song seems indicative of some necessary upward motion or action of the spirit. Regarding this sequence, in *Chris Marker- La Jetée,* Janet Harbord asserts that "exactly what is still and what is moving is not immediately apparent, and this can be traced through Marker's film as an uncertainty of where movement and stillness begin and end" (34). As a space in which one might dream of rising beyond the confines of mundane existence, into a more spacious expanse of sky, the jetty stands as a symbol of potential. A diffuse yet vital radiance saturates the scene, establishing an air of the ineffable, as the light of the sun glares off the pier. A viewer might initially move into a state of reverie, taken by the quality of light, the evocative chorus, and the symbolic nature of the observation deck. However, the direction in which one's spirit or being might actually move remains uncertain. In the reality envisioned in the film, it seems as if physical action must give way to the action of the inner consciousness; it must expose itself in its haunting reality, rising symbolically as song in order to simultaneously liberate itself and mourn.

In later scenes the song's meaning becomes clear, as voices play against images of a ruined Paris to mourn the loss of human life and civilization. The chorus seems to be made up of the grieving, stunned dead. Yet at the film's start, the song also symbolizes the cathartic yet ultimately destructive momentum the prisoner initiates in his attempts at time travel. Again, the song picks up where the movement of the panning camera leaves off. It registers the trajectory he undertakes within both his consciousness and the

interstices of space and time. In its wordless rise, the choral piece stands as a plaintive ode to the desire for release that increasingly compels him, and ultimately leads to his destruction. Pushed to venture beyond the borders within which his awareness is typically bounded, he eventually proves incapable of stabilizing the momentum he has initiated. Exposed in prewar Paris to the reality of the past while simultaneously mourning it, he falls victim to his desire to know an order of life sublime in its normalcy. The steady crescendos with which the voices rise convey the tragic intensity of his attempt to break the tethers that bind him instead to a despotic future. The beauty of the song is of such an extreme nature that it comes here to possess a sublimely harrowing quality.

In a subsequent shot the narrator observes that at Orly, "parents used to take their children to watch departing planes" (*La Jetée*). An image follows, of the prisoner as a young boy standing on the rails of the observation jetty. Introduced into a public space, he is given permission to enter into a state of reverie, per se, prompted by the expansive nature of the sky beyond the runways. Discussing this state, Bachelard, again, notes that "in our childhood, reverie gave us freedom" (Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie* 101). Asking "what other psychological freedom do we have than the freedom to dream," he asserts that "when he would dream in his solitude, the child knew an existence without bounds. His reverie was not simply a reverie of escape. It was a reverie of flight" (101, 100). The society of prewar France is introduced with this image, one in which children might be encouraged to abandon themselves to the expanse of the horizon, to utilize public spaces even for solitary imagined flights. The narrator goes on to assert, however, that "on this Sunday, the child of this story was bound to remember the sight of a frozen sun, of a stage setting at the end of the pier" (*La Jetée*). Hanging in a white sky, the sun

releases a hazy, diffuse light while simultaneously appearing distant, focused and removed. As the child unwittingly turns to watch his adult self fall upon the platform, his state of reverie and wonder transforms into an experience of confused horror. With this, Marker foreshadows the future regime. He asks if there is space for an individual experience of reverie and its attendant freedoms in societies unremittingly open to the public, and if this internal state must inevitably become corrupted within the "stage setting" of human society. The light in this shot resolves that question somewhat. In its "frozen," intangible yet omnipresent nature, the sun almost seems like an observing eye.

In the scene that follows, startled visitors to Orly observe the prisoner's fall. His final glimpse of the world is relayed in a blurred shot of planes parked beside a hanger, until the image fades to black. These opening sequences provide alternating impressions of movement and stasis that enigmatically initiate Marker's commentary on war and totalitarianism. They are echoed in subsequent scenes developing the idea that notice must be paid to the strength and purpose of the imaginative subconscious and subjective mind. A montage follows regarding the destructive impact of World War Three, for instance. Bookended by two ten-second periods of darkness, it underscores how final the separation is that has occurred between past and present. While giving a sense of weight to the devastation of the war, this use of a black screen simultaneously places viewers in a nebulous state. According to Harbord, this dark space points to the need to venture into and accept the space of memory and the imagination. She finds that "this deployment of leader 'replicates gaps in recollection', and produces a space for fantasy to take root" (42). The remnants of humanity find themselves suspended in a liminal realm, facing their inevitable extinction in tunnels beneath a surface world riddled with radioactive

debris. Deferred, in a way, conventional means of surviving having been proscribed by their own actions, they are needful of an alternate way to manifest a viable future. They literally have to turn within and dream, as dreams are all they have left themselves. Like the chorus, this black space not only marks the trauma that has separated humanity from its past, but points as well to humanity's need to pass beyond the liminal threshold it has incepted and now inhabits.

The film's opening shots invoke an atmosphere of elusive unknowns that is answered here by a candid appraisal of humanity's potential for self-destruction. The only words that emerge in the first period of darkness consist of a terse statement that "soon afterwards, Paris was blown up" (*La Jetée*). The sounds of the chorus rise, as banked clouds of fire glow in the sky beyond the Eiffel Tower. Shots of ruined buildings follow in a montage. These scenes of devastation provide the first overt images of fragmentation in *La Jetée.* The bulk of the ruined buildings possess a severe, industrial beauty, the exposed cement and stone of which they are composed giving them an implicit, raw presence. Marker proffers each image with a distinctly tentative, respectful tone. Shots are held for several seconds, in a quietly reverential or stunned manner. In *Turbulence and Flow,* Yvette Biro addresses shifts in cinematic pacing: "the tone of parts, their slow or rapid breathing, is far from extraneous…Similar to music, film develops its themes in time, and the slow or rushing flow of these rhythms adds as much to the exposition of ideas as the content of the story" (35, 36). While this pacing is suggestive of a need to frankly appraise the results of war, it might too survey a terrain of destabilized and fragmented psyches. Marker paces these shots in such a way that viewers may feel they do not survey ruins so much as assess the severity of the wounding

that has resulted from the war. Images of hollowed apartment blocks are interspersed with long shots of damaged roadways. Avenues leading away from the city are blocked by rubble, and the devastated buildings, like the minds of the imprisoned, cannot easily supply any haven. These images establish the sense that no ability to flee or find a sanctuary within exists.

The chorus begins building in intensity as one ruined building stands reflected in a wide pool of water. A shot of a cathedral follows as the near-shrill music reaches a haunting crescendo, followed by a photograph of a ruined Arc de Triomphe. The need for catharsis inherent in the chorus' momentum becomes clear. Voices rise when an image of what humanity has built and leveled is mirrored self-reflectively. By following this image with a shot of a devastated cathedral, Marker perhaps asks what form of transcendence, absolution or rebirth might now be possible. Images of transcendence and succor compete here consistently with an air of stasis and immobility. Light held within the cathedral seems more desolate than the wistful light playing off the husks that dominate the city landscape. The rays falling through the still air of the cathedral possess an attenuated, rigid quality, set against the vertical columns of the building. A certain grace is evident in the distant curve of the cathedral's sanctuary, yet the nave in which parishioners would traditionally congregate is strewn with wreckage. While the cathedral shot indicates that access to a transcendent reality is withheld, or at least severely vexed, the sanctuary of the church remains intact, and in fact radiates light through a series of windows. The delicate concave structure of the cathedral centers awareness within, following the preceding image of a ruin doubly exposed in its reflection.

The voices descend finally in a revealing shot of a shattered symbol of military

strength. Twisting openly, metal rods stabilizing the internal structure of the Arc de Triomphe stand exposed to the sun. This focus on a damaged monument to military prowess unites with the opening shot of this montage. Allusions to the Allied firebombing of Axis cities during World War II can be drawn from the symbolically fire-ridden sky behind the Eiffel Tower. If this chorus is indeed delivered by an assemblage of the grieving dead, mourning and indicting itself simultaneously, this montage might see Marker calling into question any versions of history that identify victors of wars as implicitly moral, heroic figures. These shots intimate that any claim to victory might be rendered void if the standards under which an army has operated are considered. The exposed metal rods speak for instance of the manipulations inherent in warfare. With these shots, Marker subtly interrogates the notion that the presumed victors of a war have a right to assert their rule over a conquered land. As the narrator later sardonically notes when describing the society that develops following the war, "some fancied themselves to be victors. Others were made prisoners" (*La Jetée*). In linking this trio of images to the chorus, Marker perhaps indicates that where access to salvation and survival were once located beyond the individual, within religions or notions of civic and military might, that access is now being centered within. Again, the chorus might indicate that conventional means of escape must be exchanged for an action that is more subjective and internal. While mourning great loss and wrongdoing, the song points to the potential for transcendence in its cadenced rise. Its more harrowing qualities point however to the continued state of entrapment humanity endures.

The manner in which Marker represents the tension between the victors and those they have imprisoned can be explored by examining the space of the experiments

themselves. The intricacies of the proposed system of time travel are treated obliquely. Not explored in an overt, objective manner, they are rather alluded to with images of syringes and blindfolds, and dislocating shots of a man driven mad by the scientists' earliest efforts. With their eyes hidden by blindfolds, subjects must traverse an inner space overwhelming in its complexity. However, the blindfolds also flatten one's sense of their presence. Camp guards similarly wear uniforms that conceal their individuality. As Harbord notes, the "first image we see of a human being is a man standing next to an industrial pipe, lit from above so that the shadows fall downwards across his face. He is dressed in combat clothing, a hood covers his head and strange optical devices…obscure his eyes" (79). Regarding this image, she asserts that "the body here is off-limits, but more so is the expressive nature of the face; we are denied the language of the body" (79). Being is here fragmented, as the senses become mere apparatus meant to service society rather than the individual. Deliberately masked, the guard's face is hidden, yet shadows fall over it as well to point to his own liminal existence. Where the apparatus worn by the guard protrudes however, extending beyond the regular contours of his face intrusively, the prisoner is forced further within by the imposition of a blindfold.

Having observed that people were driven mad when first subjected to time travel experiments, "the camp police spied even on dreams" (*La Jetée*). Attempting to identify individuals with strong minds, they choose this prisoner "from among a thousand for his obsession with an image from the past" (*La Jetée*). They had found that in regards to time travel, "the human mind balked at the idea. To wake up in another age meant to be born again…The shock would be too great…The inventors were now concentrating on men given to very strong mental images. If they were able to conceive or dream another time,

perhaps they would be able to live in it" (*La Jetée*). In its ironic reliance upon individual will and vision, the regime needs the prisoner to force and mimic reverie, to pursue a potentially imagined image. He is to constellate somehow by the unknown. The state of mind the prisoner must enter to focus on significant internal images is not the kind that can generally be summoned at will. According to Bachelard, "reverie is going to be born naturally, in an awareness without tension, in an easy cogito, providing certainties of being with regard to a pleasing image" (Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie* 151). Prisoners are placed on a hammock slung within a dark underground chamber. While its use speaks of the impoverishment of this society and the lack of space within the tunnels, the hammock functions ironically as well. They are unique symbols of liminality, hanging between the sky and earth. Providing visual access to the sky, with structures capable of molding themselves to their users, they make potential the experience of rest and reverie. The hammock in the chamber however seems to hang over an abyss, into which the prisoner's consciousness is flung by the injections the scientists provide to enable his transit. Caught between two worlds, his body and awareness become vulnerable in a state of forced reverie. Shots of his anxious gnawing at the cords that support the hammock reinforce the irony inherent in this symbol.

Prior subjects had indeed proven vulnerable when forced to access other times. In a sequence devoted to one maddened subject, close-up shots taken from different angles establish the sense that his awareness is anchored in a distorted internal terrain. As this sequence proceeds, the camera captures shadowed, dark hollows instead of his eyes, following a shot of a looming spectacled guard. The subject has fled within and continues to journey there, incapable of broaching the space of objective reality. One standard shot

of the tunnel down which he wanders is shown repeatedly throughout this sequence, establishing a sense of entrapment. Simultaneously however, it curves ominously, seeming to have no endpoint. A dissolve employed at the end of this sequence anchors a sense of warped, inconclusive stasis. Harbord claims that

> we see his gaunt face and terrified stare several times before it is cross-dissolved over another image, seeming to hover, to remain beyond its term. …And against the rhythmic clicking-past of the back-to-back images, the dissolve gums up the system, images seem to stick together, refusing to pass through (37).

A string ensemble plays quietly, as though wary of encroaching upon his space. The chorus can or will not rise, as to do so could prove too jarring, and because this man is seemingly incapable of the transcendence the choral song potentially implies.

Hanging at his sides, the man's hands seem tensed, as though he wishes to grasp something of substance or complete a remembered action. While they instead remain inert, light limns the edges of his fingers and rests upon his shoulders. As navigators of the unknown space of the mind, a certain trust is placed in these prisoners; the light edging this man's hands symbolizes the idea that they have a sacred mission of sorts. Ironically, the phrase "*tête apôtre*," or "head of the apostle," stands out on the tunnel's wall. A brief shot of the phrase appears as this sequence plays out, and repeats prior to the first experimental use of the unnamed prisoner. This phrase implies that if they are navigators, per se, the prisoners assay not only the matrix of time and space, but all that that implies. They traverse the space of memory and emotion, the states of being that memory records. They can therefore initiate others into an awareness of their individual natures, in a society that seems primed to instead dismiss or control them. While the graffiti-scrawled phrase recognizes the symbolically sacred nature of the subjects' acts, it

points as well to the sacrificial nature of the explorers. Baptized in what Marker terms "waves of time," they are like martyred apostles to be sacrificed before they can share what they have discovered (*La Jetée*).

In contrast with this maddened prisoner, the unnamed protagonist finds himself anchored to reality by his attachment to the image of the woman. While he discovers that the confused enigma of his death perhaps prompted his prescient childhood obsession, he begins to understand that his sense of wonder at another's existence sustained him in later years. His ability to attach himself to another being emotionally in fact allows him to negotiate the field of time and space successfully. As Kia Lindroos observes in *Now-Time Image-Space*, rather than using technology, the type of time travel put forth by Marker "visualizes the potentiality of the mind to cross the limits of time as a result of the human ability to remember, dream and hope" (239). In a society focused on establishing control over the lives and minds of others, any success the prisoner has is however tantamount to sin. The narrator therefore describes the process of the experiment baldly: "He does not die. He does not go mad. He suffers. They continue. On the tenth day, images begin to ooze, like confessions" (*La Jetée*). Religious language and imagery here stand in for scientific terminology, focusing attention on the almost criminal fact of the prisoner's emotions as he visibly writhes within the hammock. The lack of feeling in the narrator's voice entrenches the sense that this society requires redemption, and that only someone who can feel for another person, who "does not go mad" but instead "suffers," might realign it (*La Jetée*).

The prisoner ultimately learns how to journey successfully by abandoning objective conceptions of time for a subjective experience of it.[7] In discovering how to embrace his subjectivity, he finds that the experience of love and wonder incept their own time. He and the woman together establish a more fluid, immediate temporal field. As the narrator states, "they are without memories, without plans. Time builds itself painlessly around them. Their only landmarks are the flavor of the moment they are living" (*La Jetée*). While many analysts of *La Jetée* examine Marker's focus on subjective time, for the purposes of this discussion it is necessary to relate the concept, and any imagery regarding it, to the straitened living conditions established by the regime. Marker's depiction of subjective time stresses that opening to emotional experience entails an acceptance of the reality and wonder of the Other, and is essential for the survival of humanity. Just as "our hero must expend enormous effort to conjure up an encounter with the other," his "repeated attempts…accurately describe the drama of human r*approchement* and attempts at making contact" (Biro 85). The time and energy the prisoner gives to encountering the woman and then forming a stable bond with her is logical. It symbolically parallels the connections that Marker implies must be made between societies or states encountering one another. While the man and woman do not overtly play out roles related to subject and ruler, or invader and colonized subject, he does possess the ability to intrude upon her freely, and therefore must earn her trust to develop and maintain an accord. She comes to accept him, calling him her "ghost," and entertains his random presence without losing any sense of self (*La Jetée*). The film's

[7] French philosopher Henri Bergson introduced the concept of subjective time in his 1887 essay "Time and Free Will," analyzing the differences between objective, mathematical time and pure time, or *durée*. The most essential aspect of his views on time in relation to this analysis relate to his idea that more qualitative, subjective experiences introduce one into a more creative, fluid field of time, one quite different from the linear mathematical construction of time that modern societies rely upon for their mundane functioning.

pacing reflects the slow process by which affiliation and congress occur, on an individual or group level.

Marker depicts the experience and worth of subjective time in various shots taken of the woman. In one specific scene, still shots dissolve into each other with increasing speed, to show her waking. At the end of this sequence, in the second moving shot of the film, her eyes open briefly and blink. Her acceptant gaze trains itself upon an Other, putatively the prisoner, who has found her in a private chamber as she sleeps. She looks directly into the camera, establishing the fact that we view her through his eyes. These shots establish a sense of stillness, their pacing capturing the shifts in awareness that she experiences waking. A uniquely liminal atmosphere evolves, demonstrating that the lovers have come to dwell in a space that is simultaneously still and active. Harbord observes that "the camera is not rushing forward at all but holding still, as though we may discern the shift from stillness to movement all the more clearly. Yet the woman only blinks. Through this transition into motion, we find conversely a quality of stillness, and duration, of time as qualitatively experienced rather than measured" (32-33). The atmosphere of liminality that has pervaded the film develops a sense of meaning and purpose here. The scene maintains the dichotomous atmosphere Marker imposes on the film, but in a manner that elevates it, restoring a sense of security and wonder to the threshold experience of liminal subjectivity. Marker shows that when in a state of communion with others, individuals can experience a sense of repose while still seeking beyond themselves.

While this woman has long represented the Other to the prisoner, we see here that he does the same for her, in a necessary sense. In terms of the symbolic aspect of this

shot, Morin observes that in close-ups, one's face is a "mirror of the soul, the soul itself being mirror of the world. The close-up sees much more than the soul in the soul, it sees the world at the root of the soul" (108). The sense of reciprocity implicit in the close-up image of her gaze says much of the manner in which individuals in any society might interface. In the quiet stillness implicit in her gaze, movement from within passes deeply outside of herself to an Other. Having chosen to accept the presence of the man, she can now swim in the field their connection has created. This scene is particularly relevant as it demonstrates that the prisoner does not "save" humanity on his own. He is uniquely dependent upon this woman's receptivity; it helps anchor him to the nebulous reality he has been delivered into, and thrives within. She too has moved outside of the boundaries within which her consciousness might have been directed and circumscribed. Her ability to receive and consort with another, to submit to the ambiguities and unknowns his presence in her life implies, has essentially helped to save humanity.

In tandem with a continued meditation on the qualitative state of time, the remainder of the film focuses on the sense of shock and wonder the prisoner feels at the nature of prewar society. Forced to consciously surface within the past, he devours it to the extent that he can. What proves sublimely evocative for him is ironically commonplace in prewar Paris. At one point the narrator notes that "they are in a garden. He remembers there were gardens" (*La Jetée*). The reverential, almost pathetic simplicity of this statement palpates with feeling, as the prisoner considers the fact that something as simple as a garden is now anomalous and therefore utterly profound. Gardens have in essence become completely defamiliarized. Places, beings and objects that might be disregarded by those inured to their presence cannot blur before the prisoner's eyes.

Everything he sees stands out and in fact has a dislocating impact upon him, as it is made new and sublimely moving for Marker's viewers as well. The sense of awe the prisoner experiences at seemingly mundane aspects of the world implicitly pronounces the worth of that which is common and individual. His hunger for this time, however, cannot but provoke and intimidate his captors.

Where poetically singular images stand out in *La Jetée,* sounds however often entrench a sense of the collective. Used to intimate what words and images cannot convey alone, sound can symbolically assault the senses. Birds sing throughout the scene of the woman's awakening, for instance, as the chorus does at other times. However, rather than indicating a need for transcendence and rebirth, as the chorus does, the birds' song initially helps ground viewers within the real. Their steady clamor intimates that however subjective the awareness of the characters might become, it anchors them in the reality of the physical world. Still, the song grows increasingly cacophonous, creating a sense of tension somehow more chaotic than that generated by the chorus. As the woman opens her eyes and blinks, the birds crescendo, and the man is thrust back into the experimental chamber to meet the mercenary gaze of the experiment's head scientist. The lovers lack the power to maintain the connection they have wrought, as the regime relentlessly intrudes upon them. The chaotic sound of the birds uncannily seems to blur; symbolic of the lack of distinction between the individual and the collective, the sound obscures and overwhelms the unique terrain established by the lovers. It devalues the sense of wonder at the individual essence of things that the prisoner has provocatively begun developing.

Marker uses a blurred shot to close the film, as the opening scene replays and the man begins to grasp the implications of the image that has haunted him. As he falls to the deck of the viewing platform, face turned to the sky, his arms stretch out like wings or as if he is undergoing crucifixion. However, no potential exists for either flight or resurrection within this scene. He has mastered a certain kind of flight, assaying the liminal, fragmented space of being and the mind, in an attempt to guarantee the survival of his species. Yet as he afterwards attempts to complete this process by freeing himself, he finds that his individual essence has been sacrificed to service the machinery of his society. Any certainty he may have held regarding his potential to subjectively determine the course of his life is placed in question by the blurring of the images he sees. Grounded like the stationary airplanes that his final gaze lights upon, he finds himself entirely circumscribed. A threshold has been subsumed into itself, internalized by the society that first forced it to be established.

While the prisoner ultimately falls prey to the regime, one must take into account the continuous dichotomies Marker employs within *La Jetée* to determine whether his tone is ultimately hopeful or disheartened. The consistent interchange made between shots of a radiant, ineffable nature and those possessing a more hallucinatory oneiric or mundane aspect establishes an elusive, unsettling terrain. The sound, lighting, imagery and pacing employed in the film function poetically, establishing a symbolic field in which ideas must be contemplated on an abstract level. Through their use, Marker demands that viewers placed in a space of liminality access and come to terms with their own subjective awareness, as they consider humanity's potential future. His ironic version of time travel sees him validating the potentials within individuals' capacity to

feel and determine their own paths, traits that totalitarian states specifically dismiss as nonessential. As Arendt maintains, "men insofar as they are more than animal reaction and fulfillment of function are entirely superfluous to totalitarian regimes…Total power can be achieved and safeguarded only in a world of conditioned reflexes, or marionettes without the slightest trace of spontaneity" (155). Marker's insistence that his viewers wake to a new, more poetic way of relating and conceiving of life allows him to point to a potential future predicated on the acceptance and utilization of the creative, dreaming mind. Bachelard speaks of the nature of poetry in relation to one's ability to imagine and incept a provocative future: "Poetry is one of the destinies of speech. [From it,] we get the impression that we are touching the man whose speech is new, in that it is not limited to expressing ideas or sensations, but tries to have a future. One would say that the poetic image, in its newness, opens a future to language" (*The Poetics of Reverie* 3). In his use of poetically sublime cinematic elements, Marker perhaps asserts that the future is terrifying yet still open. As Morin states, "the cinema is in its essence indeterminate, open, like man himself" (211).

CHAPTER 4
"I HEARD FAMILIAR VOICES"

Providing a quietly provocative impression of modern Thai society, the film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* stands out on the basis of its fantastic nature. Reflecting upon provincial animist beliefs, Buddhist philosophy and the political and economic realities driving contemporary Thai society, this 2010 film by Apichatpong Weerasethakul maintains an air of the ineffable. Essentially a celebratory work, it references the political circumstances of the nation in a far more oblique manner than it does spiritual or cultural concerns. Subject to the threat of censorship, Weerasethakul, like Erice, needs to deliver his social critiques in a deliberately obscure manner. However, the magical realist style of filmmaking he has developed is already innately enigmatic. Presenting haunting, sometimes unfathomable individuals and circumstances, his films situate them within the immediate proximity of the mundane. Establishing a dreamlike atmosphere through the casual interplay he sets up between the metaphysical and the objectively real, he utilizes this field to bring ideas introduced in the prior analyses into a unique tension. An exploration of *Uncle Boonmee* will therefore conclude this study, in order to more deeply address certain themes that have been considered in the preceding analyses.

The film grew out of Weerasethakul's desire to make sense of his father's death, as well as of a book given to him by a Buddhist monk concerning a man's ability to remember prior incarnations. Animist and Buddhist beliefs central to Thai culture hold

sway conceptually, as the film offers glimpses of the transformations that Boonmee, a man dying of kidney failure, has undergone incarnating in different human and animal forms. A contemplation of the nature of death thus underlies many of the themes that surface, yet from within this focus a visual and aural meditation on the nature of being emerges. Although *Uncle Boonmee* maintains a foreboding air in its portrayal of the military regime that took control of Thailand in 2006, this film differs from the preceding two in that it is not governed by a persistent sense of stagnancy and claustrophobia. A playfully flagrant, kitsch modernity gestures ambiguously at times, yet Weerasethakul returns continually to the human capacity for wonder and transformation. Implicit within the film's thematics is the need for freedom and movement; a sense of wakeful expectancy characterizes its atmosphere as, sensing another plane of reality hovering around themselves, characters consider their ability to experience life at a deeper level. Alternating between the fantastic and a frequently oblique, documentary-style realism, the six reels composing the film cohere on the basis of the uniquely meditative state each establishes. In the hauntingly obscure opening reel it becomes clear that Jen and Tong, Boonmee's sister-in-law and nephew respectively, have come to his farm to see him through his final days. Subsequent reels find them joined by spirits intent on preparing Boonmee for his passage into the afterlife, a cathartically poignant variation on the royal costume dramas of Weerasethakul's youth, and a starkly focused, surreal depiction of the urban and militaristic society evolving in contemporary Thailand.

Like Marker and Erice, Weerasethakul subtly defamiliarizes the terrain of his film, compelling viewers to adapt to the meditative space he opens up. While depicting the transformations in consciousness that various characters undergo, *Uncle Boonmee*

simulates these experiences for viewers. The film holds them within a cinematic field in which sound, lighting, imagery and pacing create a sense of immersion in a deeper layer of reality than that which might commonly be sensed. Metaphysical elements infuse the film with an enigmatic atmosphere, while natural imagery and sounds endow it with a depth capable of waking one to the more elemental aspects of the mundane. Due to their immersion in this atmospheric field, viewers have the potential to enter a dreamlike, meditative state, and from it consider Weerasethakul's interpretation of modern reality. Apart from focusing on the presence of the military in Thailand, tensions between the rural and urban sectors of society, and contemporary approaches to death, life and spirituality, Weerasethakul frankly considers the need modern individuals have for contact. This analysis will therefore not only explore the politicization of the shifts in consciousness that characters experience, and the defamiliarizing techniques Weerasethakul employs to establish a sense of such states within viewers. An appraisal of the connections characters share will be made, to evaluate the political implications of the need individuals have for a sense of community and rapport. Opening first however with a discussion of the political background of the film in relation to its magical realist tendencies, this analysis will then focus on the balance Weerasethakul maintains between the supernatural and mundane, through an exploration of the defamiliarizing cinematic techniques he employs.

Before considering *Uncle Boonmee* in detail it is necessary to introduce the historic political dimensions of the film, to establish the grounds for its setting and focus. *Uncle Boonmee* is shrewdly political in the images it briefly proffers of the military and in the discreet references it makes to violent periods of recent Thai history. Over the past

century, Thailand has seen military dictatorships move into place as it has oscillated between weakly structured constitutional monarchies and democracies. While the regimes that have taken power may not all be classified as totalitarian, systems of censorship, military rule and propaganda have regularly been put into place, irrespective of the type of political organization governing the nation. The regular purging of activist elements has characterized Thai society for decades; protests and activist movements have been violently suppressed, leaving many dead, tortured or simply "disappeared."

Weerasethakul's art has become increasingly political in recent years, simultaneously referencing traditional spiritual beliefs and militaristic practices in an attempt to express the manner in which violence has penetrated the psyches of modern Thais.[8] Born in 1970, he moved as a child from Bangkok to the northeastern province of Isaan. This area saw brutal military persecution during an occupation that lasted from the 1960s through the 1980s, due to the presence of Communist insurgents in the region. Weerasethakul was witness to the activism and intense traditional spirituality basic to the people of Isaan, as well as to the violence attendant upon their pursuit of political freedom. Finding this provincial culture inspiring, he frequently uses it as the backdrop for his films.

The biography *A Man Who Can Recall Past Lives,* by Phra Sripariyattiweti, details the animal and human lives that Boonmee, a man from the province of Isaan, claimed to remember when engaged in meditation. A film based on the real Boonmee's exploration of lifetimes spent as an ox or princess might not seem immediately political,

[8] Weerasethakul maintained a relatively low profile politically until his film *Syndromes and a Century* saw significant revision under the censors put into place following the nation's 2006 military coup. He has since begun working actively in the Free Thai Cinema movement, a group that seeks to end the censorship of films; his production company Kick the Machine focuses on providing funding and support for experimental Thai filmmakers.

yet neither might a meditation on the nature of death. As he prepares to die, the titular character of the film contemplates the potential nature of the afterlife while considering the karmic implications of various acts he has committed. He also encourages others to undertake esoteric meditative practices capable of endowing them with a stronger sense of personal agency. Stating for instance that he has learned how to separate from his body during meditation, in a form of astral travel, he describes the knowledge he has gained journeying beyond the immediately physical. In this portrayal of a conscious exploration of mortality and spiritual potential is an implicit defense of the need for a depth of consciousness that is often unwelcome in totalitarian states. It provides a significant counterpoint to the type of society being cultivated within Thailand. A scene cut from the first reel for instance sees Jen and Tong sitting in a bus station. As static suddenly blares from a loudspeaker, people rise to sing a state anthem delivered in a saccharine, cajoling voice. However realistic, the scene takes on a surreal quality as this casual assortment of travelers forms into a regimented, somewhat anesthetized group mindful of the need to abide by the dictates of a tired propaganda machine. The imposition of this type of ritual in public spaces demonstrates how totalitarian regimes gradually school individuals to take on the role of "marionettes" (Arendt 155). Addressing the ability individuals have to act independently from a stance of self-awareness, Arendt states that, "precisely because man's resources are so great, he can be fully dominated only when he becomes a specimen of the animal-species man" (155). Stating that "total domination does not allow free initiative in any field of life, for any activity that is not entirely predictable," she speaks of the process by which people are worn down into a grim, if numbed acceptance of totalitarian rule (37). Weerasethakul's decision to focus on the delicate matrix woven

by one individual's actions and beliefs, and the intricacies of the departure he is preparing to make, is thus political in certain respects.[9]

The current regime defends the character of Thailand's official Buddhist culture, and first subjected Weerasethakul to censorship due to his casual, relaxed depictions of monks. However, aspects of Thailand's religious system might ultimately seem at odds with a regime that Weerasethakul has defined as totalitarian in multiple interviews. An immersion within the animist and Buddhist cosmologies at the core of Thai culture might prove unwieldy in state systems resistant to unknowns in the ideologies they tout. In its enigmatic depiction of reincarnation, the film for instance carefully acknowledges the ambiguities basic to both existence and the afterlife. Boonmee is not depicted as experiencing conscious recall of the various incarnations Weerasethakul portrays. Weerasethakul's original script clearly identified which figures from these sequences were prior incarnations of Boonmee, yet as filming progressed, he chose not to introduce

[9] Attempting to discover more about the individual featured in Sripariyattiweti,'s work, in order to develop a script based on the concept of reincarnation, Weerasthekul traveled through the rural northeastern province of Isaan until reaching the small village of Nabua. A community that saw brutal military persecution during the occupation that lasted from the 1960s through the 1980s, Nabua drew him to contemplate a more extended work. His 8-screen video installation entitled *Primitive* documents the complex and troubled inner lives of the young men of this village. *Uncle Boonmee* is therefore generally considered in immediate relation to the eight works that make up this piece, as they are seen as being intrinsically linked. Part documentary, part science fiction narrative and part music video, *Primitive* evokes the burdened yet wondering atmosphere of the village. It centers upon local youths forced to mature within a climate of oppressive violence without their fathers, who as Communists frequently found it necessary to flee into the jungles of Isaan. In a work given to fabulation, a certain stark, documentary realism coincides with abstract and fantastic depictions of the states of consciousness experienced by these youths; it variously sees them building a spaceship to escape into the past and future, undergoing an unnerving interrogation within its low-lit, red interior and kicking a flaming soccer ball through a film screen. A young man recounts memories similar to those of Boonmee, marveling at the glowing orbs he saw moving through the jungle as a child, which contained scenes from his past lives. However, while both works address the political and spiritual realities experienced by modern Thais, they differ in a key respect. Where *Primitive* maintains a focus on a stymied yet inspired group of young men, *Uncle Boonmee* does not concern itself with a collective, but rather with the nature of individual experience. While still considering the place of community, the feature film is peopled by specific characters, whereas in *Primitive,* individuals seeking to forget their past merge somewhat ironically into the sheltering archetypes of a collective. For this reason, this analysis will concern itself solely with the feature film, as its exploration of subjective experience within an increasingly oppressive sociopolitical environment matches the focus of this study.

them as such. Rather, throughout the film obscure, evocative vignettes drawn from Sripariyattiweti's work play out anonymously. Known for his obscure style of filmmaking, he simply allows each vignette to establish its own elusive, mysterious space within the film. Blithely refusing to keep to the field of the objectively real, he questions a global society that prioritizes the calculable and known over the subjective experience of self and world.

In the press kit released for the film, Weerasethakul points to the dichotomy that exists between official beliefs and the spiritual practices basic to his culture. Declaring that "I have become interested in the destruction and extinction processes of cultures and of species," he explains that, "for the past few years in Thailand, nationalism, fueled by the military coups, brought about a confrontation of ideologies. There is now a state agency that acts as a moral policeman to ban 'inappropriate' activities and to destroy their contents" (*Director's Statement*). He claims that "it is impossible not to relate the story of Uncle Boonmee and his belief to this" (*Director's Statement*). Considering Boonmee's spirituality and sense of wondering satisfaction at life, Weerasethakul finds that he "is an emblem of something…about to disappear, something that…[has] no place in our contemporary landscape" (*Director's Statement*). Weerasethakul's depiction of Boonmee is thus a defense of a reality paradigm threatened by urban consumerism and a state system that could render citizens without a heritage to which they might link themselves, conceptually or historically. In relation to this, Popovich acknowledges that "in its eccentric aspect, magic realism has a powerful potential to give a clear and vibrant voice not only to the formerly colonized but also to all those whose self-expression, self-realization, and distinct histories have been suppressed by cultural, economic, and

political hegemonies" (18). By engaging in what she refers to as anthropological magical realism, the presentation of the traditional beliefs of his people, Weerasethakul confronts those who would deny the validity of indigenous cosmologies and practices, and the states of being they imply (Popovich, 18).

However, his ability to imbue the mundane with a unique depth is revelatory in its own right. Within his oeuvre, no explicit delineation exists between the spiritual and the physical. The numinous interfaces continually with the mundane. While *Uncle Boonmee* is distinguished by its fantastic nature, the physical is rendered as an immediately palpable, mysteriously profound terrain. It is thus steadily matched to the provocative space of what would in the West be termed the supernatural. Again, Roh did not seek after images of a supernatural nature in the art he defined as magical realist, when introducing the term into contemporary discourse. Rather, he sought art that raises an intuitive awareness of the inner nature of the beings or objects it depicts. As he states, "for the new art it is a question of representing before our eyes, in an intuitive way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world" (24). The cinema Weerasethakul crafts participates in both strains of magical realism, confirming the place of the spiritual beliefs of his ancestors in the modern world while evoking the subtleties and unknowns of the mundane. Pointing not only to subtle forces that hover at the edge of objective reality, Weerasethakul renders the space of the ordinary sacred, mysterious and vitalizing. Opening for instance with a water buffalo's deliberate escape from the tether binding it to a tree, the film sees it gallop raptly into the surrounding jungle. The animal's intent determination to free itself and in grateful relief discover what the forest might hold gently introduces Roh's strain of magical realism.

Initially struggling against the tether as incense smoke rises from its hooves, the water buffalo ventures away from a man and child gathered at a fire. Grazing contemplatively among the trees, it glows palely blue against the dark greens and purples of the evening terrain. A small white moth plays momentarily among its horns, as it stares offscreen in captivation at the forest. An implicit stillness evolves at the start of this scene, as the steady, deep sounding of crickets and the silent actions caught onscreen inaugurate a focus on the hidden depths of the mundane. Halting once inside the trees, the water buffalo gazes into the restorative depths of the jungle as if recognizing both the land and itself. The camera's slow perusal of the physical yet internal terrain into which the animal strives to move is in line with Roh's call for an art which establishes "a calm admiration of the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their own faces" (20). The manner in which moonlight plays on the pallor of the moth's wings endows this scene with a sense of quiet grace, of "the interior figure" Roh speaks of (24). Its brief and sudden appearance is unique and unanticipated, and the sense of wonder and subdued delight its presence evokes could not have been planned or controlled cinematically.

Yet as the water buffalo moves offscreen, retrieved by its owner, another shot of the jungle is proffered. Situated against a wall of trees and vines, a humanoid creature stares out beyond the fourth wall of the filmic stage. Entirely black, its red eyes probe the space beyond itself while announcing its presence. Shifting minutely as it gazes out beyond the jungle, its dark body seems to swallow light. Its presence seems to announce how entire the spiritual realm might be, how total its awareness. The level of knowing the being's stance embodies is almost severe in its totality; its ability to stare beyond that

realm into the viewer's eyes is explicit. A viewer might not become immediately alert to its presence once the camera observes the departure of the water buffalo. Becoming gradually aware of the implicit quiescence of the scene that follows, one is compelled to look deeper within the frame, and then identify what might first seem a shadow as a hovering, watchful being. The protracted point of encounter with its gaze allows Weerasethakul to demonstrate that one must cultivate a different kind of attention, to come into awareness of the forces potentially immanent within mundane reality.

Providing viewers with an elemental experience of the natural world and the numinous forces that members of his traditional society sense within it, Weerasethakul places them beyond the boundaries of a modern sociopolitical identity. Through his unique blend of imagery, pacing, lighting and sound he seeks to return viewers to the origins of human experience. When asked about his focus on the jungle, he states that

> the jungle for me is home. When we were living in caves or in historic times, the jungle used to be a place we were comfortable with. But now when we go to the jungle we feel alienated. Sometimes I was scared of some sound, what happened there,…so the jungle became some kind of alien place. So to go back to the root, in *Uncle Boonmee*, is very important…It's like going back to origin (Scalavy).

Weerasethakul claims in the commentar*y* appended to the film that within the opening scenes "there's a mystery, and idea of ambient sound like a character." The deep, resonant voice of insects sussurates within the surrounding darkness, to establish a fundamental sense of absorption within the terrain. Basic to a film that lacks a musical soundtrack, their steady thrum creates its own ambient field. Immersed within their constant reverberations, viewers begin to identify a sound that precedes music in human experience. Having chosen to elevate the levels of ambient sound within the film, Weerasethakul asserts that "when you talk about reincarnation and the transmigration of

souls between animal, plant, and human, you need to have the audience aware of the other lives in this universe" (Peranson). He finds it essential that this is done on a visual and aural level, in order to establish a deep sensory experience for his viewers. As he states, "with this film…you're supposed to feel this relationship between man and nature, all these things that sometimes you cannot really put into words. The idea was to visualise this, to illuminate it…and for me to respect the audience's imagination" (Scalavy). While a certain primeval awareness is triggered by the sounds, so is a sense of stillness. In a film that answers Bresson's call for "noises that must become music," the insistent sounding of the jungle ironically seems to invoke a form of silence (30). In regards to this idea, Bresson differentiates between "absolute silence and silence obtained by a *pianissimo* of noises" (72). Protracted depictions of the lambent fall of moonlight or pale, deep sun link with the constant bank of noise to create a sense of hushed calm in the background. A viewer immersed in the jungle's sounds and subtle, glowing hues might feel as if the primordial space of nature is being revealed, in its simultaneously lush and internal nature.

A variety of lighting styles intensify encounters with the land, from the clean fall of natural sunlight to nights created through the use of a blue filter. The third reel for instance is candidly objective, presenting Jen's hesitant then increasingly confident exploration of Boonmee's farm. Observing that this reel is "similar to the first part but without mystery," Weerasethakul asserts that it is "more like a documentary," giving time to an evocation of the calming yet stimulating landscape in the afternoon sun. While daylight scenes often possess a timeless, restorative quality, and thereby help return viewers to the "origin" Weerasethakul speaks of, much of the film takes place at night, at

the edge of a jungle that is cinematic in its otherworldliness. Weerasethakul observes that, contrary to prior films, he deliberately enhanced the jungle depicted in *Uncle Boonmee*: "this jungle is artificial, it's a cinematic jungle. We used the day-for-night technique, so there's a fake quality to it, a green and blue tint" (Scalavy). Highlighting plants in a chiaroscuro against the strict darkness, Weerasethakul captures them at angles that can make them seen alien, and somehow sentient and aware. Yet the moonlight falling within the night jungle is of such a heightened, refulgent nature that it renders what it touches somewhat numinous. The jungle seems not artificial or unreal so much as a heightened version of itself, an invocation of its more extreme, sublime aspects.

The slow pacing Weerasethakul employs is key to his development of this compellingly grounded yet enigmatic atmosphere. Again, the film's reels coordinate with one another on the basis of the atmosphere they establish. While portraying various scenarios and times, the reels all share a meditatively slow pace. It is attenuated in a telling way; holding shots for an extended period of time in long takes, Weerasethakul invokes a space that viewers can enter, and then contemplate imagery and concepts from. His filming techniques evince a certain frugality that is again in line with concepts espoused by Bresson, who claims that "one does not create by adding, but by taking away" (96). Calling for "expression through compression," he asserts that one must "cut what would deflect attention elsewhere" (95, 91). Sparsely peopled, and lacking excess motion or overtly complex dialogue, most scenes return the viewer's focus to the experience of an environment or state of being. Long takes allow viewers to lose their focus and enter a trancelike state, moving within greenery or azure, moonlit waters in a space lacking thought, but replete with motion and color. In this way Weerasethakul

works to evoke a sense of wonder within viewers, who finds themselves able to give in to reverie.

The film provides viewers with a measured way to open to the kind of meditative vision that takes in the profundity of the everyday and the provocative, curious aspects of the numinous. Long takes permit Weerasethakul to portray the contemplative manner by which one comes to accommodate a greater reality, while the uncanny beauty his camera registers, coupled with the incessant sounding of the jungle, point to the presence of unique, elemental forces within it. In the commentary appended to the film Weerasethakul claims that "the movie is made from a child's point of view, so it has a certain simplicity, naivete…Everything is looked at in wonderment." By situating viewers within both earthly and more spiritual planes it extends an invitation to them to expand the sources from which they draw their knowledge and experiences. Concerned that the imposition of military rule and incessant urbanization will render traditional cultures and species extinct, Weerasethakul works to bind viewers again to the land and the mysterious presence he finds within it.

By considering the spirits with whom Boonmee interacts, a deeper sense of the type of reality their presence implies should develop. They seem to hold a unique brand of knowledge, as though time spent in alternate dimensions has honed their awareness. Boonmee's wife Huay materializes unexpectedly one evening at the table setting beside a startled Tong, as the family gathers on Boonmee's veranda for dinner. While unforeseen, her appearance is not ultimately incongruous. Although she manifests in a slow fade, the slats of her chair showing through her subdued modern dress, the internal, radiant quality of her presence is such that she seems unlikely to induce sensations of fear or discomfort.

Rather, her presence imparts a sense of stillness, as if, having journeyed beyond the mortal realm, she now holds a deep, stabilizing awareness of the nature of being. While she is compassionately gracious to those with whom she interacts, her serene countenance remains essentially private, as though her experience of the afterlife has granted her a tranquility and wisdom that render her somewhat separate.

Having disappeared sixteen years ago into the jungle, the son Huay shares with Boonmee in time joins the gathering as well. Wary viewers alerted by his low footsteps meet his disquieting eyes as he rises into view on the staircase leading to the veranda. Claiming to have transformed into a monkey spirit like the red-eyed being of the opening sequence, Boonsong speaks to his father of the fascination his death holds for those living in less physical planes. He presents an eerily knowing, powerful image of the spirit realm as he informs Boonmee that spirits and animals have gathered outside his home, drawn by the energy of his illness. As he relates the process by which he abandoned his human form, his unflinching gaze provokes the viewer to consider the depths of knowledge and awareness now implicit to his being. Spirits serve in this manner to elevate the work, not intruding so much as reaching out from a primordial plane deeper within reality. They do not seem to come from outside or beyond the earthly plane so much as to be deeply internal aspects of it. The sense of mystery evoked as one gradually becomes aware of their presence is based not in the idea that one reality must be transcended for another. Rather, it derives from a growing awareness that the mundane interfaces continually with a primordial realm one may come in time to sense.

The second reel's introduction of spirits is performed with such frank sincerity that it proves haunting in its peculiar simplicity. Asserting in the commentary that in

Thailand, “we always think that there’s invisible beings around us,” Weerasethakul states that, “in this film, I tried to put this feeling that the characters or the audience are surrounded by invisible beings or some kind of forces.” Their presence, and the film’s celebration of the vagaries and textures of mundane life, ultimately conduce to a sense of the oneiric. When asked in an interview what sensations he wanted a surreal, elusive film such as *Uncle Boonmee* to give his audience, Weerasethakul declared that he wants viewers to be left “floating and dreaming in their own memories. I always say that they can or should sleep while watching my films, which I sometimes do” (Fitch). Asked to elaborate on the nature of dreams, he asserts that “they are what we need, like food, like cinema. It is a liberation of a fixed pattern of thinking and living. We are all prisoners and we need to dream to be out of our cells” (Fitch). In relating the experience of film viewing to the dream life, he echoes film theorists who point to the oneiric aspect of cinema. Morin claims for instance that “I go to the cinema as I go to sleep” (77). He sees that films provide viewers with a form of release, through the escape promised by a fictional narrative, and sustenance, in the form of images capable of feeding essential aspects of the psyche. As he states, film rediscovers “the dreamed, weakened, shrunken, enlarged, bought closer, distorted, haunting image of the secret world we withdraw to in the waking state as in sleep” (78). Weerasethakul’s films stimulate the imaginative, variegated thought patterns of the subjective self in this manner, as they move between the fantastic and the objectively real. As he observes, his films possess “layers like our own mind works, drifting randomly” (Scalavy). His focus in specific scenes is often left undefined. They are not to be made sense of so much as they are to be experienced, like

dreams or thoughts. Passages of time are frequently marked less by movement or communication than by a focus on the presence of certain beings or realities.

One scene stands out in this regard, as it simply is, and bears out the spiritual, silent quality of its presence. The morning following the dinner gathering finds Huay sitting straight-backed on a chair beside the bed in which Jen slumbers. Light falls on Jen through blue curtains at her windows, and drifts softly through the purple mosquito netting surrounding her bed. A transcendent, dreamlike atmosphere meets the viewer, who simply watches as Huay gently, staunchly studies her sister's prone form. The scene possesses an acute sense of the ineffable, yet this effect is created by the joint presence of a spirit and the physical, yet refined dawn light. As the morning light comes more sharply into focus and dawn shifts perceptibly to day, Huay begins to fade. The bedroom intriguingly does not feel emptier with her absence. It feels complete, rather, as if it is in its own way already replete within the strictly physical. Frequently, viewers of Weerasethakul's films must work to understand the realities he depicts and the states of awareness being provoked within themselves. In this scene, such analysis is somewhat foregone. One is simply to observe and rest within the colors and light, with an awareness of Huay's watchful presence, and Jen's implicit surrender to rest and its release.

However, the quiet attention Huay gives Jen brings into focus the film's explicit concern with the experience of emotional rapport. The three films surveyed in this analysis prompt viewers to consider the nature of societies in which the significance of meaningful encounters between individuals may be marginalized or prohibited. By exploring the poignant logic behind the experience of rapport, they work to challenge the sense of isolation that can result from feelings of estrangement within modern society.

Their shared focus is apropos, if Arendt's analysis of the position isolation holds in the entrenchment of totalitarian states is taken into account. In asking how regimes manipulate individuals' capacities to think and feel, she considers their ability to capitalize on the sense of atomization common to modern life. Providing a historical perspective on the process of atomization, she states that

> loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideology…, the preparation of its executioners and victims, is closely connected with up-rootedness and superfluousness, which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution, and have become acute with…the breakdown of political institutions and social traditions in our own time (173).

She observes that within totalitarian states, "as long as all men have not been made equally superfluous…the ideal of total domination has not been achieved" (155). However, to this exploration of the loss of individuality might be added the statement that, so long as the experience of an individual yet perhaps ordinary life has not been made superfluous, a totalitarian regime has not gained complete ascendancy either. Addressing the fact that totalitarian states work to keep citizens engaged in constant "struggles" or campaigns aimed at purifying and strengthening party rule, Arendt claims that a "regime is not a government in any traditional sense, but a movement, whose advance constantly meets with new obstacles that have to be eliminated" (123). With their attention diverted to goals and ideologies that Arendt acknowledges are frequently impractical, if not illogical, citizens of totalitarian regimes are meant to give allegiance over to the system in which they have become enmeshed. Individuals are in this way doubly isolated, if they already cope with a sense of atomization due to the nature of contemporary life.

Weerasethakul brings this thematic focus on the need to remedy the modern experience of isolation into stark relief. While he does not overtly relate this focus to the political situation he sees evolving within his country, *Uncle Boonmee* ends on an uncertain note, both foreboding and celebratory in its consideration of modern Thai culture. Weerasethakul is clearly aware of what might be lost within Thailand on a personal, communal and national scale, making his focus on the place of rapport significant in a sociopolitical sense. Observing that the film "talks about things that we share, such as our last moments and how we want to connect with our loved ones," he addresses the need beings have to communicate and develop stable bonds with one another (Scalavy). At the film's end Tong flees the monk's cell he has been consigned to for the hotel room Jen sits in, to take advantage of the amenities offered by modern civilization, yet also because he feels severely isolated. Boonsong forsakes his human identity in order to mate with a female monkey spirit with whom he has become fascinated, allying himself with her reality and way of life. Other spirits and mortals similarly find themselves returning to the sides of those they have loved; those who have passed over or who are preparing to die speak of the ties that link them beyond death. Inner realizations are continually linked back into the community due to their evocation of shared cosmologies, and an emphasis is placed on the worth of quiet exchanges that cement communities and families. In the dialogues that idly flourish between spiritual beings and the living, a profound sense of the compelling force of the human spirit develops.

Huay's poignant attachment to her family is key in establishing this focus. She speaks frankly of the attraction that the physical realm holds for spirits who have passed

on. Candidly observing that "heaven is overrated" when Boonmee expresses a fear that he will prove unable to find her once he dies, she asserts that "there's nothing there" (*Uncle Boonmee*). Claiming that "ghost aren't attached to places but to people, to the living," she insists that he recognize the potent force of emotion, which she finds capable of transcending space and time (*Uncle Boonmee*). When he still worriedly presses her for assurances, she looks away, holding his arm knowingly. Huay knows something beyond this, and it is a bittersweet knowledge gained in solitude. With her glib, baldly made statements she declares that the eternal and infinite might lack the intensity and meaning that can be experienced in the span of a human lifetime. It becomes evident that her serenely distant, private gaze derives not simply from the access she has gained to a transcendent realm, but from her comparative isolation within it.

In a film that seeks to restore a sense of mystery to the mundane, the enigmatic nature of human encounters is celebrated and observed through her figure; she mysteriously yet significantly gains in corporeality as the film progresses. Initially transparent, in time she appears fully fleshed as if, like the "hungry ghosts" of Asian legend, she is fed and sustained by the direct interactions she has begun to have with the living. However transcendent her aspect and awareness, her substance seems to derive from the significant encounters she undertakes with mortals. Through her, Weerasethakul perhaps asks if there is something inherently mysterious and inviolable, if not infinite in the sense of rapport that can evolve between lovers, families and communities. The kinds of movement that *Uncle Boonmee* charts become reconfigured in scenes involving her. The transformation in consciousness that Boonmee experiences as he moves closer to death may not progress solely forward, as he experiences revelations regarding his own

nature. It may also inevitably involve a return, an acknowledgement of the necessary worth of communities and of the love he has shared.

Weerasethakul's celebration of the simple experience of life, with its imbalances and grace, peaks somewhat in his brief consideration of the meting out of death. Boonmee struggles to reconcile himself to the fact that he participated as a young man in the military's violent assaults on Isaan's Communists, and killed insects as well to protect his plantation. His concerns about the karmic implications of the deaths he has been responsible for stand in unique relation to another scene cut from the film. Opening on the bank of a marsh, the camera gradually moves from the reflections cast on the water to the beings inhabiting the terrain below. Zooming in on a protozoa glowing with a blue, translucent light, it observes the minute pulsations its tissues make trembling in the dim, fluid space. Golden flecks within its transparent form shift as it changes shape to engulf more. The protozoa seems surreally organic, rendered aesthetic and beyond the mundane by the lighting and camerawork Weerasethakul employs. The scene is documentary in nature yet elevated beyond this, in its observation of the act of consumption. The violence basic to such acts is seen to possess a sublime grace, in the raw yet elegant process of its unfolding. Viewers immersed in the slow pace and nocturnal underwater lighting of this close-up can be pulled into a liminal state of awareness themselves. Gradually becoming aware that the protozoa is eating, they are compelled to ask what such acts imply on the aesthetic level they have been raised to.

As literary theorist Luis Leal comments, "the magical realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality or to wound it, but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things" (123). While overtly a meditation on reincarnation, the film also asks what it is to

encounter the world as a being who must sacrifice others to survive. Enchanting the senses with an evocation of the richness of life, Weerasethakul establishes a sense of wonder at the opportunity to know what it is to exist, and to observe life in all of its manifestations and cycles. The protozoa's existence is celebrated and wondered at by the camera, as are the microscopically flowerlike, golden creatures quivering within it. This celebration of the mundane is adamantly magical realist in nature as, according to David Danow in *The Spirit of Carnival,* **"**magical realism manages to present a view of life that exudes a sense of energy and vitality in a world that promises not only joy, but a fair share of misery as well" (65). Boonmee's mention of the military actions he was forced to engage in provides Weerasethakul with a means to critique them circumspectly, yet the scene analyzed above seems to provide a sort of absolution to the concerns Boonmee fields regarding karma. When told of his fears, Jen assures Boonmee with a wry, practical grin that so long as he had good intentions when forced to kill, the deaths for which he is responsible are absolved. The underwater sequence helps situate him within a certain inescapable momentum, acknowledging that cycles of life and death occur on every level of existence, and that individuals can become caught up within them in order to survive.

With dreamlike sequences such as the two just considered, Weerasethakul establishes a momentum that in time resolves itself through the use of near complete abstraction. Weerasethakul ultimately seeks to create an altered state of consciousness within his viewers, in order to provide them with access to a reality beyond that to which they may have become accustomed. The incorporation of a spiritual perspective is key to this process, as he ultimately seems interested in situating viewers in an initiatory state of engagement with the numinous, or divine. This focus becomes more apparent if a scene

cut from the final edit regarding Boonmee's death is considered. Discarded due to the possibility that it could trigger epileptic attacks, it explores the borders between the physical and spiritual.

As Huay and Jen tend Boonmee in a cave he has discovered in the sixth reel, light begins to play over the rocks surrounding them. Centering entirely upon it, the camera tracks its flashing. A deep, probing hum rises as the strobing light passes inquisitively over the stone walls. For a space of several minutes the light simply moves along the walls as the ambient sound intensifies. As a sense of stillness begins to accompany the movement of this light, the camera focuses in on an outcropping of rock rising from the floor. Lit from within, it glows with a peculiar pastel luminescence. Resting upon this bonelike outcropping, the strobing light eventually fades as viewers are left to the darkness.

Reduced to light and ambient noise against a backdrop of rock, the elements in this scene are both active and arresting. A viewer encountering them after viewing the descent Boonmee's party makes into the depths of the cave could find little in this passage to use as a reference point. The light simply stands as a singularity to instead become aware of. It appears that Boonmee's soul, freed from his body and assaying space, is provocatively other in nature, aware, and of a great, active beauty. With this sequence Weerasethakul imparts a sense of the experience Boonmee might have had on dying, as his spirit rises from his form. The strobing light, fiercely sublime in its stark, unremitting flashing, signifies the sense of shock and wonder that perhaps accompanies such transitions. The sound accompanying it similarly is not musical in nature. Rather, it starkly embodies the planing sound of a searching spirit.

An immersion within the sublime field that this light and sound invoke matches well with descriptions of transcendent states put forth by religion scholar Rudolf Otto, in his work *The Idea of the Holy.* In it, he describes a "stupor" experienced "before something wholly other," occasioned by an interface with the mysterious aspect of the divine (26). He finds this "wholly other,…which is quite outside the limits of the canny, and is contrasted with it, capable of filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment" (26-27). Unable to speak or necessarily define their state, individuals accessing the realm of the wholly other find themselves positioned in the primordial and now unspeakable realm of the divine. That Boonmee has become this wholly other force is key to Weerasethakul's thematic focus, as he works throughout the film to restore a sense of the vastness and mystery of individual beings.

This death sequence conforms uniquely with Otto's sense that the experience of the transcendent inevitably invokes two sensations, which he terms "*mysterium tremendum*" and "*mysterium fascinans*" (13). Although an experience of *mysterium tremendum*, or awe and terror before the divine, might prove overwhelming, the simultaneous experience of *mysterium fascinans,* a state of wonder and bewilderment, helps ameliorate the more terrifying aspect of what Otto terms the holy. The powerful, unidentified strobing light can stun, yet in its wandering search and ultimate focus on the glowing stone, it mesmerizes and confounds. Discussing the perplexing nature of the sublimely transcendent, Otto states that "*mysterium* denotes merely that which is hidden and esoteric, that which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar. Though what is enunciated in the word is negative, what is meant is something absolutely and intensely positive" (13). The passage the light makes, with its

unnerving sound, uplifts as it overwhelms the senses. While Weerasehakul seeks throughout the film to evoke the mysterious, profound aspects of nature and life, here he points explicitly to the uncanny force and presence intrinsic to individual beings.

Although, again, this scene could not ultimately be included in the film due to health concerns, this encounter with Boonmee's spirit seems the culmination of the habitual shifts the film makes between objective reality and more ambiguous, surreal states. In his work *Transcendental Style in Film*, Paul Schrader discusses the manner in which the transcendent can be portrayed cinematically. He finds that it often follows a specific protocol, due to the difficulty inherent in expressing the sublime, ineffable aspects of being. [10] According to him, a precise balance evolves throughout films focused on the transcendent, based on the use of what he terms abundant and sparse means. Claiming that within sacred art, "abundant means sustain the viewer's…physical existence…[and] maintain his interest," Schrader finds that they "are sensual, emotional, humanistic…They are characterized by soft lines [and] realistic portraiture" (155). In comparison, "sparse means are cold, formalistic, hieratic. They are characterized by abstraction" (155). Identifiying a specific pattern that evolves in such films, he finds that full, abundant imagery and events play off of increasingly sparse scenes until a more abstracted, spare atmosphere develops, and ultimately is abandoned itself.

[10] Schrader acknowledges the "understandable reluctance of aestheticians and serious film critics to employ the concept of transcendence," as well as the impossibility of expressing the literal nature of a transcendent force or experience (5). In *The Mystical Languages of Unsaying,* religion scholar Michael Sells discusses the ironic fact that while "the transcendent must be beyond names, ineffable," to even "claim that the transcendent is beyond names…I must give it a name" (2). While acknowledging the difficulty inherent in depicting the transcendent, Schrader nonetheless assigns such attempts worth. Frankly addressing the desire individuals experience for a sense of wonder in their lives, he claims that a sublimely spiritual style "seeks to maximize the mystery of existence; it eschews all conventional interpretations of reality: realism, naturalism, psychologism, romanticism,…and…rationalism…These conventional interpretations of reality are…constructs devised by man to dilute or explain away the transcendental" (10-11).

Asserting that "a good work can be of 'oversparse' means, if it fails to sustain life until the process of spiritual purification occurs," Schrader addresses what is entailed by a successful deployment of sparse and abundant means (166). The progression Weerasethakul effects throughout the film, alternating between objective, sunlit scenes and more mysterious nocturnal sequences, maintains a successful balance of these forces. The incorporation of the mythos of his people is also central to his ability to gradually imbue the film with a transcendent, spiritual aspect; the persistent shifts in focus he makes between the doings of otherworldly beings and mortals contributes to the building of this momentum. Otto himself describes "magic, fairy tale and myth…as forming the vestibule of religion" (19). Those aspects of the jungle that Weerasethakul chooses to highlight evoke a terrain in which the numinous aspects of the film can play out. While he foregrounds the rich life of the jungle to bring viewers steadily and insistently into the natural world, nature itself is cast as a realm unsettling in its beauty. The sense of the transcendent that wakes over the course of the film does not thus derive simply from the mythic, spiritual aspects of the work, but from a physical terrain provocative in its sometimes unnerving beauty.

While Weerasethakul makes the necessary shifts, establishing a momentum capable of carrying viewers into a dreamlike, transcendent state, the fourth reel sees a unique deployment of sparse means when viewed in relation to *Uncle Boonmee's* ultimate trajectory. This reel disengages the viewer from the overt timeline governing the film, regarding Boonmee's movement towards death, into an underlying timeline focused on the incarnations he has experienced. In this reel, a princess carried through a moonlit jungle hides within the concealing veils of her palanquin. Eventually sobbing beside a

waterfall, the scarred woman enters into a pact with a devoted catfish swimming in the pool before her, to regain her beauty. Giving herself to it in the water, she pulses in time to its thrusts in a willful, pained catharsis. Hearkening back to an older style of television, this reel recalls the fantastic costume dramas Weerasethakul viewed as a child, in which magical creatures and figures of royalty enacted fairy tales. While the woman's vain concern over the loss of her beauty echo anxieties voiced by the aging Boonmee, the disengagement Weerasethakul effects from the film's main storyline might seem anomalous. However, this scene also sees the eventual immersion of the viewer within the moonlit water, as the camera rests for several minutes within its phosphorescent wash. In the agitated waves churning beneath the princess and catfish, Weerasethakul abstracts overt phenomena to the point that viewers can be impulsed into a trancelike state of awareness. As Bresson observes, a "film's beauty will not be in the images…but in the ineffable that they will disengage" (119). Removed from the main storyline, the viewer can experience a sense of entranced wonder within the waters that the princess resourcefully attempts renewal in.

As Schrader states, "the abundant means must serve to sustain the sparse means, the sparse means must yield to a spiritual awareness" (155). Ultimately, the physical must be abandoned within this formula, as the viewer is carried into a state of direct engagement with a more numinous plane of reality. Returned to the fifth reel following this immersion in an enveloping, fantastic terrain, the viewer is set to move into a more abstracted space. Aware that he will soon die, Boonmee ventures in this reel into the jungle with his bemused, uncertain family. Monkey spirits trace the party's passage above in the trees, swinging eerily along the path Boonmee discovers. Leading the party,

he seems essentially alone. Diffuse moonlight spills along the path he intuitively discerns, as the camera tracks his ragged breathing. A monkey spirit appears again after Boonmee has passed with his family through a thin, jagged aperture into the cave. As red eyes stare provocatively from a passage behind him, Boonmee muses that the cave is "like a womb" in which he was born, "in a life (he) can't recall" (*Uncle Boonmee*). The monkey spirit moves away within the darkness, as Boonmee states that "I don't know if I was human or animal, a woman or a man" (*Uncle Boonmee*). Pointing to the transmigration of souls, he acknowledges that he has existed in other lifetimes, but that he could have known an infinity of forms and natures in them; he feels gravely decentered acknowledging that he is eternal, yet always changing.[11] Boonmee's words attest to the simultaneous awe and uncertainty he feels at his own nature, and uncertain trajectory beyond this life. In this way Weerasethakul considers what it is to be physical yet irrevocably of the spirit, and the impact an understanding of this can have on one's awareness.

The circuits made by the monkey spirits, fleetly tracing Boonmee's final journey above him in the trees, and then staring probingly from the inner recesses of the cave, provoke viewers to enter more deeply into the phenomena in which they have become ensnared. As the strobing light makes its circuit, then comes to hover and eventually abandon space for darkness, viewers move into a space lacking substance, in a direct interface with the spiritual forces Weerasethakul evokes. Regarding the conditions established at the end of films possessing a transcendental style, Schrader observes that "stasis is the final example of sparse means. The image simply stops,…[as] the most eloquent statements can only lead to silence" (161, 8). Once this occurs, "the viewer

[11] Regarding this, Weerasethakul asserts that "I believe in the transmigration of souls between humans, plants, animals, and ghosts. Uncle Boonmee's story shows the relationship between man and animal and at the same time destroys the line dividing them" (*Director's Statement*).

keeps going, moving deeper…into the image. This is the "miracle" of sacred art. If it occurs, the viewer has moved past the point where any temporal means, abundant or sparse, are of any avail. He has moved beyond the province of art" (161). Theoretically, a viewer would sit with this experience for a time, enveloped in a sense of stillness.

However, the film does not end here. It perhaps mourns the passing of Boonmee and the lifestyle he represents in a closing sequence devoted to the careful negotiation of modernity. Jen and Tong wake the morning after his death within a sunlit chasm, in a space that feels renewed. Yet the sixth reel finds the rural terrain abandoned, as the film adopts an increasingly ambiguous momentum. Jen and Tong attend Boonmee's funeral in a ceremony both tawdry and charming in its excessive lighting displays and awkwardly public nature. Eventually counting out the contributions left by funeral goers, Jen and her daughter rest in a sterile, cold hotel room. The space itself seems a vacuum, in its plain detailing and conventional fixtures. However, Tong seeks it out with great need. Forced to enter a monastery for a period of time, he struggles with the discomfort of his cell and the essential effacement of identity he experiences as a monk. As he lies on his pallet in a darkened chamber, cloaked in mosquito netting, a hallucinatory, claustrophobic atmosphere develops. Windows letting onto the night sky jut at disorienting angles, as he struggles simply to rest. Slipping ultimately into the hotel room, he finds his identity restored within the teasing company of family, but also in the simple ability he has to shower and don his own clothing.

Constantly provoked by a modern terrain surreal in the shocks and disarming comforts it provides, in this final sequence Tong insists on his need to maintain a sense of his own identity. Standing to leave the hotel room with Jen in order to find dinner, he

discovers that an aspect of his being still sits on the bed, watching television. Jen's spirit too has separated from her body, and inches away from it across the coverlet. As they stare in concern and awe at their hypnotized doubles, images of deploying troops and rapidly churned out factory items greet them in a frantic montage. The camera moves attentively to the concerned expressions drifting over their doubles' faces, which seem drained of an essential vitality, in their shock at the soldiers' rigid, dynamic marching and the hypnotic, almost predatory display of products. After exiting the room, stunned, Tong and Jen settle warily in a vivid, teasingly kitsch karaoke bar.

In a film focused around the idea that beings move cyclically within a matrix, exploring the boundaries of the physical and more numinous planes, this stark representation of dissociation stands out. The situation Tong and Jen face compares uniquely to the final passage Boonmee makes in his abandonment of form. The sense of shock and power he emanates upon transforming parallels the tenuous strength Jen and Tong must summon to cope with the impact had by this display of public media. With this scene Weerasethakul nimbly confronts the sense of shock and paralysis that can overtake individuals exposed to the willful force and posturing of regimes that prefer propaganda to diplomacy. He assesses the peculiar nature of modern commerce, in its giddy yet aggressive celebration of its wares. He asks as well after the narrative presented by contemporary societies, finding that individuals sacrifice aspects of their being when confronted with the overweening discourse of modernity.

In the final edit, a progression of still shots with a voiceover by Boonmee takes the place of the scene in which he moves into a realm of pure spirit. Both sequences demand that an end be made to the traditional structure of the narrative; the deleted scene

with its abstracted play of light and sound, and the still shots, with their slow pacing and voiceover, defamiliarize the narrative structure immediately. Weerasethakul has acknowledged in several interviews that this sequence of still shots is in part an homage to Marker's *La Jetée,* and that the dream Boonmee describes as the shots play was in fact his own. In this series of color photos, young men in combat fatigues stay tightly knotted together as they rest, pursue individuals fleeing into a forest, and patrol their territory. While one soldier leads a monkey spirit by a rope through a field of dried grass, another shot shows the men posing for a group shot with the smiling being. As this incongruous set of images slowly plays, Boonmee recounts a dream in which he visited the future in a time machine, and there encountered a society administered by a regime able to "make anybody disappear" (*Uncle Boonmee*). Capable of recognizing visitors from the past, the regime disposes of them upon extracting memories of their prior experiences. This regime's ability to extract the narratives that encompass an individual's existence seems to provide it with an inherent form of control over them, eliminating their essence by isolating it beyond them. The fact that the process by which the regime accomplishes this resembles the screening of a film or television drama resonates uncannily with the hotel room sequence closing *Uncle Boonmee.* Observing the process by which their society is being commandeered and threatened, Jen and Tong find themselves polarized, their essence leached away, painfully mesmerized and rendered immobile.

In a film focused on the need to resurrect a sense of personal identity, through an immersion within a restorative and culturally resonant landscape, Weerasethakul perhaps provokes viewers to consider how they will henceforth articulate their own identities. Ending the film with a striking instance of dissociation and the subsequent production of

dual timelines, Weerasethakul allows his viewers to decide whether to conceive of the film's end as either positive or negative. The hotel room and karaoke bar can appear oppressively sterile and nonsensical, respectively, in comparison to the landscape celebrated in prior reels. The ominous presence of the military and the reality-skewing panoply of commercial items can similarly overwhelm. Yet the landscape of modernity succors, simultaneously. The strict, neutral lines of the hotel shower provide Tong with an empty space in which he can collect and begin to recognize himself, following his seclusion within the monastery. Stating that "you don't know if the reality is in the karaoke bar or in the hotel room," Weerasethakul asserts that he wants viewers to determine for themselves whether the timeline along which the entire film runs is based in the reality depicted in the karaoke bar or before the television (Peranson). The glowing blues and greens of the karaoke bar, with its brightly painted walls and cheap décor, create a vibrant, winsome space in which he and Jen can assess how they will proceed, following their jarring transition from Boonmee's farm to the city.

Having resolutely affirmed the surreal, enigmatic nature of the traditional Thai cosmology, building to a stark observation of Boonmee's transition into spirit form, Weerasethakul presents the modern landscape as unremittingly surreal as well. He closes as Jen and Tong consider taking an opportunity to express themselves by singing in the karaoke bar. Each goads the other teasingly with their eyes, yet both ultimately choose not to sing. Jen studies Tong thoughtfully however, aware that he has chosen to define his own needs and act upon them in increasingly unnerving surroundings. This scene provides a unique closure to this study's focus on the development of individual identity and expressive power in systems eager to deny their place. It celebrates the seemingly

casual manner in which people can begin to claim their own experience of self and world, however haunted they simultaneously are by humanity's darker potentials. Huay claims that she was heartened when visiting a local temple as a spirit, in the years following her death. While comforted by the gifts Jen left there for her, she found herself restored when family members visited the temple grounds and she "heard familiar voices" (*Uncle Boonmee*). The voices of her family provided her with some sense of community, yet they also helped remind her that she could speak as well, emerging cathartically from a solitary, hidden place. The bright, vigorous song that spirals out of the karaoke bar as the film closes seems somewhat in keeping with the voices that unwittingly rejoin Huay to consider her resources. This untranslated song, voiced by its original singer, responds buoyantly to the disabling images put forth by the news media. In its stylized pop cadences it maintains a plaintive yet jaunty air, and is aptly matched to the wily, reflective expressions cycling over the faces of Jen and Tong.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Erice, Marker and Weerasethakul each establish a unique atmosphere of stillness within their films. From this space they track the momentum that can evolve as individuals move from a state of quiescence or genuine stagnancy into an increasingly profound encounter with the world. Invoking a brand of stillness eventually taut in its latent potential, each director situates these characters at the border of action, poised to emerge.

The sense of shock and privation that leads to Ana's flight in *The Spirit of the Beehive* finds its resolution in the clear vision she gains of her own alterity. Driven from the static yet roiling space of her home, Ana finds herself beset by a need to commune with that which is compellingly other. Acknowledging that she must plumb the nature of her own being as she simultaneously makes sense of the provocative forces stirring beyond herself, in Spanish society and the greater world, she prepares to engage with life with a grim yet resolute air.

Upon their return to the city, Tong and Jen similarly situate themselves in opposition to the sense of warped stasis that chaotic, numbing elements of modern Thai society easily trigger. Finding that their spirits refuse to submit to the disorienting impact of these forces, they discover that they have in fact exercised a unique initiative in order to escape, by moving into a parallel timeline. Seeking a sense of stability following this unexpected experience of dissociation, they ironically find it within the stimulation that

the lively, garish terrain of the city provides. The example set by Boonmee, who surrenders to the movement in which he is irrevocably engaged, perhaps inspires their intuitive response to the forces accosting their awareness. An emphasis on the potentially alienating, solitary nature of transformation emerges in the film as Boonmee consciously prepares to die, yet he ultimately moves into and beyond the internal void that his death summons. *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* closes as Jen and Tong consider what kinds of transformation they too have opened themselves to, in their instinctive response to the hypnotically dulling narrative with which their society has become engaged. Having realized that essential elements of their beings could be sacrificed, rendered immobile by the disabling yet charismatic shock of modernity, they take on wary, resourceful stances as they begin evaluating the space into which they have emerged.

The unnamed prisoner of *La Jetée* proves less able to salvage any future for himself, out of the confused mixture of realities he passes through. Although this film recognizes and elevates the experience of emotional rapport, its exploration of the power of love and subjectivity rely on its focus on the strength of memory. Marker provides a final, devastating warning about the potential that totalitarian regimes have to dominate all areas of life, in his refusal to provide a positive resolution to the prisoner's efforts to regain his past. In doing so, however, Marker pushes viewers to ask what drives might compel the prisoner to instead chart a different trajectory, one in which he might survive. Presenting an individual who craves the comfort and familiarity of a remembered space, Marker demonstrates that such a terrain can be invaded.

While the prisoner clearly returns to the time of his youth to remain with the woman he has grown to love, his intense nostalgia and yearning for the structure this historic environment provides simultaneously drives his return. After submitting to the desolation and manipulations of the postwar world, he logically seeks the comforts that love and a familiar space can proffer, for the few years that remain before the war. The abstract, elusively refined society of the future Earth that he locates perhaps seems barren in its own right. To a man who has already been rendered alien, enduring the isolation of imprisonment, the somewhat intangible nature of the Earth's future citizens perhaps alarms. The prisoner thus chooses a fleeting comfort over the challenges that his inclusion in this future society would produce. Unlike Boonmee, who places himself in alignment with a trajectory that he cannnot circumvent, and thus transforms in accordance with it, the exhausted prisoner submits to the demands of memory and nostalgia, potentially closing off his future as much as do the agent of the postwar regime.

These three films focus on the shifts that take place within individuals as the comforts and familiar signposts of their daily existence are stripped away, or take on an oppressive and even fantastic aspect. They point to the need to adopt a certain resiliency in frequently unyielding environments, and to transform as necessary to survive, however much such efforts risk some element of self or other. While *Uncle Boonmee* celebrates the bonds that are preserved in memory, and that maintain coherent, lasting power after death, Weerasethakul insists that individuals trust that they can withstand the transformations they must necessarily undergo as they are confronted by dissociative, surreal forces. Like Ana, standing in moonlight at the close of *The Spirit of the Beehive*,

in a atmosphere of stillness that nonetheless quivers with implicit energy, these films point to the ability individuals have to intuitively claim a space for the self within environments that seem to offer little purchase.

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