

DIVISION

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REVIEW

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The Possibility of Contradiction J. Todd Dean

In 1938, Freud penned some notes that were published posthumously as "Findings, Ideas, Problems" (1953/1964). In the first, dated June 16, he writes: "It is interesting that in connection with early experiences, as contrasted with later experiences, all the various reactions to them survive, of course including contradictory ones."

All the entries in these notes are exactly such conundrums, each making the argument for a rational, mature psyche more problematic, until the end, on August 22nd: "Space may be the projection of the extension of the psychological apparatus. No other derivation is probable. Instead of Kant's *a priori* determinants of our psychical

apparatus. Psyche is extended; knows nothing about it."

What is striking about these notes is not only their content, but their date of composition: the first was written ten days after Freud's arrival at Victoria Station in his flight from the Nazis (Gay, 1988, p.629). The entire text was finished in a few months, and

Bicycle; besides, like Fellini's mechanical doll, was it not an inanimate object? Precisely because that scene wasn't aimed at moving me to pity, the crashed object "pricked" me.

Pasolini also imposes something quite outrageous on us: moving us to pity for two pieces of wood thrown onto a rubbish dump.

One might say, however, that Pasolini intended to move us, while *punctum* is a detail that eludes the author's control. It is true, this short film moved me just as Barthes' book on photography had—because both make us confess the *punctum*, and remind us that even in art, something real troubles us. And that every work of art includes a sort of ethics, albeit in a most primitive form.

Behind the cultivated parable, full of philosophical and historical allusions, in this film Pasolini reminds us of an ethics that hurts, that does not rest on a wisely distributed compassion toward our fellow men, but on a pity for the real—on an obtuse respect for what exists.

But this strange mad pity for things betrays the foundation underlying any ethics. Our post-Kantian ethics has been reduced to a contractual acknowledgement of the rights of our fellow creatures, to a neutral application to the Human Being of universal anonymous precepts. We have lost the naïve matrix of concrete goodness: pity for existence and the flesh. Yet, when we truly love, we don't love a set of qualities, what a person *represents*:

the being we love only represents her- or himself, in her or his nonsensical uniqueness. The loved one is a *punctum* in the coherent judicious fabric of moral discourse; but without this stain there would be no discourse, and no hope of being "decent," even if not absolutely good. My childish pity for that bicycle also means that what is dear to us in human beings too is their being-there.

Pasolini's interpretation of Othello and Iago's story therefore touches us with its grace. It makes us finally see things, even if only for a moment, with the freshness and the sense of wonder they deserve, beyond the tunnel of interpretations. The heart-rending marvelous beauty of beings. ■

Ev'ry Time We Wait: Victor Erice's *Alumbramiento* Bettina Mathes

In the cinema people learn what they might have been and discover what belongs to them apart from their single lives.
(Berger, 1991)

Every time we wait ... we put ourselves at risk. Why? Because a lot can go wrong. If I wait too long or not long enough, I'll miss out. Unable to seize the right moment, I wait and I wait and I wait ... impatiently or in patience, helpless, with nothing but my breath to keep me going; waiting for someone to put an end to my waiting; waiting for satisfaction to arrive; waiting for satisfaction to pass me by. Because nothing is happening, anything is possible. Those are no small risks. But the greatest danger lies in experiencing myself as a desiring self: wanting, greedy, exposed, subject to the fear that sets in when who I might become attacks the very core of my being. Waiting takes us back to our earliest beginnings when we waited (needed to wait) ... to be held, to be loved, and to be found. And when someone kindly kept the rendezvous, waited for you so that you could find them. We tend to forget that it is through waiting and being waited for that we come to know what hope is. (Many of us also come to know what dread is.) Waiting is, perhaps, our first experience of time, and of desire.

Every time I write (and read) I am forced to think about waiting. To write (and, though to a lesser degree, to read) is to be hyper-aware of time. Every comma, colon, slash, and dash, every hyphen, bracket, and apostrophe, every full stop, question mark, and every exclamation point denotes a kind of hesitation: long or short, fearful or relaxed, demanding or understanding, precise or ambiguous. But always significant. Punctuation is breathing in language, waiting with words—deliberate, abstract.

Every time I go the cinema, I wait, but differently. Because the cinema has fewer tools to convey hesitation, it brings us closer to the *experience* of waiting. Expectant, still, suspended between here and elsewhere, unable to halt or alter the stream of images moving on their own time ... I give myself over, I lie in wait. When used as an art form, film conveys what lies beyond the modern, action-driven fixation on beginnings and endings, cause and effect. Every film makes us aware of time (entering the theatre, I make a time commitment); few films, however, encourage waiting. Victor Erice's *Alumbramiento* is such a film.

One of Spain's most revered filmmakers, Erice certainly knows how to take his time. Only three features in four decades: *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973), *El Sur* (1983), and *The Quince Tree Sun* (1992), all of them masterpieces, all of them addressing the condition of time. *Alumbramiento* is no exception. Part of the compilation feature film *Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet*, this ten-minute film may be described as a visual contemplation of the enigma of time. On second glance, the film explores something much more delicious—the life-giving capacity of patience. That's why for me *Alumbramiento* (so far Erice's shortest film, released in 2002) occupies a special place: a black-and-white film shot in color—and the longest ten minutes I've ever spent.

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Erice's film begins where everything begins: in the dark. A black screen, still, not a sound. White letters, forming the word A-L-U-M-B-R-A-M-I-E-N-T-O (*Lifeline* in the English version). And then the cry of a newborn cutting through the dark. Perhaps his first sound ever. *Un alumbramiento*: a lament, an embrace, an illumination, a birth. In the Spanish language to give birth is to give to

the light, *dar a luz*. This giving-to-the-light is what mothers and the cinema have in common, *alumbramiento*. But darkness comes first. And with it, time unmeasured, undivided, unaccounted for. Once we're born ... waiting sets in.

From the dark the film moves us into a light-filled bedroom. Let's imagine a hot day in August—early afternoon, perhaps. A mother and her baby, sleeping. We don't need words to understand that this bedroom contains the world in it. And for the newborn sleeping in his cradle, lovingly dressed in layers of immaculate white linen, that world is his mother; she, too, dressed in white, she, too, engulfed by sleep in her bed next to her infant's crib. Do they dream? Do they know of each other? Does it matter?

As the film cuts from one to the other, their movements are in sync, both of them sleeping restlessly, as though unconsciously aware of some impending danger, and we realise that mother and baby are living in the same time-space. A time-space I can observe, contemplate, but not share in, and, confined as I am to my position in front of the screen, certainly not interfere with. Mother and baby are oblivious to my presence. And because I see what they do not, cannot see: a heart-shaped stain of blood seeping through the baby's garment, right on his belly, I understand that I am not just watching, I am forced into waiting. In a black-and-white film blood is black, but I see red. Will someone please tend to the baby!

Time, Tiempo, Zeit: unavoidable like money, we count it, measure it, divide it, stretch it, retard it, save it, freeze it. And often it weighs on us. But time is older than money. The time inscribed in my body and my psyche as I grow, mature, age, and die. The time of sleep and of dreams. *Sueño*. In some languages

to sleep is to dream. The time of pain and of suffering. The time of those who came before me. The time of a song, and of the softly spoken word. The time of a mother and her baby, united in the rhythm of their breathing, their movements, and their glances, their inflections and intonations . . . immortal and beyond death, like the sculpture of the Virgin and her baby boy on the dresser in their bedroom. Does father have his own time?—With this question the film takes me out of the bedroom, and into the village. And I discover, with some relief, that I am not the only one waiting (though I maybe the only one waiting in agony).

If the baby's cry marks the beginning of the film (and on a metaphorical level, the beginning of time), the distant cry of the rooster, following that of the infant, marks the beginning of a new day. Erice uses sound to orient us in time and space. We are in the Asturian countryside, where the rhythm of life is slow,

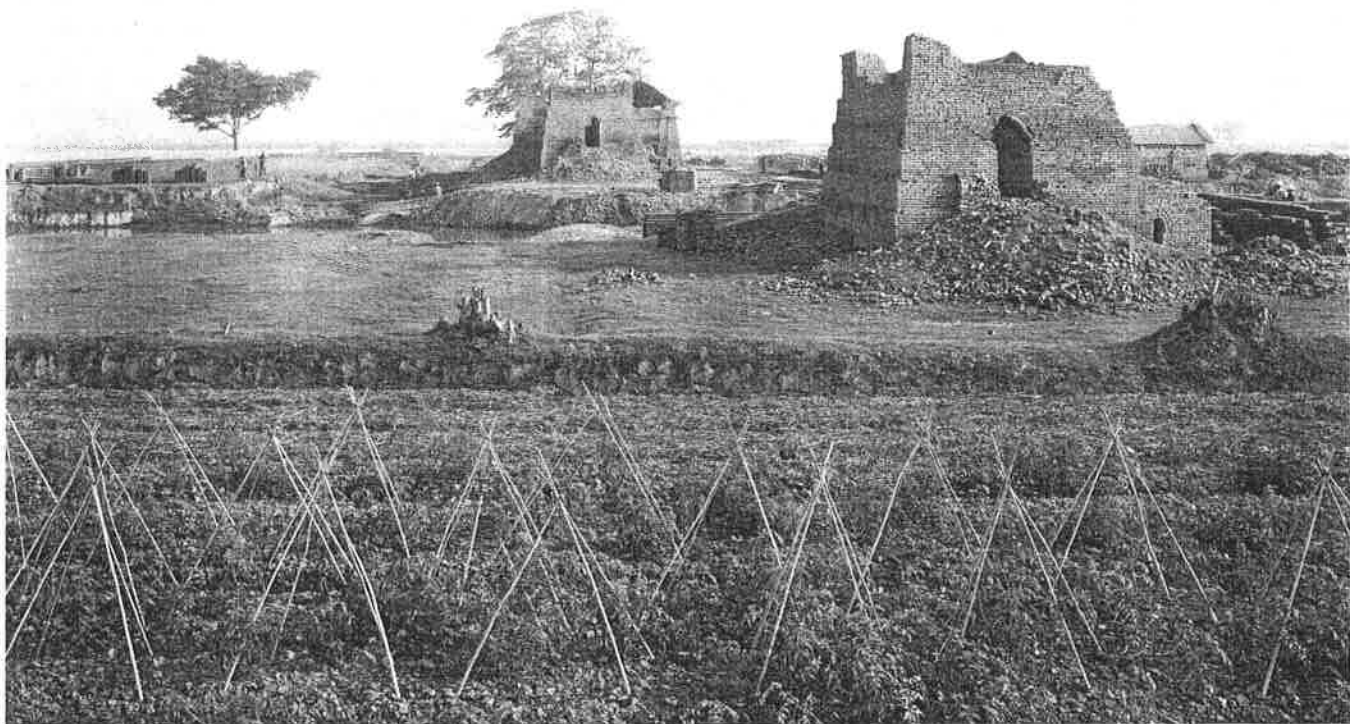
the presence of someone, he writes, "is one of the most important signs of maturity in emotional development" (p.29). And this maturity, Erice reveals to us, depends on the capacity to make time: personal time: time that stays close to the body and the senses, time that is not afraid of life and of death, time that makes space for nostalgia.

A boy all by himself in a barn amongst apples, he is drawing a watch on his arm, enticed by its imaginary ticking (the soundtrack offers the hollow tick-tock of a grandfather clock). Two men—one old, the other one young—holding siesta in a living room whose walls are covered with photographs from a time gone by; frozen time. (The film briefly dissolves to a clock, it is twenty minutes to four.) The reassuring sound of a sewing machine, a woman stitching the baby's name onto a tiny bodysuit: *Luisin*, little Luis. The up-and-down movement of the needle dissolves into the ever-expanding blood stain on the baby's

posed from the blue and golden tranquility of Delft to the black-and-white simplicity of this village in Asturias. Erice's film has the feel of a stretched-out painting: space moving through the flat lands of time. In a painting time is encapsulated in layers of paint, in Erice's film the layers have been separated and spread into a series of images.

Because Erice works with lay actors and minimal directions, the film's intimacy and emotional immediacy lies in the spectator. The actors explain nothing, and the camera does not analyze. Psychology is not the aim. We cannot know what each character thinks or feels; we sit with them as they wait; we watch them making time for themselves, but beyond that . . . ? Because they don't perform for a spectator, it would be inaccurate to say that the villagers play themselves. They are—making time, each in their own way.

A man in a field of tall grass, dressed in the loose white shirt of a peasant, hammering



But That, 1996

repetitive, driven by ritual, and by the need for food, shelter, and play. Where time is less unified, less one-directional than in the city; where time is not money, where time and privacy are friends, not enemies. No need to sync calendars, or cell phones. As Erice takes me on a tour of the tiny village, a sentence from Winnicott's paper *The Capacity to Be Alone* (1958) comes to mind. To be alone in

belly. I am nervous. When will they notice? Is nobody paying attention? "Be patient," Erice whispers in my ear as the camera returns to the villagers in their solitude. Here is an old woman in her kitchen slowly kneading dough for the traditional *torta*: chapped hands tender and firm as they mix water with flour. In her dedication to the present moment (there is no point in trying to make the dough rise faster) she reminds me of Vermeer's milkmaid trans-

at the edge of a scythe blade: ping ping ping, that's his time signature. A woman hanging laundry on a rope to dry. Two peasants, one behind the other, rhythmically scything tall grass; if one of them loses the rhythm, the other one will get hurt. A young, one-legged soldier braiding a piece of string fastened to the toe of his remaining foot—left, right, left, right. A pair of dangling feet, small feet (don't let this be suicide), they belong to a little girl

on her swing, back and forth and back and forth, deep in thought. A sleeping dog, a bird picking berries, a serpent slithering among fallen apples in the grass, seizing the moment? Snakes are that way, aren't they? Suddenly we are in biblical times. But not for long. Watch the children in an old American car with a Cuban license plate pretending to speed on an imaginary highway: "faster, go faster!" Ah! The delights of the imagination! And then there are the dedicated brush strokes of two women shining shoes, lots of shoes, all of them in pairs. They don't talk; they tend to something that comes before language: *there-ness*, and the need for an other to feel real—I could go on but it is not my intention to exhaust the film. Because what Erice is after are the very personal measures and signatures of time. In the countryside many of these measures are rooted in the body, which doesn't follow the anonymous regime of the clock. The time it takes for the sourdough to rise, the blade to be peened, or the grass to be cut; the flexible time of the siesta (longer in the summer, shorter in the winter) that so markedly contrasts with the frozen time of the photographs in the living room; the comforting speed of the sewing machine; the soundscape created by the leaking faucet dripping into a sink, and the virtual speed of the car the children are so excited about and, of course, the film itself manipulating time through cuts and dissolves. In Erice's panorama of the village nobody speaks, nobody makes conversation, but everybody and everything makes and shapes time—while I wait.

Rarely do we get to witness other people's solitude (their way of making time) without intruding or interrupting. Something so special (and so necessary) that I find myself watching the film over and over again. What we cannot have in real life, we can find in a movie. And then there is little Luisin quietly bleeding in his cradle. *What kind of mother is this, who sleeps while her baby's life is in danger?* The juxtaposition of the villagers giving themselves over to solitude with the infant bleeding to death—alone, unnoticed—is unnerving and convincing at the same time. This is not neglect. This is not cruelty or sadism. *Alumbramiento* is not a horror movie. There is something about the way in which the film engages the spectator. But no, *engage* is not the right word. There is something about the way in which the film *uses* me as a presence. As if, somehow, I was a necessary link, a certain kind of bridge between the villagers absorbed in their own internal scenarios, waiting, and the newborn fighting for his life. As long as someone keeps watching, the film seems to say, everything will hold together. As if Luisin was spread out among the villagers and me, each of us holding a piece of him, somehow. But how? Luckily, a black cat appears, peeps into the cradle, her gaze mirroring mine. Does she see what I see? It is at this

point that the baby wakes up and cries. Loud and clear! "The baby, he is dying," a woman's voice sounds through the village. In an instant, the villagers act like one body, all its members rushing to the bedroom where the midwife stops the bleeding and reties the umbilical cord. The camera lovingly lingers on the villagers' faces: young faces, old faces; tired faces, anxious faces; all of them attentive to the little creature struggling to stay alive. And suddenly I know what everybody—each in their own way—had been waiting for: a cry for help, a sign from the baby demanding their attention and their care. All is well now. As the midwife hands him over to his mother and father, Luisin's smile fills up the screen: an expression of sheer joy, joy of life. His cry for help was heard. But not only that: the whole village had waited for him to summon them to his rescue. What a magnificent triumph! Life is indeed worth living.

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I too am changed, euphoric almost. Erice's film has given me a new and better understanding of Donald Winnicott's theories about earliest infancy, and the baby's struggles to separate from mother. In "The Parent-Infant Relationship," Winnicott writes:

The mother seems to know that the infant has a new capacity, that of giving a signal so that she can be guided towards meeting the infant's needs. It could be said that if now she knows too well what the infant needs, this is magic and forms no basis for an object relationship. . . . In other words, at the end of merging. . . . an important feature is that the infant has to give a signal. (1960, p.247)

But the real revelation came when I finally felt the truth in one of Winnicott's most enigmatic descriptions about the baby's experience of time. This passage is from his paper "Primitive Emotional Development":

There are long stretches of time in a normal infant's life in which a baby does not mind whether he is in many bits or in one whole being, or whether he lives in his mother's face or in his own body, provided that from time to time he comes together and feels something. (1945, p.140)

Let's be sure what Winnicott is saying: "The baby does not mind whether he is in many bits or in one whole being." Really? I have wrestled with this sentence for years. But now, in just ten minutes (the longest ten minutes I can remember) I suddenly know (and feel) what Winnicott means. In only ten minutes Luisin was not just born twice, he was "reassembled" into life by those who were able to wait for him to give the signal indicating that he was ready to be brought

back, this time on his terms. As the villagers go back to their work (and their solitude), as we listen to the mother's voice tenderly singing a lullaby for her son, I imagine Luisin once again spreading himself out among those around him, for a time.

Whether Victor Erice knew of Winnicott's theories about child development when he made *Alumbramiento* is not important. I am not concerned here with cause and effect. What is important is that Erice's film gives lived experience to what seems like a psychoanalyst's quasi-mystical speculation. The film makes Winnicott's theories relevant and true for everybody who has eyes to see, a body to feel, and the capacity to wait.

I want to introduce one more thought, a thought without which my discussion of time in relation to Erice's film (his oeuvre, really) might seem banal or irresponsible. Though timeless and metaphorical, almost preverbal in its sparse use of language, *Alumbramiento* is not oblivious to historical reality. A page from the newspaper *La Nueva España*, spread on the kitchen table, orients us in history: June 6, 1940. "La Cruz Gamada en el Puente de Handaya" (The swastika at the bridge of Handaya). The headline announces the German army's crossing of the French-Basque border in an attempt to force Franco into an alliance with Hitler. A photograph shows three young men in Nazi uniforms: tired, confident, forward-looking. Erice was born three weeks later, on June 30, 1940. We see the newspaper twice, once toward the beginning of the film when we enter the kitchen where the woman is making bread, and another time at the end of the film where we watch the page getting slowly soaked in water as the camera zooms in on the soldiers' faces: a visual reference to the blood seeping through the baby's garment. There are of course many possible meanings here, but one association keeps coming back: for the infant, who lacks a sense of history, time is physical, sensual, a thing more than a concept; for the adult, time is also historical, abstract, indifferent to the local texture of an individual's life. To hold those two forces together and apart, to keep the channel between inner and outer reality protected from flooding, to believe in the continuity of life in the face of ruptures—that is the lifelong task. And every time we wait, we are reminded of this task, for better or for worse.

To Ellen Gussaroff.

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