

**No way home:  
Silence, slowness and the problem of authenticity  
in the cinema of Lisandro Alonso**  
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In his trilogy, comprising *La Libertad* (2001), *Los Muertos* (2004) and *Liverpool* (2008), Argentinean director Lisandro Alonso employs a distinctive narrative motif, namely the journey of the solitary individual through desolated landscapes in rural Argentina. From a comparative point of view, the key to understanding these introverted trajectories is to consider Alonso's construction of narrative space around the misery of a stark void, namely the absence of home. For Alonso, home is not a peaceful destination, connoting the intimacy of a family, serenity or simply a place where one is allowed to dream in peace (Bachelard 1994, 6). The absence of home becomes the blind spot of these journeys: home turns out to be a broken horizon. In this essay I will mainly focus on the film *Los Muertos* and the way in which it radicalizes narrative space through the combination of cinematic silence (absence of words and dialogues) and cinematic slowness (the use of long-takes), while formulating a void which coincides with the protagonist's homelessness. Moreover, positioning my effort within the growing field of slow cinema studies, this essay considers how Alonso's radical cinematic realism problematizes the concept of authenticity in its aesthetic and political dimensions.

### Slow cinema and filmic reality

A recent category in film studies, slow cinema illustrates the approach of different filmmakers with a minimalistic and zero-degree style. From Tsai Ming Liang to Béla Tarr, from Lisandro Alonso to Jia Zhang-ke, the aesthetics of slow cinema has been recently conceptualized in relation to three main stylistic elements which are shared by different directors in a transcultural fashion: the use of long-takes, the lack of plot, and the focus on the everyday (Flanagan 2008). Slow cinema, moreover, can be perceived as a cinematic style motivated by a fascination with the passage of time. As Ira Jaffe points out in his recent *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action*, slow movies "temporally diverge from Deleuze's time-image even as they bring it to mind. For their sparse narrative usually adhere to the present moment, to what D. N. Rodowick calls 'chronological time'" (Jaffe

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2014, 5). One could say that a cinema of slowness unravels its measured and time-consuming images through a sense of becoming, which shapes the spectator's experience and shows a renewed interest in the forms of cinematic realism, consigning "slow movies to a continuous stillness, silence, impassivity and emptiness in the present tense" (Jaffe 2014, 5). Another important element in slow movies, and especially in the work of Lisandro Alonso, is the absence of speech or minimal use of spoken language. This is a tactic frequently employed by Alonso together with, as Jaffe promptly suggests in his investigation about *Liverpool*, the elisions of the character's point of view and his external reality, which "diminish the spectator's intimacy and identification" (Jaffe 2014, 113), provoking a contemplative detachment of the viewer's filmic experience.

Lisandro Alonso's trilogy, making use of silence and observational detachment, tells the secluded stories and trajectories of silent male characters through Argentina's landscapes. In *La Libertad*, we follow Misael's daily routine from the woods to the sawmill and the gas station until his arrival in the evening at his solitary hut, which corresponds to his isolated life and separation from the community. In *Los Muertos*, we observe Argentino's release from prison and his slow immersive journey into rural Argentina via the Paraná river towards home. For Argentino, going back to his home village means reconnecting with what is left of his family after the killing of his brothers which marks the oneiric opening scene of the film. The only ones left to wait for Argentino are his grandson and little granddaughter, living alone in the middle of the rural maze, abandoned by their mother (Argentino's daughter Olga). The third film of the trilogy, *Liverpool*, depicts the sailor Farrel on a short leave from his work to pay a visit to his mother in Ushuaia (Tierra del Fuego). After the unsuccessful encounter with his sick mother and the daughter, Farrel recognizes that he no longer has a place he can call home and goes back to the ship.



Image 1: 'Nobody is waiting for Argentino'  
(Lisandro Alonso, *Los Muertos*, 2004) | © Lisandro Alonso, 4L

From the point of view of cinematic realism and the integration of fiction and documentary styles, the most interesting film of

the trilogy is arguably *Los Muertos*, whose opening is marked by an oneiric sequence which differs from the cinematic style generally employed in all three films. The opening scene of *Los Muertos* leads us into a lush forest through slow, floating and tilting camera movements, which create blurred images of the forest but which sometimes focuses on a small detail like a leaf or a tree trunk. After nearly two minutes, the camera moves down towards the ground and gives us a quick and appalling view of a half-naked dead body of a young boy lying in a small stream of water. The camera continues its slow movement as if the body was an ordinary element of the forest while the aural texture increases with a thunderous sound of birds mixed with a drone effect. A second corpse is discovered whereupon the camera is almost touched by a figure walking in the opposite direction and the image fades into bright green. This sequence is followed by a static medium shot of a man sleeping, woken up by another man while someone else off-screen is calling out a list of names: we are inside a prison. At the aural level, the transition between the lush forest and the prison cell where Argentino is still sleeping is extremely smooth; it suggests, quite strangely, a strong continuity, as if the previous images were indeed images from his oneiric activity. From this moment onwards, the viewer follows Argentino's micro-actions and daily activities inside the prison (working, sipping 'mate', having dinner on a swing), until the encounter with a prison mate implies that this is Argentino's last day in prison: his friend gives him instructions on how to get a letter to his daughter Maria and where he can find the canoe she left for him to reach her place. The next morning, after a quick haircut, Argentino is ready to leave and embarks on his journey back home. Alonso's ellipsis, which takes us from the murder scene to the prison release in a few minutes, seems to suggest the ineffectiveness of the prison as a public institution or at least a total disinterest towards its normalizing function. After his twenty-five year sentence, Argentino is released but he behaves as if he is just going through another of his daily routines. Alonso does not leave any clues regarding his intentions and leaves us wondering if there is at least someone waiting for Argentino outside. The cut between inside and outside the prison is rapid and abrupt: nobody is waiting for Argentino, as we see him sitting on the back of a police truck. From this moment on, we slowly follow Argentino's immersion into the rural landscape (a trip which takes roughly three-quarters of the film's actual duration), without knowing exactly what to expect from his journey or what he will find at his final destination.

Alonso's storytelling calls into question the relationship between reality and authenticity and the power of filmic reality to redeem it. Alonso's "deliberative realism" (Jaffe 2014, 12), permeated by the absence of speech and the use of a hybrid documentary aesthetics intensified by slowness, follows a real persona and seems to engage with the aspiration of Italian screenwriter Cesare Zavattini

of filming eighty minutes in the life of a man where nothing happens, save a series of everyday occurrences (see Bazin 1972, 67). As Bazin famously put it, commenting on Italian Neo-realism aesthetics, “the priority which they accord incident over plot has led De Sica and Zavattini to replace plot as such with a micro-action based on an infinitely divisible attention to the complexities in even the most ordinary of events” (Bazin 1972, 89-90). Alonso’s approach to film narrative is indeed formulated through the juxtaposition of one micro-action after another: his anti-heroes are immersed in an ascetic solitude wherein the absence of home is echoed by the absence of language. The micro-action approach, as Bazin suggests, disintegrates the plot, producing a reality effect through the concatenation of everyday life actions. This, of course, has fundamental implications on the ways we perceive reality on screen and the degree of authenticity we confer to a given narrative or social reality.

However, I consider authenticity here as a contentious notion in film studies. Firstly, for a film or a character to be authentic one should determine how reality has been mediated through the author’s own perspective. Secondly, the look of authenticity on screen never coincides with its rhetorical dynamics, leaving the spectator either sceptical or totally caught by the filmic reality projected.

Questions of mediation and verisimilitude have been discussed at length in film studies in relation to cinematic realism. I believe that the recent groundbreaking study by Richard Rushton, *The reality of film: Theories of filmic reality*, finally offers refreshing and innovative insights into the ability of cinema to engage with the creation, and not merely representation, of reality. In the second chapter of his investigation, titled ‘Realism, reality and authenticity’, Rushton delineates a reassessment of André Bazin’s position in the history of film theory, questioning the simplified relegation of his contributions to a *realist* ontology of cinema and its mimetic postulation. Guided by and making references to the work of Daniel Morgan, Philip Rosen, and art historian Michael Fried, Rushton reconsiders Bazin’s realism as something not based on representation and verisimilitude but centred upon the notion of authenticity: “For Bazin, the cinema has the capacity to create reality in a specific way, and that way is, I argue, one that conceives of modes of life in an ‘authentic’ manner. The kind of authenticity Bazin envisages is explicitly non-representational – it has nothing to do with reflecting, representing or capturing reality, and instead is about creating modes of life that are to be considered ‘real’” (Rushton, 2011, 10-11). Rushton claims that this ‘new’ reading of Bazin’s realism shows that “cinema does not represent reality, but cinema is, in one way or another, reality itself” (Rushton 2011, 44). For Rushton, Bazin does not trace a correspondence between perceptual reality and cinema, but formulates a notion of realism as authenticity. Following this line of reasoning, cinematic realism therefore does not deliver an objective

and ontological representation of reality based on verisimilitude but, on the contrary, “a corporeal reality that is spatially and temporally involving, one that engages the beholder as part of his or her shared world” (Rushton 2011, 76). The feeling of an authentic reality configures forms of life and actions that affect the spectators’ viewing experience and become part of their reality.

I believe that Alonso primarily embraces the aesthetics of slow cinema, merging together cinematic silence and slowness, for a radical redemption of cinematic realism offering authentic modes of life that precipitate the viewer into Argentino’s silent and marginal world. My aim in the following pages is to determine the ways in which Alonso’s realism navigates through the nuances of authenticity, creating a world deeply rooted on a social and historical reality. In this sense, one could argue that Alonso engages with an ethics of realism (Nagib 2011), which entrusts the profilmic event and the filmic medium with the task of producing and presenting reality through silence and slowness, rather than representing it. Argentino’s authentic mode of life is created and cinematically invented by Alonso through the journey towards the absence of home, Argentino’s total displacement and lack of human sociality. The question, then, is not to ask whether Argentino’s story is true because it *looks* real, but how we respond to Alonso’s cinematic realism and the fabrication of an authentic form of life, which is based on the interplay between staged reality and fiction and only apparently on a documentary verisimilitude?

### **Thresholds of sense: silence and slowness in *Los Muertos***

Argentino is indeed a man of few words. His silent posture, which originates from the brutal killing that opens the film, speaks of death. His silence is totally different from other more famous cinematic silences one can find in the history of cinema. Argentino’s silence, for example, is not defined in contrast with the continuous talking of another character in the film (like Elisabeth’s self-imposed silence in Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* in opposition to Alma, or Chief’s deaf and mute character in Milos Forman’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* in opposition to Mac). To explore how silence can redefine our experience of cinema, one should focus on the aural means by which the cinematic image is presented to the viewer and the ways in which the spectator reacts to the radical void created by a story constructed without words. Silence, emerging from the silent performance of actors, is here considered as a critical stance for inhabiting *and* disrupting the world in which we live. Jacques Ranci re, writing on B la Tarr, explains how silence, in the sound film, dismisses the language of signs, thereby establishing a new temporal order for the spectator’s perception:

silent cinema was not an art of silence. Its model was the language of signs. Silence only has tangible power in the sound film, thanks to the possibility it offers of dismissing the language of signs, of making faces speak not through expressions signifying sentiments, but through the time taken to turn around their secret. (Rancière 2013, 5)

Rancière is here clearly rephrasing Robert Bresson's famous aphorism that illustrates, in its minimalist effort, how the advent of the soundtrack literally invented cinematic silence (Bresson 1997, 48). Michel Chion notably theorised how the relativity of cinematic silence must be considered in relation to the film context, so "silence is never a neutral emptiness. It is the negative of sound we've heard beforehand or imagined; it is the product of a contrast" (Chion 1994, 57). To think silence as a negative outcome of our listening experience is, however, reductive and it does not do justice to the critical contribution of silence in narrative films. It is clear that silence indeed has a tangible power in narrative cinema but nonetheless, it is never absolute silence. Silence puts a distance on the experience of space and time because it intensifies time while expanding our acoustic familiarity with what surrounds us. Silence becomes the indispensable trait of the aural, its spine and its constitutional essence, and it is, from the very beginning, marked by the absence of words. A cinema of silence entails the presence of a silent subject whose narrative trajectory is framed by a storytelling based on an observational approach. When confronted with the presence of a silent subject on screen, the spectator is usually left to focus on other communicative means of signification. Silence is first of all a break with the linearity of the narrative, a disturbance which invites the viewer to focus or refocus on something else.

In "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema", André Bazin explains, once and for all, how the advent of the soundtrack was not the cause of a different path for the cinematic arts. Before the advent of sound film, silent film was not 'the cinema'. On the contrary, 'the real dividing line', as Bazin suggests, resides in the ways in which cinema, as the modern machine of image-construction, enables the composition of narrative through two main approaches: expressionism and realism. Bazin continues his analysis while discussing the cinematic style of Robert Bresson:

The language of film, like the language of Aesop, is ambiguous and in spite of appearances to the contrary, the history of cinema before and after 1928 is an unbroken continuity. It is the story of the relations between expressionism and realism. Sound was to destroy expressionism for a while before adopting it in its turn. On the other hand, it became an immediate part of the continued development of realism. (Bazin 1967, 139)

The important relation between cinematic realism and synchronized sound points towards the essential role that silence plays, as a narrative cinematic expression, within the evolution of realism

as a contested site of modern representation. Historians like Rick Altman have pointed out how silent cinema was never completely silent because music and sound accompaniment always had an indisputable role in early film exhibitions (Altman 2007, 193). Altman argues, however, that the nickelodeons, the first prototypes of indoor film exhibition in the U.S., handled music as a separate attraction, thus reinforcing the idea that in the early cinema period, films were projected in complete silence (Altman 2007, 197). My initial concern here is, however, slightly different. It is not, I contend, the technological innovation of synchronized sound that transformed the development of realism. Silence as a narrative trope becomes a subversive element in sound film and narrative cinema because it intensifies visuality while at the same time defying language as a tool of communication.

There is a paradigmatic figure in the early sound film that perfectly symbolizes Bazin's notion of unbroken continuity between silent and sound film: the American comedian and film star Harpo Marx. Probably one of the most popular actors in the history of cinema and television whose silent performance is employed in a very disruptive and ironic way, Harpo Marx, the best silent comedian of all time, was hastily dubbed by Sigfried Kracauer as 'the residue of the past' (Kracauer 1960; 108). The Marx Brothers (Groucho, Harpo, and Chico as the core acting ensemble) do not need any introduction here. Within the dynamics of their comedy sketches, Harpo's silence emerges as a pure movement of narration: the absence of words and the refusal to language points to the mimic and gestural effects of his actions. As Charlene Fix brilliantly explains:

Harpo's silence offers a critique of the limits of language and a protest against powerful people who sometimes distort language for their own use. At times Harpo's silence feels like a refusal to be like Job, arguing with God against injustice. Harpo's silence even suggests an Adorno-esque despair of language, and in the early films a prescient pre-Holocaust refusal to speak. Having taken what is essentially a vow of silence, Harpo also seems linked to religious and spiritual traditions of silence found within Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, and Catholicism in monastic orders like Benedictines and Trappists and Carmelite Nuns. [...] Finally, Harpo's silence helps us see. In the midst of the quiet, we focus. (Fix 2013; 12)

Charlene Fix illustrates the ways in which Harpo Marx becomes a trickster — that is, a disturbance into the regulatory and restrictive predisposition of mutual dialogue and speech on the screen. Harpo's silence is an interruption that brings back the language of comedy to the pre-cinematic traditions of clownery and circus. Harpo's silence is of interest here because it symbolically represents a popular reference to the potentiality of cinematic silence as a subversive practice within a narrative perspective. Fix creates a list of possible theoretical and historical references (Adorno, spiritual and religious approaches) showing how the figure of Harpo perfectly

embodies the relationship between silence and speech as constructed on an aporetic precondition of non-verbal communication: speech is enabled by silence as much as silence is framed by speech.

In the context of contemporary cinematic realism, Bazin's unbroken continuity surely has different implications, especially in the direction highlighted by Rushton. Extended periods of silence, like in *Los Muertos*, points to the absence of spoken language as an element of rupture. Silence in *Los Muertos* is subversive because it totally defies language and creates the breeding ground for political dissensus, as expounded by Jacques Rancière in the following passage:

Aristotle tells us that slaves understand language but don't possess it. This is what dissensus means. There is politics because speaking is not the same as speaking, because there is not even an agreement on what a sense means. Political dissensus is not a discussion between speaking people who would confront their interests and values. It is a conflict about who speaks and who does not speak, about what has to be heard as the voice of pain and what has to be heard as an argument on justice. (Rancière 2011; 2)



Image 2: 'Inner dialogue: Argentino's inexorable return'  
(Lisandro Alonso, *Los Muertos*, 2004) | © Lisandro Alonso, 4L

Argentino's silence is a subversive element because it highlights the impossibility of speech pertaining to his political condition. Alonso concentrates on the marginality of Argentino within a wider process of marginalization occurring in contemporary society. In this sense, the relationship between silence and the natural landscape is a telling example. In *Los Muertos*, the sequence which begins with Argentino's encounter with Chamorro and ends with his arrival at Maria's hut, lasts more than fifteen minutes on screen. We see Argentino navigating the river on a wooden boat, harvesting a honeycomb, eating it, and then looking distractedly at the banks of the river. The camera does not indulge in what Argentino looks at and there is in fact nothing extraordinary to be seen which makes the scene even slightly awkward until the camera drifts away and stops on the surface of the water. The inner dialogue between Argentino and the landscape is permeated by an inaccessible silence, what Guillen rightly calls 'practical wisdom' (Guillen 2009). There is nothing



mystical about the impenetrability of the forest, yet the slow duration of such inner dialogue between Argentino and the landscape induces the spectator to experience the struggle implicit in his inexorable return. This struggle is also denoted in the few sentences exchanged with Chamorro: when Argentino is interrogated about his brothers, he repeats in an indifferent tone ‘It’s all forgotten now, I have forgotten’. The obscure memory of violence and death is dismissed with a few words, while the silent posture he maintains throughout his journey echoes the void that such an unspeakable event created in Argentino’s life. The cinematic slowness employed by Alonso to depict Argentino’s journey is paired with the inevitable unspoken torment that surrounds Vargas’ condition. Cinematic slowness produces the only apparent recording of the here and now which translates into Argentino’s ahistorical position outside civilization.

If one accepts Susan Sontag’s definition of the aesthetics of silence as modernist art’s project for the reinvention of spirituality (Sontag 2013, 1), then in Alonso’s cinema she or he should instead address how the politics of silence shapes cinematic realism with the aspiration to transform cinematic language as such, fully embracing the Bazinian formula of phenomenological realism as authenticity, while at the same time informing the relationship between physical reality and cinema (Nagib 2011; de Luca 2014). Cinematic silence defies language. It immobilizes the possibility of a response and of a reaction, placing the viewer before an unwritten text. The hybrid observational approach employed by Alonso situates silence as an aesthetic tool which radicalizes cinematic language to the extent that it does not only function as subtraction of speech but also as a political condition. Silence is the cipher for a sensual discernment of a reality that is devoid of human presence.

Silence turns out to be an intentional strategy to remove the dogmatic requisite of the character’s identification while increasing the intensity of the cinematic experience. The articulation of silence permeates the narrative in such a way that what is not said and expressed through words is built on other aural sources: silence becomes a form of speech (Sontag 2013) or even ‘a manner of speaking’ (Blanchot 1993, 32) and, more importantly, a way of seeing the world. Karmen MacKendrick, in her book *Immemorial Silence*, elaborates on Blanchot’s focus on the relationship between silence, time, and eternity and affirms that:

Silence calls us to an unknown, to the outside/within of language. Yet our sense of this unknown is not pure future – that which we *shall* find – nor is it presence, as if we could see it before us. Silence calls to memory, to our sense of having forgotten. It calls, more precisely, to what we could never remember, never recollect, because it began without origin, in fragmentation, as the very site of disruption. (MacKendrick 2001, 27)

If, according to MacKendrick, silence calls to memory and forgetfulness, Argentino's condition tells us that the political origin of silence dwells in fragmentation, in something never lost because it's never attained. The voices of the spectres haunting Argentino's journey are evoked by his silence: being-with ghosts, as Derrida reminds us, is also and always a politics of memory and of generations (Derrida 1994). Alonso's realism implodes the factuality of reality with a memory of a violent encounter, bringing Argentino's ghosts into a full loop of an unalterable present.

### **The rhetoric of authenticity: cinematic realism and the political**

In *Los Muertos*, Alonso confronts us with two different dimensions of authenticity: the aesthetic and the political. The aesthetic dimension points to the problem of realism in film studies which has been widely reconsidered in relation to hybrid cinematic works that blend documentary and fiction. As I have shown above, my personal view on the problem of authenticity in cinematic realism is shaped by Richard Rushton's reframing of Bazin's realism as authenticity. In the other scholars' work, one can find analogous considerations of realism not as the objective rendering of reality but as the creation of reality itself. In *Representing Reality*, for example, Bill Nichols defines the problem of authenticity of the documentary image focusing on the relation between indexicality and its historical referent: "Indexicality plays a key role in authenticating the documentary image's claims to the historically real, but the authentication itself must come from elsewhere and it is often subject to doubt" (Nichols 1991, 153). The extra-textual verification invoked by Nichols eventually conflates documentary and fiction into the realm of narrative storytelling and subjectivity: "Documentary is a fiction unlike any other precisely because the images direct us toward the historical world, but if that world is unfamiliar to us, our direction will just as likely be toward a fiction like any other" (Nichols 1991, 160). In *Los Muertos*, extra-textual information about Argentino Vargas and his 24 children, provided by Alonso (Guillen 2009), definitely helps to contextualize his authorial perspective, but at the same time it does not add any necessary interpretation to the film itself.

Ivon Margulies' notion of performative realism can also shed light on the relationship between realism and authenticity as demonstrated by Rushton, with a particular focus on how performance resists mimetic forms of representation, as in the case of casting Argentino as a person more than an actor. In brief, performative realism is a strategy that provides us with a shift towards a notion of performance as that which *enacts* social tensions more than representing them (Margulies 2003). Alonso's engagement with Argentino's authentic background and his simulation in front of the

camera, reframes indexicality as the presentation of a possible condition of being in the world.

Recently, the work of Jacques Rancière has been fundamental in re-establishing a critical focus on the ways in which one could approach such an anodyne dichotomy between documentary and fiction. In an essay titled “The Paradoxes of Political Art”, Rancière introduces the expression ‘the labour of fiction’ as “a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective” (Rancière 2010, 141). Rancière’s notion of the labour of fiction as the reorganization of given facts and fictional imaginaries can indeed be a good starting point in the process of reconceiving the tension between fiction and documentary through the notion of authenticity. Reality is certainly a much richer, fascinating, and complex source of storytelling: the labour of fiction is constituted by a work of memory which is generated by acts of exposure more than based on acts of representation. For Rancière, as Baumbach notes, ‘cinema as documentary’ constructs an aesthetic of knowledge which aligns fiction and fact through staged reality: “the potential of documentary is not to challenge lies and distortions with sober facts, but to allow for new kinds of histories to be told that create new common worlds heterogeneous to official narratives marked by inequality” (Baumbach, 2010, 68).

The second type of authenticity found in Alonso’s work is concerned with the political dimension of his cinema. It is true that different kinds of authenticity exist but their fundamental relation to modernity and consumer culture remains one of their most important traits (Adorno 1973; Benjamin 1969). Moreover, the relationship between authenticity and authority defines the legitimating claims belonging to a specific work and the degree of its validation. Marshall Berman’s affirmative reading of authenticity as a distinct modern problem is still viable when he writes that authenticity,

is bound up with a radical rejection of things as they are. It begins with an insistence that the social and political structures men live in are keeping the self-stifled, chained down, locked up. It argues that only if the old structure is renovated, or if a new one is built from the ground up –or if the old one is wrecked and nothing put in its place, so that men may live without any structure at all- only then can the self come into its own. (Berman 1973, xix)

The rejection of the status quo as the authentic discovery of the self and the path to freedom is modernity’s unattainable objective par excellence. What this critical node sheds light on, however, is the relation between authenticity and subjectivity, opening up the second dimension of authenticity, which relates directly to the sphere of the political. Building upon my ruminations on Berman’s

definition, I argue that the social and political reality presented in *Los Muertos* expounds the problem of authenticity beyond its mere validation in aesthetic terms, inaugurating, while remaining faithful to the Bazinian formula, a reflection on the political meaning of authentic forms of life. Berman's stance thus opens the problem of authenticity as the rejection of the status quo that can be related to what we have previously named, through Jacques Rancière, as political dissensus. The relation between dissensus and the right to speak indicates how truly the path to freedom is the subversion of the pre-determined social structure, which defines the struggle for authenticity and recognition as a revolutionary action. My contention is that Alonso's narrative approach intends to transform us into witnesses of Argentino's only apparent pre-modern condition. Argentino's resilience to the neo-liberal assimilation is destined to fail and authenticity remains thus impossible to achieve.

In order to better elucidate this double dimension of authenticity, I will now provide a close-reading of Alonso's work. In *Los Muertos*, as anticipated above, Alonso works through authenticity in two ways: on the hand, at the aesthetic and narrative level, casting Argentino Vargas as *Argentino Vargas*, a non-professional actor, Alonso penetrates reality through a fictional construction of Argentino's life and his native land. Authenticity for Alonso means to employ the observational impulse of cinematic slowness to record reality as it *should be* represented in real time, and not reality as it is. Temporality in *Los Muertos* is linear and pertaining to the moment, to the here and now that cinematic slowness lingers upon. On the other hand, at the level of the political, Alonso is showing us how a certain portion of the population living outside civilization is at the same time bounded by the impossibility of breaking the circle of oppression *and* trapped by a false condition of authenticity, which reminds us of the noble savage. It is at the level of the political that Argentino's silence and his impossibility of speaking reveals the broken path to emancipation. This erasure occurring through silence is a tantalizing condition. The viewer's attention is redirected towards Argentino's, albeit minimal, gestures. Alonso's double configuration of authenticity shows us the intermingling of aesthetics and politics in the form of a radical cinematic realism with the objective of creating, as Baumbach reminds us, "new common worlds heterogeneous to official narratives marked by inequality" (Baumbach, 2010, 68).

Argentino's slow immersion into the landscape, as seen previously, transforms the latter into a narrative space where silence (or the absence of words) points to the absence of home. It is the collision between landscape and cinematic silence that displays how authenticity is shaped in Argentino's return. The landscape functions as a 'cultural practice' of confinement (Mitchell 1994, 1): it represents a sort of refuge, a place of safety, which actually substitutes home. This act of substitution can be detected in Argentino's behav-

jour during his slow immersion into the landscape. In this sense, *Los Muertos* shows how the landscape is an emblem of a short-circuit between the absence of home and the silence of nature. After leaving the prison, Argentino goes through another series of micro-actions (sleeping with a prostitute, buying some bread, some cigarettes and a gift for Maria). Finally he reaches the shores of the Paraná river and meets with Chamorro, the man in charge of keeping the boat left by Maria. The natural setting slowly absorbs Argentino, and his body and gestures seem to regain a certain familiarity with the environment. He naturally feels at home in this landscape; his spontaneity (which is due to the fact that Alonso casts Argentino Vargas as himself within a semi-fictional narrative) allows the spectator to witness a sort of inner dialogue between Argentino and the landscape. After his encounter with Chamorro, Argentino gets on the boat and starts navigating the river. Here, Alonso constructs the slow journey on the river in alternation with four micro-actions: Argentino's harvest of a honeycomb; the arrival at Maria's hut where he spends the night and where he is given very brief indications about his daughter's house (his final destination); the next day his slaughter of a goat on the way to his daughter's hut; and lastly his arrival at the hut and the greeting of his grandson, living alone and taking care of his little sister, the both of them having been abandoned by their mother. The honeycomb and goat sequences reveal Argentino's agility and intact experience with the environment. I would argue that the landscape has a fundamental function in the film because it plays a strong dialectical role in opposition to the absence of home. Argentino's return, after twenty-five years, shows not only that home coincides simply with the poverty of the rural landscape but that little has changed concerning the condition of the people living in the village (Guillen 2009).



Image 3: 'Nature is haunted by violence'  
(Lisandro Alonso, *Los Muertos*, 2004) | © Lisandro Alonso, 4L

Jens Andermann's reading of Alonso's work through the Deleuzian concept of the pulsation-image as *caesura* is a fundamental starting point for discussing the meaning of the landscape in Alonso's films (Andermann 2012, 85). For Andermann, "it is the

natural setting itself, which charges the documentary image with a fictional surplus or excess, as the origin of an ominous, enigmatic and latent violence, that overshadows the entire film” (Andermann 2012, 89). The natural landscape is an integral part of the film because it assumes the actual role and importance of a character, creating a mutual relationship with Argentino. Andermann continues: “Nature, then, becomes stage-like in *Los Muertos*, because it is still inscribed in the political as the scene of an originary exclusion: its secrecy and ominousness are those of a question about the origins of power and their relation to justice and violence” (Andermann 2012, 90). In my view, the inscription of the natural into the political is accomplished by Alonso through the strong correlation between immersion in the landscape and the absence of home. It is in nature as staged reality that the struggle for authenticity finds its political meaning. The natural setting is Argentino’s home; it is however a place haunted by violence: “nature is never outside politics, and it likewise attains this political dimension here in its ambiguous status as object of documentary observation and as fictional setting” (Andermann 2012, 88). Alonso’s narrative strategy in blending documentary and fictional elements becomes the political quest for an authenticity impossible to achieve. The use of a radical cinematic realism which plays with the mode of observational documentary is a choice that delineates the concept of authenticity not only at the level of aesthetics (cinematic slowness) but also at the level of the political (cinematic silence).

### **Final remarks: silence and the politics of memory**

*Los Muertos* is a journey at the margins of civilization. This article aimed at understanding how the use of cinematic silence and slowness put forward a double configuration of authenticity both in aesthetical and political terms. Alonso’s interest in the rhetoric of authenticity and its ambiguity marks the opening scene of the film with its dramatic staging of a violent act of killing. In the final scene of *Los Muertos*, Argentino’s return to his home village and the encounter with his grandson and granddaughter testifies, after a period of twenty-five years, to the impossibility of change and transformation in such rural conditions. Argentino’s grandsons are the new generation whose future is as bleak as it was for Argentino’s brothers twenty-five years before. In this sense, the final moments of the film are revealing: the camera lingers on Argentino, hypnotized and motionless, playing with a toy for a full minute while the grandson takes his little sister inside the hut. The scene recalls Bachelard’s description of how the memories of other places haunt us throughout our lives:

And after we are in the new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all Immemorial things are. We live

fixations, fixations of happiness. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost. (Bachelard 1994, 6)



Image 4: 'In the land of Motionless Childhood'  
(Lisandro Alonso, *Los Muertos*, 2004) | © Lisandro Alonso, 4L

In this final scene, the dimension of silence is performed in the hypnotic moment when Argentino stands still before disappearing behind the hut. Silence amplifies the immemorial feeling of something perpetually lost, that is, something that was never found in the first place. Argentino is back home, only to discover that he never really left and that everything repeats itself. It is this call to memory and its unknown origin that paves the way to a politics of silence. I believe that Alonso deliberately chooses the liminality of this confinement to illustrate the exhaustion of experience. Silence allows this exhaustion to be viewed from a distance, to be objectified and affirmed both as inert acceptance of the status quo, but also as the only available condition of survival. Argentino's taciturn performance parallels his fading away into the landscape, configuring home as a vanishing point. Alonso draws a direct correspondence between the indifference of nature and the brutality of crime: there is no space for the subject to disrupt this condition of non-belonging and therefore, for Alonso, cinema is the only tool left to inscribe the marginal (Argentino) into the political (Argentina). In *Los Muertos*, Alonso constructs the emergence of a type of subjectivity which is somehow outside history, while silence amplifies the present into an ahistorical condition; cinema has the power to reveal this condition, making it visible and ethically accessible. Alonso's aesthetic choices find an ethical dimension in the observation of the impossibility of change and the exhaustion of experience. In this sense, *Los Muertos* visualizes the irrevocability of a lost memory, characterizing silence as the denial of a subjective opening into a world radically and fundamentally built without words.

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