

## Carlos Reygadas, the Avant-Garde, and the Senses

Carlos Reygadas was born in Mexico in 1971 and studied international law before turning to the cinema. During his studies in Brussels, he frequented the Museum of Cinema, sometimes viewing as many as three films a day. The future director discovered the films of Robert Bresson, Carl Th. Dreyer, and Andrei Tarkovsky (Wood 2006: 116–118), and the influence of each director is clear in his four films to date: Tarkovsky in *Japón* (2002) and *Post Tenebras Lux* (premiered in 2012, re-edited for theatrical and home release in 2013), Bresson in *Battle in Heaven* (*Batalla en el cielo*, 2005), and Dreyer in *Silent Light* (*Stellet Licht*, 2007). Tracing Reygadas's influences is productive for certain historiographical analyses, but an obvious comparison between the masters of art cinema and Reygadas neglects the impact of experimental filmmaking on the director's *oeuvre*. While the relationship between the avant-garde and Reygadas's films is unarguably indirect as his stated influences were, in fact, the above named directors, and the “avant-garde” consists of a “spectrum of alternative practices which develop and decay with historically specific needs and possibilities” (Smith 1998: 398, citing David James), I nonetheless contend that Reygadas shares the aim of experimental filmmakers: that is, to grant viewers heightened perceptual and sensuous engagement with the medium.

Stan Brakhage, perhaps the most renowned experimental filmmaker, criticized the theatricality of “ninety-nine and forty-four one hundredths per cent” of the cinema. The theatricality of “Motion Pictures” is experiential rather than aesthetic or stylistic, “an experience akin to watching

a stage-play thru a variety of opera-glasses controlled by the director-editor of the movie being passively watched” ([1996] 2011: 670). One gets the sense that this type of movie is crafted by a lazy director–editor who merely stiches together pieces of a play. We can perhaps suggest that the theatricality of cinema follows closely the theatricality Michael Fried has identified in painting ([1967] 1998). While slightly tautological, it perhaps suffices to describe theatricality as “staginess” and “literalist” (Fried [1967] 1998). We can apply this to the cinema. Brakhage notes that the bond between theatre and film is in the French word for cinematographer, *cinématographe*, which can be literally translated as “writer of movement.” His preferred definition of “Film” is Bill Wees’s “Light Moving in Time,” a series of Platonic ideals implied by the capitalization (Brakhage 2011: 671, citing Wees). Reygadas too will condemn theatricality, but not so far as to declare Light (the projector) as the specific aspect that defines Film<sup>1</sup>; however, what Brakhage and Reygadas share is the idea that the specific quality of cinema is first and foremost an apparatus for perception rather than cognition (Brakhage 2011: 671).<sup>2</sup> In light of this claim, this chapter sets out to assess Reygadas’s dreamy and hallucinatory *Post Tenebras Lux*.

This 2013 film is a slight departure from the realist style of Reygadas’s previous works, although there are numerous parallels to be made between it and the three others. I see *Post Tenebras Lux* as a counter-argument to Alan Williams’s categories of “principal genres”: narrative film, experimental/avant-garde film, and documentary. For Williams, all film is simply these principal genres and, under them, what we typically call the other genres are what he labels “sub-genres” (cited in Neale 1995: 176). *Post Tenebras Lux* foils distinctions amongst the principals. In this chapter, I will articulate how the film collapses narrative and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Deren [1960] 2011. Maya Deren, an experimental filmmaker as well, condemns theatricality for similar reasons to Brakhage. She argues that film must distance itself from “the narrative disciplines” to develop its own language. For Deren, the medium offers an art that can re-order time and reality. This creative treatment of reality further links Reygadas to the avant-garde tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Beugnet (2007: 22–23) productively links extreme cinema to Antonin Artaud’s praise of avant-garde film. “The power of the cinema [...] rested with ‘purely visual sensations [...] the dramatic force of which springs from a sock on the eyes, drawn, one might say, from the very substance of the eye, and not from psychological circumlocutions of a discursive nature which are nothing but visual interpretations of a text.’”

avant-garde, and in the next, how it collapses narrative and documentary. What Williams's theory and my work here have in common, I should note, is that the former declares that genre is not solely a Hollywood phenomenon but a global one (cited in Neale 1995: 159).

This chapter will argue that *Post Tenebras Lux* is a work of "visionary realism." Following P. Adam Sitney, Tiago de Luca defines visionary realism as a filmmaking technique that adheres to certain staples of the realist style, such as location shooting, long takes, and non-professional actors, but which also "contradicts [this] focus on the objective real through experimental strategies that evoke mental processes of perception and cognition, that is to say, altered states of mind" (2014: 159–160, 181). De Luca's notion of visionary realism may seem at odds with the common interpretation of André Bazin's praise of realist filmmaking, namely, the indexical relationship between what is photographed and the imprint it leaves on celluloid; however, Adam Lowenstein has recently reinvigorated a debate regarding Bazin's championing of surrealism, so that a surrealist realism is not a contradiction of terms (2015: 13–17). What remains is for me to describe the experience of *Post Tenebras Lux*—and in this experience we find Reygadas's ties to the experimental filmmaking tradition. My main claim is that the levels of reality in this film—the present-tense conscious reality of the main characters as well as the dreams and fantasies of those characters—are immanent expressions of the film's formal qualities. Further, amending de Luca's definition slightly, the representation of these differing levels of reality offers a philosophical concept: dreams and fantasies are embodied experiences rather than purely mental ones.

Reygadas has been included in the scholarship on extreme cinema due to the performances of real sex in his first two features. His inclusion within extreme cinema is perhaps questionable with the latter two films, *Silent Light* and *Post Tenebras Lux*, however, since these works downplay violence and sex rather than shocking viewers with graphic or explicit visuals (although Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall include the latter in a footnote listing extreme films outside of Europe [2012: 5n1]). Yet his visionary realism, I claim, assures Reygadas a place amongst other contemporary art cinema directors whose films are experiments with narrativized sex and violence. Moreover, similar to other auteurs of extreme cinema (Beugnet 2007: 61), his challenging narrative structures, employment of various genres and visual and aural filmmaking,

and emphasis on the bodies of his characters, as well as appealing to the bodies in the film theatre, suggest his relevance to extreme cinema scholarship. In this chapter we will see how Reygadas moves his viewers bodily in the manner of the avant-garde, and how this avant-garde aesthetics generates critical thinking about what is precisely documented and its significance. In the next chapters we will see that Catherine Breillat aims to invoke spectators' senses through the genres of pornography and horror. Thus the two directors can be subsumed under cinemas of sensation, and both, in their respective uses and abuses of genre, allow spectators to engage with the films in the manner that best suits them.

In the first section I turn to *Post Tenebras Lux* and discuss my first experience of coming into contact with the film myself. It affected me like one of Brakhage's pieces. I felt a curious mix of perceptual pleasure and cognitive boredom. I will provide some context on the film's release, my theoretical framework for analyzing the film, and a brief synopsis. In the proceeding sections I analyze the film through specific lenses and themes to uncover its means for evoking a sensuous film experience and work toward my larger claims about filmic representations of dreams and Reygadas's investment in representing sexual difference. My discussion of the film will be grounded in Vivian Sobchack's and others' phenomenological film theory. This theoretical foundation helps to account for the mode of viewing that Reygadas's film elicits.

I approach *Post Tenebras Lux* via contemporary phenomenology due to some provocative yet simple claims made by the director during interviews about the film and the numerous critical reviews emphasizing the sensations felt during its viewing, ranging from uncanny beauty to narrative confusion. Little has been written about the director's films, but he has graced us with many interviews. I draw on many of these in order to substantiate my claim that theory and practice work in tandem in much of contemporary art cinema. We may not agree with Reygadas on all accounts, nor do we need to accept the director's post-film reflections (read: filmmaking intentions), but as I noted in the Introduction, the films should teach us how to read them. Put differently, the film theorist should not impose theory upon his or her objects of study, but the films should show one how to reflect and theorize. Reygadas and Breillat are articulate and educated individuals who seem to enjoy discussing their films, agreeing and disagreeing with interviewers, and through these conversations generate some theoretically complex statements on the nature of filmmaking. In this volume I therefore treat their words in conjunction with their practice.

## THE DIFFICULT FILM

*Post Tenebras Lux*, Latin for “After Darkness, Light,” has a sense of incompleteness and fragmentariness. The episodes appear to be arranged at random by the director and his wife and editor, Natalia Lopez. Jonathan Romney contends that the film is exciting for its sketch-like quality of potentialities, possibilities, and the combinations of images (2013: 74), a comment that resonates with my claim that Reygadas and Breillat offer films that require an effort on the part of the viewer to collect and curate the shots, sounds, and formal elements of a given work in order to generate a full experience of it, including its technical prowess and critiques. Reygadas’s (2013) film works with characters’ dreams, fantasies, and desires in an achronological fashion. With this film the director is unquestionably an experimental filmmaker, but not to the extent that narrative has altogether disappeared. “My cinema is tremendously narrative,” he states; “There’s always a clear line that connects” (Koehler 2013: 13). Yet Reygadas wants viewers to come away with a feeling or sense of the work, rather than following or identifying with a story, plot, or character(s). He is frequently dismissive of the deeper meanings directors instill in films and, for that matter, of viewers who attempt to read too much into a work. For the film’s capacity to generate multiple kinds of viewing, while simultaneously eschewing meaning in favor of producing perceptual and bodily sensations in spectators, *Post Tenebras Lux* is often described as challenging and difficult.

According to Vivian Sobchack’s typology of the “difficult film,” a typology which includes films that are described or experienced as disgusting, boring, bad, complicated, or any combination of these, the most difficult works transgress these conventional impediments as well as narrative logic and cinematic specificity, and “make sense” to us “sensuously, experientially, in the phenomenological ‘now’ of seeing, hearing, and touching (if always also at a distance)” (2014: 51).<sup>3</sup> She provides

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<sup>3</sup>The full typology is as follows (Sobchack 2014: 50): “There are those that are difficult to watch because of their explicit violence or graphic sex (Gaspar Noé’s *Irreversible* [*Irréversible*, 2002]), or their extremely disturbing visceral effects (Kirby Dick’s documentary *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* [1997]). There are also those that are pleasurable in their difficulty: cerebral “puzzle” films with intricate plots and/or structures that require some effort to figure out (Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* [2000], or Carruth’s debut feature *Primer* [2004]). Then there are films that are difficult because they push the limits of representation as far as it will go (Charlie Kaufman’s *Synecdoche*,

Terrence Malick's *To the Wonder* (2012) and Shane Carruth's *Upstream Color* (2013) as examples. The former asks its viewers to experience its fragmented visual poetry rather than a plot; the latter depicts a sci-fi story more concerned with presenting the bodily experiences of characters infected by a mysterious bug than with exploring its causes or social, ethical, and political effects. Carruth's characters, in line with Sobchack's argument, have heightened sensorial experiences, and the film attempts to capture such moments. *Post Tenebras Lux*, alongside its aesthetics of visionary realism, is part of this category of difficult film. The stories in Reygadas's features, however, are always very simple, so as to grant the spectator a sensuous experience over and beyond (or under and below) narrative pleasures.

As I mentioned earlier, Reygadas brings the narrative tradition into contact with traditions and ideas in experimental filmmaking. For Murray Smith (1998: 396), "the avant-garde [...] aims to challenge and subvert[, ...] asks us to rethink our fundamental preconceptions about cinema." I am interested in the contestation the film's narrative poses, as a strenuous and intellectual effort to comprehend, but it is more worthwhile to investigate the test Reygadas proposes: he demands that spectators rid themselves of their desire to put the pieces of the film together and replace their traditional modes of viewing with a highly sensuous experience. This sort of spectatorship, however, still requires an engagement with the story, as it serves to link the sounds and images with cognitive continuity. With a story and the style used to show and tell it, generic conventions appear and disappear. A study of *Post Tenebras Lux* therefore poses questions about the nature of genre, spectatorship, and fictional film, and to study a fictional film requires a careful explanation of the story to bring the experience of the work to language. Thus my explication of the narrative and form of the film presupposes that the reader has not seen it, and my analysis of the film's "sensory mode of address" (de Luca 2014), as elsewhere in this book, posits the first-time viewer as its intended spectator.

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*New York* [2008] and its mise en abyme of infinite representational regress). There are others that go even further and push the very limits of cinema itself (Derek Jarman's monochromatic *Blue* [1993], or Michael Snow's *La Région centrale* [1971]). Most commonplace, however, are those films that are difficult to watch because they push nothing: they're unchallenging spectacles devoid of thought, affect, and any reason, other than mercenary, for being at all (certain kinds of mainstream trash like [...] *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters* [2013])."

Juan (Adolfo Jiménez Castro) and Natalia (Natalia Acevedo) are a married couple living about 45 miles (70 km) outside of Mexico City in the unstated city of Tepoztlán (the city is Reygadas's current town of residence, and the film was shot on his estate). Juan, Natalia, and their very young children Rut (short for Rutilia, performed by Rut Reygadas) and Eleazar (Eleazar Reygadas) live in a newly built, quite luxurious home in the mountains.<sup>4</sup> Despite his economic and familial success, Juan has an internet pornography addiction. This addiction is briefly mentioned by Juan and resurfaces, perhaps, in his aggression toward his dog Martita and his sexual frustration regarding his wife. Natalia appears to have her mental health, but Juan's sexual problems likely generate emotional and sexual issues for her. This family is also light-skinned, "Western Mexicans," Reygadas says.<sup>5</sup> The lighter-skinned family is contrasted with a worker for the household, Seven (Willebaldo Torres), who is darker and poorer. In describing the class situation in contemporary Mexico, de Luca notes that "class and ethnicity go hand in hand [...], meaning that the darker one is, the poorer one is likely to be" (2014: 85). We can see this in each of Reygadas's features: the Westernized middle-aged painter (Alejandro Ferretis) who visits a rural village in *Japón*; Marcos (Marcos Hernández), as the obese and dark-skinned chauffeur of the young and beautiful Ana in *Battle in Heaven*; and *Silent Light*'s narrative focus on the white Mennonites living in Mexico. Although there is initially no observable tension between Juan and Seven in *Post Tenebras Lux*, and they appear to be friends, there nevertheless exist class and ethnic divides that Reygadas is keen to explore.

On a day of national celebration, the family is driving toward some unknown destination. Natalia realizes she has forgotten something back at their home. On the return journey, the family stops at a restaurant and sees Jarro, another worker who, at that time, was supposed to be guarding the family's house while they were away. Natalia and the children remain with Jarro, and Juan goes to retrieve the items. Upon his homecoming Juan surprises Seven and another man in the middle of

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<sup>4</sup>The infants are Reygadas's children. They have retained their names so that they may respond to them in the confabulated settings of the film. For the same reasons, the fictional wife is named Natalia, after the children's mother.

<sup>5</sup>Reygadas in Koehler (2013: 12): "Western Mexicans tend to have chronic dissatisfaction and see life from a disconnected point of view. [Juan is] detached, and he's that way since he's wealthy."

attempted robbery. At the goading of the other man, Seven shoots Juan and both men flee, leaving Juan for dead. As a result, Juan loses part of a lung. Seven later decides to visit his wounded friend and in a far from melodramatic shocker, young Eleazar casually informs Seven that his father has died. The murderer then strolls into a field and, without warning, removes his head with his own hands.

This surreal scene completes the foundational narrative thread of the film. If we were to take these sequences alone, however, Reygadas would barely have a feature-length product. In fact, the key plot event of the film—Seven shooting Juan and Juan’s death—does not transpire until more than halfway through the story. The events in what I would call the present-tense narrative were quickly summarized above. Some of the episodes that I have not noted are dreams, fantasies, desires, flash-forwards, even concepts, although, which character the dreams might be emanating from is neither established nor, I think, relevant.<sup>6</sup> However, as Alphonso Lingis suggests and as I will argue, dreams and phantasms are integral components of the human perceptual field. These dream and fantasy sequences are neither supplements nor addendums, nor commonplace dream-sequences that push ahead the plot; nor do they serve to establish a character’s psychological state, or operate as a catalyst for action, or even as a reason for an action—each stands as a unique sensuous moment in the whole. Contrasted to altered states of mind, I interpret these sequences an experience of altered states of embodiment, and such sequences aim to represent dreams and fantasy “as if” real for the spectating subject. Reygadas fosters this kind of sensuous engagement through his aesthetics and storytelling; the hallucinations and dreams are as real as the diegetic present: that is, they exist on a plane with an equal degree of intensity to the real or present-tense diegetic events. Alongside Sheldon Penn’s Deleuzian discussion of *Silent Light*, it would therefore be appropriate to call the film a “cinema of immanence” or what Martine Beugnet calls “cinemas of sensation” (2007). According to Penn (2013), Reygadas’s immanent cinema offers movement for itself, without meaning or message, cuts that are entirely irrational, and objects and spaces that are presented in excess of the narrative; and it sometimes appears

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<sup>6</sup>To simplify the writing in this chapter, when I refer generally to the sequences that do not operate in the present, I will use the phrase “dream” or “fantasy sequence(s).” However, it should be stressed that not all the episodes are necessarily dreams or fantasies.



as if the actors themselves are acting without direction. I tread this same thematic path but carry a different theoretical walking stick. My preference for a cinema of immanence is also not dismissing Maurice Merleau-Ponty's evaluation of the *ek-stase* of experience, defined as an "Active transcendence of the subject in relation to the world" (2004: 84n1). To fill in the gaps of the frame, of temporarily, of spatiality, the spectator must also transcend the immanent experience of what is on-screen and in frame.

As Reygadas observes of his filmmaking method, and inadvertently in a nod to the objects of study for phenomenological inquiry, let us now turn to "the things themselves" (Lim 2013).

### "[A]LL THE LEVELS OF PERCEPTION"

In terms of the film's capacity to elicit spectators' sensuous engagement with its images and sounds, it is possible to study six interrelated aspects of Reygadas's method and style. In this chapter, I will consider narrative and chronology, cinematography, and dreams and fantasy. In Chap. 3 I will turn to the profilmic event and documentary traditions, dead and living animals, and the representation of death.

### NARRATIVE SHOCK

After his first two features, Reygadas became known for shocking viewers with his graphic displays of sexuality between likely and unlikely couples. The most shocking example is perhaps *Battle in Heaven*. This film features an obese dark-skinned Mexican man receiving fellatio from a rich, young white girl, followed summarily by their real on-screen sex, and lastly, that same man's sex with an obese and dark-skinned woman. I discuss the fellatio sequences in Chap. 6 in an attempt to reorient theoretical conversations about performance in contemporary art films that depict performers engaging in sex. For now, when *Post Tenebras Lux* turns to sex, the film takes a different approach, depicting it in a rather subdued manner compared to the director's prior features.<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup>However, in a screening I held, a mother and her teenage daughter promptly left during the sex sequence. "Trent Film Society Presents: Carlos Reygadas's *Post Tenebras Lux*," Artspace, Peterborough, ON, May 28, 2014.

controversy and debate around this film was not about its display of sexuality; rather, “the film’s biggest provocations are its aesthetic and narrative liberties,” film critic Dennis Lim wrote in 2013.

I did not explore the “narrative liberties” in my synopsis. Amongst the episodes described above are sequences that are dreams, flashbacks, and flash-forwards that function as evidence of a character’s desire or offer a concept about our ontology and the ontology of cinema that add to the sensuous quality of the feature as a whole. “Instead of progressing from one event to the next,” Lim writes, quoting his interview with Reygadas, “[the film] drifts among ‘all the levels of perception,’ [...] which include ‘dreams, things you long for, memories, an imagined future, the conscious present, a reality that is beyond us’” (Lim 2013).<sup>8</sup> It is possible, given Reygadas’s comments and the complexity of the film, to focus on any number of episodes. My choices and emphases on particular sequences and shots to demonstrate my argument is due to the demands placed upon me to write with some linearity and clarity. While the film may not command a strong understanding, theoretical writing certainly does. The concept of cinematic excess serves as a starting point to address the narrative.

Reygadas’s *oeuvre*, unquestionably, is an experiment in cinematic excess. Kristin Thompson explained this concept in detail in her 1977 essay on the topic. Her targets are those who find a cinematic device used without narrative motivation disturbing.<sup>9</sup> According to Thompson, to argue for the legitimacy of cinematic excess is to champion the specificity of cinema—that is, images and sounds—for perceptual play ([1977] 1986: 133). There are no rules that govern when a device should be used to motivate the narrative, such as an exceedingly long take (Thompson 1986: 135–136). This is clearly the case in *Post Tenebras Lux*, as we are required to restrain ourselves from linking the episodes to some kind of cause-and-effect logic. The arbitrariness of the sequences, the gaps in time, and the lack of context and situatedness of the characters in the sequences render them excessive. We will see that Reygadas’s film

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<sup>8</sup>Reygadas in Koehler (2013: 11): “The film is about many things, including the perception of reality, of our dreams, fantasies, and in our direct experiences, and in the acknowledgment of the reality beyond what we see and hear [...] As for the feelings people have from their experiences, and what these may trigger in our dreams, or subconscious, these are felt more or less powerfully. And if we didn’t feel them we wouldn’t be alive.”

<sup>9</sup>According to Anton Chekhov, these sorts of excessive films would bungle their plots; one does not bring a gun onstage, claims the playwright, unless it is to be fired.

demands a new mode of viewing. He attempts to usher in a new kind of narrative cinema where the images function individually, are themselves expressive of the capacity for the film's and spectator's perceptual play, and can be curated or collected in a manner that suits the spectator's tastes or preferences (even if the spectator dislikes what is seen and heard). In my following analysis of the narrative, I attempt to heed Thompson's advice (1986: 141) on encountering the excessive film:

Once the narrative [of an excessive film] is recognized as arbitrary rather than logical, the viewer is free to ask why individual events within its structures are as they are. The viewer is no longer constrained by conventions of reading to find a meaning or theme within the work as a solution to a sort of puzzle which has a right answer. Instead, the work becomes a perceptual field of structures which the viewer is free to study at length, going beyond the strictly functional aspects.

Her comment is evocative of Stanley Cavell's statement (1981: 29), made just a few short years later, that a genre does not simply comprise of the common features in a body of films but is instead a mode of critical engagement whereby the individual spectator asks, for him- or herself, "*what [the films] are in view of one another*". Taking Thompson and Cavell's advice to heart, by absorbing myself in the episodes presented in Reygadas's film, I can both engage with what is there as perceptual play while also studying the individual sequences and their relationship to the whole, and then, in relation to other films, genres, and production trends.

*Post Tenebras Lux* begins with Rut meandering in a damp soccer field as the sun sets. Above the tree-lined mountains we see the sky in a beautiful shade of light blue; purples and pinks dance on the few visible clouds. Rut chases the cows, pets the dogs, and watches the dogs chase the cows. Horses and donkeys trot at a distance from her. With her newly acquired language skills, Rut points to the animals and identifies them with their colloquial names (Fig. 2.1). She laughs and giggles; the dogs pant and splash in the puddles. The day slowly fades into night; the brightness of the sunset quickly darkens to a near pitch black. Dark clouds now cover the sky. Rut whispers, "Mommy," "Daddy," "Home," "Rut, Eleazar," and her silhouette, in a medium shot, appears between lighting strikes on the horizon behind her. Rut disappears, and we cut to a shot of the stormy sky. Each word of the title individually appears, like Rut, between lightning flashes. The sequence lasts about seven minutes.



**Fig. 2.1** *Post Tenebras Lux* (Reygadas 2013)

A sequence featuring a glowing red devil with a toolbox appears next (Fig. 2.2). The devil enters, looks about, encounters a child, and then enters the bedroom of the child’s parents (we assume). The devil may be a representation of what children will become—not evil, as we commonly associate with devils, but a person capable of creative and destructive acts. Reygadas thus names this long scene a “concept” (2013), and he has also identified it as Eleazar’s dream (Solórzano 2013: 53), although the child in the devil sequence is not Eleazar himself and neither does the home belong to the protagonists.

Seven is then introduced to us, but we do not yet know his status or name. The temptation is to link him to the devil of the preceding episode; however, with the lack of definitive claims or arguments in the film as to the strength of such a link, there is no reason to build a bridge between the two sequences. We must not forget Rudolf Arnheim’s ontological claim about the cinema ([1933] 2011: 287): “because the fact that two sequences follow each other on the screen does not indicate in itself that



Fig. 2.2 *Post Tenebras Lux* (Reygadas 2013)

they should be understood as following each other in time.” Similar to the opening of a Western, Seven casually travels in the forest atop his donkey, two dogs scampering about. Here, in Seven’s axe-wielding and tree-chopping sequence, Reygadas intentionally denies spectators the opportunity to engage their cognitive faculties if they are not Mexican or familiar with Mexican rural life. Reygadas informs us that in Mexico logging has become a deeply ecological issue, as the men chop small chunks from the trees for the *anafes* (“rudimentary stoves”), and therefore most of us can only understand this sequence post-film experience with the aid of this interview (Solórzano 2013: 53). In a long panning shot of tree tops, we hear the sound of chopping wood. Seven’s relationship to the forest will appear twice more before the end credits roll.

We spend many minutes with Seven, his logging, and his travels, before turning to our main protagonists, Juan, Natalia, Rut, and Eleazar. Close-ups of Natalia and Juan sleeping, similar to countless shots we will see in the film, far exceeds the requirements of narrative functionality.

Natalia is slowly roused by a crying Rut, and as the latter babbles about animals, the mother asks if she dreamt of giraffes and cows. In the opening scenes with Rut, with its lack of an event, space for character identification (and camera identification, as I explore below), and setting for a story, the sequence attained the status of a lived perception. Only now are we informed that it was a dream. The sequence of Rut skipping across the field initially gripped us in its immanence, in its present-ness. Reygadas denies that the scenes function as a prologue and downplays a rational explanation of them as a “synthesis of the story.” He mentions, “I love that piece of land [the setting of the scene] and go there every evening. I love those animals. I wanted to make a film that started by showing those things only because I wanted to share them” (Solórzano 2013: 53). This is the first of many instances where Reygadas places himself in the film, in this case as a person who loves a particular piece of land. Including oneself in the film without any narrative motivation is an avant-garde strategy. (Alfred Hitchcock’s cameos have nothing to do with a personal stamp on the film, although, they operate as a clever display of hide-and-seek and the addition of an extra.) But just as significant as the selfish indulgence of the director are his earlier claims to aestheticize all the levels of perception. I will turn to the levels of dreams and fantasies after I discuss the cinematography and style of the film.

Now the family is awake. All four enjoy each other’s drowsy company on Juan and Natalia’s bed. A naked Eleazar wrestles his father. After a scene of Juan taking his aggression out on his favorite dog, Martita—she had done “it again”—we cut to an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting, where Seven and others deliver speeches regarding their substance abuse. Non-professional actors grace us with their perhaps authentic tales. In a brief talk with Seven following the meeting, we learn of Juan’s porn addiction. Juan’s addiction is not addressed in depth; thus the film is a far departure from the psychological character study of porn addict Brandon (Michael Fassbender) in Steve McQueen’s *Shame* (2011). Instead, Juan’s addiction will be revealed through his anger toward his dogs and in petty squabbles with his wife. I would further suggest that the very different kinds of addiction plaguing Seven (alcoholism) and Juan are representative of their classes.

If viewers are still with the narrative at this point, some thirty minutes into the film, a conceptual, flashback, or symbolic scene punctures whatever narrative pleasure we had left. A group of English teenage boys prepare for a rugby match by stretching, shouting, and chanting. Tony

Rayns writes: “The most disruptive element here is the rugby match [...] The two rugby scenes are wild anomalies – visually, linguistically, you name it” (2013: 101). We can see the episode as yet another expression of Reygadas’s selfish indulgence: he loves the sport and as a young man attended and played rugby at that depicted school in Derbyshire, in the UK (Solórzano 2013: 53; O’Hehir 2013). It is also “technically” a scene from Juan’s youth, Reygadas agrees with Robert Koehler, and this flashback is to a time of lessened strife (2013: 14). Conceptually, the director claims these young men are about to enter into adulthood and thereby lose their purity and innocence (Solórzano 2013: 53). The boys are thus linked to the devil sequence. In the second rugby sequence, which also serves as the conclusion of the film, we hear the team’s “rallying cry” to shed their individualities, work together as a team, and overcome their opponents, who are stronger than them.

In my reading, the effect of this episode is to produce a gaping hole in our desire for narrative logic and to intensify Juan’s immediately prior confession regarding his addiction to porn. He had lost his purity and innocence perhaps at this very juncture of his life when sport, a homo-social affair, to say the least, was introduced. We will see this enthusiasm for physicality reappear in another episode which is, as expected by now, another puncture in our habitually narrative-driven film experience. But what this rugby scene and the following temporally out-of-joint ones suggest is the interiority of time. I began with an epigraph quoting Reygadas on interiority for this very reason. When the film proceeds backwards into Juan’s memories of life in the UK, or later when a sequence leaps years ahead, I contend that Juan and Natalia’s world, a world of sensations and experiences which generate meaning and significance, are constituted by internal temporality. This must be the case if the sequences are altered states of embodiment. Jenny Chamarette, theorizing the cinematic subject in a phenomenological framework, writes (2012: 35): “One might venture to say that temporality is pure subjectivity, given that it rests in no object, is contained by no subject, and is, rather, a condition of possibility for being sensible of, or sensitive to, the world.” *Post Tenebras Lux* presents time in this fashion, even when the time that is presented is the immanence of memory, dream, and fantasy.

Now we leap ahead. Rut and Eleazar are around ten years of age and the family is at a lavish and crowded Christmas dinner party. Family and friends are all there, and the two children are at that age between curiosity and sociality. They lack confidence in their social skills, so they

wander about the party while the adults engage in idle chatter. The adults should bore us, as they bore each other with their drunkenness and passing remarks about Russian literature. Juan recites one of Leo Tolstoy's character's epiphanies, the moment the character realizes life is not about money, class, status, etc., and this unannounced recital parallels Juan's own epiphany just before his death later in the film.<sup>10</sup> But the party itself, akin to Juan's impressive recital, in its subdued frenzy of food, drink, and gift-giving gives us no point of reference narratively, spatially, or temporally. Similar to some real-life Christmas gatherings, we, like the guests, do not know all these people; nor, for that matter, do we know how our protagonists arrived there or what they have been doing for the approximately seven to eight years since we last saw them. If we take seriously Eleazar's pronouncement at the end of the film—that is, his father has died—this is the first of the film's fantasy scenes. Its utter lack of an event, merely a banal Christmas gathering, suggests it is a future projection of one of the family members. Had Juan not been shot, and Natalia and the children remained healthy, these mundane and routine parties would exist. However, since we do not yet know that Juan will die while the children are still quite young, again the episode must be taken in its present-ness. Thus the narrative shock when Juan gives up the ghost later in the story.

In each of the temporally out-of-joint episodes Juan adopts a new hair-cut and varies his facial hair. In the last he had medium-length hair and was clean-shaven. To end the Christmas party sequence, a rapid cut presents a naked woman's torso and is followed by a selection of shots presenting other nude patrons, male and female, in a sauna. Alongside the bored and naked individuals are the sounds of sex: slaps, groans, and men barking sexual commands. No director has taken Michel Foucault's claim that "sex is boring" so seriously (Gutting 2005: 101, quoting Foucault). It is likely, we may speculate, that when Juan and Natalia enter the frame, they desired this orgy precisely because of their stale physicality. The husband is now buzz-cut with facial stubble; therefore, it is ambiguous whether the scene transpires before or after the previous one or is yet another conceptual

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<sup>10</sup>Juan recites a passage from *War and Peace* (Война и мирь, 1869), but these epiphanies plague Tolstoy's work. Cf. *The Cossacks* (Казак, 1862), *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (Смерть Ивана Ильича, 1886), and *Master and Man* (Хозяин и работник, 1895). I agree with Juan's interlocutor in this scene that it is not Tolstoy, or Fyodor Dostoevsky, who is the master, but Chekhov.



scene. I speculate that this is not a real event that happens to the characters but is the immanent expression of Natalia's desire. I address this sequence fully in two separate sections below. Its significance is immense for what I claim to be Reygadas's critique of contemporary romance.

Another scene of *Seven* deals with woodcutting—a friend of his wants a tree chopped down to enrage his sister. The episode ends and transitions to a cut of women eating. This is a festive scene at a time when the children are still infants. Rut and Eleazar, in contrast to the Rut and Eleazar of a few years older, identify colors and stamp their feet onto a projected light on the dance floor, looking much like cats who attack flashlight beams on a wall. A very drunk, dark-skinned man refers to Juan and Natalia as “whiteys,” and the couple must assure this man that they too are Mexican. The man then invites them to visit his poor home for a beer during the celebration of the Lady of Guadalupe on December 12.

Cut to a beach. Rut and Eleazar, mentioned by name, are teenagers. Juan has long hair down his back. Close-ups of the children reveal that they are becoming beautiful and handsome, not unlike their attractive parents. Unlike the opening scene with Rut, a pretty sunset closes the episode, and this static shot lasts about a minute until Rut and Eleazar, now back in their infancy, appear in frame and cavort in the sand. We transition to the family's home and watch a domestic scene unfold. The infants are put to bed and Juan whispers to Natalia that he will have sex with her “in the ass” that evening. Natalia seems receptive, but the scene eventually turns into a squabble regarding the color of curtains. In a medium shot of Natalia, the petty badgering leads to anger and frustration as Juan reveals his dissatisfaction with their sex lives. Finally, Natalia threatens to leave him. The husband exits the room and a short episode of the dogs feeding follows.

The film is an hour and fifteen minutes in, and here the narrative event that tied together my synopsis—that is, the shooting of Juan by *Seven*—at last unfolds. Once the shooting has taken place, Reygadas provides us another conceptual scene, perhaps, as a man (Natalia's new husband? He refers to Eleazar as “son”) appears to take Rut and Eleazar, now around age ten again, out to hunt birds—they paddle along a river and likely shoot a bird. Through the use of symbolic cutting, Rut's gunshot brings us to an episode of some anonymous men discussing life, playing chess, and eventually Juan's condition: we discover that Juan has lost part of a lung.

Reygadas has an eye for aesthetically pleasing locations and shooting conditions. The following episode contains the two infants playing atop some boulders while Natalia and a dog rest on the ground. We should note here that Natalia is without Juan. This scene was cut short by Reygadas after the film's premiere at Cannes, and I think it needs to be seen in its original length.<sup>11</sup> From one perspective, Juan is the main protagonist, and therefore Reygadas is correct when he states that the extended scene is without importance. Watching Natalia walk back to the house with the children alone asserts her self-importance, and her gaze at the house where Juan is recovering also suggests her loneliness without the father of her children. We must not forget, as Reygadas does in interviews, that Juan's passing is significant for the story of Juan, to be sure, but is simultaneously a life-changing event for his wife and mother of his children. Natalia's care for the children without Juan might hint at the optimism of the film's title; perhaps, after Juan has died, there will be light.

In the next episode, during Juan's convalescence, Natalia's charming and off-key recital of a Neil Young tune on the piano, "It's a Dream," confirms not only the fantasy of the flash-forward episodes but also the melancholy optimism of a life without her husband.<sup>12</sup> According to Reygadas, evidence of Juan's imminent death concludes the recital. During Natalia's rendition of Young's song, a painting fills the screen. It is entitled *The Iceberg* and is by Frederic Edwin Church. This is Juan's point of view, and the painting "suggests he's going to die" (Reygadas in Koehler 2013: 15). Juan poetically reflects at length on his life, particularly his childhood, and his seemingly solitary speech—the whole thing is shot in a close-up without a cut—ends with Natalia jumping into frame in tears followed by Juan in tears. His epiphany is a memory of childhood joys, and now, he says, it is Rut and Eleazar's turn to live. In a new sequence, Eleazar then informs Seven of Juan's passing, and Seven commits suicide. Just prior to this death, it is worth mentioning, Seven has failed to reunite with his wife and children, suggesting that in addition to murdering Juan he has nothing left to live for. A self-decapitation, and then we cut to the British boys' rugby match.

*Salon* film critic Andrew O'Hehir, like many of his colleagues, grappled with the film in a manner that echoes Thompson's theorization of

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<sup>11</sup>The deleted scenes are available on Strand Releasing's Blu-ray of *Post Tenebras Lux*.

<sup>12</sup>Reygadas in Koehler (2013: 13): "When [Natalia is] playing Neil Young's 'It's a Dream,' that's like supercondensed narrative."

cinematic excess. He placed himself in the moment of the feature and wrote of it in a past which, now gone, cannot be apprehended or experienced in quite the same way. During the episode of Juan's convalescence, while Natalia is singing, Juan looks over "in a mood of wistful nostalgia, at a photograph of the Spanish golfer Seve Ballesteros at the British Open." For O'Hehir, unable to account for it in his writing, he nevertheless knew that Juan's glance, and to some degree the film as a whole, "*made perfect sense at the time*. I felt, while I was watching the movie, that I understood it well enough [...] I [...] understood that while this movie is deliberately constructed so that almost nobody will 'get it' or like it – and I'm not sure how I feel about that perversity – it's a masterpiece despite that, or because of that or just anyway" (2013). My close description of the narrative as well as some interpretative remarks began with an experience like O'Hehir's. But given the complexities of time and space, I needed to return to the film again and again to write this section. Even with many viewings behind me, the film still leaves me perplexed, uncertain, unsure of whether my reading is appropriate, correct, apt, worthy of transmission.

The narrative is shocking and an immense challenge—if we try too hard to comprehend during our first experience of *Post Tenebras Lux*, we risk losing the aesthetic and political dimensions, an unarguably important aspect of the film that I will discuss at length in below. Despite its seemingly arbitrary narrative, I will later argue that the political aspect is dependent upon the film's aesthetics and experimentation. In regards to the narrative, as time subjectively operates for the individual spectator, the jarring cuts and episodes play with our personal and bodily temporality. The film affects us precisely because its narrative provides such limited opportunities for cognitive and intellectual engagement. It is not a puzzle to be solved, but a painting to be absorbed, or a tune to hum along to, without thought or reason. I will revisit this idea of narrative shock in Chap. 5. For this chapter, the shorter sections that follow address more narrowly defined devices, themes, and scenes.

## CINEMATOGRAPHY AND LEVELS

Alphonso Lingis, a translator of Merleau-Ponty and a continental philosopher who pays direct homage to the tradition through highly subjective worldly accounts, posits his own account of embodiment in *The*

*Imperative.* He names our practicable field *levels*. A practicable field may be defined as our outward bodily engagements and expressions with objects and persons in the world, although, for Lingis, the boundaries between practicable and unpracticable fields are blurry: the latter may be defined as bodily expressions directed inward, such as dreams and the like. Levels are the sense organs in their contact with the elements (Lingis 1996: 13–17). We experience the tactility of wood or fur with our hands; light and darkness play on our retinas; we hear a noisy music hall silence when a conductor raises his baton, or we focus on the person's voice across from us and turn a room's chatter into background noise. The levels are neither empirically verifiable, a set of significations that make a thing comprehensible, nor a universal or necessary law for the appearance of things as such (Lingis 1996: 25–27).

A level is neither a purely intelligible order, nor a positive form given to a pure a priori intuition; it is a sensory phenomenon. A level is neither a content grasped in a perception nor a form imposed on an amorphous matter of sensation; it is that with which or according to which we perceive. It is not an object formed nor an organization elaborated among objects but an ordinance taken up and followed through.

The levels of our practicable field, but also those of the unpracticable domains, the landscapes, the visions, the spheres of musicality, the oneiric and the erotic fields, the vistas through which our nomadic vitality wanders, are not suspended in void nor in the empty immanence in which our representational faculty a priori would extend the pure form of exteriority. They take form in a vital medium, in light, in the air, in warmth, in the tangible density of exteriority, on the ground, in the night, and in the night beyond night. (Lingis 1996: 27)

Similar to Lingis's phenomenology, Laura U. Marks suggests that with haptic visibility, a touching with one's eyes, the levels of sense perception can be extended. She contrasts haptic visibility to optic visibility, "discrete, self-standing elements of figuration in illusionistic spaces" (Beugnet 2007: 66). A haptic visibility closes the distance between observer and image; spectators graze the surface of the image with their sight, to be sure, but other senses may be engaged, depending upon the formal properties of the film as well as the film stock, for instance (Beugnet 2007: 51–52). Additionally, the content of the images can

sometimes affect the intensity of hapticity, yet for Marks, a cinematographic style is the more elaborate and sensually convincing means for a haptic cinema. Multisensory filmmakers refuse “to make their images accessible to vision, so that the viewer must resort to other senses, such as touch, in order to perceive the images” (Marks 2000: 159). For example, Roula Haj-Ismail’s *I Wet My Hands Etched and Surveyed Vessels Approaching Marks Eyed Inside* (1992) and Ming-Yuen S. Ma’s *Sniff* (1996) use such extreme close-ups of bodies that verification by sight gives way to verification by our sense of the tactility of skin or scalp (2000: 156–158, 172–173). Indeed, this applies to some shots in popular cinema as well. In her experience of Jane Campion’s *The Piano* (1993), Vivian Sobchack contends that the blurry images that begin the film were recognized—sensed—by her fingers prior to having sense of them visually. She writes: “we do not experience a movie only through our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium” (2004: 63).

*Post Tenebras Lux* offers the spectator an engagement with levels; the film aims to make the spectator aware of his/her capacity to experience sensory phenomena. While viewing Reygadas’s film, we do not make contact with the forest’s smells and tactility directly with our senses of smell and touch, nor do we feel or get a scent of the many dogs gallivanting or resting. Through its cinematography, *Post Tenebras Lux* intends to rouse not just one sense at a time through perception, but the basic motility and spatial organization of the spectator’s body. The film’s capacity to elicit sensuous engagements is noted in many critical reviews. Dan Sullivan, among others, contends that “Reygadas aims to evoke pure sensation [, ...] make the viewer truly *feel* the audible and visible” (2013: 67). This evocation of sensation further ties the director to the avant-garde as defined by its early practitioner Germaine Dulac. The avant-garde “envelop[s] the viewer in a network [...] of sensations to experience and to feel” (Dulac [1932] 2011: 656). Reygadas’s director of photography, Alexis Zabé, accidentally discovered the merits of a lens which, in part, made this sensuous engagement possible. For most of the exterior shots, and a few interiors, Reygadas and his DP employed a beveled or refracted lens. This lens is polished flat so that (the camera’s and spectator’s) perception is drawn toward an inner circle, creating a “halo-like effect” and a “ghostly doubling” of whatever

appears in the fringes of the frame (Lim 2012).<sup>13</sup> For the director, this produced “an amazing effect” (Reygadas in Koehler 2013: 15); for film critic Peter Bradshaw it was “annoying and absurd” (2013). Contrary to Bradshaw’s dismissive remark, this effect creates a number of stylistic and philosophical conclusions, particularly when it is deployed for Steadicam and handheld shots. At the stylistic level, it blurs the motion of the figure on-screen at their peripheries, thereby dissecting the perfect figure–ground dichotomy of HD-quality cameras and images. These sorts of high-definition “horrible images,” says Reygadas (Lim 2013), “go further than the actual eye can see” and are therefore far from real perception. The intention with *Post Tenebras Lux* was to revisit and reinterpret the aesthetics of reality (Reygadas in Lim 2012), and the lens is a technical means that helped the director accomplish his aims.

Philosophically, a more accurate cinematographic perception of reality would also be more attuned to the levels of perception that exclude the human as visual object. In some films, the narrative motivation calls for such shots, but Reygadas would prefer to focus on landscapes, non-human animals, or pieces of nature that serve no other purpose than to be eye-pleasing. This tendency is consistently employed in Reygadas’s other features as well. It is this lack of a human character in the frame that again commands a sensuous engagement with *Post Tenebras Lux*. Indeed, this is how de Luca describes Gus Van Sant’s visionary realism in *Gerry* (2002), citing the film’s “disdain for anthropomorphic dimensions” (2014: 175). The prologue of *Post Tenebras Lux* serves as an example of such disdain.

In the opening scene the refracted lens of the Steadicam occasionally seems to take Rut’s point of view (Fig. 2.3). The shot is low, at the perceptual level where the infant can encounter the playful dogs firsthand. The shakiness of the camera accentuates this point-of-view (POV) shot, particularly when there are reverse shots between Rut’s POV and that of a cow or dog, or when the dogs run around and avoid bumping into Rut/the camera operator. After some minutes of exchange between what we think to be POV shots and shots featuring Rut in frame as the central object (Fig. 2.4), a long shot of the animals has Rut enter the right of

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<sup>13</sup>Reygadas in Koehler 2013: 15: “What happens is the outside of the lens is polished and shaved so it becomes flat, and then it creates a refraction. It was a 25 mm lens, and it reacts differently depending on the light and atmosphere, as well as the camera movement.”



**Fig. 2.3** *Post Tenebras Lux* (Reygadas 2013)

the frame unannounced, disrupting our assumption that we were viewing Rut's POV and our certainties about camera position(s). In Craig Epplin's observations (2012: 299), in Reygadas's films the camera often appears to line up with a character's gaze only to then deny us their POV as it drifts back to reveal them or, as I observe here, have the character enter the frame to our surprise. Writing on *Japón*, but similarly applicable here, Epplin argues that Reygadas's camera erases the human subject and questions the human subject's centrality in narrative film. We see this in the opening of *Post Tenebras Lux* and in many other scenes as well: for example, our introduction to Seven, the many shots of dogs and trees, a (CGI) devil, the frequent use of post-action lag, and the long take of waves gliding up to the sand in the beach episode. Reygadas's semi- or quasi-documentary aesthetic transcends the boundaries of the camera as factual observer of the (human) world, as well as transcending the perceptual treatment of the POV shots, which are more often used to establish a direct relationship between character and spectator.



**Fig. 2.4** *Post Tenebras Lux* (Reygadas 2013)

To reinforce this effect Reygadas consistently employs handheld cameras or a Steadicam. Moreover, instances in which a shot would normally cut and bring us to a new camera set-up to coincide with narrative momentum, Reygadas's shots frequently work against the logic of narrative or character identification and challenge our spatial awareness of where the characters are going and what they are getting into. In *Battle in Heaven*, the camera follows Marcos's trek as he pushes through persons in a crowded subway station; the camera tracks right through a subway turnstile and eventually loses track of him altogether. In the 2013 feature, we travel alongside Juan and Natalia in the sauna as they search the hallways for the Duchamp room. As they enter the Hegel room, the camera pursuing them continues directly inside. The camera moves forward at waist height, inches from one patron's flaccid penis, then breaks the threshold of the room and to a medium shot of a young girl who gazes at what we can only guess to be the new guests, Juan and Natalia. Behind her is yet another bored older couple. But with this tracking



motion our attention is shifted as Juan and Natalia disappear from the frame, sidestepping to the left. The protagonists' and spectators' spatial awareness of the room is not established before we lose contact with them. Reygadas does not grant us this ordinariness in our cinematic experience.

This constantly shifting dynamic of spatial, temporal, and perspectival co-ordinates intertwines "the levels of actor, character, and audience," writes William Rowlandson (2006: 1033) on *Japón*, and we should add to these three levels that of the relationship between spectator's body and Sobchack's non-anthropomorphic concept of the "film's body." The film's body, as I wrote in the Introduction, is the spectator's phenomenological experience of the cinematic apparatus. Unlike the apparatus of psychoanalytic film theory, the film's body participates in a relationship with the human spectator; the film's body expresses itself—with zooms, edits, etc.—and we perceive its expression. Meaning is drawn by the spectator from this exchange. Consider a wandering camera theorized as an aspect of the film's body and a humanly enabled camera that exists not as cinematic expression but for narrative economy. The latter should retain its interest in the film's protagonists, aid spectators in their comprehension and engagement with a human-centered story, and represent something. Reygadas has called these aesthetics "filmed theatre" (Higgins 2005). His images instead express themselves with obvious curiosity and with little regard for bridging the gap between spectators' desire for narrative momentum and character identification. Cinema returns to its fundamental capacity, as I understood Merleau-Ponty also to be arguing.

For Jennifer M. Barker, the spectator's body and the film's body both orient themselves in space with musculature, a given set of physical co-ordinates that come near to and are spatially separate from other persons and things. She writes: "[w]e comport ourselves by means of arms, legs, muscles, and tendons whereas the film does so with dollies, camera tracks, zoom lenses, aspect ratios, and editing patterns [...] We mark our position in relation to space by such things as shoulders and hips, whereas the film's frame is marked off by the edges of the celluloid strip, viewfinder, screen, and theatre" (Barker 2009: 77). She invokes Merleau-Ponty's concept of *ek-stase*, defined again as a transcendence whereby one can consciously activate the body to function in the world and carry out projects (2009: 76). With Reygadas's wandering camera we will see how activating the body for particular goals serves both film's body and spectator's body.

Barker argues that long tracking shots allow spectators to empathize with the film's body's musculature. During the sauna sequence in *Post Tenebras Lux*, with the lens nearly brushing the flaccid penis and then crossing the threshold of the Hegel room, we watch and feel as the camera comports itself in the world and finds what interests it: the young girl. As the Steadicam traipses through the soccer field with Rut, in the bobbing close-up of Seven atop his donkey near the beginning of the film, or when we move alongside Juan and Natalia in the sauna, "we feel those movements in our muscles because our bodies have made similar movements: we have whipped our heads from side to side, moved slowly and stealthily, and stretched out our bodies in ways that are distinctly human but inspired by attitudes like those that inspire the film's movements" (Barker 2009: 75). These are but a few examples of the ways in which *Post Tenebras Lux* is attuned to multiple levels of perception, in filmmaking and its processes of expression and projection, and in spectators' empathetic experience of the audio-visual displays. The cinematography functions like the camera of an avant-garde filmmaker, rather than that of strictly narrative cinemas.

We can also consider the levels of perception with reference to aspect ratios. *Silent Light* was shot in the now standard widescreen aspect ratio. The open plains of the Chihuahua province in Mexico called for such a presentation. Reygadas's camera would pan across these landscapes, taking its time to return us to a human character, and the narrative at hand. *Post Tenebras Lux* adopts the 4:3 ratio. The mountainous landscapes surrounding the city of Tepoztlán necessitated the return to the Academy ratio (1:37:1), as it was important to feel the heights of the mountains and be overwhelmed by the grandeur of the trees (Reygadas in Lim 2012). And when the Academy ratio is employed, we cannot help but think of Yasujiro Ozu's films, which employ this aspect ratio alongside low camera placements so as to come as close to possible to human perception.

The film's body comports itself with aspect ratios, cranes, dollies, and tracks—what Barker calls the musculature. But while humans are rooted to the ground and limited in our movements to tilts of the head up and down, or a walk forward which requires a gaze straight ahead, the camera has a freer range of mobility, reminding "us that we're not as competent, fast, graceful, and powerful as the film's body" (Barker 2009: 110). When Reygadas shoots the tallness of the trees with his refracted lens from what I suspect to be a dollied crane, while the dolly tracks forward the camera's gaze is to the right. Such a look in motion is a difficult

bodily movement for humans; it would mean sidestepping left and looking straight ahead (while not running into anything on our left), or walking straight ahead while looking right (while not running into any oncoming people or objects). Provided the aspect ratio and movement, I suggest we come to the fore ourselves and discover our bodies in this shot. Since the art's inception, the wind in the trees has been a standard trope for acknowledging the power of the filmic medium to present reality. Van Sant (de Luca 2014: 170) and Reygadas are no exceptions, but the latter does so in order to heighten spectators' awareness of their own bodies. Lingis writes of his favorite trees (1996: 62):

When we look at the sequoias, our eyes follow the upward thrust of their towering trunks touching the sky and their sparse branches fingering the mist. We comprehend this uprightness of their life not with a concept-generating faculty of our mind but with the uprighting aspiration in our vertebrate organism which they awaken. Our postural axis turned up before them emanates about itself a body image which is shaped not as the visual form our body would turn to a fellow-human standing at normal human viewing-distance but as our body looks to the sequoias.

Our gaze in the 4:3 format, combined with the humanly impossible view from the dollied crane, turns us back on ourselves. The trees stand erect and the film engages our perception and up-down axis. This coming to the fore of ourselves is how Marks describes her preferred mode of film experience. With the reversible exchange between film and viewer, the deployment of haptic visuality for haptic images, "I come to the surface of myself [...], losing myself in the intensified relation with an other that cannot be possessed" (Marks 2000: 184). Indeed, haptic images are akin to a new discovery, coming across a thing for the very first time (Marks 2000: 178).

I would describe Reygadas's cinema as a discovery. We know not what awaits us as every shot and sequence generates a different experience of both the film's body and, by extension, our own. This is unlike the recent cinema of Malick, a director whose work critics tend to liken to *Post Tenebras Lux*. In *The New World* (2005), a film set in the seventeenth century about the colonization of the territory now known as Virginia, Malick required the actors to generate a haptic experience for the audience. Reaching the shores of new land, characters were compelled to bring their eyes skyward or gaze about in wonder; some would run their hands across the trees and elements, and this effort was employed to set in motion, by

association, the senses of spectators. This façade of discovery was unnecessary, however, given Marks's theory.<sup>14</sup> Reygadas does not resort to projecting the tactile cinematic experience empathetically through character's limbs; the film's body that makes up this work called *Post Tenebras Lux* solicits haptic visuality through purely cinematic means, not theatrical ones.

One more cinematographic example will advance my argument about the film's body and the spectator's body. Consider another perceptually impossible view for human bodies—the camera mounted on the front of Juan and Natalia's speeding vehicle. In our first viewing of this episode, the one I named in the synopsis "a day of national celebration," we do not know from whose vehicle we are looking and who we are looking at. The prior sequence ends then rapidly cuts to a mounted camera which follows a motorcyclist for a minute, winding down a hilly road (we never learn who the motorcyclist is). Then Reygadas cuts to the inside of the vehicle and shoots briefly from behind the windshield, and eventually we cut to the protagonists. Similar to the dollied crane, with a mounted camera "The film throws us out and gives us nothing to hang onto." Barker continues: "In these moments [of mounted camera shots], we go where even fearless drivers and pilots would not dare go; we are riding without seat belts, without windshields, without any protection at all" (2009: 113). There is a kind of action here, more akin to an amusement park ride than a contemplative art film. My point is that both crane and mounted camera shots operate according to a certain logic, namely, to present what is not available to ordinary perception but nevertheless solicits an engagement with spectators' own bodies.<sup>15</sup> Whether we see the trees in the flesh or mediated through Reygadas's dreamy lens, or experience speed from the front of a moving-vehicle firsthand or on a screen, "[p]erception is ordered by the ordinances things realize, and we as perceivers realize what we are through the styles of postural integration they induce in us and in the images they project back on us of the

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<sup>14</sup>Cf. Koehler (2013), an excellent article dealing with the numerous problems in Malick's recent output.

<sup>15</sup>Rudolf Arnheim shared this description of the cinematic experience ([1933] 2011: 287): "Our eyes are not a mechanism functioning independently of the rest of our body. They work in constant cooperation with the other sense organs. Hence surprising phenomena result if the eyes are asked to convey ideas unaided by other senses. Thus, for example, it is well known that a feeling of giddiness is produced by watching a film that has been taken with the camera traveling very rapidly. This giddiness is caused by the eyes

way we look, hear, and feel to them” (Lingis 1996: 63). We encounter the trees or a winding road, but according to Lingis, via Merleau-Ponty, we also encounter ourselves.

Cinematography, for Reygadas, plays the same role as editing and storytelling; the seemingly arbitrary selection of shots, persons, and objects works in tandem with the seemingly fragmentary and incomplete selection of episodes described in the prior section. This leads us back to the description of embodiment Merleau-Ponty developed: that is, its pre-personal and anonymous existence. With a narrative unfolding in the manner befitting itself, its own designs as it were, and a cinematography which attempts to replicate the conditions of human perception on the one hand and bring new perceptions to us on the other, we have evidence for Reygadas’s claim that his cinema aims for “all the levels of perception.” I now turn to the often unacknowledged levels, dream and fantasy.

### A SLOW DREAM, “AS IF” IT WAS REAL

What grants the dream and fantasy sequences similar immanent, cinematographic properties to the present-tense images? How do we perceptually and sensuously experience them “as if” they are real and as legitimate narrative devices for the characters in the film? Reygadas’s film has no time for indications of *mise en abyme*, as a dream within a dream or un-/subconscious processes. Rather, the film is better described via the concept of immanence, or “present-ness,” as Sobchack illustrated; the dream episodes are immanent expressions of characters’ bodies, not “out-of-body” or disembodied events. Sobchack’s concept of “sensual catachresis” will help to describe the spectator’s immanent experience of these altered states of embodiment.

In response to the question as to why the refracted lens was used, Reygadas answered—not getting “too analytical about it”—that it cinematically projects how we might perceive a dream (Koehler 2013: 15). The seven-minute opening sequence of Rut playing in the field with dogs

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participating in a different world from that indicated by the kinesthetic reactions of the body, which is at rest. The eyes act as if the body as a whole were moving; whereas the other senses, including that of equilibrium, report that it is at rest.”

and cows is a dream, but we do not know it is a dream until Natalia asks her child about it in the film's first episode proper. What do we make of the rest of the scenes shot with the refracted lens? Clearly these are not all dreams. And what do we make of the scenes that are projections into the future? Reygadas offers viewers the chance to decide for themselves.

We go back and forth in our own heads, we imagine a future that never comes, and then you see the past, and we go back and forth [in the film *Post Tenebras Lux*] as we do in our own heads all the time.

I'm doing that in the film without a code or conventional limits in storytelling [...] The viewer nowadays is highly developed, and can go very far, and doesn't need to be taken by the hand. (Reygadas in Koehler 2013: 13)

Before Juan is killed, the film presents what appear to be flash-forwards of the family: at a Christmas party and at the beach, for example. We know they are flash-forwards because the children are older and the adults' hair-styles have changed. By the end of the film, it seems probable that these are not exactly dreams but fantasies of Juan, Natalia, Eleazar, or Rut, or all four, or combinations thereof, or simply the projection of what a nuclear family might look like from no one person's perspective in particular. Yet we only learn of their status as future projections at the end of the film, when Juan has died from his gun wound. Whether we engage with the episodes as dreams, fantasies, or projections of a future which could not possibly exist, what we see takes place at the levels of immediate perception and has a tangible and present-ness. Thus film critics have cited Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) as another influence on *Post Tenebras Lux*, despite their dissimilar genres. As the scholars in the feature-length video essay *Room 237* (Rodney Ascher, 2012) elaborate, the characters Jack, Wendy, and Danny all live through horrors and hallucinations that are impossible to verify as really existing, and this verification applies to spectators as well. To discuss one spectatorial experience of *Post Tenebras Lux*, it is necessary first to establish a phenomenological account of sleep and dreams.

According to Lingis, sleep is different from a coma. In our sleep we maintain a contact with the perceptual levels, our tasks, and our projects which need to begin again when we awake. Our dreams, however, are not merely the daily residues hypothesized by Sigmund Freud: the dream images are strange and fascinating, projecting their own perceptual, tactile, and sexual depths (Lingis 1996: 108–109). The dream is spatially

and temporally unstable and episodic, a series of blurry images that conceal and reveal the confounding experience of embodiment. A dream could be described as the obstinate state of our body, not a ready-to-hand and practicable field as in ordinary everydayness but the uncanny experience of the body as present-to-hand. Such an analogy echoes Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of the body in the moment and the habit body. When practicing new bodily movements, such as dancing, we become aware of the body as a thing that can disagree with our mental preparations for it; on the other hand, dancing is a real possibility because we have habitualized the movements of walking (Russon 2003: 29–31).

For example, we run and flail in our dreams, sometimes without much success; we are maimed and wounded, sexually excited and emotionally distressed, and each of the physical exchanges or emotional moods of our dream life can rouse us from our slumber. The dream ties itself to the waking state. Merleau-Ponty writes: “the world obsesses us even during sleep, and it is about the world that we dream” (Lingis 1996: 112, quoting Merleau-Ponty). Every practicable field (bodily expression directed outward) and unpracticable field (bodily and conscious states directed inward) of perceptual expression and projection exists in the same world; thus for the dreamer, his or her nighttime reveries or daytime fantasies exist as one level among the many. For Lingis and Merleau-Ponty, this “one-world hypothesis” means that there is not “one universal set of geometrical dimensions upon which the spaces opened in dreams and erotic obsessions can be measured. These spaces are absorbed into the geography of the practicable world, ‘as the double images merge into one thing, when my finger stops pressing upon my eyeball’” (Lingis 1996: 112, quoting Merleau-Ponty).

The dream sequences that populate the cinemas offer something different from Merleau-Ponty's one-world hypothesis. Most films indicate a dream from its diegetic present. The standard trope is to fade into a dream as a character slowly shuts their eyelids, or to cut sharply from a dreamy event to a character's startled awakening, punctuated by close-ups of the eyes opening or a gasp for breath. In films such as Luis Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* (1950), the dream is signified by the shift to soft focus and slow motion. The clear separation between waking and dreaming is relinquished in *Post Tenebras Lux*. As part of its attempt to evoke sensuous experiences in its spectators, this film presents the immanence of the dream as both an embodied experience and an uninterrupted

practicable field of perceptual awareness. Indeed, if we accept the director's claim—the lens perceives “as if” in a dream—this dreaminess (or fantasy of a projected future) works alongside other aspects of the film's body, including the cinematography, the slow pace of the episodes, the events therein, and the consistent use of the “hyperbolic long take” (de Luca 2014).

The sequences of *Post Tenebras Lux* seem to extend indefinitely and the shots therein withstand the command to cut, thereby providing the time required for spectators to explore objects, persons, and landscapes before altering the camera set-up. We see an attempt by the filmmaker to explore cinematic perception attuned to human perception (in our continuous and uninterrupted stream of sensuous perception of the world). Reygadas, alongside many other internationally renowned art cinema directors, such as Tsai Ming-liang, Abbas Kiarostami, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Béla Tarr, and Hou Hsiao-hsien, is part of a recent production trend embarking upon aesthetics of slowness. The turn to digital filmmaking has contributed to this proliferation of slow cinema. Matthew Flanagan (2008) hints at some of the activities involved in watching such a feature: contemplation, relaxation, “panoramic perception.”<sup>16</sup> Romney contends that slow cinema helps to establish mood rather than plot, and intensifies our reception of temporality (James 2010, quoting Romney). Yvette Bíró argues (2006) for the fullness of this minimalist cinema, which has the appeal of a more “universal vision” on the level of sensation. To sum up critics' and theorists' praise, despite the uneventfulness of story and plot there is more taking place in these films than in other trends, Hollywood, independent, or otherwise.

Slow cinema aims at a sensuous experience for spectators, its long takes perceptively illustrating real time passing in both the diegesis and at the level of the viewer's body. De Luca writes about *Gerry* (2014: 183) in a manner applicable also to *Post Tenebras Lux*: “Onscreen for minutes in overstretched shots, these images resist signification, being conveyed as heightened sensible presences. Here, the long take provides the view with plenty of time to study the phenomenal, textural, tactile, in short, the sensory-material qualities these landscapes radiate.” The long takes and slow episodes of *Post Tenebras Lux* may not have a strong narrative motivation, but the extended experience of the film's temporality,

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<sup>16</sup>Cf. Keathley (2006: 41–49), on panoramic perception.



equalized as it is across the film's episodes, suggests that these sequences all exist on the same plane of reality. Further, by not clearly demarcating the dream or fantasy of the episode, the (non-)event depicted in a given episode presents the literalness of the viewed. The consistent style employed throughout suggests Merleau-Ponty's one-world hypothesis. Although varying in intensities, the events and episodes form a description of the phenomenological subject whose bodily and mental organization does not differentiate, in a Cartesian mode, between mental and physical experiences—dream, fantasy, and desire are part of embodied existence. If we agree with Barker's argument that we empathize with the film's body, my provocative claim is that Reygadas allows us *to feel* dream and fantasy and desire, or at least to feel "as if" we perceive them.

The immanence of these dream or fantasy episodes resonates with Sobchack's argument that critics and theorists resort to the phrase "the film [shot, scene, or sequence] felt 'as if' it were real" because language lacks a better one. In her phenomenology of film experience, it is no longer necessary to posit a hierarchy of the senses. Thus being "touched" by the film—when not "actually" being touched—is not metaphorical. Sobchack demonstrates how all the senses are ignited in the film experience, or, in Barker's terms, we feel the reversible exchange of empathy between film's body and our body—the immanent although diegetically unreal episodes of *Post Tenebras Lux* work in the same way.

Sobchack develops the concept of sensual catachresis for examining our relationship to cinema. Catachresis is a "false or improper metaphor;" "it mediates and conflates the metaphoric and the literal" and is used "when no proper, or literal, term is available" (Sobchack 2004: 81, quoting Richard Shiff). Sobchack's examples include the "head" of a pin or the "arm" of a chair. Thus when a film critic contends that a shot felt "as if" it was real, that critic is reflecting upon himself and his body to find the appropriate relationship between his sensuous experience and that which cannot be sufficiently literalized. With sensual catachresis, in "trying to describe this complex reciprocity of body and representation, our phrases turn back on themselves to convey the figural sense of that experience as literally physicalized" (Sobchack 2004: 82).

*Post Tenebras Lux*, through its formal and narrative qualities, legitimizes the often unexplored realities of being-in-the-world, such as dreams and hallucinations, and we can understand the film better, and three sequences in particular, via the concept of sensual catachresis. Reygadas attempts to bring the figuratively real of a desire

into the literally, although imagined, real for Natalia. The sex sequence does not operate as metaphor or symbolism, but immanently exists for her “as if” real: that is, the embodied reality of fantasizing and desiring. Her sexual problems with Juan, revealed in a later sequence, suggest that the earlier orgy apart from her husband is an impossible yet desired event. The focus on the tactile elements in this sequence, such as the varying textures of flesh, further demonstrates the haptic visuality the screen demands. The continuous stream of embodied experience is also addressed in the shift from Rut’s dream to conscious state. When she awakens in tears and tries to bring her dream to language, we see and hear her struggle with phrases to describe the lingering resonance of the immanent experience. Rut’s playful dream turned thunderstorm continues to live itself in her consciousness. And finally, the collective but imaginary flash-forward episodes of the family at a Christmas party and at the beach are not symbolic representations of what a nuclear family could be—these are fantasized futures of ordinary everydayness or, as Stanley Cavell calls it, the film medium’s power to show what is otherwise unseen to our everyday lives: the ordinary (Macarthur 2014: 92–95). These banal futures are latent in Juan, Natalia, Eleazar, and Rut, and were awaiting realization. However, in a kind of reverse melodrama similar to Gaspar Noé’s *Irreversible* (*Irréversible*, 2002) or François Ozon’s *5x2* (2004), Juan is murdered, and therefore these episodes will only ever exist as latent potentialities of an ordinary everydayness. If we follow de Luca’s claim that the long take affects spectators sensually, that the cinema is a haptic and tactile experience, and that the analysis of the cinematic apparatus and embodied spectatorship is best described as a reversible exchange between film and viewer’s body, what we are sensing in *Post Tenebras Lux* is the sensation of a dream “as if” it was real. Sobchack aptly concludes: “In the film experience the nonverbal mediation of catachresis is achieved literally by the spectator’s lived body in *sensual* relation to the film’s *sensible* figuration” (Sobchack 2004: 83).

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