

**‘The Open Whole’: Human-Nonhuman Relationality in Carlos Reygadas’ Neo-Surrealist *Post Tenebras Lux* (2012)**

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## **Abstract**

This article reads Carlos Reygadas' neo-surrealist film *Post Tenebras Lux* in dialogue with Eduardo Kohn's anthropological text *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* in order to interrogate the human-nonhuman relationality that characterises Reygadas' filmmaking. I examine the ways Reygadas' and Kohn's works intersect around themes of semiosis, dreamscapes, death and the relationship between nonhuman worlds and precarious categories of human life. My analysis also attends to the surrealistic elements and antecedents that shape human-nonhuman relationality in *Post Tenebras Lux*, with particular reference to surrealist celebrations of oneiric spaces and appeals to the reenchantment of a world darkened by reason. My argument is twofold: I demonstrate that, in the surrealist tradition, Reygadas opens up the human to nonhuman ontologies as a means of challenging the legacy of restrictive, rationalistic thought; and in doing so, his film implicitly foregrounds an 'open' form of posthumanism, which works in tandem with human social and existential concerns.

## **Keywords**

Mexican cinema; Posthumanism; Carlos Reygadas; Dreamscapes; Death; Enlightenment

**‘The Open Whole’: Human-Nonhuman Relationality in Carlos Reygadas’ Neo-Surrealist *Post Tenebras Lux* (2012)**

This article examines the aesthetics and implicit politics of human-nonhuman relationality in Mexican director Carlos Reygadas’ most recent film, *Post Tenebras Lux* (2012), and questions how this relationality intersects with the film’s neo-surrealistic elements. Even though *Post Tenebras Lux* gained decidedly mixed reviews across the international media directly following its release,<sup>1</sup> Reygadas won the Best Director Award at the Cannes Film Festival for this film in 2012, and as such it serves to consolidate his growing reputation as one of the most important contemporary filmmakers in the international film circuit. *Post Tenebras Lux* resists summarisation due to its departure from dialogue and its resistance to linear narrative progression. The film unfolds through a surrealistic free association of thought, which propels spectators across fantasies and dreams, and through divergent pasts and imagined futures, with little, if anything, to separate these imagistic paths. Broadly speaking, *Post Tenebras Lux* follows a wealthy family after their relocation from Mexico City to rural Mexico, and observes their relationships with each other, their animals, the wider rural community, and the sylvan and, sometimes, maritime landscapes that surround them. These rural and domestic episodes are interrupted on occasion with episodes shot abroad featuring an English school’s rugby team and an orgiastic French bathhouse with rooms named after Hegel and Duchamp. The film builds to a climax when the patriarch of the wealthy family, Juan, comes home to find one of his former employees, Siete, stealing his electronic devices with the help of another man. When Juan confronts these men, he is shot and he (possibly) dies from the injuries he

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<sup>1</sup> Negative reviews included Xan Brooks, ‘Cannes 2012: Post Tenebras Lux – review’, *The Guardian*, 24 May 2012, and Eric Kohn, ‘Carlos Reygadas’ *Post Tenebras Lux* Is a Mess of Half-Baked Ideas’, *IndieWire*, 24 May 2012.

sustains. Juan's young children tell Siete that their father is dead, but an episode showing a future party that takes place when both the children and Juan are older suggests another possible future; the film plays on these contrastive eventualities. Soon after Juan's possible death, Siete meets his own demise in an episode of surrealistic self-decapitation that takes place in front of the forest after his estranged family leave him for the second time. Siete's blood pours down from the sky and drenches the grass beneath him in a sequence that exemplifies Reygadas' blending of religious iconography, nonhuman landscapes and surrealistic images – a hybrid aesthetic that characterises his film.

*Post Tenebras Lux* continues in the tradition of Reygadas' previous three feature-length films – *Japón* (2002), *Stellet Licht* (2007) and *Batalla en el cielo* (2005) – affording significant time and space on the levels of image and soundscape to nonhumans – the forest, the sea, domestic farmyard animals and the sky. Critics have noted this tendency in Reygadas' earlier films, pointing to the ways this aesthetic decentralises the human in relation to the natural and material environments it occupies. In particular, the horizontality of the camera is often evoked as a primary driver behind the production of this movement beyond the human. Tiago de Luca, for example, observes that 'screen mobility and horizontality' in *Japón* are used 'for their ability to relativize and diminish human presence in relation to the non-human world...'.<sup>2</sup> Underscoring the importance of the countryside in Reygadas' filmmaking, Joanne Hershfield also estimates that '75% of the scenes in [*Japón* and *Stellet Licht*] feature landscapes. With the use of wide-angle lenses and panning camera movement, both films emphasise the horizontal dimension of the world that seems united only by

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<sup>2</sup> Tiago de Luca, 'Contingency and Death in Carlos Reygadas's *Japón* and Lisandro Alonso's *Los muertos*' in *Slow Cinema*, ed. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2015), 219-230 (p.225)

a distant horizon'.<sup>3</sup> In addition to cinematographic horizontality,<sup>4</sup> the absence of dialogue in Reygadas' cinema is also presented as an example of the erasure of human exceptionalism. For example, Craig Epplin writes that the 'trivialisation' of speech in Reygadas' cinema erodes the distinction between the human and the nonhuman in his films. In Epplin's reading of *Japón*, the expansive 'recognition' of the nonhuman that accompanies this retreat of human speech is interpreted as echoing the ways 'global capitalism today mines the entire planet in a quest for new horizons of commodification'.<sup>5</sup> Through my discussion of *Post Tenebras Lux*, I seek to build on these critical observations about the central human-nonhuman relationality that marks Reygadas' influential filmmaking. *Post Tenebras Lux* has not yet been read through this lens,<sup>6</sup> and I aim to demonstrate that approaching the film from this perspective facilitates a generative engagement with the film's neo-surrealistic and posthuman implications.

My reading will situate *Post Tenebras Lux* in dialogue with the posthuman framework put forwards by Eduardo Kohn in *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, which was published in 2013.<sup>7</sup> While *Post Tenebras Lux* is part of a contemporary global movement in filmmaking that gives increasing

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<sup>3</sup> Joanne Hershfield, 'Nation and post-nationalism: the contemporary modernist films of Carlos Reygadas', *Transnational Cinemas*, 5.1 (2014), 28-40 (p.37)

<sup>4</sup> See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (London: Duke University Press, 2010) for a theoretical argument in favour of the human-nonhuman politics of 'horizontalities,' and see Laura McMahon, 'Animal Agency in *Le Quattro volte*' *Screen* 56.1 (2015), 108-114 for an excellent extension of this theory into nonhuman film studies.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Epplin, 'Sacrifice and Recognition in Carlos Reygadas's *Japón*', *Mexican Studies/ Estudios Mexicanos*, 28:2 (2012), 287-305 (pp.297-301)

<sup>6</sup> Gwendolyn Audrey Foster mentions that there is 'a strong indictment in the film about the treatment of nature and the environment' in her recent reading of *Post Tenebras Lux*, but she does not draw out the film's nonhuman elements, opting instead to focus on the patriarchal and class-based tensions the film evokes, and on a reading of Natalia, the protagonist's wife, in particular. See 'Feminist Disruptions in Postcolonial Film' in *Disruptive Feminisms: Raced, Gendered, and Classed Bodies in Film* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 5-27 (p.18).

<sup>7</sup> Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). Henceforth, all references to this work will be in-text.

attention to nonhumans,<sup>8</sup> Kohn's work features prominently within a comparable trend in anthropology that seeks to provide the critical tools for scholarly interactions with nonhuman elements (other notable theorists of this tradition include Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro). Reygadas' film and Kohn's anthropology share a posthuman outlook that seeks to displace human exceptionality, particularly on the level of representation, while not moving past the human completely. In Kohn's words 'the goal here is neither to do away with the human nor to reinscribe it but to open it' (6); a statement that resonates with Reygadas' approach to filmmaking, which does not depart from human existential and social conflicts even as it moves towards nonhuman worlds. This form of relationality is captured by the notion of 'the open whole' deployed in the title of this essay, a concept that in Kohn's work stands for an acknowledgement that representational processes characterise all forms of life, a realisation that enables us to situate human symbolic and linguistic 'ways of being in the world' as 'emergent from and in continuity with a broader living semiotic realm' that also includes modes of 'thought' and 'representation' that humans share with plants, animals and other nonhuman forms of life (16).

Over the course of this article, I shall explore the similarities between Reygadas' film and Kohn's anthropological framework that emerge in relation to themes of semiosis, dreamscapes, death and the relationship between nonhuman worlds and human categories of class and race. My analysis of these themes will also pay close attention to the neo-surrealistic outlook that shapes human-nonhuman relationality in the filmic episodes under discussion, with a particular focus on the importance of dreams in the history of surrealist thought and filmmaking, as well as the interplay between enchantment and disenchantment that has animated surrealist

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<sup>8</sup> See de Luca, 'Contingency and Death' for more on this global context

approaches to art. My overall argument is that *Post Tenebras Lux* opens up the human to nonhuman ontologies in order to evade the legacy of Enlightenment rationalism that constricts thought and representation, in keeping with earlier surrealist repudiations of positivism and utility. In foregrounding this human-nonhuman relationality, I shall argue, Reygadas' film also implicitly evokes a posthuman politics that promotes a vision of sustainability through recurrent images of, and proclamations about, trans-species communion and continuity. Due to the issues of class, race and capital that circulate alongside nonhuman worlds in the rural locale of *Post Tenebras Lux*, I shall demonstrate that Reygadas' posthuman vision of sustainability avoids some of the main charges that have been levelled against the 'turn' away from the human within theory: namely, that this turn too often disavows precarious categories of human life, and even contributes to the production of new inequalities and racisms.

### 1. Semiosis

*How Forests Think* grew out of Kohn's ethnographic work with the Ávila Runa indigenous community in Amazonian Ecuador. While attending to the specificities of this region, Kohn's book also seeks to craft broader conceptual tools 'out of the unexpected properties of the world beyond the human that we discover ethnographically', particularly those properties that relate to ideas of 'representation' and 'thought' (22). Kohn contends that socio-cultural anthropology is 'colonised by certain ways of thinking about relationality'; that it 'can only imagine the ways in which selves and thoughts might form associations through our assumptions about the forms of associations that structure human language' (21). Kohn argues that these assumptions are frequently projected onto nonhuman beings, which are then required to 'provide us with corrective reflections of ourselves' (21). By contrast, in taking the

premise of ‘thinking forests’ seriously, Kohn’s monograph ‘aims to free our thinking of that excess conceptual baggage that has accumulated as a result of our exclusive attention...to that which makes us humans exceptional’ (22). Kohn’s anthropological suggestions unfold through images –oneiric, allegorical, photographic, each of which contains their own body of information– and in this spirit I shall explain his framework with direct reference to Reygadas’ filmic images rather than engaging in an extended theoretical introduction.<sup>9</sup>

The opening episode of *Post Tenebras Lux* brings the intersections between human and nonhuman selves directly into focus. The film opens with a young toddler running in an open terrain that is encircled by mountains and forests. We later learn that this toddler is Rut, the protagonist’s daughter (and she is also Reygadas’ daughter). This shot of Rut is marked by a halo-effect lens that is employed throughout the film as a whole, blurring the outer edges of the image and imbuing the episodes with oneiric and spectral qualities; ‘un estilo que desfamiliariza la imagen y la vuelve incómoda o perturbadora’, as Mariano Paz describes it.<sup>10</sup> Reygadas decided to incorporate this lens because it reproduced the sensation of imperfect vision that characterises human sight.<sup>11</sup> The chosen lens, therefore, does not value the corrected, clear or enhanced sight that cinema often facilitates, but privileges an uncertain form of vision that fills the image with ripples and echoes. These ripples blur the contours of individual bodily form that usually serve to separate the human from the broader environment.

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<sup>9</sup> While the rural Mexico of *Post Tenebras Lux* differs in important ways from Kohn’s ethnographic context, Kohn’s broader theoretical extrapolations make his work an evocative source to read in dialogue with Reygadas’ film, as I aim to demonstrate.

<sup>10</sup> Mariano Paz, ‘Las leyes del deseo: sexualidad, anomia y nación en el cine de Carlos Reygadas’ *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 92:7 (2015), 1063-1077 (p.1074)

<sup>11</sup> Dennis Lim, ‘All the Dreaminess of Reality’, *The New York Times*, 28 April 2013, 18.



A pack of dogs rush past Rut as she advances towards the camera. As the sequence continues, a hand-held camera moves to frame and follow multiple forms of animal life, including dogs, cattle and horses. The perspective constantly shifts between the human figure and the nonhuman animals, sometimes aligning with Rut's viewpoint, sometimes corresponding with the perspectives of the dogs as they run around, interact, and herd the cattle and the horses, and sometimes drifting across the terrain seemingly without any connection to an embodied stance. Already, through this cinematographic interplay of perspectives between the human and the nonhuman, we see the decentralisation of human vision and thought at work. As well as nonhuman animal life, the episode brings into focus swirls of heavy pink and grey clouds in the darkening sky, grass and plant life, and puddles of reflective water that further constitute and magnify the nonhuman environment. The small figure of Rut is lost in the sublime world that engulfs her, a world that produces an increasing sense of danger as the Edenic symbolic undertones of the opening moments erode.

This opening episode is characterised by the relationality that Kohn labels *semiosis*, which is broadly defined as 'the creation and interpretation of signs' (9). Kohn's notion of semiosis, which is central to his theory, draws on the philosophy of Charles Peirce in order to extend the ideas of the sign and representation beyond the human. For Kohn, as for Peirce, semiosis is marked by three modalities – iconicity, indexicality and the symbolic – only one of which (the symbolic) is unique to human life. Crucially, this symbolism is not detached from the nonhuman world, for it rests on the interplay of indices, which in turn rely on iconicity – semiotic modalities are inextricably bound together. Kohn's understanding of semiosis as a process that includes and emerges from nonhuman worlds challenges our usual ideas about what counts as 'representation'. For Kohn, dominant understandings of representation are

too often tied to the linguistic thought that characterises human existence, and representation has therefore become an exclusionary category that cuts the human off from the nonhuman world that does not share this mode of linguistic sign production. On this point, Kohn writes that ‘nonhuman life-forms also represent the world. This more expansive understanding of representation is hard to appreciate because our social theory – whether humanist or posthumanist, structuralist or poststructuralist – conflates representation with language’ (8). Moving beyond language, Kohn argues that tropical plants can *represent* the world, for example, through the ways they have adapted across time to reflect the environment that surrounds them (182). As this example makes clear, representation is neither purely linguistic nor solely symbolic in Kohn’s anthropology beyond the human.

In part, this semiotic relationality emerges in Reygadas’ opening episode through the minimisation of language and the consequent creation of filmic space and time for other representational elements. The only ‘language’ that enters the opening episode is emitted in a broken form from the toddler through the words she uses to name the animals that surround her: ‘vacas’, ‘burros’, ‘perrito’. These words are blurted out, disjointed from grammatical sentence structures, and seem to function more as memorised indices that refer directly to certain figures rather than indicating an understanding of the symbolism that animates the internal structuring logic of language. The toddler’s words transport viewers back to a time in which language exists as a potentiality that is not yet fully acquired or developed. This minimisation of human language is characteristic of what Reygadas refers to as the ‘arte de la presencia’ that animates his films. For Reygadas, presence stands in sharp contrast to ‘representation’, or, rather, to a particular form of representation that marks theatre and literature. Reygadas has stated that ‘la mayoría del cine que se hace en el mundo

no es cine, sino básicamente literatura filmada con los medios teatrales, donde lo más importante es contar una buena historia'.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Reygadas strives to bring his filmmaking closer to the 'silent' observational arts (linguistically speaking) of painting or photography,<sup>13</sup> in order to capture 'la esencia de seres, objetos y paisajes'.<sup>14</sup> It seems to me that Reygadas' notion of *presencia* challenges dominant notions of 'representation' in a comparable way to Kohn's semiotic theory. Reygadas strives to move beyond a particular type of linguistic, narratological human representation in order to capture the essence of human and nonhuman being.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, for Kohn the essence of all living being lies in a 'new' form of representation that lies beyond the parameters of language and the symbolic.

Indeed, as language and narrative fade in Reygadas' opening episode, the nonhuman modalities of thought and representation that Kohn describes come to the fore. The camera's sustained focus on nonhumans permits the observation of animals in processes of interpreting the iconic and indexical signs of other animals, anticipating the meanings of movements and sounds, and reacting to these guessed meanings – as in the example of the 'herding' movements that connect the farmyard animals together. Similarly, the slow cinematographic focus on the cloud formations in the sky centralises the ways these clouds index the approaching storm that veils the filmic image, implicitly providing another example of a way in which nonhuman figures produce signs and represent their environment. When it erupts, this storm affects the cinematic image directly: lightening illuminates Rut in sharp flashes, and between the forks of lightening the screen is left in complete blackness. These

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<sup>12</sup> Reygadas quoted in 'Lo que más se filma no es cine', *Reforma, Cultura*, 11 December 2009, 26.

<sup>13</sup> 'Reygadas habla de la teoría del cine', *Notimex, El Universal*, 1 March 2013 <<http://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/907082.html>> (accessed 5 June 2016)

<sup>14</sup> Ivett Salgado, 'Carlos Reygadas, el director de los no-actores', *Milenio*, 27 December 2012 <<http://www.pressreader.com/mexico/milenio/20121227/282248072893936>> (accessed 5 June 2016)

<sup>15</sup> The infant, non-professional child 'actor', who cannot yet 'act', 'perform' or fully speak, contributes to this aesthetic.

examples are illustrative of the ways Reygadas embeds his images within the world, suturing together human thought and nonhuman realms in his invocation of cinematic *presence*.

The nonhuman selves of this opening episode react to and index events and other selves that exist in the broader landscape beyond the frame of the filmic image, introducing an unpredictability that works to disturb the film's symbolic properties. De Luca emphasises the importance of this 'sheer contingency of the natural world' in his engagement with *Japón*, averring that this contingency is 'as much an integral part of the slow film's aesthetic as are its solitary and sparse human protagonists'.<sup>16</sup> De Luca draws on the influential film theory of André Bazin in order to interrogate this contingency as it plays out in relation to animals, noting how the animal appears in Bazin's writings as 'the dynamic and embodied evidence of an intractable reality surplus within the filmic image, often working against, and spite of, its carefully planned structure and design', a surplus marked by a sense of 'risk and death'.<sup>17</sup> In *Post Tenebras Lux*, as in his earlier films, Reygadas makes his lens susceptible to the accidental, chance and fortuitous movements of animals and the nonhuman environment. In the case of the opening sequence, the nonhuman modalities of representation of which this unpredictability consists work to move the image away from solely human representational economies, transforming the Edenic symbolism into something less containable. For example, Reygadas' domestic farmyard animals are defamiliarised as the camera captures their contingency, and a looming untamed, wildness, which leaps beyond human symbolic structures, begins to imply uncertainty and danger as the toddler is submerged in darkness.

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<sup>16</sup> De Luca, 'Contingency and Death', 219-220

<sup>17</sup> De Luca, 'Contingency and Death', 221

It is worth noting briefly that this theme of contingency is central to Kohn's theory of 'the self,' which is defined in relation to futurity and anticipation. For Kohn, 'Selves, human or nonhuman, simple or complex, are outcomes of semiosis as well as the starting points for new sign interpretation whose outcome will be a future self. They are waypoints in a semiotic process' (34). While selves are formed through absences – through the trace of what is lost or deceased – they materialise in acts that anticipate future events. Reygadas' film seems to reflect this sense of movement, imagined and enacted, on both the level of its sustained incorporation of the contingency of nonhuman selves and in its associative formal structure, which plays with temporality and anticipated pathways in an experimental manner.

## **2. Dreamscapes and Enlightenment**

Human-nonhuman relationality at the start of *Post Tenebras Lux* is mediated through a dream. The opening episode, it is subtly implied, is the dream of Rut, who wakes her mother up speaking of animals. The appearance of a glowing, chimerical man-devil figure carrying a briefcase directly after the opening episode (and repeated once again towards the end of the film) further extends these oneiric aesthetics.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the importance of dreaming is indicated towards the end of the film through the incorporation of Neil Young's song 'Only a Dream' while Juan lies in his possible sickbed or deathbed, depending on whether we believe that he eventually dies.

Dreams, according to Kohn, are one prominent modality through which human and nonhuman worlds come into contact and are negotiated. His experiences with the *Ávila Runa* convinced him that 'dreams are not commentaries on the world; they take

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<sup>18</sup> Reygadas has stated that 'this image came out of a dream I had, set in my parents' house, where I lived until I was five. The toolbox the demon is carrying is actually my father's, the one he was carrying before I was born and he still has'. See Robert Koehler, 'The Impossible Becomes Reality: An Interview with Carlos Reygadas', *Cineaste* (summer 2013), 10-15 (p.12).

place in it' (140); that dreams 'grow out of and work on the world, and learning to be attuned to their special logics and their fragile forms of efficacy helps reveal something about the world beyond the human' (13). Kohn writes that for the Ávila Runa humans can become animals (taking on the perspective of the jaguar, for example) and animals see themselves as humans and can become human (when dogs are fed *aya huasca* by their human companions they are believed to share human visions, just as humans are thought to enter the viewpoint of the masters through this same hallucinogen). Within these processes, the point is that the self takes up these divergent perspectives *without* completely becoming-other. For the Ávila Runa, dreams function at this intersection of perspectives, this 'open whole' between worlds, which allows for these shifts in stance. Reygadas' film resonates with this sense of the dream as a threshold through which the human is exposed to nonhuman ontologies.

This intermingling of dream and the natural, nonhuman environment also relates to the surrealist antecedents of Reygadas' film. Historically, surrealists invoked dreams and natural landscapes to resist the perceived 'disenchantment' of the world that characterised the Age of Reason. As surrealist scholar Paul Hammond notes, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer famously claim at the beginning of their seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that 'the program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world', and with Enlightenment 'the concordance between the mind of man and the nature of things that he had in mind is patriarchal: the human mind, which overcomes superstition, is to hold sway over a disenchanted nature'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by John Cumming (London: Verso, 1999), 3-4. German exiles writing in the years following the Holocaust, Adorno and Horkheimer sought to question 'why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism' in the twentieth century (xi). To answer this question, the authors examine the elements that allowed reason to become a totalitarian structure of domination: its blindness and lack of reflection, its unchecked pursuit of control over nature, the commodification of thought, and rationalism's abhorrence of 'outsideness', which it subsumes under a unifying system (xi-20). As will

These sentiments capture the spirit of the rationalism that the surrealists reacted against. While surrealists were often attached to urban centres, and engaged creatively with modernisation and capitalism, Hammond notes that after around 1939 they frequently appealed to ‘the reenchantment of nature’ as a means of freeing human thought from the strictures of positivism.<sup>20</sup> Hammond writes that ‘what had begun as an ironical disavowal of nature in favour of the enchantments of the life-world was reversed...in favour of the Arcadian potential of the embattled natural world, with its elective sites in Mexico, the Antilles, Canada, and in rural France...’.<sup>21</sup> The complexities of the historical surrealist engagements with nature in the specifically Mexican context fall outside the scope of this article, though they can be traced in the work of seminal figures such as André Breton and Antonin Artaud.<sup>22</sup> What is salient here is the ways in which Hammond’s identification of nature as ‘an imaginary ground of utopia’ for the surrealists<sup>23</sup> resonates with Reygadas’ neo-surrealistic appeal to the rural environment as a mechanism for combatting the effects of ‘rationalism’.

Like nature, dreams assumed a prominent position in surrealist thought.

Drawing on Sigmund Freud’s theory of the interpretation of dreams, the surrealists ‘atribuían a la psique del inconsciente y al estado onírico un potencial tanto

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become clear, Reygadas’ film implicitly targets a similar form of rationalistic thought that is rooted in exploitation and superiority and that is characterised by a detachment from the natural world.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Hammond, *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, Second Edition (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991), 2-3.

<sup>21</sup> Hammond, *The Shadow and Its Shadow*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> I do not have space in the current enquiry to provide a detailed overview of the history of Mexico and surrealism, though a rich and extensive literature on this subject exists. Suffice it to indicate here that the ‘discovery’ of Mexico and its natural terrain and autochthonous culture as ‘surrealist’ by European thinkers was plagued by problems of exoticisation, essentialism and projected idealisations, and often demonstrated a lack of sensitivity to the specific cultural realities of Mexico. At the same time, the influence of Mexico and its landscape on surrealist thought was ‘enormous’, in the words of Melanie Nicholson, in ‘Surrealism’s ‘found object’: The enigmatic Mexico of Artaud and Breton’, *Journal of European Studies* 43:1 (2013), 27-43 (p.28). For more information on the relationship between surrealism and Mexico see Luis Mario Schneider *México y el surrealismo 1925-1950* (México: Arte y Libros, 1978); Berit Callsen, ‘El (des)encuentro con el Otro: André Breton y Antonin Artaud en México’, *Mester* 2010 (<http://web.fu-berlin.de/phn/phn58/p58t1.htm>); Inés Ferrero Cándenas, ‘México y el surrealismo: la dimensión etnográfica’. *Valenciana*, 6.12 (2013), 113-126.

<sup>23</sup> Hammond, *The Shadow and Its Shadow*, 3.

iluminador-creativo como subversivo-liberador en cuanto a la revelación de la realidad interior del individuo', as Berit Callsen puts it.<sup>24</sup> Dreams provided a model through which artistic production could become 'unhindered by reason, and uninfluenced by aesthetic or moral considerations', as Stephen Sharot notes.<sup>25</sup> In particular, surrealists invoked the cinema as a space of 'oneiric illumination' and believed that 'the movie auditorium was...the festive tent of that quest after our tenebrous originary depths'.<sup>26</sup> To provide one of the most notable examples, the influential surrealist film *Un chien andalou* is illustrative of this tendency to connect films and dreams. Luis Buñuel describes this film as emerging from an 'encounter' between his dreams and those of Salvador Dalí.<sup>27</sup> The oneiric quality of Reygadas' blurred lens, which continues throughout the film, harks back to this longstanding connection between cinema and dreams.<sup>28</sup>

Just as the surrealists reacted against rationalism, in interviews Reygadas has positioned *Post Tenebras Lux* in relation to the legacy of Enlightenment. Reygadas describes the film's protagonist, Juan, as the 'unsatisfied Westerner...the distinguishing element of the Western world', an outlook that according to the director stems from the Enlightenment, 'that paradigm...has somehow ruined much of our lives'.<sup>29</sup> This viewpoint, coupled with Reygadas' expansive oneiric and nonhuman anti-rationalistic focus echoes the surrealist belief that 'the overarching rationalism of the Enlightenment, and of its avatar, positivism, had led to an alienating diminution of

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<sup>24</sup> Callsen, 'El (des)encuentro con el Otro'

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Sharot, 'Dreams in Films and Films as Dreams: Surrealism and Popular American Cinema', *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 24:1 (2015), 66-89 (p.70)

<sup>26</sup> Hammond, *The Shadow and Its Shadow*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Sharot, 'Dreams in Films and Films as Dreams', 73. See Foster, 'Feminist Disruptions in Postcolonial Film' for references to the ways in which Reygadas' aesthetics are tied to Buñuel's.

<sup>28</sup> When asked 'what was the thinking behind the use of the refracted lens?', Reygadas answers that 'it can suggest the way we might see a dream'. Cited in Koehler, 'The Impossible Becomes Reality', 15.

<sup>29</sup> Reygadas quoted in Lim, 'All the Dreaminess of Reality'.



the polysemic fulsomeness of the world that man inhabited and that inhabited him'.<sup>30</sup> The attraction to psychoanalytical accounts of the dream and the unconscious that has marked the historical development of surrealist thought is also evident in Reygadas' filmic philosophy. For instance, the director has stated that 'de alguna forma mis películas, al ser productos del inconsciente, pueden ser una especie de radiografía psicológica del autor'.<sup>31 32</sup> The title of Reygadas' film – which roughly translates as 'After Darkness, Light' – also signals a similar experimentation with the terms of lightness and darkness to the historical surrealists. While the surrealist notion of 'oneiric illumination' plays on the idea of a new lightness produced through the darkness of dreams, which can displace the darkness produced by the proclaimed lightness of Enlightenment, Reygadas' film too is entangled with the renewed lightness that emerges through dreams and the nonhuman world.<sup>33</sup>

Like the surrealists, Kohn draws on Freud (alongside Claude Levi-Strauss) in his description of the ways human thought can be opened up. Referring to Freud's theory of dreams and malapropisms, Kohn writes that 'when thought's "purpose of yielding a return" is removed what is left is that which is ancillary to or beyond what is practical: the fragile but effortless iconic propagation of self-organising thought, which resonates with and thereby explores its environment' (177). While Freud sought to harness such chains of associative thinking as means through which to access the symptoms of his patients, Kohn seeks to approach these chains in a different

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<sup>30</sup> Hammond, *The Shadow and Its Shadow*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Salgado, 'Carlos Reygadas, el director de los no-actores'

<sup>32</sup> This statement clearly points towards the human basis of thought processes. Yet I hope to demonstrate that in Reygadas' cinema, as for Kohn, human thought is often open to and shaped by the broader non-human environment.

<sup>33</sup> These metaphors of darkness and lightness also animate the classic critique espoused by Adorno and Horkheimer. For instance, the authors refer to the 'blind domination' and 'blindly pragmatized thought' of Enlightenment, which 'condemns the spirit to increasing darkness', and discuss the ways in which Enlightenment works to consume myth, which has always been 'obscure and enlightening at one and the same time'. Cited in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xiii-xvi.

light. He writes that: ‘rather than arbitrary, and pointing only inward toward the psyche, we might see these associations as thoughts in the world – exemplars of a kind of worldly thinking, undomesticated, for the moment, by a particular human mind and her particular ends’ (177). Put simply, for Kohn thought ‘without a return’ allows the non-human world to reverberate and work through our psyches in icons, upsetting the boundaries we usually see between inside and outside (187). Reygadas film hovers at this meeting point between worldly thinking and (neo-)surrealist thinking, an intersection engaged in the fundamental task of pushing human thought beyond repressive historical, representational and ontological barriers.

## 2. Posthuman Necroscapes

The halo-effect lens of *Post Tenebras Lux* has spectral as well as oneiric properties, invoking a sense of the death and liminality that marks the fabric of the film. As Dennis Lim points out in his review, this halo-effect creates a ‘blurred, ghostly doubling on the edges’.<sup>34</sup> As the environment, humans or animals come into contact with the screen’s edges they spill outwards in waves and reverberations, with multiple traces of their form appearing at once. This spectral quality of the trace ties into the film’s thematic focus on, and philosophical location of, death.

The most striking death of *Post Tenebras Lux* occurs with the surrealistic image of Siete’s self-beheading. After discovering that his gunshot has killed Juan, and then realising that his estranged family, who Juan had helped to locate, have left him once more, Siete walks into an opening between forest and mountains. The camera avoids his face as he stands in this terrain, instead focusing in on his lower torso in a close up, before switching to a long shot that shows a tree slowly falling down in the distance.

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<sup>34</sup> Lim, ‘All the Dreaminess of Reality’

The camera moves from this long shot to different perspectives in the forest that capture the trees that begin to fall one after the other from different angles. While continuing to 'face' the falling trees, Siete moves his hands up to the top of his head and pulls his head off, before falling to the ground in a pool of blood. While historical surrealist dismemberment and distortions of the body in art are often contextualised in relation to the embodied horrors of World War I, Reygadas' screening of decapitation functions as a neo-surrealist trace of the spectre of beheadings that have appeared in the violence surrounding the escalating violence of the drugs conflict in Mexico.<sup>35</sup> Paz reads this episode in similar terms, claiming that 'El suicidio de Siete...es una clara referencia a la extrema violencia que afecta a la sociedad'.<sup>36</sup>

The episode of Siete's death, which is reminiscent of the psychedelic, blood-drenched images from Alejandro Jodorowsky's Mexican surrealist cinema, is shot through with nonhuman imagery. This is in part due to the specific relationship Siete shares with the forest throughout the film. Siete is a lumberjack, and the film returns to the image of him standing by trees or cutting them down multiple times, tying their forms together. During one sequence, Siete is called by one of the local residents to cut down a tree that is protected by a woman who believes trees to be 'alive' in the same way that humans are 'alive'. The common animate and enchanted 'life' shared by Siete and the trees is therefore established in the film, although they exist in a clear hierarchical relation to one another that is akin to predation. In his final moments,

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<sup>35</sup> When President Felipe Calderón declared a war on drugs after assuming office in 2006, the violence of the conflict escalated and decapitations began to appear with increasing frequency. For more on the context of beheadings in Mexico see Andrea Noble, 'History, Modernity and Atrocity in Mexican Visual Culture', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* XCII: 3 (2015), 391-421; Ioan Grillo, 'Behind Mexico's Wave of Beheadings', *Time*, 8 September 2008; and Sergio González Rodríguez, *El hombre sin cabeza* (Madrid: Anagrama, 2010). Reygadas refers to this violent context in interviews, commenting that the 'red-orange' colour of the poster advertising *Post Tenebras Lux* carries 'the suggestion of blood', which is 'the colour of Mexico for me, because Mexico is bleeding. More people died in Mexico in the last six years than in Afghanistan. Our country is bleeding'. Cited in Koehler 'The Impossible Becomes Reality', 12.

<sup>36</sup> Paz, 'Las leyes del deseo', 1075.

however, Siete changes perspective in relation to the forest, becoming the severed tree rather than the severer. He has lost his position of dominance and is now the slain meat rather than the 'hunter', the fallen prey rather than the dominant, surviving 'I', to invoke Kohn's terminology.

Siete's death is integrated into broader natural forms. As he falls to the ground following his beheading, blood begins to pour down from the sky. This blood soaks into the ground, nourishing the grass, while the cattle graze on this plant life in the open terrain, their mouths covered in the traces of Siete's fallen blood. Reygadas' surrealistic use of blood in this episode works to displace the religious image of communion onto nature and bovine life. Siete's individual form might now be redundant, but his self seems to be located in a broader trans-species continuum; his blood is reincorporated into nonhuman worlds. This continuum evokes another possible interpretation of the film's title: lightness or life seems to continue through, and in the face of, the darkness of death, in the merging of religious iconography with a posthumanist sense of 'becoming'.

The idea of the passage of death into life ties into Kohn's notions of the relationship between the dead and the living. For Kohn, life and the 'self' exceed the individual being. The self continues through biological lineages and relational positions – through *semiosis* – and is forever marked by the absences of that which does not survive: 'what it is to be an *I*, a self, is...shaped by the many kinds of dead, their many kinds of bodies, and the histories of their many deaths' (210). This understanding of the continuity of life is seen, for example, in the case of the snout of the anteater or the example of the tropical plant provided earlier, both of which have adapted over evolutionary time to 'more exhaustively represent their surroundings', while other possible futures fall away to make room for these adaptations, which are

nevertheless marked by what is lost (182). This sense of life beyond the singular being is also apparent in the Runa community's relationship with the 'spirit master' realm of the forest, which is an afterlife of sorts: 'The realm of the masters houses all of the spectres of the past. And it is in this realm that the timeless *I* continues, by virtue of its intimate relation to these absences' (16). While Kohn purposefully avoids mapping human ethics or morality onto nonhuman worlds, his philosophical conception of death overlaps with posthumanism's wider grappling with the death-life continuum because it promotes, indirectly, the idea of an ethical, sustainable world that continues beyond individual human forms.<sup>37</sup> Reygadas' staging of Siete's death works to literalise the unity of posthuman becoming that carries on through individual demise.

The possible demise of Juan, the film's protagonist, works in a comparable manner. On his deathbed or sickbed, Juan speaks to his wife about the life that he has noticed in everything that surrounds him, both human and nonhuman. Juan refers to the idea of 'existence' as a notion of the continuity of the self that passes through lineages, commenting that when he was young all he had to do was exist and now it is his children's turn to do the same. He also refers to the shining, vibrant life he perceives in all things: the loud music from the nearby community, a chair and machines. This radical affirmation of the continuity of life both affirms and departs from Kohn's theory. Juan's proclamations about existence resonate with Kohn's sense of a projective future, but Juan departs from Kohn's semiotic theory in his reference to objects. Importantly, Kohn's notion of semiotic relationality does not extend to 'objects' as other nonhuman theories of relationality have.<sup>38</sup> Kohn writes that 'what

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Polity: Cambridge, 2013)

<sup>38</sup> See, for instance, Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social – An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005); and Braidotti, *The Posthuman*. Upon the publication of *How Forests Think*, Kohn received criticism within the anthropological community for his exclusion of 'non-living' objects from his theory of relationality, as evidenced by the 2014 issue of *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* (4.2), which contained five critical responses to Kohn's book from

differentiates life from the inanimate physical world is that life-forms represent the world in some way or another, and these representations are intrinsic to their being' (9); 'selves, not things, qualify as agents. Resistance is not the same as agency. Nor, contra Bennett (2010) does materiality confer vitality' (92). Despite this particular difference between Juan's dying statements about the vibrancy of the world and Kohn's exclusion of objects, Kohn's theory seems to me to offer the most appropriate nonhuman framework for a reading of *Post Tenebras Lux*, due to the particularly prominent place of 'living' nonhuman sylvan and rural environments in the film and due to the similarities between their works on the level of dreams.

The vision of death put forward in *Post Tenebras Lux* enables an extension of the critical analysis of death that has emerged in scholarship on Reygadas' previous films. Craig Epplin, drawing on the work of historian and anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz, has argued persuasively that whereas death used to be sublimated by a coherent nation-state in Mexico through the idea of sacrifice, in the globalised context of the present in which the power of the nation is waning death merely becomes an expression of waste.<sup>39</sup> In the case of *Japón*, Epplin avers, the strewn pieces of stone intermixed with dead bodies that end the film provides evidence of this changed meaning (or non-meaning) of death, for these materials, echoing the human bodies, will no longer be put to any meaningful 'use'.<sup>40</sup> While the untimely deaths of Siete and (possibly) Juan in *Post Tenebras Lux* evoke this sense of disposability and waste, the filmic situation of these deaths (and lives) within the broader nonhuman world

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other leading intellectuals. See, for instance, Philippe Descola, 'All Too Human (Still): A Comment on Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think*', *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4.2 (2014), 267-273; Bruno Latour, 'On Selves, Forms, and Forces', *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4.2 (2014), 261-266; and Marisol De la Cadena, 'Runa: Human But Not Only', *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4.2 (2014), 253-259.

<sup>39</sup> In advancing this argument, Epplin draws on Lomnitz, 'Times of Crisis: Historicity, Sacrifice, and the Spectacle of Debacle in Mexico City', *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003), and Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (New York: Zone, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> Epplin, 'Sacrifice and Recognition', 292.

positions them within an economy of meaning that exceeds the human social and existential realm. In this sense, *Post Tenebras Lux* subtly complicates Epplin's observation about Reygadas' earlier cinema that 'transcendence is...impossible within Reygadas' oeuvre; all action mimes the immanence of capital's colonisation of the planet',<sup>41</sup> by offering a sense perhaps not of transcendence but of the material continuity and incorporative nature of the ecological realm that the human emerges from and falls back into.

#### 4. The Politics of Hierarchy

The forest Kohn writes of is populated by questions of race, marginality and colonialism. For instance, the spirit masters of the forest 'are often thought of as European priests or powerful white estate owners' by the *Ávila Runa* (154), illustrating the historical interplay that ties positions of colonial power to positions of power in the forest. The traces of this colonial history mark the ecology of selves that enchants the forest, even though 'whiteness' ultimately becomes a relational – rather than essential – category in the *Runa*'s existence, and cannot be reduced to 'culture' or 'acculturative' processes (216). As Kohn puts it evocatively, 'bits of history, the detritus of prior formal alignments, get frozen inside the forest form and leave their residues there' (183). Given these imprints of race and colonialism in the semiosis of the forest, Kohn's theory presents an evocative route into asking questions about the politics of posthumanism and how these politics interact with existent categories of human identity.

While affording significant filmic time and space to nonhuman life, Reygadas' film contains shots that point to human social divisions that occur across the lines of

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<sup>41</sup> Epplin, 'Sacrifice and Recognition', 301.

wealth, class and race. In interviews, Reygadas states that his film has ‘sociological’ and ‘psychological’ dimensions that relate to a ‘clash’ between what he identifies, perhaps too starkly, as ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ strands of Mexican society.<sup>42</sup> Reygadas comments that Juan projects a ‘Western mind-set’ of ‘superiority’ in his interactions with the people that surround him, and that this outlook ties his protagonist to a historical ‘paradigm’ of ‘European rationalism’ marked by ‘war’, ‘colonialism’, ‘patriarchy’, and ‘exploitation’, in addition to various ideas of ‘progress’.<sup>43</sup> For Reygadas, both Juan’s wealth and his so-called ‘Western mind’ are responsible for his ‘chronic dissatisfaction’ and ‘disconnection’ from other humans and ‘from the natural world’; Reygadas attributes Juan’s disaffection to his class.<sup>44</sup> Alongside Juan and his family, Reygadas brings into focus the ‘non-Western’ strand of Mexican society (to use the director’s words) in a manner that resists the pitfalls of idealisation, exoticisation or identity politics. Reygadas states: ‘I’m not trying to say that’s a better way of life or whatever at all’, and comments that the problems that plague the rural community stem from the fact that ‘non-Western’ Mexico was ‘destroyed and raped [and] it hasn’t yet recovered’, terms that allude to the violent colonial formation of Mexican and the legacy of this violence in the present.<sup>45</sup> Reygadas’ reflections evoke aspects of what Latin American decolonial theorist Aníbal Quijano refers to as the ‘coloniality of power’ to denote the lasting impact of Eurocentrism in Latin American history and cultures, and to invoke the ongoing inequalities that occur along the axes of race and

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<sup>42</sup> See David Barker and Carlos Reygadas, “I’ve Never Understood a Traditional Screenplay”: Carlos Reygadas on *Post Tenebras Lux*, *Filmmaker*, 1 May 2013 <<http://filmmakermagazine.com/66943-ive-never-understood-a-traditional-screenplay-carlos-reygadas-on-post-tenebras-lux/>>

<sup>43</sup> Barker and Reygadas, “I’ve Never Understood a Traditional Screenplay”

<sup>44</sup> Koehler and Reygadas, ‘The Impossible Becomes Reality’, 12-14.

<sup>45</sup> The notion of a foundational ‘rape’ of course harks back to Octavio Paz’s seminal mid-century psychoanalytical ‘diagnosis’ of Mexican national identity and the legacy of colonialism in *El laberinto de la soledad* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988).



labour.<sup>46</sup> Quijano writes that ‘the European paradigm of rational knowledge, was not only elaborated in the context of, but as part of, a power structure that involved the European colonial domination over the rest of the world’<sup>47</sup>, in a manner that resonates with Reygadas’ sense of the exploitative, ‘rational’ superiority of his wealthy ‘Western’ protagonist.

Social divisions between the wealthy and non-wealthy are apparent in the contrast between party sequences in *Post Tenebras Lux*. The lavish, luxurious celebration thrown by Juan and his family is notably disjointed from the modest celebration organised by the rural community. At Juan’s party, relatives and friends hand out US dollar bills to the children, encouraging them to become businessmen when they grow up, while hired waiters serve food at the numerous, immaculately-set tables. Juan and his guests discuss Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov, while at the rural party Mexican national traditions become the topic of conversation. The identitarian ‘clash between Western Mexicans and non-Western Mexicans’<sup>48</sup> that Reygadas describes erupts at the rural party in a tense, drunken debate about who is more ‘Mexican’: the impoverished rural residents or the wealthy, cosmopolitan upper class. Conceptions of race animate this divide, as Juan is identified by one of the local residents as ‘güero’.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Anibal Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/ Rationality’, *Cultural Studies* 21:2-3 (2007), 168-178. Quijano contends that coloniality ‘is still the most general form of domination in the world today, once colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed. It doesn’t exhaust, obviously, the conditions nor the modes of exploitation and domination between peoples. But it hasn’t ceased to be, for 500 years, their main framework’ (p.170).

<sup>47</sup> Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/ Rationality’, 174.

<sup>48</sup> Lim, ‘All the Dreaminess of Reality’.

<sup>49</sup> I follow sociologist Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa’s definition of *güera/o* as ‘an adjective that refers to somebody considered to be whiter and/or blonder and/or having fairer or lighter skin colour (in comparison to others)’, in ‘Distributed intensities: Whiteness, mestizaje and the logics of Mexican racism’ *Ethnicities* 10 (3), 387-401 (p.400). In this article, Moreno Figueroa discusses the ways in which ‘the colonial importance of hierarchy and caste had lasting effects’ in Mexico (4), despite the fact that ‘racial discourses have throughout time, up to this contemporary period, faded away behind national,

As the examples of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov convey, Juan and his family are tied by Reygadas to the pillars of European humanistic culture. This is also apparent when Juan and his wife visit a French bathhouse for swingers, which contains rooms that are named after Hegel and Duchamp. This latter episode works to connect capital to the heights of both cultural and orgiastic possibility in a manner that calls to mind a version of Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* that makes use of all shapes of bodies (in line with Reygadas' signature style of eroticism).

On the other hand, the legacy of Enlightenment, and its relation to human inequalities, emerges through the themes of electricity and technology that divide the elite from the poor. Siete, we learn at the beginning of the film, has installed all of the electricity cables into Juan's home, using only the finest brands. The internet, and internet pornography, are identified early on as objects that separates the populace along the axis of capital, for only those with money can gain access to this technological prosthesis. The tension that leads to Juan being shot stems from the theft of technology from his home by Siete, the man who set up these devices. The scientific-technological legacy of the Enlightenment is thereby positioned as a conflict upon which broader class-based tensions evolve.

Reygadas' attention to these human social divisions alongside his aesthetic turn towards nonhuman worlds has significant consequences for posthuman politics. To date, one of the most persuasive arguments *against* the turn beyond the human in scholarship is the claim that this turn negates precarious categories of the human or, worse, produces new forms of marginality and new categories of human exclusion. The special issue on 'Theorizing Queer Inhumanisms' that appeared in *GLQ* in 2015

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cultural and economic explanations of social hierarchies and, as a consequence, their effects have been somehow masked' (4-5).

provides convincing arguments in this vein. For instance, Jinthana Haritaworn points out that animal and environmental studies can create inequities that place already marginalised indigenous populations below animals or the environment, as subspecies, due to these peoples' perceived 'misuse' of these entities in the face of exclusionary 'Western' conceptions of environmentalism and the humane treatment of animals. Environmentalism and animal rights movements can therefore produce new racisms.<sup>50</sup> Reading Kohn alongside Haritaworn, one could see how the feeding of *aya huasca* to the dogs by the Ávila Runa, cited earlier in this essay, provides one such moment of geopolitical disjunction, along with these dogs' general malnourishment and slender frames – a viewpoint that is of course absent from Kohn's text. Similarly, Reygadas' depictions of violence against animals in rural settings – in *Post Tenebras Lux*, Juan violently attacks his favourite dog, badly injuring her – also provokes such a response in his global, art-house audiences.<sup>51</sup> For comparable reasons, Haritaworn cautions that 'It is...essential to interrogate the nonhuman alongside the dehumanisation of "Man's human Others" and to understand what disposes them to becoming animal's other (or object's other)'.<sup>52</sup> Zakiyyah Iman Jackson also points out that the 'human' is rarely interrogated in attempts to 'move beyond the human' – 'What and crucially *whose* conception of humanity are we moving beyond?' – while the 'post' of posthumanism has no temporal-spatial dimension as such which leaves it open to repeat past metaphysical inequities.<sup>53</sup> According to Jackson: 'Whether machine, plant, animal, or object, the nonhuman's figuration and mattering is shaped by the gendered racialization of the field of metaphysics even as the teleological finality is indefinitely

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<sup>50</sup> Jinthana Haritaworn, 'Decolonizing the Non/Human', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 21:2-3(2015), 210-213 (pp.212-213)

<sup>51</sup> See de Luca 'Contingency and death' for a discussion of animals in *Japón*

<sup>52</sup> Haritaworn, 'Decolonizing the Non/Human', 212.

<sup>53</sup> Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, 'Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movement "Beyond the Human"', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 21:2-3(2015), 215-218 (p.215)

deferred by the processual nature of actualisation or the agency of matter'.<sup>54</sup> It is important, then, to hold the human and the nonhuman alongside one another without collapsing these terms into each other indistinguishably so that we might be sensitive to the ways nonhuman and human worlds – and engagements with these worlds – perpetually shape and affect one another.

The horizontal 'flattening' of life (and non-life) along a singular plane that is prominent in many accounts of the posthuman is something that Kohn self-consciously critiques. While Kohn perhaps dismisses these 'horizontal' accounts too quickly, it is nevertheless worth taking his line of argument seriously. Kohn's critique rests on the premise that 'in the hopeful politics we seek to cultivate, we privilege heterarchy over hierarchy, the rhizomatic over the arborescent, and we celebrate the fact that such horizontal processes – lateral gene transfer, symbiosis, commensalism, and the like – can be found in the nonhuman living world'; but for Kohn 'this is the wrong way to ground politics' (19). Kohn's point is that we should not project human morality and ethics onto nonhuman hierarchical forms (which are inherently devoid of human morality), despite the fact that human and non-human hierarchies meet in uncomfortable ways, such as in the clear colonial inflections of certain inter-species relations (170). Extending Kohn's theory of hierarchies away from his text, I suggest that the intersectionality between the human and nonhuman in Reygadas' *Post Tenebras Lux* provides one juncture at which we can extrapolate a possible political consequence of hierarchy. In Reygadas' filmmaking horizontality and hierarchy clearly interact: while horizontality is often apparent on the level of the cinematographic movement that seeks to capture the human and the nonhuman along a plane, hierarchies also mark the perspectival interplay of the camera as well as the human

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<sup>54</sup> Jackson, 'Outer Worlds', 217.

interactions that are characterised by persistent social divisions and inequalities.

Following *Post Tenebras Lux*, I would like to suggest that by being attentive to the ways the horizon is undercut and disturbed by hierarchy we can avoid the risk of disavowing certain categories of marginalised life. This of course does not mean that we should naturalise hierarchy on a human level or posit as somehow inevitable; but rather the opposite, that we should recognise its continued existence and need to be countered even at the threshold to nonhuman worlds.

I should like to end this article by proposing that Reygadas' careful negotiation of nonhuman worlds and human inequalities carries significant possibilities for global theoretical and artistic thought. Necessitated by the social inequities and divisions of the landscape he sought to capture, Reygadas' film implicitly foregrounds an 'open' and 'incomplete' posthuman politics that is shot through with multiple worlds, selves, and traces of past and future injustices. This is a form of posthumanism that works through and in tandem with the human, rather than supplanting or surpassing it.<sup>55</sup>

### Conclusions

Positioning Reygadas in dialogue with Kohn's anthropology beyond the human, I have traced the ways human-nonhuman relationality marks *Post Tenebras Lux* on the level of representation, and through the filmic situation of death and introduction of dreamscapes. I have also discussed the ways the nonhuman worlds and selves introduced in *Post Tenebras Lux* form part of a surrealistic tradition of thought that is

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<sup>55</sup> A comparable model of posthumanist thought is advocated by Cary Wolfe. Wolfe contends that 'far from surpassing or rejecting the human' (as posthumanism sometimes seeks to do, particularly in the case of transhumanism) the question of posthumanism should in fact '[force] us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of *Homo sapiens* itself, by recontextualising them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own autopoietic ways of "bringing forth a world"...' Cited in Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. xxv.

characterised by an appeal to the reenchantment of nature and by a celebration of oneiric spaces as mechanisms for undermining the repressive structures of the forms of thought introduced by the 'Enlightened' world. Reygadas' own discussions of the legacy of rationalism are indicative of this continuation in surrealist artistic production.

I have also explored the implications of Reygadas' focus on human-nonhuman relationality for a posthuman politics of sustainability, as explicitly evoked in the depiction of human death embedded within broader ecologies. At the same time, I have argued that the posthuman vision that Reygadas' film evokes does not disavow the human or human tensions, but rather holds open the space between human and nonhuman worlds, allowing for the proliferation of different forms of relationality, both hierarchical and horizontal. To return to the image invoked at the beginning of this essay, my conclusion is that *Post Tenebras Lux* stands as an 'open whole' through which human and nonhuman perspectives, worlds and issues touch, align and depart, in a manner that powerfully demonstrates the ways in which posthuman politics can work through and in tandem with the human, rather than supplanting it completely.