

Hispanism's Digital Turn

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When I first began researching Latin American cinema in the early 1990s – I had a new job as Director of the Latin American Studies Program at the University of Kentucky and used it as a pretext to switch fields – information was hard to obtain. So much so that when I wrote the entry on the Bolivian film director, Jorge Sanjinés, for the *Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Culture: Hispanic Culture of Spanish America*, I had to content myself with stating that he was born ‘circa 1940’.¹ Compared with the information that is now available – both in printed form and on the internet – those days seem light-years away. There were some important studies – one thinks of Robert Stam, *Brazilian Cinema* (1982); Julianne Burton, *The New Latin American Cinema: An Annotated Bibliography of Sources in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, 1960-1980* (1983); Michael Chanan, *The Cuban Image* (1985); Julianne Burton, *Cinema and Social Change in Latin America: Conversations with Filmmakers* (1986); Randal Johnson, *The Film Industry in Brazil* (1987); Luis Trelles Plazola, *South American Cinema: A Dictionary of Film Makers* (1989); and John King, *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America* (1990) – but it is sometimes forgotten that in the early 1990s Latin American film was far from having the global reach it now possesses. And, then, a decade later, something unprecedented happened which completely turned Latin American cinema on its head: Alejandro González Iñárritu’s film, *Amores perros* (2000). It was the first Latin American film to have its release publicized globally (there were even adverts on the walls of the London tube!), and its quality stunned a number of film critics.² Whereas Latin

¹ ‘Jorge Sanjinés’, in *Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Culture: Hispanic Culture of Spanish America*, ed. Peter Standish (New York, NY: Gale Research, 1995), 246-47 (p. 246). Sanjinés was in fact born in 1936.

² I remember a conversation in the autumn of 2002 with Paul Julian Smith, then Head of Spanish at the University of Cambridge, when he told me about his surprise when he first saw *Amores*

American cinema in the 1980s and 1990s had been content to aspire to Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film – which was won by María Luisa Bemberg’s *Camila* in 1984 and by Luis Puenzo’s *La historia oficial* in 1985 – here was a film which wanted to compete with Hollywood.

Just as extraordinary, a string of films followed – Alfonso Cuarón’s *Y tu mamá también* (2001), Fernando Meirelles’s *Cidade de Deus* (2002), Walter Salles’s *Los diarios de motocicleta* (2004), Meirelles’s *The Constant Gardener* (2005), Carlos Reygadas’s *Batalla en el cielo* (2005), Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* (2006), Guillermo del Toro’s *El laberinto del fauno* (2006), González Iñárritu’s *Babel* (2007), Juan José Campanella’s *El secreto de sus ojos* (2009), González Iñárritu’s *Biutiful* (2010), Reygadas’s *Post tenebras lux* (2012) and Alfonso Cuarón’s *Gravity* (2013) – which completely bucked the provincialist trend, allowing Latin American cinema to become one of the major players in contemporary world cinema.³ Latin American directors are nowadays routinely commissioned by Hollywood studios to direct blockbusters, as suggested by Guillermo del Toro’s *Mimic* (1997), *Blade II* (2002); *Hellboy* (2004); *Hellboy II* (2008), and, more recently, *Pacific Rim* (2013). In 2007 three Mexican directors – González Iñárritu, Alfonso Cuarón as well as Guillermo del Toro – were able to attract sixteen Oscar nominations between them (the Mexicans were therefore in second place, jointly tied with the United Kingdom behind the United States in first place).⁴ Cuarón’s *Gravity* (2013) completed the arc by winning seven Oscar awards at the 2014 Hollywood awards ceremony, more than any other Latin American film.

In my academic research I tried to answer the question of what was distinctive about Latin American film at that time and initially came up with the moniker of ‘slick

perros; it had a quality which Latin American films had not demonstrated up until that point.

³ For further discussion of this point, see Deborah Shaw, ‘Latin American Cinema Today: A Qualified Success Story’, in *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Breaking into the Global Market*, ed. Deborah Shaw (Lanham: Rowman, 2007), 1-10.

⁴ Anonymous, ‘Mexican wave rides high in the film world’, BBC News, 22 February 2007; see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/6382161.stm>. (Consulted on 17 October 2014).

grit'. I argued that Latin American film had managed to combine the political and social 'grit' of its Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano era with the slick editing of the 21st century.⁵ My interest in Latin American cinema during this period – which I grasped was part of a digital revolution as much as part of a new cultural confidence in the nations of Latin America – also sparked an interest in film-making and so it was that, on a cold rainy evening in London in late November 2003, I decided to have a go at making a film. I had been attending a two-day Hollywood Film Institute course at Raindance in London taught by Dov S-S Siemens, a rather brash Hollywood film-maker whose leitmotiv ('Stop complaining about the obstacles and just go out and do it') eventually wore me down. In February 2005 I hosted the visit to the UK of the Cuban film director and co-founder of ICAIC, Julio García Espinosa, who – just before he got on the plane back to Havana – invited me to come to Cuba to co-teach with Enrique Colina a summer course on documentary film-making at the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión. I initially dismissed the idea as impracticable but in the summer of 2005 agreed to take the plunge and organise a 'taller' for the following summer.

While teaching an MA course in Autumn 2005 on Latin American film I happened to mention to one of the students, Owen Williams, that I was going to Cuba in the summer and he told me he was an experienced digital editor and so, in January 2006, I went with him, a Peruvian actor (Manuel Arenas) and a crew made up of friends and family members to Paris to make a short film about the Peruvian poet, César Vallejo called *Traspié entre 46 estrellas* (2006). We filmed – without any permissions, there wasn't time – at the Arc de Triomphe, the Palais Royal, the Jardin de Luxembourg, the Montparnasse cemetery where Vallejo's grave is, as well as in the hotel where Vallejo lived in the 1920s. Though challenged on various occasions we were lucky enough to have enough footage to make

⁵ "Slick Grit": Auteurship Versus Mimicry in Three Films by Francisco Lombardi?, *New Cinemas*, 3.3 (2005), 159-67.

the film. I learned one thing, which is that the shooting of the film is as much a part of the film as the script. I had been to lots of film festivals and heard lots of directors say this but until then I had never believed them. I decided to film the scene in which Vallejo climbs the stairs to enter the room in which he will eventually meet his death on the morning we were about to leave for London before the maids had come up – Manuel initially refused. I insisted and we filmed the sequence with Manuel walking up the stairs to room 46 (which I had discovered that morning). In the footage Manuel looked half-dead; in fact he was – he was suffering from a terrible hangover caused by his carousings of the night before. Though unplanned, this incident led to the best sequence of the film.

Now I believe not only that unexpected things happen during the shoot, I also believe that they are invariably the best parts of the film, and they grow out of the film's DNA. They are already there before you start. I also learned that the editing process produces a logic of its own – thus I structured the film around the movement of the Satie soundtrack rather than vice-versa – and I discovered that once you finish a film it has a life of its own. I was taken aback when I was accused later on in the Peruvian press of deliberately blackening the name of Vallejo's widow, Georgette de Vallejo, in my film, and I was amazed when I presented the film in Paris at the Maison de l'Amérique latine to be 'told' by a member of the audience that it was obvious that I had intended the central sequence of the film to be understood as Vallejo's dream. I retorted that this was not my intention but my protestations were ignored (by my interlocutor as much as by other members of the audience).

When I took my first group to the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión in summer 2006 I co-directed a film – with a group of the students – entitled *El invento*, about the extraordinary things Cubans get up to in order to make ends meet as a result of the US 'bloqueo'. I later made a film called *Chiaroscuro* (2008) which tells the story of how Julio García Espinosa made the documentary, *El Mégano*, in 1955, about the trials and

tribulations of the daily lives of the charcoal workers of Ciénaga, a region south of Havana. My aim originally was to tell the story of how the discourse of ‘el cine imperfecto’ was born, but I travelled with Julio and his wife, Lola, to the area and a number of other stories intervened – including the mysterious distance between Julio and his erstwhile friend and colleague, Alfredo Guevara. The film was eventually screened at the Teatro Chaplín in 2011 as part of a homage to Julio García Espinosa. I also directed a short film about the house where the Colombian writer, Gabriel García Márquez, grew up in Aracataca (*Sin título* [2010]) and was executive producer of a short, fictional film about the time the French poets Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud, lived in London in 1873, entitled *House of Knives* (2013).

As a result of my experience teaching and filming at the EICTV and in Europe I have devised new courses at UCL such as the MA module ‘How to make an 8-minute documentary’, in which I challenge students to tell the story of London to Londoners. I used this model to devise an undergraduate course for UCL language students in which they would use their linguistic skills to tell the story of a community in London whose first language is not English – and got some good work on the Hispanic community in the Elephant and Castle, for example. I have also devised a new doctoral strand at UCL, the documentary-track PhD in which students write a slightly shorter PhD – 60,000-70,000 words rather than the standard 80,000 – while also creating a short documentary (normally 25-30 minutes long) which visually articulates some aspect of the research findings of the PhD. There are now 10 students on the documentary-track PhD researching and filming topics as various as Costa Rican film, Mariology in Mexico and Cuba, documentary and psychoanalysis, and film censorship.

My experience of film-making has also led me to change the way in which I teach film history. In this I have attempted to follow Lev Kuleshov’s dictum:

Teaching filmcraft without being cognisant of fundamental cinematic theories demeans film craft to the mere level of an amateur workshop. And the opposite: studying film history and theory without a corresponding experience in the elemental aspects of filmmaking leaves theoretical research without a solid basis, forcing students to plunge into abstraction.⁶

There are five ways in which my teaching has changed. When I teach narrative structure I used to portray narrative according to a model proposed by Vladimir Propp as a path littered with a series of hurdles or obstacles which the protagonist needs to negotiate.⁷ I prefer now to analyse the building blocks of filmic narrative in terms of a set of events which the director uses in order to control the ‘dosage’ of information provided at a given point to the viewer. I draw attention to the ‘dosificación’ which underlies each major event or scene of the film, and ask students to identify how much information is being held back and how much is being revealed in particular scenes in the film. The aim behind this simple change is to allow students to think through – as if they were the director – the decisions made in terms of the visual and audial information provided at specific junctures in the film.

Secondly, when discussing editing I used to provide a number of theories – ranging from industry-style continuity editing to Eisenstein’s ‘montage as conflict’. Now I show students a clip of the famous Kuleshov Effect and, if they have cameras and editing software, I ask them to create their own version of the Kuleshov Effect, and show it in class. I then ask them to use this idea as a lens with which to look at the effect created by editing in the Latin American films we are studying in the course. I normally start with Eisenstein’s *¡Que viva México!* which I present as a laboratory of rush-cut images which I ask them to re-edit to produce different effects.

⁶ Quoted in Frank Tomasulo, 'Theory to Practice: Integrating Cinema Theory and Film Production', *Cinema Journal*, 36.3 (Spring 1997), 113-117 (p. 113).

⁷ Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folk Tale* (Austin & London: University of Texas Press, 1968).

Thirdly, I use one of the film exercises developed in the documentary course – the mood exercise which involves setting students the task of expressing the mood of a place in 45 film-seconds – and use it as a basis to analyse distinct film techniques. The first is what I used to call the ‘establishing scene’ and which I now present in terms of ‘mood establishment’, in other words, the visual presentation of the precise number of ingredients you need to set up the drama of the ensuing sequence. I ask them to experiment with the number of visual ingredients needed (normally it’s five). I then ask them to see if they can provide a sufficiently plausible atmosphere when they remove one element, then another, etc. Most students are comfortable with this idea since they are, after all, the ‘re-mashing’ generation. It allows students to understand which are the most important ingredients of an ‘establishing/mood scene’ and how they operate.

Fourthly, I also use this technique as a means of talking about symbolic stage props. If – for argument’s sake – there are five visual ingredients in any mood establishment exercise and one of these ingredients also operates symbolically, I ask the students to think about ways of making the symbolic character of the chosen stage prop emerge within the frame. Once they grasp the idea I ask them to apply this idea to their interpretation of the films we are studying, focussing on phenomena such as the spilt glass in Bemberg’s *Camila* (1984), the train in Puenzo’s *La historia oficial* (1984), the limping goat in Salles’s *Central do Brasil* (1998) and the decapitated hen in *Babel* (2006).⁸ Again it is not that different from standard film analysis but it enhances the sense of authorial control which can lead to a more concrete understanding of the mechanics of symbolic backstory in a film.

Finally my experience of film-making has led me to the belief that the transition from analogue to digital is the most significant paradigm-shift which has occurred in the

⁸ For discussion of the *Babel* imagery, for example, see my forthcoming book, *Latin American Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), p. 157.

history of film, namely, that it is bigger than the transition from ‘actualités’ to narratives, from silent film to talkies, and even from movement-image to time-image (pace Deleuze). Since I’ve mentioned Deleuze perhaps I should say a bit more about this. In his study of the time-image – originally published in French in 1985 and in English translation in 1989, Deleuze argued that cinema is ‘automatism become spiritual art’,⁹ and he then went on to suggest that a paradigm-shift of the image was in the offing at that time – the so-called ‘new images’ which he described in the following terms:

The new images no longer have any outside (out-of-field), any more than they are internalized in a whole; rather, they have a right side and a reverse, reversible and non-superimposable, like a power to turn back on themselves. They are the object of a perpetual reorganization, in which a new image can arise from any point whatever of the preceding image. The organization of space here loses its privileged directions, and first of all the privilege of the vertical which the position of the screen still displays, in favour of an omni-directional space which constantly varies its angles and co-ordinates, to exchange the vertical and the horizontal.¹⁰

Though he does not use the word, Deleuze is clearly talking about what came to be known later as the digital turn, but he was writing his *magnum opus* just before the true nature of the paradigm-shift inaugurated by the digital turn had been fully revealed. Thus, though the technology allowing the creation of digital images had been around for a long time (the process was pioneered by an engineer, Steve Sassoon, in 1975 while working for Eastman Kodak), it was at the end of the last millennium that a number of feature films were recorded in their entirety on a digital camera.¹¹ I wish to devote the rest of this essay to discussion of the difference between analogue and digital film, via my experience of digital film which is the predominant medium used at the EICTV nowadays.

At the EICTV the film professors and film-makers run courses using 8 mm,

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 2011), 252.

¹⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 254.

¹¹ The Danish film *Idioterne* (The Idiots, 1998), directed by Dogme 95 film director Lars von Trier, is normally seen as the first film to be filmed entirely on a digital camera (it was a Sony DCR-VX1000), that is, 13 years after Deleuze’s book came out.

16mm, 35mm or digital film and – in the more experimental courses – teach students how to mix the two languages. A course taught in the summer of 2014, for example, required students to film with an 8 mm bolex camera, splicing the film in a traditional way and – afterwards – creating new visual effects using digital postproduction. The results when screened were intriguing and posed questions about the nature of film itself as much as they provided a representational image of a lived experience. Indeed, bringing the two languages of analogue and digital film together allows for a more precise sense of the ways in which different technologies interact with the phenomenal world.

One of the most important differences between analogue and digital, of course, is that while digital allows you to also see what you are filming simultaneously, in ‘real-time’ as it were, analogue film is, ipso facto, always a ‘deferred’ medium since you normally only see what you have filmed a day or – at the very least – a few hours later. In this context it is curious to note that the term analogue only came into being when the technology which allowed digital film to be created became more routinely available. Before digital technology was invented 35 mm film was simply known generically as ‘film’. The creation of digital film, as it were, ‘forced’ 35 mm film to ‘become’ analogue film; in a sense therefore ‘analogue’ was born as a result of what – in a different context – Freud identified as ‘nachträglichkeit’ (deferred action). Freud used the term in his 1895 essay ‘Project for a Scientific Psychology’ to describe the experience of one of his patients, Emma, who had merged a memory of being sexually assaulted when she was eight years old by a shopkeeper with another memory of being laughed at by two shop assistants when she was twelve years old, such that the repressed memory ‘has only become a trauma by deferred action’ (nachträglichkeit).¹² The true drama of analogue film – its trauma, for even the creation of

¹² Sigmund Freud, ‘Project for a Scientific Psychology I’ (1895), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Volume 1 [1886-1899] (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), 353-54 (p. 356).

its name was by ‘deferred action’ – was locked up inside as a future perfect verb.

Most people would also accept the proposition that the digital camera in the new millennium – given its flexibility, its low costs, its portability and, crucially, the fact you can see what you are filming – offered the opportunity for thousands to create, write, and create new narratives about the world we live in. Digital cinema, for many, offers access to a post-35mm world which turns its back on the grand narrative of national destiny or world wars, focusing instead on the everyday lives of the world’s citizens. Digital expresses the ‘petite histoire’ rather than the ‘grande histoire’ that the analogue image brought into being, the worm’s-eye rather than the king’s-eye view of the world.

The second most important characteristic about digital film is that it departs from a cut-and-splice paradigm. William Brown makes this point well: ‘If limits in the size of film reels and the bulk of the camera have led mainstream narrative and analogue cinema to cut, then digital cinema seems to be predicated upon continuity’.¹³ Brown also proposes that the emphasis on continuity in digital cinema has a number of important implications for the portrayal therein of character, nature, time and space. He argues that ‘characters in digital cinema no longer stand out as unique agents against the space that surrounds them’,¹⁴ that the bodies of the characters ‘are also profoundly in, or with, the world’ (which includes nature),¹⁵ and that ‘time, like space, becomes a continuum that can be traversed in any direction – and in a continuous manner’.¹⁶ These are bold claims since, as any viewer might argue when comparing a digital film side by side with an analogue film, they do not look that different.¹⁷ But Brown makes an important point when he argues that

¹³ William Brown, *Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age: Supercinema* (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 1.

¹⁴ William Brown, *Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age*, 2.

¹⁵ William Brown, *Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age*, 3.

¹⁶ William Brown, *Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age*, 2.

¹⁷ The difference – or lack of substantive difference – between digital and analogue is a contested field, in moving image as much as photography; for a brief introduction to some of the main issues at play here, see Adam Lerner, ‘Film Photography vs. Digital Photography – a shoot-out of sorts’; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AL3L0Lextr4c> (consulted on 2 October 2014).

Digital cinema is Superman compared to analogue cinema's Batman. That is, cinema might well have been characterized in part by a history of films that have tried to surpass or at the very least hide the limitations of the analogue technology used to create it. *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, USA, 1948), for example, stands out as a film that seems to be a 'real time' movie with no (or rather, two) cuts, when in fact it made up of multiple shots. With digital cinema, however, there is a reversal. Films may well still cut; in fact, as per Bordwell, Salt, and Cutting et al., films cut now even more than they used to. But digital technology's effect on cinema is such that while cutting remains as a convention, it does not need to. For the sake of fitting in, digital cinema might look like analogue cinema (Clark Kent), but it is in fact of a different nature (Supercinema).¹⁸

By way of example, we should note that a number of digital films which use the shot-reverse shot routine for conversations between two characters need not do so. This was created as an imaginative solution for analogue film equipment which was very heavy. Though it is not necessary some film directors continue to use the technique, preferring to be 'Clark Kent' rather than 'Superman', to use Brown's terms.

We can see of these ideas at work if we briefly compare and contrast an analogue film (Charles Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* of 1925) with a digital film (Carlos Reygadas's *Stellet licht* of 2007) to see if there are any differences which are ascribable to the medium of representation. Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925) tells the story of the adventures and misadventures of a motley crew during the Klondike Gold Rush – the Tramp (Charlie Chaplin), Big Jim (Mark Swain), Black Larsen (Tom Murray) and Georgia (Georgia Hale), and the saloon girl the Tramp falls in love with. In many ways *The Gold Rush* is an action film which fits the description of the action-image as defined by Deleuze in which objects and settings 'already had a reality of their own' which was a 'functional reality, strictly determined by the demands of the situation' which then 'directly extended into action and passion'.¹⁹ The narrative of *The Gold Rush* sticks to a chronological format and does not introduce a character's memories or the character's past into the narrative (via flashback,

¹⁸ Brown, *Film-philosophy for the digital age*, 9-10.

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 4.

for example), thereby, in effect keeping the film always in the present tense. Even when a character's inner thoughts are expressed they are articulated in a visible and explicit way as, for example, when Big Jim is first shown to be driven mad by hunger and then shown to be hallucinating that the Tramp has become a chicken.



Big Jim imagines Charlie Chaplin is a chicken in *The Gold Rush*

When the Tramp dreams about how good it is going to be at his New Year's Eve party in the cabin with Georgia and her three friends the sequence concludes with a frame of the Tramp waking up in order to make quite clear that the (wish-fulfilment-fuelled) sequence just witnessed by the audience was in fact a dream. The cutting of the film predisposed the director and editor to narrative sequentiality. The narrative was the engine behind analogue film and was articulated in its mode of construction.

Carlos Reygadas's *Stellet licht* (Silent Light, 2007) – in terms of its use of narrativity – could not be more different from Chaplin's film. It is full of unexplained events – ranging from a sudden death to a resurrection – which makes it a polar opposite of the explicit-analogue narrativity of *Gold Rush*. *Stellet licht* is the story of a man, Johan, the head of a family in a Mennonite community in northern Mexico, who is married to Esther but in love with another woman, Marianne. His affair leads to his wife's death – she appears to

die of a heart attack (though it seems to be as a result of her broken heart) while she is out driving with her husband. While lying in her coffin, Eshter is kissed by the other woman, Marianne, and – miraculously – is brought back to life. Just as important, *Stellet licht* is filmed deliberately and in elongated takes and sequences which slow down the narrative, and force the viewer to reflect on what he is viewing and experiencing. In the opening scene of the film – in an extraordinarily long take – we witness the birth of the day in the Mennonite community as the sun gradually emerges over the horizon.

There is one other characteristic of *Stellet licht* which allows us to identify it as evoking the atmosphere we associate with a digital film, and this is its use of re-mixing. In her important study, *The Neuro-Image* (2012) Patricia Pisters has argued that the digital turn in the 21st century has made culture ‘deeply remixable’, which means that ‘not only can content be remixed and recombined, but also different technologies (such as design, animation, and live action) can be recombined’.²⁰ As Pisters goes on to argue: ‘Mash-ups, remakes, samplings: contemporary culture is profoundly fragmented and constantly recreated. What were once avant-garde strategies have now become everyday practices’.²¹ This notion of remixability is, indeed, intrinsic to *Stellet Licht* which remixes the film *Ordet* (1955) by the Danish film director, Carl Dreyer. Dreyer’s film is a starkly drawn, Kierkegaardian drama about religious conflict and love. Morten, patriarch of the Borgen family who live in a tiny village in Denmark, has three sons: Mikkel who, though Godless, is married to the devout Inger (who is pregnant); Joahannes who lost his mind while reading the work of the Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard (author of *Fear and Trembling*) and believes he has become Christ; and Anders who experiences a tragic love for a local girl, Anne (Anne’s father, Peter, disapproves of Anders and forbids their

²⁰ Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 10.

²¹ Pisters, *The Neuro Image*, 10.

marriage because he is head of a local religious sect which is at odds with Morten). Morten and Peter almost come to blows when discussing whether Anders may marry Anne but they are interrupted by a telephone call which informs Morten that he must hurry home because Inger has gone into labour. Tragically she loses the child and then dies herself. While Inger is lying in her coffin, the mad son Johannes enters the parlour and criticizes his family for their little faith and then – miraculously – resurrects Inger, which leads to Mikkel regaining his faith, Morten and Peter becoming reconciled and agreeing to the marriage between Anders and Anne.



Inger 'wakes up' in *Ordet* (1955)

Reygadas remixes a number of the ideas in Dreyer's original film to create a new version in his *Stellet licht*. Thus he adds the theme of adultery (Johannes is married to Esther but in love with another woman, Marianne), translates the leitmotif of religious conflict into a story about a Christian sect (Johannes is a member of the Mennonite community), keeps the theme of a sudden death but changes it from death in child-birth (Inger) to death from a heart attack caused by grief (Esther dies from the heart-ache caused by her husband's adultery), and expands visually and audially the theme of resurrection (Marianne's kiss leads to Esther's resurrection). Though the cinematography used for the resurrection scene in

Stellet Licht is very similar to that used in *Ordet*, Reygadas emphasizes and explores new dimensions of reality which underlie his vision.



Inger lies in her coffin in Dreyer's *Ordet*



Reygadas uses similar cinematography to depict Esther lying in her coffin in *Stellet Licht* (2007)

While the resurrection scene in *Ordet* is signalled by Inger suddenly moving her hands – which shows that she is now alive – this is indicated in *Stellet Licht* by the growth of light, the sound of breathing and the opening of Esther's eyes.



Still from *Stellet Licht* in which Marianne kisses Esther



In *Stellet Licht*, the moment after Esther ‘wakes up’ and comes back to life

The emphasis upon Esther’s breathing – as a signal of resurrection and cinematic shorthand for the very mystery of life itself – is, indeed, a constant leitmotif within Reygadas’s work. There are a number of points in Carlos Reygadas’s films when the camera focusses – rather eerily – on a character who seems to be doing nothing other than simply breathing. It is also, I suggest, an allusion to the sense of the continuum of life that Brown argues is intrinsic to digital film. This focus on breathing occurs frequently, for example, in *La batalla en el cielo* (Battle in Heaven, 2005). On a number of occasions we are presented

with a scene in which the protagonist, Ana, is lying on the bed and we see her rib cage moving up and down as she is breathing. Though breathing is a quintessentially natural phenomenon – what could be more natural than breathing? – even so Reygadas manages to de-familiarise it, allowing it to appear strange to the viewer.²² This leitmotif even appears in his latest film, *Post tenebras lux* (2012). In an interview about the film, for example, Reygadas referred to the reason why he used a rugby scene in the film: ‘The beautiful thing about contact sports is that you are afraid. You are in the middle of the scrum, so many people on top of you, the feeling you are going to lose your breath; it all implies life goes on even though you are afraid of it, you keep on playing no matter what.’²³ Reygada’s films do have a breathless feeling about them, ‘the feeling that you are going to lose your breath’, which is produced by the sense of disorientation often experienced by viewers of his work.

Marianne’s kiss functions in *Stellet Licht* on two levels. On a narratological level it reproduces the representation of the miracle performed by Johannes in Carl Dreyer’s *Ordet*; it re-mixes the (filmic) past. But the kiss also functions – given the resonance that Reygadas gives to breathing within his work – as a self-deictic signal of the ‘magic’ of digital film which unravels the spatial and temporal laws of the analogue universe. The drama of digital film – its ability to express the ‘uncut’ nature of reality – is captured by the moment in which Esther is woken up by the Judas kiss of her enemy, analogue film. It is a kiss which allegorises the birth of the digital turn.

²² J. Hoberman refers to *La batalla en el cielo* as ‘a new sort of ceremonial cinema at once dauntingly local and boldly universal’; *Film after Film, Or, What Became of 21st Century Cinema?* (London: Verso, 2012), 229.

²³ Andrew Pulver, ‘Carlos Reygadas: In Defense of Post Tenebras Lux’, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2013; see <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/mar/14/carlos-reygadas-post-tenebras-lux> (consulted on 5 September 2014).