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Exilic Conditions: Reflections of Home and the Experiential Cinema

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Paolo Cesar Zuñiga

Committee in charge:

      Professor Brian Cross, Chair
      Professor Amy Adler
      Professor Erica Cho
      Professor Pasquale Verdicchio

2019

The Thesis of Paolo Cesar Zuñiga is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2019

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To my loves, Violet, Luciano, Danielle.

To my parents, Jose and Genoveva, for your years of selfless sacrifice.

To my brother, Louis, for your encouragement and support.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Exilic Conditions: Reflections of Home and the Experiential Cinema

by

Paolo Cesar Zuñiga

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2019

Professor Brian Cross, Chair

Exilic Conditions: Reflections of Home and the Experiential Cinema is a collection of writings that reflect on perceptions of home and identity while examining the particular considerations within my filmmaking practice that situate the work as a post-cinéma vérité style of filmmaking that moves beyond documentary as a proper genre and into realms that renegotiate the formalized qualities of fictional filmmaking.

PREFACE

The sun had set in the distance and I began walking towards my car, which was parked discreetly under a tree about a mile away. It had rained an hour earlier, and so my rented camera was haphazardly wrapped in a thin plastic bag. To alleviate the boredom of walking, I turned on the camera and started documenting the dimly lit road ahead. It was nearly dark now and I began to feel the mosquitos striking my warm hands. Moments later I sat in my car struggling to fend off the last of the intrusive insects while contemplating why I had returned - why I had left my wife, daughter, and week-old son to make a film about a place. A lake, more precisely, that exists adjacent to my family's home in Jalisco, Mexico. I wasn't born here, but rather "over there," in the north. However, at several points in my life, I persuaded myself to believe that I was indeed from here. Thus began my ambiguous relationship with this place called "home."

HOUSE, HOME, HOMELAND

"How many borders must we cross to reach home?"

Ulysses' Gaze, 1995

This quote from Theo Angelopoulos' film *Ulysses' Gaze* once prompted me to examine my own sense of displacement as a son of Mexican immigrants and subsequently to consider the position from which I could examine and share personal narratives through an affective engagement with the cinematic form. It can be said that my parents' immigration to the United States from Mexico situated our family, including those who stayed behind, within a diasporic class in which concepts of identity and homeland were redefined by those who migrated away from their place of origin. Like many immigrant families, the U.S./Mexico border became an integral part of our negotiation to maintain familial ties. Yet its dominance as a hegemonic, economic, political, and cultural force obscures the day-to-day conceptions of "home." This has produced deep affective sentiments and altered realities on both sides of the border.

Living in an emotional place of home, I sense that I have become ambivalent about nostalgic reflections of the past, which are ultimately the result of my earnest desire to belong and feel connected. Through these impressions, I steer the construction of home in any number of possible directions, leading to liminal moments that move from the personal memories and ephemeral experiences of my past towards a social, emotional, and visual awareness that is informed by the nuances of my

environment. In negotiating these cognitive realms, I've taken to filmmaking as an artistic practice produced in narratives that are (re)constructed through a blending of fiction and non-fiction, and through abstraction from the individual experience to the universal and back to the singular.

The narratives in my film work reflect upon perceptions of house, home, and homeland—concepts that I draw from film scholar Hamid Naficy's meditation on home, exile, and homeland. Moving from the literal to the abstract, he classifies "house" as the literal structure that one inhabits and which exists in a legal category of rights, property, and possession. It is different from "home", which may exist as a moveable place that can be reconstructed numerous times over, both physically and within one's own memory. "Homeland," the most mythical of these concepts, can arguably be identified as a body of land that expresses physical and emotional qualities that invite cultural identification. Thus, a person can claim that Latin America is their homeland, but where exactly does Latin America begin and end? This postmodern condition of displacement has become highly subjective within our globalized world and is not experienced, nor can be spoken of, uniformly. As Naficy suggests, "Exile discourse thrives on detail, specificity, and locality. There is a there *there* in exile" (4); a phrase that responds to Gertrude Stein's claim that "there is no *there* there" as she reflects on the disappearance of her childhood home in California (289).

It is worth noting that these empirical and metaphorical concepts of place are often obscured. Their relevance is dictated by the particularity of physical or sensorial gestures, such as the imprint of an old house key, the smell of a damp bedroom, or the

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sight of a blooming tree. The narratives produced by these sensorial experiences

disrupt the past-present continuum and suggest recollections that often sway between

truth and fiction, creating a field of tension that results in a form of anamnesis wherein

partial or disassociated memories take on a new shape to suggest other realities.

Where the un-remembering of one's past, that negative space, is met with new

perceptions of home and place.

My countless returns to my parent's hometown of Ciudad Guzmán, Jalisco over

the past couple of decades have been met with an amalgamation of concerns pertaining

to my liminal sense of home and place. Absorbed in such thoughts, I am left with a

yearning for the ideal. Convinced that art and filmmaking are a way of assimilating

myself into the world, yet always faced with the lingering question of what it means to

return home.

SUBJECTIVITY OF TRUTH

My interest in filmmaking as a visual mode of expression first began during my

undergraduate studies in cultural anthropology and subsequent admiration for the

documentary work of Louis Malle, Jean Rouch, and Robert Flaherty. Inspired by Dziga

Vertov's theory of "kino-pravda," or "film-truth," these filmmakers' use of observational

and participatory filming in the same breath demonstrated a type of free-wheeling prose

wherein the camera functioned as a tool for documenting "truthful" moments, sometimes

capturing a palpable disconcerted gesture as the film subject returned a gaze back towards the lens with a degree of suspicious curiosity.

The French filmmaker Chris Marker would later acknowledge such interaction in his landmark essay film *Sans Soleil* (1983). As the film's female protagonist reflects on an unknown traveler's description of wanderers and travelers standing on a jetty in Fodo as, "patient as pebbles, but ready to jump," the camera captures the mundane realities of labor and waiting around. Eventually conceding to the faces looking directly at us, the traveler says "Frankly, have you ever heard of anything stupider than to say to people, as they teach in film schools, not to look at the camera?" Marker's film is an explicit disruption of both an ethnographic document and a fictional narrative. Watching it was illuminating and expanded my thoughts about the potential of cinematic representation to go between these forms. Additionally, it underscored the power of editing to provide structure and meaning to the recorded material, further complicating the subjectivity of truth and fiction.

It is not my intention to solely focus on the categorically designated term of documentary and its implied position on truth and technique. Truth in documentary is a construct built upon the need to inform. And while my film practice engages with certain elements of the genre, it dismisses the notion that documentary must represent a truthful counterpoint to fiction filmmaking. Therefore, I am interested in situating my film work in the in-between. Moving away from absolute truth as an element produced by the powers that be and repositioning it within a more egalitarian framework where the power of truth and interpretation is situated between camera, subject, and audience.

In speaking about narrative discontinuity and meaning within documentary film, Vietnamese filmmaker and literary theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha expressed that "Truth, even when "caught on the run," does not yield itself either in names or in filmic frames. Meaning should be prevented from coming to closure at either what is said or what is shown. Truth and meaning: the two are likely to be equated with one another. Yet, what is put forth as truth is often nothing more than *a* meaning" (77). What I find attractive about her claim is the idea that meaning is found within the interval moments of cinema, allowing for personal subjectivity and experiential histories to determine where that moment of truth exists.

Moreover, there is something to be said about the auteur's voice within the filmmaking process and the attempt to renegotiate the biased representations of reality. This position situates my practice within a post-cinéma vérité style of filmmaking that moves beyond documentary as a proper genre and into realms that reconsider the formalized qualities of fictional filmmaking. The compromise between both genres is grounded in the neorealist movement set forth by Italian filmmakers, such as Michelangelo Antonioni and Vittorio De Sica, who used film as a way to contend with the difficult economic and moral conditions of post-WWII Italy. The essence of their work lay not only in their study of social conditions amongst working class people but in their unconventional use of long durational takes that established an unusual pacing that emphasized visual composition and mood over traditional plot development. By allowing narrative to unfold naturally as the camera rolls, the viewer is able to

experience narrative action in real time. This is the antithesis of most Hollywood films, which suggest that durational movement should be implied and not endured.

These neorealist filmmakers, along with those involved in subsequent New Wave and Third Cinema film movements, grounded narrative action within a "real world" that was devoid of artificial representation. They introduced a focused subjectivity that complicated the manipulation of time and the pursuit of naturalism across cinematic technologies. The use of diegetic sound, synchronous dialogue, camera mobility, and adoption of the long-take were employed in a faithful attempt to capture the sensibilities of a reality set in the present tense, which had been long obscured by a pragmatic reproduction of realism by the studio system.

Furthermore, in his essay, "Observations on the Long Take," filmmaker and writer Pier Paolo Pasolini claimed that "subjectivity is thus the maximum conceivable limit of any audiovisual technique" (3). He directly links subjectivity and the perception of reality to the point of view of the perceiving subject. The film may present an ideal yet abstract and seemingly unnatural point of view within a performance. However, the audiovisual impression that is captured becomes realistic and naturalistic once viewed and heard by the subjective viewer through a single pair of eyes and ears. His point challenges our perceptions of reality by suggesting that what we see and hear as it happens is always in the present tense and that, "the long take, the schematic and primordial element of cinema, is thus in the present tense. Cinema therefore 'reproduces the present'" (3).

The use of durational shots within my own work attempts to bridge the gap between the subjectivity of the viewer and the present tense of the action that appears on screen. There is also a great interest in the subjectivity of myself as a filmmaker and the role of the camera as it engages within spaces by pushing the boundary of observational methods in an attempt to find expression in the form of film. Quite often a narrative is focused on people while external forces exist on the periphery as part of the setting to a particular story. The gaze of the lens and my own subjectivity attempt to disperse the audience's focus and de-centralize it from the focused narrative by including natural forces of place and time, such as the temporal qualities of a particular landscape. Subjectivity therefore becomes a question of form—in the widest sense of the term—which includes my own physical presence and the external forces that widen the field of how we create. All of these motivate the direction of the film and provide an element of naturalism that is both familiar and unexpected.

FIELDWORK

My camera-based work is informed by an ethnographic practice that engages with modes of research, observation, and documentation. Under a classic anthropological schema, ethnographic fieldwork can be considered a diligent process where a researcher dedicates significant time and resources to studying elements of culture amongst groups of people. The arguably slow process begins with the researcher making calculated decisions in order to build trust, then conducts the

ethnographic research, synthesizes the information through a reflexive process, and ultimately presents it in a reliable manner.

The engagement with observational fieldwork as a *practice* raises many questions concerning forms of knowledge and technique. But rather than rely on a "matter of fact" methodology that focuses on content and subject to situate the ethnographic research as a form of film-as-text, I use elements of fieldwork as a practice that reorients the disciplinary thought towards a new form of cinematic realism that moves beyond the subject and is shaped by the complex interweaving of spatial and temporal qualities. Through this shift, the value of realism comes from how we interpret and represent the world that is being presented. Additionally, this method opens up new perspectives about modes of inquiry that reconsider how one navigates landscapes, either symbolic or literal, to construct narratives that embrace the aesthetics of a particular place or setting to express a kind of human truth.

PROCESS

The production of my films should not be regarded as a means to an end, or something to be mastered, but as a process in itself. This is echoed in my scriptwriting, where the commodified narrative templates of a Hollywood system are abandoned in favor of the abstract. Scenes are imaginatively visualized and written out using descriptive prose as if one were watching the finished film being projected in real time. A concern for pedantic details becomes secondary to the poetics of time and place. This

method of writing functions within the scope of documentary and fictional narratives. The essence of this process is to imagine the visual and auditory potential of the film, despite the fact that everything will change during production. The script, therefore, functions as a reference in moments of uncertainty as the film becomes reimagined through its production.

The writing then shifts towards a more collaborative process where specific actions and dialogue are written in conversation with the protagonists themselves; relying on the inert sensibilities of the individual as source material for the dramatized action. This becomes problematic to the trained actor, who employs theatrical methods to "act" for the camera. This attitude towards the development of characters is inspired by French filmmaker Robert Bresson's repudiation of cinema as type of photographed theater and the belief that, unlike actors, people do not analyze what they say. Thus lending to a more natural form of speech. Additionally, the use of non-actors and natural dialogue pushes the boundary of authenticity towards a visual performance that is concerned with the subtilty of aesthetics—the way someone articulates their words, the gaze of their eyes, their physical traits, and so forth. Using this as a form of casting that characterizes the non-actors as "being (models) instead of seeming (actors)" (6). These methods of collaborative scriptwriting and casting establish an imaginable cinematic truth that reflects not a fictional world, but an embodied realism that offers little room for false interpretations of memorized dialogue and gestures.

It's worth noting that directors don't always create, they can also impede or destroy with too many demands or ideas that are often unnatural. Iranian filmmaker

Abbas Kiarostami once expressed this with an analogy of a director as a football coach who selects his players, the plays, and so forth, then sits back and watches the performance unfold, as the audience would. Sometimes it works; other times it fails. Given the opportunity to take a step back and observe, you realize the flaw in the play and do your best to correct it, then try again (124). The concern for improvisation and natural performance classifies my work as a long-term practice where the film's form and structure are revealed through a lengthy process of fieldwork, research, writing, conversations, improvisation, documentation, and so forth. There are no preconceived conditions of what the film should be, only ideas for what it could suggest.

The edit process adopts a similar approach. The captured impressions of a performance or environment are layered in an improvised manner that is dictated by the visualized script and a sense of rhythm—a process that for me is synonymous with painting and music composition. The pseudo-improvised assemblage begins to take shape as it reveals a structure. At each point of revelation, I take a step back to observe the sequence in full motion. I make notes, then continue along with the process. The length of the film is of little concern. However, it's important to note that I speak of a general process, and that some conditions to length are dictated by form, such as the number of uninterrupted frames allowed by a manual 16mm camera.

Nonetheless, duration in cinema must not be imposed if it's to be considered art. Nobody examines a painting as a "a small painting", therefore "short" or "long" terms in relation to the length of a film are irrelevant connotations. The general consensus is that a film's visual narrative is mediated by the extraneous conditions of time. Furthermore,

it's commonly agreed that the average shot length should last anywhere from 5 to 10 seconds. In this manner, scenes are quickly propelled forward for an hour and a half, from one cut, to the next, and the next. This rapid process creates a rhythmic chaos for the audience, or, I should say, an expectation. The audience now becomes attentive to the rhythm created by fast cuts rather than the temporal qualities of a scene or the development of a particular character.

The film is ultimately shared with an audience once the edit is finalized. This is to say that the subtle elements reflected within my film work are best experienced under controlled lighting conditions with the use of projection and sound. The attention to audience experience in my film work has been motivated by the American writer Susan Sontag and her eloquent investigations concerning our role as observers to reveal layers of meaning in what we see and where the poetics of narrative film have the capacity to *apply* to one's own experience of life. Yet conversely, she suggests, a story may *instruct* the course of one's experience of life (Sontag). Here is where I find the value of film as a mode of expression and its ability to be shared and become part of someone else's subjective experience. As Kiarostami once noted, "the beauty of art lies in the reaction that it causes" (Saeed-Vafa, Rosenbaum 124).

"A good fictional film is also a documentary and vice versa."

Abbas Kiarostami

FILM WORKS

Next I will discuss two films that I've produced during my MFA graduate studies:

There's Only One Me (2017) and *Lacustrine* (2019). I describe the impetus of each film

and some of the considerations that have instructed their narrative structure and form.

Furthermore, they illustrate how I've narrativized experiential concepts of home,

displacement, and identity within the framework of a post-cinéma vérité style that

reveals an intimacy between the camera, subject, and audience.

There's Only One Me, 09'31", 2017

Borders are physical barriers that divide and restrict an individual's sense of self and place while also disrupting the common histories of families and cultural groups. It's through this context that I began to explore the dynamic elements of social systems, their intrinsic link to what sociologist Johan Galtung referred to as "structural violence" (171), and their impact on people's identity and memory. This violence refers to the avoidable impairment that is placed upon groups of people by institutions or social systems, preventing them from achieving a quality of life that would have otherwise been possible. I thought about how varying degrees of violence, aside from physical violence, may influence a person's perception of reality and truth. And through these reflections I was reminded of a series of unfinished interviews my friend Sophia and I had conducted in the summer of 2015 with Felix Peralta, a deported U.S. military veteran living in Tijuana. The original intent of our interviews was to create a documentary that explored his use of creative writing as a mode of personal therapy. However, his thoughts expressed unclear perceptions of reality in addition to fantastical notions of salvation and the end of the world. The project was ultimately shelved while we attempted to formulate new, more direct, questions and reconsider the form of documentary we hoped to create.

It eventually became clear that the experience of being physically displaced through deportation, as Felix was, could not be discussed neutrally and was embedded with "the most collective of collective memories to the most private of private emotions"

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(Said 177) that are associated with the condition of being exiled. His constructed reflections about his past and present life were also an exaggeration, or embodiment, of the idea of memory. In his essay, "Reflections on Exile," Edward Said noted that "Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past. They generally do not have armies or states, although they are often in search of them. Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people" (177). Said's writings inspired me to formulate new questions about Felix's unreal and violent circumstance as a deported person and prompted me to revisit our documented interviews a year later, under this new lens.

I was intrigued by Felix's perceptions of reality given his experience as a son of immigrant parents and a deported veteran. He spoke of his upbringing in East Los Angeles, his military service, his divine sense of being one-of-a-kind, and his fears of losing himself in the shadows of Tijuana. His coherent thoughts and spiritual notions, sincere yet at times fragmented, seemed to reflect an extreme sense of duality and perception of a life once lived. His anecdotal writings described a lacking sense of home and reflected his sentiment of being "lost in a world I was born in, but don't know."

The process of documenting Felix consisted of three interviews over the course of several months—twice out on a field near the Otay International Border and once in his shared bedroom at the deported veterans home. Each session consisted of approximately two hours of sound recordings and video. Our method was influenced by the improvised nature of our production. There were no scripts, no secured locations, and no sense of what Felix would choose to speak on. There were only questions.

Through our conversations with Felix, I understood that his storytelling, or production of identity, was to a degree reflective of my own life and the way I attempted to approach my filmmaking practice—blurring the lines between the real and non-real while situating the narrative in a re-telling of the past. To a large extent, truth doesn't matter. Our perceptions and lived experiences inform our truths and our own realities. In an online interview about filmmaking, ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall once suggested that there are two types of documentary practices: one as a form of publication to a pre-existing knowledge, often based on prior research, while the other is a research process in and of itself. The latter relies on a form of intimacy, allowing you to explore your subjects in detail and discover something about them. Yet I would add that this approach also allows you, the filmmaker, to discover things about yourself.

The end result is a film that reflects not only your subject's story, but that which you, the filmmaker, has learned through the process. This relies heavily on the notion that one's film subject, or protagonist, is willing to open up to you and the camera. Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieślowski described this as, "documentary's great problem. It catches itself as in its own trap. The closer it wants to get to somebody, the more that person shuts him or herself off from it" (86). While I agree that this is a natural human response towards the photographic process, I would argue that an essential element to capturing a genuine performance or image relies on the establishment of a mutual relationship built upon trust. Only then can a negotiation between the camera, filmmaker, and subject be allowed to exist.

The film was edited down to nine minutes as a visual montage that is paired with non-sync audio excerpts of our three interviews along with ambient diegetic sound recorded at each location. The narrative is held together by an essay he wrote titled, "Somebody, Anybody, Help Me," which exemplifies his sense of displacement of having been raised in the U.S. and deported to Mexico. I used a 4:3 standard aspect ratio to frame the image as a way to create a sense of constraint. The viewer cannot see what it knows to exist beyond the film's frame, just as Felix's circumstance restricts him from seeing beyond the physical border wall. The film is deliberately ambiguous in an attempt to diverge from realistic representation. It attempts to create a subtle distinction between real time and place and the representation of time and place. Through it's four-part structure, the film hints at fictional representations and symbolism to reflect Felix's past experience and uncertain future. There is generally an inert desire in filmmaking to explain things in a rational manner, yet there is a place for what is not said and what is not seen, or the irrational. In this way, film can have a confounding resemblance to both memory and fiction—a doubling back on reality. Memories that are imprinted into our subconscious are imprecise and quite often open to interpretation—an affirmation that a memory does not know it is a memory until it is reflected upon.

Despite all of these considerations, it is worth noting that I felt a great responsibility towards the ethics of this project. More specifically with regard to the representation of Felix's character. Our recorded conversations opened up a dialog on the subject of representation, establishing an enunciation or position from which one speaks or writes. I questioned whether his imaginative reflections about a post-

apocalyptic world were an appropriate, or accurate, representation of his character. What about his claim of having a supernatural ability to foresee death?

The moments subsequent to each interview were uncertain due to Felix's ongoing struggle with mental health and addiction. Our sporadic attempts to visit him were often delayed by the news that he had either checked himself into rehabilitation or had moved out of the veterans group home. Once the edit was finalized, I managed to make contact with him once more. The director of the deported veterans home informed me that Felix was out of rehab and hanging around the house again. I had previously sent him a link to preview the film and had heard that he loved it. So I made the trip to Tijuana and took my camera along in case there was an opportunity for more documentation.

He seemed healthy and in good spirits but was now missing a front tooth. I sensed a different character in Felix. The friendship and mutual trust was still there. However, he now seemed to be talking for the camera. After a few updates about his life and the film, he drifted back into the fantastical stories that had once been a concern during our initial interview years earlier. In that moment I couldn't help but think that maybe in his mind, this is what I wanted to capture—the fantastical "performance". I was unsure how I could help him other than share his story through the film we had created. We ended the conversation by me giving him some money and taking his portrait. A few months later, I invited him to the film's screening premiere at in Tijuana. I thought it would be good for his spirit to watch the film with an audience on a big screen and participate in the Q&A. I wanted it to be his night, but he did not show up.

Figure 1. *There's Only One Me*, 2017; still image

Figure 2. *There's Only One Me*, 2017; still image

Lacustrine, 42'24", 2019

      A year ago, I traveled to my family's hometown of Ciudad Guzmán, a municipality

of approximately 95,000 residents located in the state of Jalisco, Mexico. I took along a

16mm analog camera with the intention of making a film about my paternal

grandmother's home—a place that shaped my formative years but has remained vacant

since her death almost 20 years ago. A few years had passed since my last visit and I

sought to reexamine the accuracy of my impressions of that home as truly my own or a

mixture of myth and truth that relied on appropriated memories, familial stories, and

nuances of exilic conditions. But to discuss displacement and exile, as Hamid Naficy

suggests, is to consider one's return and to acknowledge, "It is possible to return and to

find that one's house is not the home that one had hoped for, that it is not the structure

that memory built" (3). As I contemplated these notions of memory and a return to

home, I began to have concerns over the stillness of the house and questioned whether

motion picture was the appropriate form for capturing such a narrative.

      It was also during that visit that I began reading the book *Reflections on

Fieldwork in Morocco* by anthropologist Paul Rabinow. I was intrigued by his diaristic

reflections concerning the validity of fieldwork as a qualifier within the field of

anthropology while examining questions of "otherness" and the complex vestiges of

Morocco's colonial past. As a way to deliberate on ideas of fieldwork research, I set out

to conduct an exercise that entailed driving around in a borrowed car and documenting

the rural landscapes that surrounded the city. The resulting 16mm document of that day

became a five-minute film titled, *En Mi Pueblo* (2018). Yet it was through that process

that I became familiar with some of the ecological changes that were affecting the landscape, and in particular, a lake that sits on the outskirts of town, named *Laguna de Zapotlán*.

In 2015 the lake's water level rose at an extreme rate due to heavy rainfall from hurricane Patricia, flooding the adjacent homes and ranching parcels of nearby residents. Additionally, the lake had been plagued by an aquatic undergrowth of water hyacinth (Eichhornia crassipes). The aquatic plant was first introduced to the region because of it's attractive flowers but had now become invasive, primarily due to the increase in nutrients it received from the thriving industrialized farming practices in the surrounding basin. On a small scale, the hyacinth helps oxygenate bodies of water but when overpopulated, it becomes weed-like and produces harmful effects, such as the absence of photosynthesis and a lack of oxygen that causes the death of fish. Those affected most were the local fisherman and residents living on the edge of the lake. Manual efforts to extract the hyacinth had proven unsuccessful, and a thick layer continued to cover approximately 55 percent of the lake's surface.

I left Mexico intrigued by the idea of returning to make a film that narrativized the complexities of land use and the underlying systems that were creating a shift in people's sense of place and home. But rather than produce an expository documentary that was authoritative in its delivery of story and information, I sought to embrace the overlap between methods of observational "direct cinema" and participatory cinéma vérité. The film's narrative would rely on the camera's focused observations and my informal conversations with the people I encountered as I traversed the periphery of the

lake. No script. No storyboards. Guided only by an idea and the restrictions set forth by the lake. These methods set the foundation of what would become my thesis film, *Lacustrine* (2019).

I returned to Mexico two months later to begin documenting the lake and its surrounding landscape. The film began as a simultaneous process of fieldwork and production. I trusted that the narrative would reveal itself through the improvised layering of sounds and images during the edit process. Rather than represent landscape in a literal sense where the film was about landscape, I sought to represent the land as a dynamic subject within the film's narrative—supported by the sound of insects, the sound of pigs feeding and being fed, fire, the sound of the lake, the motor of the boat, people talking and listening to music as they work. The camera's lens focuses on the subtilties of a human-landscape-animal relationship in such a way that the qualities of each subject are echoed within the landscape. Through this method, the film became an observational portrait of landscape that is untethered from discernible chronologies and ornate arcs; instead bearing witness to the temporalities of land and labor. A place where "time builds itself painlessly" (La Jetée, 1962).

Furthermore, the lake is symbolic of the generational tension that continues to exist between privately owned land and federally owned public land. Through my conversation with Dr. J Guadalupe Michel Parra, director of the lake's research center *Centro de Investigación Lago de Zapotlán y Cuencas*, I learned that the fluctuation of the lake's water levels underscores a critical debate over property rights. According to Parra, the water to the point of its shoreline is technically federally owned property. However, that distinction becomes blurred when the water levels rise and begin to

encroach on someone's private property. Aside from the fact that the land now becomes useless to the property owner, such an occurrence perpetuates an anxiety of displacement and a concern for land ownership. This information is not explicit within the film, but the implications of an encroaching shoreline is suggested throughout the evocation of the imaginary. Leaving gaps within the film adds a degree of poetic ambiguity that entices the viewer to ask questions and consider the human impacts on the landscape, the limitations that landscape places upon people, and the forms of labor that are perpetuated by the landscape, which are intrinsically woven into people's daily lives. Additionally, by examining landscape through the use of long durational shots, there is an element of revelation that makes the natural world visible to us, offering experiences that we otherwise would not have had without the camera's focused eye.

The film exists as a portrait of non-fiction that captures landscape outside of the frame of romanticism and environmental tropes of beautification. Through the subtle suggestion of complex ecological changes and a deep attention to the temporalities of quotidian life, the film's form steers the medium of documentary away from its traditional "talking heads" approach by situating it within something more observational that does not rely on the presentation of facts. This mode counters conventional documentary techniques and attempts to renegotiate the relationship between the subject and representation. Like a photograph, the film creates its meaning through an associative process connected to the viewer's own perception and experience in such a way that the gap between observer and the observed is minimized.

Figure 3. *Lacustrine*, 2019; still image

Figure 4. *Lacustrine*, 2019; still image

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