

Haunting analysis: The audio-visual essay

ABSTRACT

This article reflects upon the audio-visual essay as academic work and work of art, exploring Martin and Álvarez López' short to demonstrate that this form of cinematic experimentation is indeed both things – providing analytical examination of the cinema of Víctor Erice as well as creating a new poetic experience in itself.

KEYWORDS

audio-visual essay

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ARTICLE

To begin with the obvious, *Haunted Memory* is a tribute to the masterful art of Víctor Erice, and watching this audio-visual essay entails what is an almost, and appropriately so, nostalgic re-visitation and re-appreciation of his films.

Erice's cinematic language is accessible, transparent and warm, yet remains strange, fragmented and traumatic. This 'double' nature, so to speak, imbues his filmmaking with a particular resonant quality, capturing unrepeatable events that leave lasting impressions in the viewers' minds, persisting in our memories. To employ the Spanish director's own words on cinema to consider his own work, it indeed 'gets glued like a second skin to things' (2007: 46, from an interview conducted by Linda C. Ehrlich in 1998). It is, in a word, *haunting*.

Exploring Erice's simultaneously haunted and haunting audio-visuality, Martin and Álvarez López' short opens on the above-mentioned quote before setting forth to explore the coherent cinematic poetry of his short and feature-length films. Introduced by the sound of a baby crying, Martin's voice-over narration starts: 'The child awakens to the world. What will be remembered of this moment of birth, of origin? An image, a sound, a quality of the light. The child begins like a film – fading in, fading out. Flickers of memory, of sensation' (2016).

Thus, from the outset, the film reveals itself as a treatment of Erice's most central thematic and formal motifs and concerns: the child, the film, time, memory, and experience. Or perhaps, as the co-directors themselves state in their *Sight & Sound* companion piece, an exploration of the 'joy and regret of nostalgia with one of the cinema's great, spare poets of sense-memory' (2016). In this way, on the one hand, this 'essay' is an academic work. As an examination and analysis of a particular auteur of the cinema, it distils and gives insight into Erice's craft and art, laying bare similarities of style, atmosphere and meaning-making in his three features and two of his shorts.

From an academic point-of-view, the audio-visual essay is both a research method and a teaching resource; it is, at the very least, a way of doing and showing film analysis. It seems fitting, then, when Martin and Álvarez López, in their introduction to a section on the form in NECSUS, describe it as a 'burgeoning field of inquiry, research, and experimentation within academia and also beyond it; the expression of critical, analytical, and theoretical work using the resources of audio-visuality – images and sounds in montage' (2014: 81). Following this, although the merits of considering this kind of intellectual experimentation as research in the stricter sense can and have been debated, the fact that their work produces new knowledge as well as disseminates scholarly ideas demonstrates its kinship with the same intentions and practices – albeit in what can still be considered an alternative approach.

Haunted Memory articulates audio-visual arguments, showing rather than telling, that is, about Erice's characteristic ways of framing, his playing, with light and shadow, as well as the stylistic figural and situational similarities of his films, to name but some points of interest or insight instigated by the film. Examples are the parallels between the use of light to illuminate Ana approaching a window in *El espíritu de la colmena* (Shots 2-3) and Estrella awakening to the shadows of her parents arguing on the other side of a screen door in *El sur* (Shots 73-74), or, more directly, the two looking at old photos and postcards and the frames-within-frames used therein (Shots 53-67). Even recurring close-ups of objects, from these mentioned films, along with *El sol del membrillo* and *Alumbramiento* (Shots 36-37 & 40-46), or shots of cinemas as the projection light shines in *Spirit* and *La morte rouge* (Shots 26-27) are compared, through montage and the interpretative narration, to disclose some of the idiosyncrasies and ideas that are inherent in Erice's filmmaking.

By carefully arranging and assembling their material in creative and deliberate ways, Martin and Álvarez López form a sort of frame-by-frame analysis that affords us the chance of being able not to read these things, but to see them, hear them and *feel* them in real time, facilitating fruitful academic understanding by way of the form of the audio-visual essay.

However, on the other hand, it is this creative and expressive quality of the film that also makes it a work of art in its own right. The same well thought-out montage and sparingly applied, atmospheric narration manage to portray the power of what Erice does – albeit to the extent that any film analysis, audio-visual or otherwise, can – not by explication but rather by evocation. In their attempt to capture the surreal feel of his audio-visuality, the elliptical and associative nature of his storytelling, the abruptness of his soundscapes, or the eloquence of his melodic editing, they simultaneously reflect these same elements in their own work. In this sense, appreciation and interpretation beget new creation and expression.

Any question about if such an essayistic cinematic variant – no matter if one chooses to call it an ‘essay-film’, ‘film-essay’, ‘cine-poem’, or something else entirely – itself can be considered art is arguably a rhetorical one, one that has been artistically answered a long time ago by the Godards, Markers and Vardas of this world. The fact that it today seems to remain a necessary query only speaks to the proliferation of new works and practitioners within the same genealogy in our digital age. The ‘audio-visual essay’, as it most often is named, comes in a host of forms and a range of variants, which therefore have to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. This article certainly does not mean to say that all audio-visual essays are works of art, nor are they all academic works for that matter, but rather that they definitely *can* be, and that *Haunted Memory* seems to merit such a designation by virtue of its merging of analytical examination and creating a poetic experience.

As early as the first shot, where the image of a man beside his pregnant wife and the sound of a baby crying are spliced together from two different films, the independent poetic intention of the project is evident. This aural asymmetry with the images is a recurring trend; sounds and sound bridges featuring movie reels, dogs, clocks, school and church bells, and the tune of a music box all appear where they often do not belong, making new connections and sensations emanating from the original material. The same is true when considering the collage of various shots, compositions, movements or fades, dissolves and superimpositions, rhythmically compiled and suggestively juxtaposed. Accompanied by the spoken script, this amalgamation of extracts and excerpts from Erice’s *oeuvre* opens up new communication and interaction between the images and sounds – adding something on its own in the process.

Whether one calls it ‘sampling’, remixing, reediting, reframing, or even remaking, in forging these bits and pieces into a new whole, Martin and Álvarez López create a new work. The end result of their endeavor is a new ‘story’, a new poetic expression and new cinematic experience for the viewer, one with its own power and resonance, leaving its own impression.

Essentially, the audio-visual essay is more often than not a balancing act between the worlds of academia and art, operating in an in-between state of disequilibrium that runs the risk of it falling into the cracks or being considered a bastard of some sort – not accepted on either side. In a more finely tuned turn of phrase, the directors themselves refer to the form as a ‘child of two mothers’, indebted to both the tradition of research and experimentation of the avant-garde film or video, and the personal, reflective elements of the essay-film, combining intellectual research and poetic exploration to form a new ‘hybrid’ unity (2014: 81-82).

This particular ‘essay’ capably achieves this balance. As it nears its end, spoken over the renowned and gorgeous compositionally contained dissolve of a younger Estrella on her bicycle becoming the older Estrella (Shots 117-118), the narration goes: ‘Losing years in a trance, an ellipsis. Something has already passed; the fabric of things is going to disappear; the story is about to end’ (2016). This moment, in many ways, encapsulates how this short has been able to explore and experiment with the haunted memories of Erice’s cinema while creating a new cinematic memory, which is too, in a word, *haunting*.

To end with the obvious, *Haunted Memory* is indeed both things: an insightful and profound look into the cinematic world of Víctor Erice *and* an artful and poignant cinematic experience in itself – amounting to what is a haunting audio-visual essay.

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