Tiago de Luca

Gus Van Sant's *Gerry* and Visionary Realism

In this article, I will look at Gus Van Sant's *Gerry* (2002) as a privileged example of a realist trend in contemporary world cinema defined by excessive adherence to spatiotemporal integrity through allegiance to the long take, eliciting, as a result, sensory-contemplative cinematic experiences embedded in physical presence and duration. In so doing, I hope to shed some light on the main aesthetic principles governing this tendency, including its distinctive reconfiguration of cinematic realism as exemplified by *Gerry*. I will start by contextualizing *Gerry* within Van Sant's career, move on to investigate the ways in which the film adheres to, and departs from, traditional notions of realism, and finally analyze its contemplative long takes in light of a landscape painting tradition and American avant-garde, "visionary" cinema. As I will argue, *Gerry*'s hyperbolic focus on the natural world is designed to enhance the phenomenology of the viewing experience, testifying to cinema's ability to revitalize perception in its full sensory dimension.

"A New Cinema"

Gerry is emblematic of a cross-cultural cinematic tendency across the globe, which I have elsewhere theorized as "realism of the senses" (de Luca), whose representatives include renowned filmmakers such as Carlos Reygadas (Mexico), Tsai Ming-liang (Taiwan), Béla Tarr (Hungary), Lisandro Alonso (Argentina), Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Thailand), Nuri Bilge Ceylan (Turkey), to cite a few examples. These are cinemas, I argue, fascinated by the physicality of animate and inanimate matter, bodies and landscapes, all enhanced by slow and/or static long takes that deflate narrative progression, and through which the perceptual and material qualities of the image are enhanced. As exemplified by films as otherwise distinct as Reygadas's *Japón* (2002), Alonso's *Liverpool* (2008), Albert Serra's *Birdsong* (*El cant del ocells*, 2008), among others, a common trope animating this tendency is the presence of solitary characters wandering through deserted landscapes. Devoid of psychological nuances, they interminably walk, stroll, and loiter, often aimlessly, precluding narrative interaction in favour of phenomenological and sensory experience. These aimless perambulations invite the viewer to protractedly study, in silent long takes, the sheer presence and literalness of the empty landscapes they traverse, a contemplative verve which, I will argue, is carried to its ultimate consequences in *Gerry*.

Before I start with my analysis of the film, however, some remarks on its context are useful. In Van Sant's case, the adoption of this cinematic style was the direct result of his encounter with the work of Hungarian filmmaker Béla Tarr. After his famous shot-by-shot remake of *Psycho* (1998), sandwiched between two similar and conventional films (*Good Will Hunting*, 1997; *Finding Forrester*, 2000), Van Sant's career seemed to have reached its saturation point, exposing a director faced with typical postmodern conundrums such as the impossibility of aesthetic originality. This was, indeed, what Van Sant himself expressed in an essay on Tarr. Entitled "The Camera is a Machine," this was included in the catalogue of a 2001 Tarr retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. In it, Van Sant highlights the inertia of what he calls the "Industrial Vocabulary"—"The cinematic vocabulary of a 2001 television show like *Ally Mcbeal* is virtually the same as *Birth of Nation*'s"—and describes his encounter with Tarr's work as marking a watershed in his career, as he found himself "attempting to rethink film grammar" (Van Sant).

And so it is that in 2002, the director released *Gerry*, a film that partly stemmed from a quest to break with conventional narrative cinema.[1] This rupture, in Van Sant's view, is materialized in Tarr's "endless" tracking shots,

---

1. This formal direction was later cemented with *Elephant* (2003) and *Last Days* (2005), films which, together with *Gerry*, comprised what the press nicknamed as the "trilogy of death," alluding to their reenactment of real life stories involving young demises: the little known story of a desert murder (*Gerry*), the Columbine massacre (*Elephant*), and the death of rock star Kurt Cobain (*Last Days*).

Figures 1-4: Shot citations of *Werckmeister Harmonies* and *Sátántangó*

whose protracted focus on inconsequential details and actions disregard story progression and exhaust narrative motivation, foregrounding, as a result, the sheer materiality of the image's audiovisual components. Rather than placing "separate fragments…together to form meaning," Van Sant declares, Tarr's meditative long takes result in films "organic and contemplative in their intentions," so much so that "it is like seeing the birth of a new cinema" (Van Sant).

That *Gerry* was inspired by Tarr is further evident in its reproduction of emblematic scenes of Tarr's *oeuvre*, which, incidentally, reiterate the citational impetus of Van Sant's cinema as epitomized by *Psycho*.[2] A sustained take of the bobbing heads of Matt Damon and Casey Affleck (*Gerry*'s protagonists) evokes, for instance, an identical visual composition we find in *Werckmeister Harmonies* (*Werckmeister harmóniák*, 2000) (Figures 1-2). The same applies to another shot in which both characters, followed from behind on a Steadicam, walk against a strong wind for several minutes, reproducing one of *Sátántangó*'s (1994) best-known sequences (Figures 3-4). Far from being solely a replication of Tarr's imagery and camera work however, *Gerry* is also the fruit of an organic and communal mode of production based on improvisation, physicality, and chance, aspects that—at least in principle—connect the film to a cinematic realist tradition.

Improvisation, Physicality, Absurdism

Gerry employs devices traditionally hailed as the quintessence of cinematic realism, as theorized, not the least, by foundational realist advocator André Bazin. Not only does the film respect the spatiotemporal integrity of reality through a hyperbolic use of the long take, it also testifies to a production process conceived on the premise of location shooting, characterized by improvisation and attention to contingent phenomena which foregrounds the physicality of actors and the materiality of profilmic events. However, as I will analyze in this section, this does not translate into a realistic fable in tune with the canons of verisimilitude and logic, but on the contrary, into an absurdist and surreal one, which complicates the categorization of the film under the rubric of realism.

Aiming at a more informal and spontaneous project, Van Sant teamed up with Matt Damon and Casey Affleck, personal friends with whom he had first worked on *Good Will Hunting*, and the trio started sketching the script for *Gerry* based on the news of a boy who murdered his friend in a desert in Mexico. We follow these two young men arriving by car at a desert, both of whom inexplicably refer to each other as Gerry (as a result, I shall be using the actors' names preceding those of the characters heretofore). We do not know who they are, their possible kinship, and what has brought them to this desert, nor are we further enlightened as the film unfolds. Indeed, the only information conveyed is that they are looking for, in their words, "the thing," yet

this search is abandoned as soon as they realize they are lost. We follow, unaware of time lapses in the film, their unsuccessful attempt to find their way back while they wander across monumental landscapes, eventually pausing, talking, and bickering. At the film's end, Damon-Gerry inexplicably chokes Affleck-Gerry to death, and manages to find his way out of the desert and be rescued by a car.

For most of *Gerry*, the viewer is confronted with these characters, weak and hopeless, dragging their way across harsh landscapes and struggling to find water under a blistering sun. In this respect, the film displays a documentary quality springing from the extreme temperatures and ruthless environmental conditions to which the cast and crew were, in actual fact, subjected. Shot entirely on location, mostly in Death Valley and the Utah salt flats (as well as in the Andes, Argentina), the harsh conditions and scorching weather of these locations resulted in a few casualties and

> *Gerry is…the fruit of an organic and communal mode of production based on improvisation, physicality, and chance, aspects that—at least in principle—connect the film to a cinematic realist tradition.*

even prompted some crew members to abandon the shoot. Granted, onscreen physical exertion is conveyed through artifice, as indicated by the large make-up crew credited at the film's end, which no doubt contributed to the despairing, sunburnt look of both actors. Still, *Gerry* attests to what Lúcia Nagib has recently theorized as "physical realism," which she defines as recording processes that "give evidence of an actor's physical engagement with the profilmic event" (19). This is what happens, for example, in the scene in which Affleck, stranded atop a rock, jumps off after hesitating for nearly eight minutes. Avoiding the use of montage trickery, this scene is presented in a long shot that foregrounds the physical reality of Affleck's jump, even though a jump cushion had been set up on the ground so as to prevent major injuries.

This allegiance to the reality of the profilmic event, with the ensuing incorporation of chance elements during the shoot, was the premise upon which *Gerry* was originally conceived. Shot in chronological order, Van Sant had no idea as to how or when the film would actually end. With a view to endowing the film with a spontaneous quality, its script, jointly sketched by director and actors, was composed of two pages containing around sixty lines and one-word descriptions, to be improvised on the spot by Damon

and Affleck. Examples include "taking a break," "getting bored," "panicking," "looking for trail," "returning the way they came," "writing," etc. (Ballinger 174). This skeletal, open-ended structure thus reveals the organic nature of this project, as well as the importance of Damon and Affleck in the film's creative process. Close friends in real life, they deliver an improvisational acting style grounded in absurdist dialogue.

Theirs is, indeed, a whimsical, obscure language full of made-up jargon such as "dirt-mattress," "rock-marooned," and "mountain scout-about." Their conversations often come across as inconsequential and nonsensical, occasionally lending the film a humorous quality. At the film's beginning, for example, the Gerrys engage in a three-minute conversation about the television program "Wheel of Fortune," recalling with amusement a contestant who "had every letter except for L" in the word "barrelling," but who thought it was a Y. Later on, Affleck-Gerry claims that he "conquered Thebes … two weeks ago," going on to give the details of the ancient Greek city's conquest to an attentive Damon, a baffling monologue that, the viewer concludes, can only refer to a video game.

Gerry's mode of production, in major respects attuned to the tenets of realist cinema, is thus translated into a fundamentally anti-realist narrative unconcerned with causality or logic. Indeed, the film's absurdist dialogue, delivered by two solitary characters in the midst of nowhere, is in many ways reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's famous existentialist play *Waiting for Godot*, an aspect largely picked up by the press upon *Gerry*'s release. Originally written in French as *En attendant Godot*, and representative of the "Theatre of the Absurd," the play presents two characters engaged in obscure conversations while they wait for the eponymous Godot, which in *Gerry* finds its cryptic equivalent in "the thing." The word "Godot," as noted by Lawrence Graver, encompasses a multitude of meanings and puns, both in English and French, among them the obvious "God," but also "*godillot*" and "*godasses,*" French words for "shapeless old shoes" and "military boots"—both recurrent visual motifs in the play (41). Interestingly, in *Gerry* it is the word "Gerry" that is endowed with a puzzling interchangeability, a usage supposedly incorporated from the way the actors speak between themselves in real life. Not only do they refer to each other as Gerry, but this word, the spectator learns as the film unfolds, has a semantic and semiotic versatility in their vocabulary: it is used as a verb, an adjective, and a noun, with varying meanings. Hence, in order to express his luck when "conquering Thebes," Affleck-Gerry exclaims that that was "such a gerry." In another scene, Damon-Gerry explains that they "gerried off to the animal tracks," using the word as a substitute for the verbs "wander" or "walk."

2. See Staiger 11-14.

Figures 5-6: Dwarfing the human in *Gerry*

Most notably, Gerry stands for the word "fuck" or "screw," as illustrated in the scene in which Damon-Gerry concludes that they "totally gerried the mountain scout-about." Thus, *Gerry*'s thin, cryptic plot seems to be encapsulated in the slippery word "Gerry," whose definite meaning, like the film's narrative, is impossible to pinpoint.

In reference to Glauber Rocha's *Black God, White Devil* (1964), a film also shot in desert landscapes (those of northeast Brazil), Nagib discusses the way in which its combination of realist (such as location shooting) and anti-realist (such as theatricality) devices "places presentational truth above representational mimesis, a method that determines, on the one hand, the exposure of the inner workings of fiction, and, on the other, the bodily engagement of crew and cast with real locations" (51). Something along these lines happens in *Gerry*, whose anti-realist narrative devices prevent spectatorial absorption on a representational level, exposing the reality of the filmmaking process itself. Unaided by character psychology and dramatic logic, the viewer is denied identificatory processes and full narrative immersion, being instead asked to concentrate on these actors' performances in their own right—that is to say, on the reality of acting, as well as on their corporeal interaction with real locations. In fact, real locations in *Gerry* are objects of attention in themselves.

Contemplative Landscapes

The lack of character psychology and drama in *Gerry* is matched, on a visual level, by its disdain for anthropomor-

...if these grandiose images lend themselves to metaphysical readings, then they convey...emptiness, nothingness, and meaninglessness, testifying not to God but to the sheer mystery of existence and the physical world...

phic dimensions. Here, landscapes dwarf human presence to the point where Damon and Affleck occasionally appear as insignificant dots within the frame (Figures 5-6). In these shots, their miniaturized scale renders impossible the reading of facial expressions, gestures, and movements, calling attention, by contrast, to the enormity of the deserts they traverse. Of course, the viewer continues to follow the characters' trajectory during the film, being occasionally offered dialogue and short-distance shots. Still, this film's extreme downplaying of human presence asks for some elaboration.

Harris Savides's landscape cinematography is by far *Gerry*'s most impressive feature. This, however, is certainly not the first film to convey a fascination with majestic natural scenery. Vast dimensions and open expanses are characteristic of the United State's geography, featuring in countless American films and being a staple of quintessentially American genres such as the Road Movie and the Western. Speaking of the latter, Bazin notes its underlying realist verve insofar as its "predilection for vast horizons, all-encompassing shots...restore to space its fullness" (*What is Cinema?*, 147). Moreover, *Gerry* is the culmination of a landscape sensibility that has consistently informed Van Sant's work, a reflection of his artistic debt to the Beat movement. As Jack Sargeant notes, films such as *Mala Noche* (1986), *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1993)—the director's independent first features—"all reveal an interest in America—and the vastness of the American landscape—which is similar to that manifested in [Beat writer] Jack Kerouac's writing" (219). Likewise, these are films flirting in postmodern fashion with the Road Movie and the Western genre. In them, characters are always on the road, which provides the cue for the foregrounding of the United State's infinite expanses, notably the North and Mid-West. However, it must be noted that their attention to vast landscapes is not only momentary but somewhat peripheral to their diegeses. In *Gerry*, by contrast, vast landscapes assume a central importance, calling attention to their own physicality and asking

to be contemplated for their own sake. Their scale is either in monstrous contrast with that of characters or else they are displayed entirely on their own in overextended shots. In this respect, *Gerry* resonates with a landscape painting tradition.

In his study of spatial representation in cinema, Martin Lefebvre asks whether there is such a thing as "landscape" in film—in the contemplative sense that this term has acquired apropos of a Western painting tradition. Distinguishing between "settings" and "autonomous landscapes," Lefebvre argues that the spectator may adopt an "autonomising gaze," taking in, for example, a western setting "in its own right" and transforming it into a "landscape" (29). On the other hand, one may find "landscapes" momentarily, as in the *temps morts* of Michelangelo Antonioni's films, famous for their long takes of characters aimlessly traversing desolate locations. Implicit in Lefebvre's discussion is the de-dramatizing function that the distant and silent long take can perform. Of course, the sequence shot can be appropriated for dramatic ends, and this was what Bazin himself praised when expounding on the long takes of Welles, Renoir, and Wyler, which, in the critic's view, displayed a meticulously orchestrated *mise-en-scène* in strict accordance with dramaturgic logic.[3] However, with Antonioni—and to an even greater extent *Gerry*—we have a different scenario. Here, long takes coupled with distant framings are often utilized so as to produce images evacuated of narrative information and meaning, which enhance, in return, the purely material presence of landscapes.

If, as Malcolm Andrews contends, a landscape painting tradition emerges as a quest "to celebrate the awesome beauty of the natural world" (48), *Gerry* is similarly a film that seems fascinated by the film medium's ability to capture phenomenological reality as materialized in stunning landscapes. Lefebvre charts the birth of a landscape tradition in the visual arts from the moment when these locations ceased to be a "spatial 'accessory' to a painted scene" and became "the primary and independent subject matter of a work" (23)—meaning the literal spatial increase of landscapes in the surface of a painting and the inversely proportional decrease in the size of human beings.[4] In particular, this dwarfing of the human figure culminated in the Sublime painting tradition, a tendency with which *Gerry* specifically resonates.

The defining characteristics of the Sublime were famously proposed by the English philosopher Edmund Burke in *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of*

3. See, for example, Bazin, *Bazin at Work* 11 and *Orson Welles: A Critical View* 80.

4. This, interestingly, would be inverted in cinema, whose over-reliance on the human body as the common denominator for its framing measures is well documented. See Doane.

the Sublime and Beautiful (1827), in which he defines it as divesting the human being of control and reasoning, the experience of which, usually found in nature, is inexpressible and unrepresentable. To encounter the Sublime is thus to confront superlative concepts such as "Vastness," "Infinity," "Light," and "Magnificence," as found in material form in the natural world (Burke). This notion was pictorially translated into landscapes whose monumentality loomed over powerless and minuscule human figures. In Caspar David Friedrich's *The Monk by the Sea* (*Der Mönch am Meer*, 1809), we encounter more than two thirds of its surface occupied by an immense and formless white sky, which weighs down

Figures 7-8: The Sublime in Caspar David Friedrich's *The Monk by the Sea* and *Gerry*

upon the infinitesimal monk at the bottom. *Gerry*'s scenes filmed in the Utah salt grounds uncannily evoke Friedrich's painting. The whiteness of the salt flats are mirrored by the purplish white sky, resulting in a visual composition whose uniform, expansive paleness is counterpointed only by the diminutive presence of Damon and Affleck at the bottom of the frame (Figures 7-8).

But here we are also compelled to examine this visual resemblance more closely. For a Romantic painter like Friedrich, the contemplation of nature—mirrored in his paintings by subjects seen from behind and contemplating views themselves—was the means by which to enter into communion with a spiritual dimension. His paintings, as *The Monk by the Sea* illustrates, are freighted with religious allusions. In *Gerry*, this metaphysical dimension is not so clear-cut. More than communing with Nature, these characters are estranged by it, suffering from its sheer physicality

and indifference, as illustrated by the splendid yet merciless salt flats. This is to say that if these grandiose images lend themselves to metaphysical readings, then they convey, perhaps more pointedly, emptiness, nothingness, and meaninglessness, testifying not to God but to the sheer mystery of existence and the physical world, as well as to the sensory power of the film medium in its ability to enhance perception.

Visionary Images

In addition to employing distant long takes that literally minimize the importance of characters before the grandiosity of the natural world—which invites a contemplative (as opposed to an interpretative and alert) spectatorial attitude—*Gerry* is regularly punctuated by images of landscapes entirely devoid of human presence. In this respect, the film's protracted focus on the objective real serves to evoke mental processes of perception and cognition. We see, in lengthy takes, immense skies, rising suns, sped up clouds and shadows, sand dunes and monumental rocks—autonomous images that arbitrarily halt *Gerry*'s already rarefied narrative and whose extended duration lend the film a hypnotic quality (Figure 9). As viewers, we are unable to locate the place of these images within the diegetic universe: are they purely objective images conveying the passing of time? Are they being "seen" through the eyes of these characters? Or are they "mirages" in their own right—that is to say, audiovisual expressions of a pure consciousness? While these questions remain unanswered, the fact remains that these oneiric images resonate with the American avant-garde tradition and its "visionary" quest as famously theorized by P. Adams Sitney. Elaborating on experimental filmmakers such as Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, among others, Sitney describes the visionary tradition in film as an attempt to reproduce dream states and (altered) mental processes through the juxtaposition of non-correlated, literal images, its greatest aspiration being "the mimesis of the human mind in a cinematic structure" (305), which seems to be the case in *Gerry*.

Van Sant's rapport with the American avant-garde goes back to his student days at the Rhode Island School of Design in the 1970s, where he studied experimental cinema and became engaged with this filmmaking strand. Though he later veered into narrative cinema, "visionary" images are pervasive, if in subdued form, in many of his films. Most notably, they appear in the form of passing clouds, which either slowed down or sped up, break the narrative flow, offering instead moments of contemplation. This visual motif has become the director's hallmark, found in most of his

work to date. In films such as *Drugstore Cowboy* and *My Own Private Idaho*, moreover, sped up clouds convey the characters' altered perception of reality. In the former, they appear, together with surreal objects floating in the air, as a means to express the characters' drug-induced state of mind (Figure 10). In the latter, its narcoleptic protagonist, played by River Phoenix, provides the cue for dreamlike images of empty roads and passing clouds whenever he falls into deep sleep.

However, visionary images are onscreen in these films for a few seconds only. Further, the altered states of mind they convey are acknowledged as such within the narrative, which clearly demarcates the reality of its intradiegetic universe and the distorted cognition of this same reality as experienced by characters. This demarcation is nowhere to be

Figure 9-10: Visionary Images in *Gerry* and *My Own Private Idaho*

found in *Gerry*, in which the real and the imaginary seem to indistinctly conflate, as illustrated by a scene that conveys a mirage—the archetypal desert trope. We initially see both Gerrys from behind, talking to each other as they sit on the ground, while a person, entirely out of focus and in the distance, walks towards the camera. As the scene cuts to a frontal shot of both characters and then back to a shot from behind, the camera starts closing in on Affleck's back and we realize that the person coming in his direction is actually Damon, and that the film operates at the intersection of subjective and objective perspectives.

More remarkably, this intersection is expressed through the film's form, which thanks to a discontinuous montage of mirage-like images, evokes "more directly states of consciousness and reflexes of the imagination in the viewer" (Sitney 306). Onscreen for minutes in overstretched shots, these images resist signification, being conveyed as heightened sensible presences. Here, the long take provides the viewer with plenty of time to study the phenomenal, textural, tactile—in short, the sensorial, material qualities these landscapes radiate: the solidity of rocks, the gaseousness of passing clouds, the whiteness of salted grounds, the blueness of skies. As such, these images resonate with Gilles Deleuze's definition of cinematic affect. Drawing on

Realism here does not emerge as a mimetic exercise, but rather, as an aesthetic endeavour concerned with reclaiming the phenomenology of the viewing experience.

Peirce's concept of "Firstness"—a mode of being in which qualities have not been actualized in a state of things and thus emerge "in their own suchness" (Peirce 86)—Deleuze defines affect as the pure expression of a pure quality or power: "It is that which is as it is for itself and in itself" (Deleuze 100). In film, affect is expressed when the image loses its spatiotemporal coordinates, enabling qualities to appear for themselves. This, he contends, is mostly accomplished through the facial close-up and spatial fragmentation (as in Bresson's films), and emptiness, what he calls the any-space-whatever (*espace quelconque*) or qualisigns:

> There are…two states of any-space-whatever, or two kinds of "qualisigns," qualisigns of deconnection and of emptiness…The any-space-whatever retains one and the same nature: it no longer has co-ordinates, it is a pure potential, it shows only pure Powers and Qualities, independently of the state of things or milieux which actualise them. (123)

True, Deleuze does not mention the long take in his discussion of the "affection-image." Yet as *Gerry* illustrates, it seems obvious that duration, when combined with particular framing strategies, can only enhance the affective qualities of images as described by the philosopher. Not only does the film foreground the emptiness of landscapes through sustained long takes, it occasionally adheres to framing devices whose resulting images threaten to overflow the borders of the figurative, thereby attaining the sensuous quality of abstract paintings in motion. This is what happens, for example, in the shot showing an immense blue sky un-

Figure 11-12: Affective landscapes

der which we see triangular summits, and formless white clouds whose changing shape is rendered visible through time-lapse procedures; or when we see the surface of rocks above which grey, heavy storm clouds swiftly pass through the screen, also the effect of time-lapse procedures (Figures 11-12). Though one obviously perceives these things for what they are, these images fluctuate between their real, individuated state and their sensorial plasticity: their movement, forms, texture, and colours are liberated from that which actualizes them. As such, the film seems to answer Stan Brakhage's famous call for a pure perception, freed from language and automatisms: "Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception" (Brakhage 46). By foregrounding reality primarily as a perceptual, sensible, and experiential phenomenon, *Gerry* is such an adventure of perception.

Concluding Remarks

As hopefully illustrated, *Gerry* cannot be so easily accommodated under the rubric of cinematic realism. On the one hand, the film accords to precepts traditionally associated with realist cinema such as location shooting, improvisational modes of production, and, in particular, the use of the long take. Superimposing these elements, however, are anti-realist narrative devices and experimental strategies that complicate *Gerry*'s categorization as a realist film in accordance with representational canons. Its hyperbolic asser-

tion of the film medium's recording ability, crystallized in its "visionary" long takes, serves to yield a cinematic sensory experience rather than attending to the demands of narrative economy. Realism here does not emerge as a mimetic exercise, but rather, as an aesthetic endeavour concerned with reclaiming the phenomenology of the viewing experience.

In 1969, Susan Sontag, in her famous essay "The Aesthetics of Silence," remarked on the representational saturation that would come to be viewed as typical of postmodernism. In it, she draws attention to a then emerging art which, rather than fostering meaning, turns to "opaqueness," "blandness," and "alogicality," citing, among others, Beckett and minimalist art. This silent turn she attributes to a general scepticism of language and the concomitant appeal of a cultural and perceptual cleansing process in the context of a world overfilled with readily available representations and "furnished with second-hand perceptions" (5). As the artist is faced with the daunting prospect that whatever he or she creates "will remind…of something already achieved," silence promises a more immediate and "unalienated art" (14-5). Van Sant was certainly after this renewal when making *Gerry*, adopting an experimental-realist approach that attests to cinema's ability to enhance perception and, in so doing, evacuate consciousness of what we traditionally call "thinking." Sontag compares silent art with the perceptual appeal of landscapes, an operation that is, therefore, literally conflated in *Gerry*:

> The spectator would approach art as he does a landscape. A landscape doesn't demand from the spectator his "understanding," his imputations of significance, his anxieties and sympathies; it demands, rather, his absence, it asks that he not add anything to *it*. Contemplation, strictly speaking, entails self-forgetfulness on the part of the spectator: an object worthy of contemplation is one which, in effect, annihilates the perceiving subject. (Sontag 16)

An annihilated perceiving subject, however, is denied thinking only in the traditional, Cartesian sense of this term. For as Sontag herself observes, in contemplation, "the silence of eternity prepares for a thought beyond thought, which must appear from the…familiar uses of the mind as no thought at all—though it may rather be the emblem of new, 'difficult' thinking" (17). In its advocacy for perceptual literalness and sensory experience, *Gerry* strives to be this contemplative kind of art. As such, the aesthetic sensations it conjures are not disconnected from thinking but are the very vehicles through which a new thinking—that which is yet to be thought—comes into being.

Works Cited

Andrews, Malcolm. *Landscape and Western Art.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.

Ballinger, Alexander. *New Cinematographers.* London: Laurence King, 2004. Print.

Bazin, André. *Orson Welles: A Critical View.* New York: Harper and Row, 1978. Print.

—. *Bazin at Work: Major Essays from the Forties & Fifties.* New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.

—. *What is Cinema? Vol. 2.* Berkeley: U of California P, 2005. Print.

Burke, Edmund. *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.* London: J. F. Dove, 1827. Print.

Brakhage, Stan. "Metaphors on Vision." *Religion, Art and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader.* Ed. S. Brent Plate. New York: Palgrave, 2002. Print.

de Luca, Tiago. "Realism of the Senses: A Tendency in Contemporary World Cinema." *Theorizing World Cinema.* Eds. Lúcia Nagib, Chris Perriam, and Rajinder Dudrah London: I.B. Tauris, 2012. Print.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image.* London: Continuum, 2005. Print.

Doane, Mary Ann. "Scale and the Negotiation of 'Real' and 'Unreal' Space in the Cinema." *Realism and the Audiovisual Media.* Eds. Lúcia Nagib and Cecília Mello. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Print.

Graver, Lawrence. *Beckett: Waiting for Godot.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.

Lefebvre, Martin. "Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema." *Landscape and Film.* Ed. Martin Lefebvre. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Nagib, Lúcia. *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism.* London: Continuum, 2011. Print.
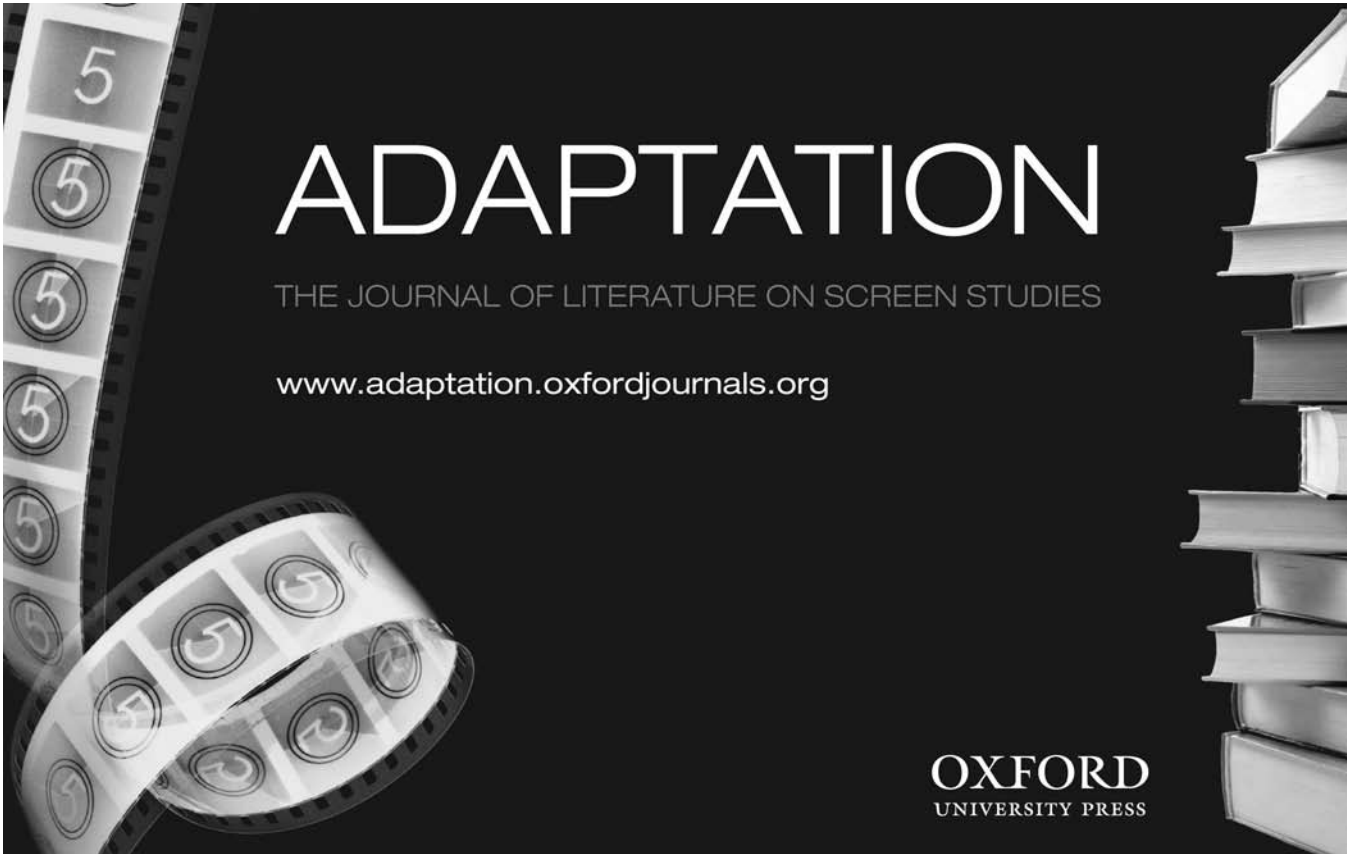
Sargeant, Jack. *The Naked Lens: a History of Beat Cinema.* London: Creation, 1997. Print.

Sitney, P. Adams. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000.* New York: Oxford UP, 2002. Print.

Sontag, Susan. *Styles of Radical Will.* London: Penguin Books, 2009. Print.

Staiger, Janet. "Authorship Studies and Gus Van Sant." *Film Criticism* 29.1 (2004): 1 - 22. Print.

Van Sant, Gus. "The Camera is a Machine." MoMA Béla Tarr Retrospective Catalogue, 2001. Available at http://blogs.walkerart.org/filmvideo/2008/03/17/gus-van-sant-light-bela-tarr/. Web. Sep. 2011.