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Natalia Posada Ruiz

ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS IN PRAGUE

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MASTER'S THESIS

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The distance montage of a drug war

Natalia Posada Ruiz

Thesis advisor: Martin Čihák

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**EL VELADOR;
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Natalia Posada Ruiz

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D e c l a r a t i o n

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Distance montage theory applied to the documentary *El Velador*

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

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Abstract

This text is an analysis of the Mexican documentary *El velador* under the scope of Peleshyan's theory of "distance montage". The thesis reflects on the way the film creates the meaning of violence without showing violence itself, and how the function of montage constructs not only a concept but also an emotional meaning through the repetition of motifs, the distance between them and symbolic associations to have resonance with the viewer about how the war against drug traffic affects everyone one way or another.

Abstrakt

Tento text je analýzou mexického dokumentu *El velador* podle Peleshyanovy teorie distanční montáže. Práce se zamýšlí nad tím, jakým způsobem film vytváří význam násilí, aniž by násilí samotné zobrazoval a jak funkce montáže konstruuje nejen koncept, ale i emocionální význam skrze opakování motivů, vzdálenostmi mezi nimi a symbolickými asociacemi, jež mají rezonovat s divákem v otázce myšlenky, jak válka proti obchodu s drogami ovlivňuje svým způsobem každého z nás.

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"There aren't enough living to bury the dead."

Wisdom of Solomon 18:12

INTRODUCTION

The work of the editor, amongst other things, consists in watching the material, asking questions, and seeing possibilities that a regular eye can't see. As editors, our first encounter with the image is understanding the different possibilities of meaning that the image can give to the viewer. After that, the editor starts to play with the meaning of two images, three images, four images and so on, creating a whole world, narrating stories, and building a language that the viewer can decode, not only to understand the film, but also to give emotions.

The editing, in the creation of a film, is the real moment where the director can see and corroborate whether the story works or not. The first interpretation of the script is done during the shooting, while during the process of montage, editors reinterpret the material, and from there try to achieve the version that the directors want. Sometimes, the director has a limited vision of the material and the connections are not as strong as they think, or the potential of the footage is even stronger than the director thinks, and they are thus wasted. That is why the editors are an important ally for the director to achieve together the best version of the film.

While learning and practicing the process of storytelling in the editing room, editors have to apply different techniques that we learn from the Soviet editors, who were responsible for creating montage theories that we are studying, analyzing and using, still today. Inspired by Artavazd Peleshyan, I wanted to focus my thesis on his theory and apply it to Latin-American documentaries, specifically *El velador*. I consider it important to connect the context where I come from, to the theories that were developed a long time ago, and to be able to mix them into current stories.

After watching several documentaries from Latin America, I decided that *El velador* was the best option to analyze for this thesis since I was captivated by the way the director, who is also the editor, told a meaningful documentary without interviews, without explicit explanations but through strong connections in the editing room, to tell a story about violence without showing violence.

The first part of the thesis focuses on summarizing what the film *El velador* is about. I will explain the context of the film, so as to give the reader a rough idea of the drug war that started decades ago, and how, especially in Mexico, it spun out of control. In this way, it will be easier for the reader to later understand the aim of the director, Natalia Almada, in making this documentary. As well, the first part of the thesis will present an overview of Natalia Almada's work, to recognize how the theoretical principles of "distance montage" is apply to this specific film in order to be more powerful, and different from her other films.

In the second chapter, the theory of Peleshyan will be explained in such a way that the reader can definitely understand its use within the film, later on in the third chapter. This third chapter will be the core of the text, since my objectives are to analyze: 1) how the theory of Peleshyan is applied to the film, 2) how the meaning of the shots and repetitions are stronger under the theory of distance montage and 3) how, had it been edited differently, the result would completely differ from the original goal of Natalia Almada.

Consequently, the montage process of the film is the main element that gives another layer for the viewer, allowing him to understand how the drug traffic war is affecting the people in this place, and at the same time, it makes it possible, with the use of montage, for the viewer to see how the violence is established as a landscape, without being shown actual images of violence.

CHAPTER 1.

EL VELADOR

1.1 *El velador* in context

El velador (The Night Watchman) is a 52 minutes long documentary made in 2011 by director Natalia Almada. The film follows Martín, the guard of an extravagant cemetery exclusively used for drug lords in the city of Culiacán, Mexico. This documentary portrays the daily life in the Jardines de Humaya cemetery, where hitmen and drug lords lie at rest. From there, the director Natalia Almada shows the viewer the violence that hits the country with the war against drug trafficking.

Although drug trafficking can be traced back several decades in Latin America, the increase of extreme violence in Mexico occurred in 2006, when President Felipe Calderon declared a "war on drugs". It consisted in going after high profile cartel leaders to please the United States of America, in order to get financing and military support.

"However, it has fractured and diversified cartels, leaving factions and rival cartels to fight for turf. Against this background, other violent crimes, such as kidnapping and extortion, which are not dependent on smuggling routes, surged... since 2007, around 230.000 people have been murdered, and more than 28.000 are reported as disappeared."¹

Subsequently, the number of series and films that portray the drug trade has increased to the point of leading to a stereotypical picture of Mexico's drug culture and society in general. Mexico, and overall Latin America, have been reduced to violence and corruption. The stories are very similar from one to another, and in some cases idealize the lives of famous drug kingpins who are battling against the evil government, such as: *El Chapo* (2017-2018), *Escobar* (2017), *Narcos* (2015-2017), *El Señor de los Cielos* (2013-present), *El Infierno* (2010), *La Reina del Sur* (2011-present).

¹ TROMP Rosanne Elisabeth, "What is Mexico? Portraying the war on Drugs in documentary film", *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, N°106 (2018), p. 219.

Unlike the majority of the films about drug traffic, *El velador* shows the violence from a different perspective and without graphic images to explain how horrible this war has been. We, as viewers, can observe the violence after death, we can observe how the pain and sadness came and how it established itself in the daily lives of the people who live there. It allows us to see the intersection between the ones who died and want to be remembered, and the ones who make a living there and try to continue with their lives.

What makes this documentary an interesting case study, is the fact that the director decided to talk about violence without showing violence, instead she wanted to provoke in the viewer an active thinking and, through her approach with the camera and the editing, generate the meaning of violence. The film does not define the concept of violence itself, but rather shows its emotional impact. This documentary doesn't follow a story or a common structure, rather, it feels as if we are observing, through Martin's vigilant eyes, how, in this place, time passes and how time stands still.

1.2 Natalia Almada's previous work

Natalia Almada was born in 1974 in Mexico. Her father is from Mexico and her mother is from the United States, hence her life has been a constant journey between Mexico and the United States. Because of this, her films are often a contrast between the two cultures to which she belongs, "she makes intimate films that delve into the tragedies of her Mexican-American family's personal history as well as the Sinaloa region's violent present"². To date, she has done 6 films that have gained recognition in several film festivals around the world.

After having obtained a B.F.A (Bachelor of Fine Arts) at the College of Santa Fe and an M.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design, Almada decided to focus her career on documentaries that push the boundaries of addressing social issues, "she incorporates powerful visual images and the observations of ordinary people she encounters with her camera into an intimate, multilayered form of storytelling."³

Her first short documentary *La memoria perfecta del agua* – 19 minutes (*All Water has a Perfect Memory*) won the best documentary at the Tribeca film festival in 2002. It is a very personal story of the passing of Natalia Almada's older sister who drowned when Almada was a baby. According to the article published in the non-profit organization about art, ART 21.ORG, in the film, the director wanted to deconstruct how the mother and the father respond to the tragedy differently according to gender and nationality.

Al Otro Lado – 90 minutes, is her first feature film made in 2005, focusing on drug trafficking and illegal migration between Mexico and the United States. The interesting point in the film is that it uses the famous local music in this part of Mexico called "Corridos", which has been used for narrative purposes, because there are always rich stories in the lyrics:

² According to the article published in the non-profit organization about art ART 21.ORG without a specific author <https://art21.org/artist/natalia-almada/>

³ MacArthur Foundation supports creative people, effective institutions, and influential networks. Natalia Almada won the award from this organization in 2012 and they interviewed her, without specific author <https://www.macfound.org/fellows/class-of-2012/natalia-almada#searchresults>

"The border is a place where one people's dreams collide with another people's politics, and the 200-year-old tradition of *corrido* music vibrantly chronicles it all. If you want to understand what is happening on the U.S./Mexico border, listen to the *corridos*, troubadour-like ballads that have become the voice of people whose views are rarely heard in mainstream media."⁴

In 2009, her third documentary was released: *El General* – 83 minutes. The film is about her great grandfather, who was president of Mexico but whom everyone remembers as a dictator. "*El General* explores an ambiguity between history and memory and how Almada's grandmother balances her memories with those of the public."⁵ The documentary is made up of a voice recording from the grandmother and archive footage of her great grandfather. With this film, she won the documentary directing award from the Sundance Film festival.

El Velador – 52 minutes (2011). Natalia traveled back from United States to the place where she grew up: Sinaloa, Culiacán, the state of Mexico that is known as the place where all the big drug lords live. Almada chose the Jardines de Humaya cemetery as the setting of her documentary in order to show the violence that is generated due to the war between the government and the drug trafficking.

In this place, Jardines de Humaya, the most important cemetery of Culiacán, drug lords and killers are the main ones who are filling the pantheon. It stands out from other cemeteries because it has big mausoleums, emulating either temples, or mansions. "The drug lords that rest in here wanted to be remembered and show off the amount of money they could've had". ⁶ Nowadays, it became a tourist attraction where many curious people come to see up close the graves of the famous drug lords, alongside actually bereft people who come to mourn their loved ones.

⁴ POV is television's longest-running showcase for independent nonfiction films. This website is available for archive purposes. In the profile of the film *Al otro lado* there is a complete text of the film description without specific author <http://archive.pov.org/alotrolado/film-description/>

⁵ From the catalogue Women Make Movies <https://www.wmm.com/catalog/film/el-general/>

⁶ ALMADA Natalia in the interview done by Velazco Salvador. "El ojo que piensa". Revista de cine Iberoamericano // e-ISSN:2007-4999, 2012, p. 1.
<http://www.elojoquepiensa.cucsh.udg.mx/index.php/elajoquepiensa/article/view/107/108>

After “*El Velador*”, Natalia Almada wanted to try telling a fictional story for the first time. She made her feature film *Todo lo Demas* – 98 minutes (2016) which talks about Flor, a woman who is trapped in her bureaucratic job. According to Natalia Almada, she wanted to show the loneliness and the feeling of invisibility in society through the character of Flor.⁷

Her most recent documentary film, *Users* – 81 minutes (2021) is a very intimate project since it is about her personal experience with her son. It is her first film not made in Mexico and thus not spoken in Spanish. She explores the relationship between humanity and technology, how it is changing the world and the way her son is growing. The idea came while the pandemic was starting and she could observe “people transformed into consumers, entities easily controllable by algorithms... Unfortunately, this “technological future” seems to have generated smaller screens than those of the analogical times and that has meant that today we have to see his film in conditions that are not optimal. Little ironies that can happen when we think –and film– what we imagine as the future”⁸

It is very interesting to see how Natalia Almada has a different style in each film, yet all of her films have in common the following of a character that carries the emotional motive she wants to explore. In the films *La memoria perfecta del agua* and *El general*, she uses archive footage and voice over, composed of the interviews she made with her family, which are guiding the story. Whereas with *Al otro lado* and *Users*, the narrative style relies on footage that she recorded by herself, and the use of a talking-head is present to tell the story.

El velador is her only documentary that has a specific style, which is what makes it so special. In some interviews, some people asked and thought she was using the observational mode called “Fly in the wall”⁹ concept developed by Bill Nichols,

⁷ This is my interpretation of the Interview with Natalia Almada for the film festival IMCINE, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbgBfcD3SwY>

⁸ LERER Diego, Micropsia blog, 2021, <https://www.micropsiacine.com/2021/02/festivales-critica-de-users-de-natalia-almada-sundance/>

⁹ Bill Nichols is an American film theoretician who established 6 different modes of documentary with their specific characteristics. One of them is the observational mode where he came out with the concept of a fly in the wall who is observing but not disturbing <https://academy.wedio.com/types-of-documentaries/>

where the filmmaker places the camera to discover the truth, observing the subject without interrupting. Natalia Almada disagreed with this, stating:

"I feel my presence does affect the situation, that my presence does change the reality that I am filming. I always try to include moments that I call transparency in which you remind the viewer that there is someone behind the camera, that someone is framing the situation, and that there is a subjective interpretation of reality. It is not reality as it was but as I saw it and as I want to tell you about it."¹⁰

Since she spent one-year filming in the cemetery, sometimes she could predict some actions and in that way be part of the place and have some sort of complicity with the people who worked there, like Martin.

The cemetery was the factor that pushed the director to find a method to tell a story in a different way than what she was used to: thinking of images as the main source of storytelling rather than words. Even though she had a lot of footage after one year of shooting, it was only during the editing that the idea of respecting the mourning, the quietness, and the stillness came to her mind, henceforth bringing a new way of telling this documentary.

¹⁰ ALMADA Natalia in the interview done by Velazco Salvador, "El ojo que piensa". Revista de cine Iberoamericano // e-ISSN:2007-4999, 2012, p 10.
<http://www.elojoquepiensa.cucsh.udg.mx/index.php/elajoquepiensa/article/view/107/108>

CHAPTER 2.

PELESHYAN DISTANCE MONTAGE

2.1 Theory of “distance montage”

The impact of Artavazd Peleshyan’s work is due to the power of the montage theory he developed with the aim of having a more organic montage “that carries not only the feeling of a deep connection between the past and the present but also the idea of the connection between the present and the future – thus adding depth and nuance to the treatment of the main idea.”¹ This modifies the documentaries in a way that diminishes the informative value and increases the iconographic value for the viewer. Because of this way of treating documentaries, many people consider Peleshyan’s films as poetic essays, for others it looks like a musical composition, “topic, variations, leitmotiv, difference and repetition, tempo... giving the emotional experience to the viewer”.² Likewise, he is considered as an experimentalist with found footage since a lot of his films were done only with archive material, and the first time he used original footage was in his most known film: *The Seasons* (1975).

Artavazd Peleshyan was born in 1938 in Armenia, he was accepted into the film school VGIK in 1963. While studying there, he started to have recognition thanks to his first film *The Beginning* (1967). His main films are *We* (1969), *Inhabitants* (1970), *Seasons* (1975), *Our Century* (1983), *The End* (1992), *Life* (1993) and the latest film, after 25 years, *Nature* (2020) which is made up of found footage, keeping the essence of his work: black-and-white, no dialogues or interviews used to talk about the “illusion that humanity can control nature.”³

He published his manifesto *Distance Montage* in 1974 and it was rewritten in 1988 as part of his book *Moe Kino* which is a compilation of all his texts that were translated into several languages.

¹ PELESHYAN Artavazd, *Montage at a Distance, or: A Theory of Distance*, p. 17.

² NINEY François, *Peleshyan: Reality Dismounted, Theory of distance montage*, Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematograficos CUEC, cuadernos FIUNAM, Mexico, 2011, p. 9. [Spanish translation of the theory distance montage]

³From the catalogue of the documentary film festival IDFA, 21 Sep. 2021 <https://www.idfa.nl/en/film/6a717da4-34c8-4095-bc67-4f3335899c9f/nature>

In his manifesto, he develops his theory "*distance montage*", and explains that it is the opposite of the theory of Kuleshov, Eisenstein or Vértov for whom the meaning is created when we put two shots together. Peleshyan says:

"...the main essence and emphasis of montage work, for me, is not to join shots but to *disjoin* them; not their junction but their *disjunction*. It happened that, for me, the most interesting part begins not when I join two montage fragments, but when I disjoin them, putting between them a third, fourth and fifth fragment." ⁴

Peleshyan believes that the ideological meaning of the two shots is stronger and deeper when they are created with a distance between them, making them communicate through the entire chain of shots that unite them. "That is why Peleshyan's films are not about telling a story but instead elaborate on a continuum of impressions of the world." ⁵

One of the most relevant things in Peleshyan's films is **repetition**. According to Peleshyan once the viewer sees a shot, he won't see it in the same way a second or third time. As Térésa Faucon explained in the article "Turbulence and repetition" about the film *Seasons* from Peleshyan; A shot placed in certain point of the film will reveal the totality of the meaning only after a lapse of time, after it is in the conscience of the viewer. These shots are called the "bearing shots", which are going to connect the main motifs during the whole film.

"We may claim that a semantic image by Peleshyan does not directly form an idea, but leads to it by a series of indirect hints, hidden signs or seemingly less important motifs which do not show off their meaning but encourage the viewer to discover them in the rapids of the stream of the film."⁶

⁴ PELESHYAN Artavazd, *Montage-at-a-Distance, or: A Theory of Distance*. p. 11.

⁵ NINEY François, *Peleshyan: Reality Dismounted, Theory of distance montage*, Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematograficos CUEC, cuardernos FIUNAM, Mexico, 2011, p. 11-12. [Spanish translation of the theory distance montage]

⁶ KAŠČEJEV Alexander, *The Poetry of the Seasons*, in the summary of the book *Distanční Montáž* Artavazda Pelešjana, ČIHÁK Martin, Prague, 2016, p. 151.

Each image, seen a second or third time, is perceived differently since it is nourished by the memory of the first time it was seen. "...repetition leads to temporary forms that can activate memory mechanisms by bringing back a collective past and personal memories, which give the image a political, philosophical, spiritual dimension, etc."⁷ Every time the viewer sees an image that was shown before it works like a revelation, and brings new meaning thanks to the distance that was created in between, which is complemented by the shots that were placed between the two bearing shots.

The repetition is not only an opportunity to reveal meaning, but also gives complexity to the time inside the film. Far from putting an end to the action by repeating it, it gives the space for prolonging the time, and it is something that Peleshyan always struggles with. "Time Against Me, My Cinema Against Time"⁸. In order to slow the passage of time, or hold it back, he created a circuit where he puts the same shot several times but, in the repetition, he flipped the shots, and plays the shots in the middle backwards, creating in the viewer a back and forth reading of the film.



Image : frames from a scene of *The Seasons* (1975), dir. Artavazd Peleshyan

"The reverse reading facilitates a kind of ascension in time, while the alternation "forward-backwards" translates the stuttering of time that plays the role of

⁷ SEMERJIAN Myriam *Materia y Cosmos, El montaje a distancia de Artavazd Peleshyan*, Bogotá, IDARTES, 2011, p. 146.

⁸ PELESHYAN Artavazd, *Discourse*, Vol. 22, Nº1, SCREENING ETHNICITY (Winter 2000), p. 92-93.

repeater and retarder.”⁹ Artavazd Peleshyan also plays with time by placing the last frame of a shot next to the same shot in reverse, that is to say, the last frame is also the first frame of the next shot. This retarding effect creates an invisible cut between repeated shots allowing the image to be paused.

Even though Peleshyan is playing with the time, he does variations to the same shots, reframing, flipping it and putting different in-out points, so the audience doesn’t feel that it is the same and it creates the illusion of stretching the time. For instance; in the first sequence of *Seasons*, there is the fall of a shepherd and his sheep, Peleshyan uses the same shot several times to play with the duration of the scene that has two parts. In the first part, where we can hear the strong river, the viewer can feel fear for the shepherd and the sheep, it raises the question of their survival. The second part is when the music takes over and the sound of the river almost disappears, the speed of the shots changes and the viewer forgets about the feeling of danger, it becomes more contemplative since the movement of the water also slows down together with the music.

In reality, these are only seconds of footage, but Peleshyan creates a sequence of several minutes, he multiplies the shots to prolong the time and combines them with the music to create two different feelings from the same shots that affect the sensitivity of the audience. This is a perfect example, not only to understand how Peleshyan plays with the time in his films, but also to understand how important the sound is in his way of creating meaning.

“...the sound would be inextricably linked with the image, and the image would be inextricably linked with the sound! My starting point was, and still is, the fact that the only justification for the use of sound in my films should be, in a figurative way, its aesthetic function. We must find the critical expressiveness even in ambient noises and, if it is necessary, we must transform their resonance. That is why synchronous sound and voice-over commentary remain absent from my films.”¹⁰

⁹ SEMERJIAN Myriam, *Materia y Cosmos, El montaje a distancia de Artavazd Peleshyan*, Bogotá, IDARTES, 2011, p. 148.

¹⁰ PELESHYAN Artavazd, *Montage-at-a-Distance, or: A Theory of Distance*, p. 9.

Peleshyan realized that trying to emphasize the value and expressiveness of sound was also affecting the editing of the image, therefore sound had to also carry a metaphorical function and, in connection to this, had to "find the exact 'dose' of duration and degree of resonance for each acoustic element, and establish the exact balance of the movement of sounds." ¹¹

Montage at a distance method is based on the "continual interaction of sound and image but the image is disintegrated by the soundtrack and the soundtrack is disintegrated by the image".¹² The most important is the continual relation that is established through the distance between the elements (shot with shot, shot with a scene, scene with sequence) that creates the interactions in the whole film.

It is important to notice that with the repetitions in his films, Peleshyan does not establish a linear structure, but instead a circular construction of the film, in which time and space are involved, thus forming the core of the stories.

"Its progression is continuous and there is no room for returns. Due to its circular movement, it can pass several times "vertical" by points that it has already travelled (diagram 1). The spiral has a special relationship with time since it has the ability to represent it. There are as many points in common between the ineluctable condition, the continuous advance and the impossibility of going back, as there is the spiral with time."¹³ "It is a question of circularity: from wherever you look at the earth it's circular, an image must also be that way and the film in its entirety too, in the manner of a holographic vision in which each fragment contains the whole... Montage at a distance offers the probabilities without an end."¹⁴

According to Myriam Semerjian, an editor who studied in depth the work of Peleshyan, an example of this spiral shape could be seen in *Seasons* (1975). The

¹¹ PELESHYAN Artavazd, *Montage-at-a-Distance, or: A Theory of Distance*, p. 10.

¹² PELESHYAN Artavazd, *Montage-at-a-Distance, or: A Theory of Distance*, p. 20-21.

¹³ SEMERJIAN Myriam, *Materia y Cosmos, El montaje a distancia de Artavazd Peleshyan*, Bogotá, IDARTES, 2011, p. 150.

¹⁴ PELESHYAN Artavazd in the interview with NINEY François, *Montage with Images that Don't Exist: Interview with Artavazd Peleshyan*, Winter 2000, Vol. 22, No. 1, SCREENING ETHNICITY (Winter 2000), p. 94-98.

sequences were edited in chronological order: spring, summer, fall, winter and again spring. Thanks to the sequence, at the end (spring), when we see the river, it is the point of going back to the beginning of the story in a vertical way.¹⁵ Every time a new season starts, someone falls and this is what structures the film, it is as if a new cycle had started.

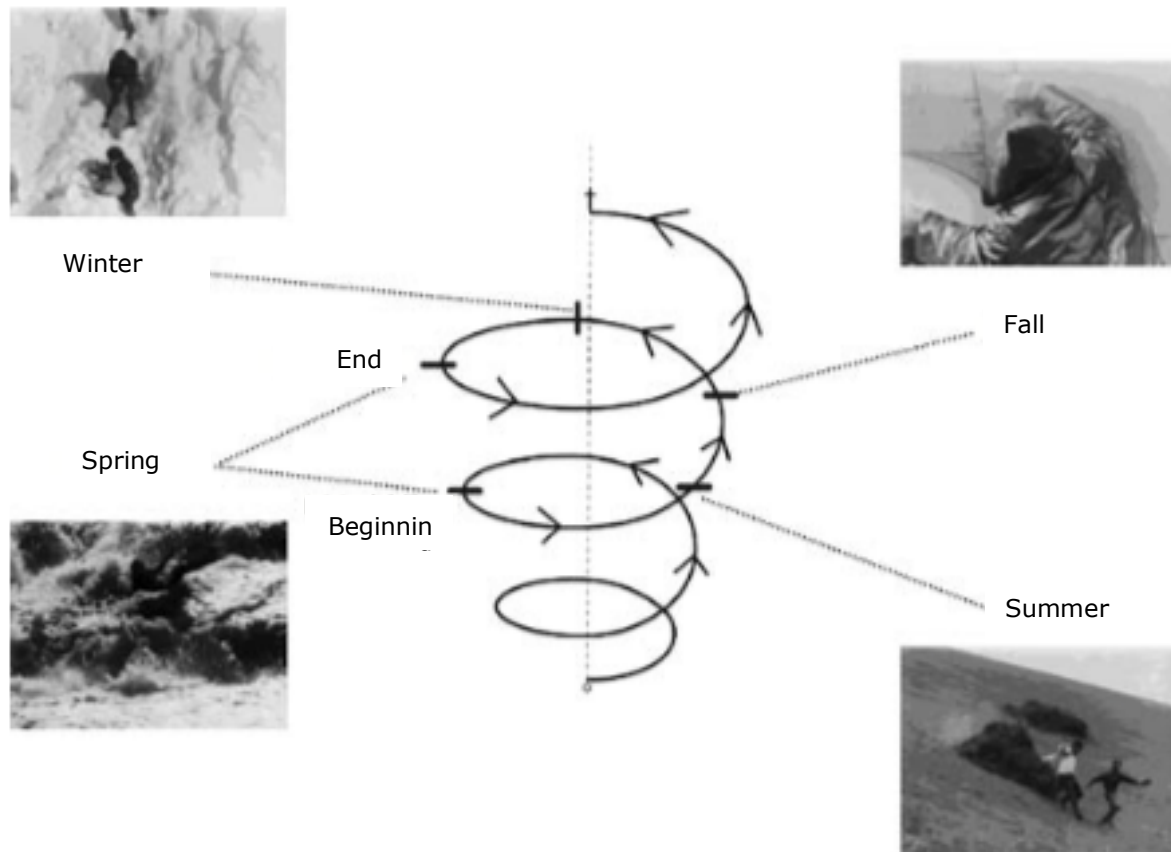


diagram 1

The repetitions of elements also have some variations. Every moment is associated with a different place (river, snow, etc...), and it is associated as well with the time, that in the spiral shape makes them either opposed to each other or brings them together, it is inviting the viewer to relate to the paths that are being shown with different men.¹⁶ "Through isolated people, it is not only the particular that is shown, but also the common. So that the definition of the people represented

¹⁵ This is my interpretation of the text: SEMERJIAN Myriam, *Materia y Cosmos, El montaje a distancia de Artavazd Peleshyan*, Bogotá, IDARTES, 2011, p. 150.

¹⁶ This is my interpretation of the text: SEMERJIAN Myriam, *Materia y Cosmos, El montaje a distancia de Artavazd Peleshyan*, Bogotá, IDARTES, 2011, p. 151.

would obey the knowledge of the typical so that in the viewer's consciousness the image of an isolated person would not be formed, but the image of the people."¹⁷

The circular shape done by the Czech Armenian director; Andran Abramjan (diagram 2) from the film *We* (1969) also supports the circular narrative way for Peleshyan to achieve a lively film.

"Each point marks a semantic whole (a shot, a motif, a sequence). The large points show the main "structural elements" of the film: the beginning and the end are marked by white dots, whereas squares mark the motif of rupture (of the ground, the rocks) and triangles the meeting of the ones who are separated. The film starts with a young girl's gaze, and evolves chronologically following a large circle (with a few digressions in smaller loops); when it finishes, it moves to the smaller set of circles on the right, which represent approximately the last third of the film. From here, it goes back to the large circle and ends with a credit that reads *We*."¹⁸

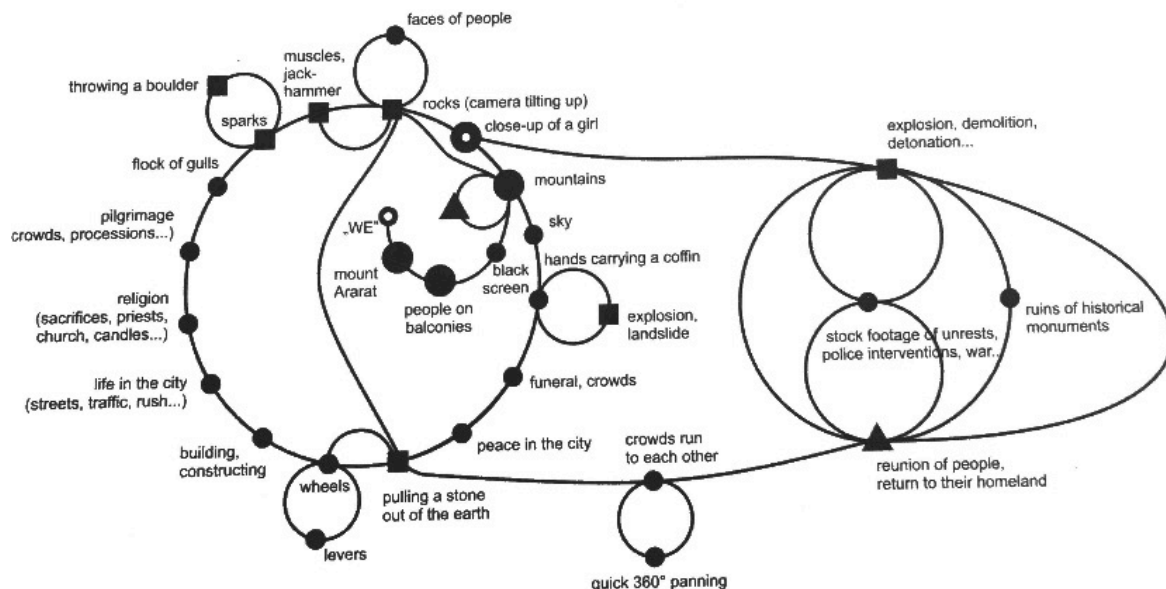


diagram 2

¹⁷ PELESHYAN Artavazd, *Theory of distance montage*, Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematograficos CUEC, cuadernos FIUNAM, Mexico, 2011, p. 23. [Spanish translation of the theory distance montage]

¹⁸ ABRAMJAN Andran, *Montage-at-a-distance and Solidifying Liquidity*, in the summary of the book *Distanční Montáž Artavazda Pelešjana*, ČIHÁK Martin, Prague, 2016, p. 149.

2.2 Metaphoric resonance

Two important elements in Peleshyan's theory that I haven't mentioned yet, are firstly what Peleshyan himself called "montage with images that don't exist"¹⁹. As I explained before, when the viewer sees an image a second or a third time, it is perceived differently from the first time. Peleshyan's idea is that symbolic associations create a montage with absent images: "An absent representation can be even more powerful. The possibility of the unreal existence of an absent image is the mystery of montage at a distance."²⁰

Secondly, many of Peleshyan's films are made with archive material. For him, the most important thing in the selection of the archives "is not the factual content of the shot, but instead the metaphoric resonance, its expressivity and the capacity to communicate a generalization"²¹ which mixed with the other shots and the distance between them brings another dimension to the archive images.

I found this intriguing since it is a way of dismounting the reality that is within the archive image itself. This is what allows, the montage with images that don't exist. The archive footage already carries a strong symbolic meaning that can bring to the viewer either a collective or personal memory.

Based on this concept of montage with images that don't exist, I would like to bring the attention to one montage experiment done by Colombian editors about collective memories. This experiment was done by three well known editors: Jorge Caballero, Felipe Guerrero and Nicolas Rincon in an attempt of reflecting on the way documentaries are written history and how editing is the element that changes the perception of reality. The experiment was called "*Mapa mudo, un relato en trenza*" (*Silent map, a braided narrative*). It wasn't based on Peleshyan's theory but it complements the research I made about Peleshyan and my attempt to relate him to the documentaries in Latino America.

¹⁹ PELESHYAN Artavazd in the interview with NINEY François, Discourse, Vol. 22, No. 1, SCREENING ETHNICITY (Winter 2000), p. 92-93.

²⁰ PELESHYAN Artavazd in the interview with NINEY François, *Montage with Images that Don't Exist: Interview with Artavazd Peleshyan*, Winter 2000, Vol. 22, n° 1, SCREENING ETHNICITY (Winter 2000), p. 94-98.

²¹ PELESHYAN Artavazd, *Montage-at-a-Distance, or: A Theory of Distance*, p. 8.

Mapa Mudo un relato en trenza was an idea that started by reflecting on collective memory. The experiment born after several encounters where these three editors noticed the similarities between them, after they leave Colombia, and how this distance from the country brought new points of view in the memory of the history of Colombia. All the massive media, such as press photos and videos as informative aids, are done to homogenize the facts with a logical, linear and objective perspective. These versions of the facts are stable, clear but also far away from reality. History becomes unquestionable. Instead, in the individual memories, each person has their own version of history that is unstable and volatile because it is made of memories that change with time. These memories are an individual perception of the history that can be told from infinite perspectives as if it were a mental edit of history.

Films, on the other hand, "are not meant to be informative, they establish a logical and narrative version of the facts, but more than that the cinema should transmit uncertainty and partial of things."²² Documentary it is a tool to uncover collective memories, these "new" little stories should not become a new reality, but rather the viewer should take them as something that adds, subtracts, divides and multiplies reality. "Cinema, which works permanently on our temporal and spatial perception, should deconstruct history: make it partial, relative, a permanent source of simple questions that make bridges."²³

With this in mind, the three editors worked for 3 years to "build" a documentary called *Mapa Mudo* where "borders are being defined with uncertain lines, wide regions are left unexplored and an organization of spaces to be filled by the imagination."²⁴ Same as it is used in Czech schools the blind map (slepá mapa) is an empty map that has to be filled by the students to prove their knowledge of geography. In this documentary experiment, the meaning has to be filled by the viewer, according to their own perception of the history, their own imagination and the memories that were built from the mass media that is in the mind of every Colombian.

²² RINCON Nicolas, "Mapa Mudo, un relato en tranza", Cuadernos del cine colombiano N°30, Bogotá, IDARTES, 2020, p. 89.

²³ RINCON Nicolas, "Mapa Mudo, un relato en tranza", Cuadernos del cine colombiano N°30, Bogotá, IDARTES, 2020, p. 89.

²⁴ RINCON Nicolas, "Mapa Mudo, un relato en tranza", Cuadernos del cine colombiano N°30, Bogotá, IDARTES, 2020, p. 90.

They developed 3 points of methodology:

- 1) Each of them had to use their own archive material, they built a story in first person, showing everydayness without being egocentric, having collision of ideas that are opposite to create weirdness in the banal things, and the clash between the banal and the general.
- 2) Try to connect their three different perspectives as a narrative braid mixed in the editing. They defined a serial order for each edit they created, not always being the same and not necessarily continuous to the previous. In addition, every piece (that they called *post*) couldn't last more than 3 minutes. I.e.

A, B, C – B, A, C – B, C, A

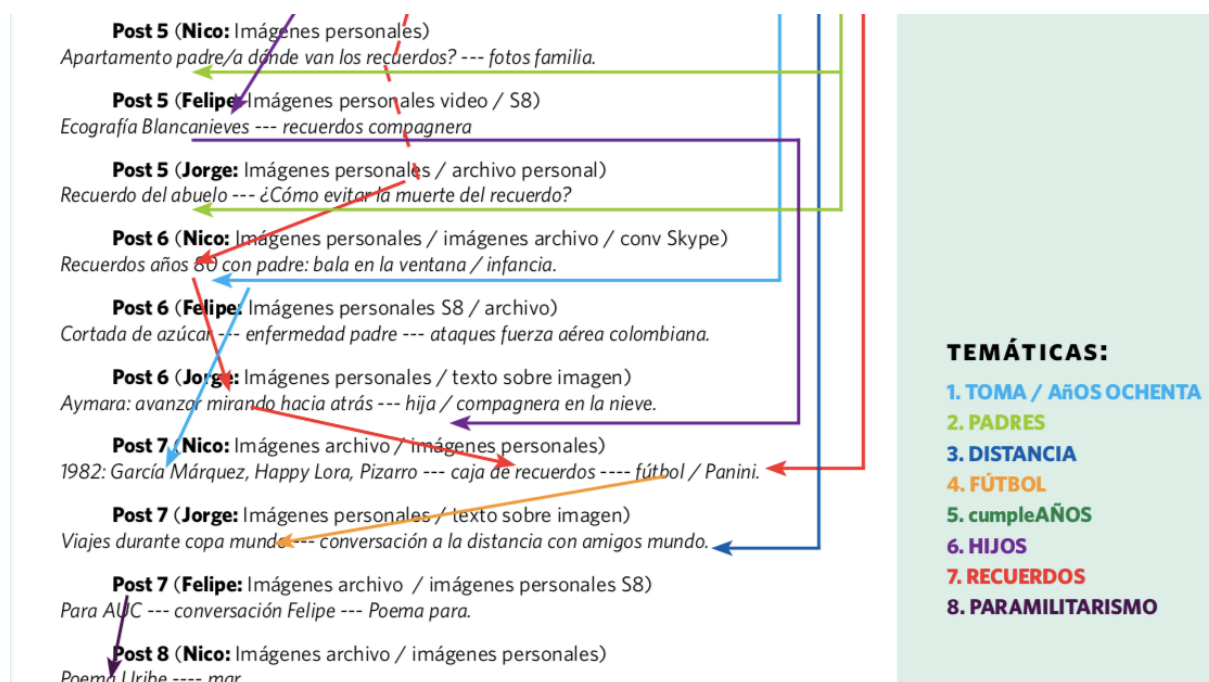
Felipe - Jorge - Nicolas

- 3) Establish crucial moments in the history of Colombia, good and bad moments that will be in the memory of every Colombian viewer, knowing beforehand that it will bring memories to the viewer. By putting these historical events, the idea wasn't to explain what happened but instead quote them several times.

The editing was the key in the experiment. They tried to collide the banal (the personal archive) and the general (historical events) to have new ideas and different feelings, and the more they move forward, the more they cross topics, contrasting them and contradicting them. Their point was to make a perceptual documentary, more than an explanatory documentary. "I remember finishing the edit in which I saw my daughters sleeping and discovering, a week later, that the following image (from the other editor) was a military bombardment of the "FARC"²⁵. The feeling of dread stayed with me for several days. The editing exposed the vulnerability of my family."²⁶

²⁵ FARC, is the abbreviation of Spanish "Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia" (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), Marxist guerrilla organization in Colombia. Formed in 1964 as the military wing of the Colombian Communist Party.

²⁶ RINCON Nicolas, "Mapa Mudo, un relato en tranza", Cuadernos del cine colombiano No 30, , Bogotá, IDARTES, 2020, p. 93.



The graphic above it is one part of the scheme they developed to braid the different topics they had such as historical events or personal archives. In the end, they had 1 hour of the documentary in which each of them interfered 9 or 11 times.

"But how to put an end to collective memory, even if it is done by three? At some point, we met to decide that *Mapa Mudo* should be an inconclusive work and that even, perhaps, its narrative power was more in the process than in the result."²⁷

I found an interesting connection between Peleshyan and the experiment *Mapa Mudo un relato en trenza*. The actual dismount of the archive material of historical events, and placing it with other archive footage, carried the same meaning since it is established in the collective memory. The metaphoric resonance that Peleshyan names is present throughout the whole experiment since the editors are not explaining the facts, but placing famous images from the history next to other images that no one have seen beforehand, in order to communicate generalizations that are not shown, thus having "absent images".

²⁷ RINCON Nicolas, "Mapa Mudo, un relato en tranza", Cuadernos del cine colombiano No 30, , Bogotá, IDARTES, 2020, p. 95.

CHAPERT 3.

DISTANCE MONTAGE OF A DRUG WAR

3.1 Director's intentions and motivation

When violence and death are rooted in the landscape of the place you grew up in, how can you make people react differently to a common situation? How to deliver a message or change the feeling toward something when it is already established? In Latin America, the massive means of communication has developed a "visual style" when it comes to violence, especially drug cartels images in the news, which are often very graphic: people tortured, bodies without heads, and severed people can be found on the television, newspapers and magazines.

Every day, in every street corner, Latino-Americans are bombarded with graphic news of death and it has unfortunately become part of their daily lives. There are so many dead people that the citizens don't really understand what lies behind the bloody images. The massive means of communication has been very hurtful since they treat the hitmen and drug lords as some kind of monsters that are capable of doing such things. As monsters, these people don't have rights, don't have families and thus the citizens lack any empathy for these monsters despite their terrible crimes.

For Natalia Almada, it was very important to approach the topic of this film in a very distinctive way, that differed from the news. She stated:

"It seemed important to me to try to find a different way of talking about violence; even, not as an analytical work but as a work that would open an emotional space for you to meditate on what violence is, why it exists and how we can all be responsible for it. In other words; participants in some way in the social conditions that lead to violence. Therefore, I decided to make the film without showing those images."²⁸

²⁸ ALMADA Natalia in the interview with VELAZCO Salvador, "El ojo que piensa". Revista de cine Iberoamericano, 2012 // e-ISSN:2007-4999, p. 2.
[http://www.eloquepiensa.cucsh.udg.mx/index.php/eloquepiensa/article/view/107/108](http://www.elojoquepiensa.cucsh.udg.mx/index.php/eloquepiensa/article/view/107/108)

El Velador is a documentary told from a cemetery that inspires the director to tell a story of violence. When Natalia Almada visited the place for the first time, some of the big graves had been constructed. When she came back, four years later, these graves were no longer as big as the new mausoleums that had been built for the recently deceased. The masons were digging a huge hole in the ground because there wasn't enough space for the upcoming dead.²⁹ This event impacted the director a lot since it became very visible how the drug traffic war was killing so many, to the extent that "There [weren't] enough living to bury the dead".

This specific location brought to the director the inspiration for the film language that the story needed. On the one hand, a cemetery is a place where life stops, the treatment of the camera is mostly static, with long takes observing the daily life of the people who visit their dead relatives. On the other hand, Natalia Almada was in a place where her life could be at risk at any moment. While doing sound and camera at the same time, she had to be prepared to pick up everything and leave. "The context in which you make a documentary affects the way you shoot."³⁰

These two elements that the location brought was not a limitation for Almada, instead, it was a process that forced her to push her limits, and adapt to the conditions, thus the creative process was much more inspirational.³¹ The fact that she stayed in the same location for a long time made her focus on gestures and details "Cuando nada pasa, el viento se vuelve un evento." - "When nothing happens, the wind becomes an event."³² After seeing what everyone sees, she started to see details, which brought another film language because now these details shouldn't depend on words, but rather on the editing, in order to give the meaning, to the viewer, through observations rather than through words.

²⁹ This is my interpretation of the interview with Natalia Almada for the FICM festival

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRMADHdieU8>

³⁰ ALMADA Natalia in the interview with VELAZCO Salvador, "El ojo que piensa". Revista de cine Iberoamericano, 2012 // e-ISSN:2007-4999, p. 7.

<http://www.elojoquepiensa.cucsh.udg.mx/index.php/elajoquepiensa/article/view/107/108>

³¹ This is my interpretation of the text VELAZCO Salvador, "El ojo que piensa". Revista de cine Iberoamericano, 2012 // e-ISSN:2007-4999, p. 7

<http://www.elojoquepiensa.cucsh.udg.mx/index.php/elajoquepiensa/article/view/107/108>

³² ALMADA Natalia in the interview with VELAZCO Salvador, "El ojo que piensa". Revista de cine Iberoamericano, 2012 // e-ISSN:2007-4999, p. 6.

<http://www.elojoquepiensa.cucsh.udg.mx/index.php/elajoquepiensa/article/view/107/108>

Besides complementing, with the idea of the cemetery as a place where life stops, the director wanted to play with time by not making it clear if her film evolved in one week, one month or one year. The light in the film gives us an idea of the passing of time since Martin, the protagonist and night watchman, arrives when the sun sets and leaves when the sun rises. But the time in the film is ambiguous, and this is precisely what Natalia Almada wanted to highlight: that "time is both: the precise instant, and the indefinite time, the infinite."³³

The director's goal was to face the question of "what it really means to live in a situation of violence."³⁴ She wanted the viewer to be **at** Jardines de Humaya cemetery, observing and imagining what it would feel like to be essentially there, a place in which the people are caught between two moments of violence: the violence that just happened (since all the people who died because of the drug traffic war are resting here), and the feeling that death is coming again and again, always anticipating the result of the drug war.

For Natalia Almada, it was important as well to show the socio-economic situation behind the violence that is hitting this city. During the film, we can see different workers, including Martin, at the cemetery, and we can observe their condition, so that later, when the spectators see the documentary, they will understand that in this place, either you become a drug dealer and die young, or work in very precarious conditions yet still witness the violence and death that are omnipresent.

³³ ALMADA Natalia in the interview with VELAZCO Salvador, "El ojo que piensa". Revista de cine Iberoamericano, 2012 // e-ISSN:2007-4999, p. 7.

<http://www.elojoquepiensa.cucsh.udg.mx/index.php/elajoquepiensa/article/view/107/108>

³⁴ MECKLER Jeremy, ALMADA Natalia, "Natalia Almada's Borderlands: Life, Death, and Mexico's Drug War", WALKER ART MAGAZINE, 20/09/2012, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/natalia-almada-el-velador-film>

3.2 *El velador* under the distance montage

"*El velador* is a very intimate portrait of someone who is not really a part of the drug violence but is impacted by it."¹ This was the crucial point that the director wanted to accentuate with the documentary. All the news is focusing on the big drug lords and the drug trafficking, but there is a whole other side that doesn't get the attention it requires; thus the meaning of violence is wider than the news can tell.

During the process of editing, Natalia Almada was inspired by jazz music, particularly how this kind of music builds tension and releases it. The game between these two, tension and release, creates a dynamic. According to the interview in the magazine *El ojo que piensa*, she wanted to generate emotions without telling a story or following a narrative. It was a challenge because she had chosen not to use a narrator or interviews, incidental music, dialogues or change of locations. Hence, she focuses more on the rhythm of the film and the meaning of the shots because, even though the film has some dramatic situations, it doesn't have a plot.

I consider this film to be an excellent example of creating meaning from the editing room since Natalia Almada did a documentary without using interviews, which usually explain everything with words. She, as editor too, had to establish clear meanings, evoke in the viewer active thinking of what she is showing in order to get another perspective of the violence and how it converges in this particular place. The fact that the film takes place in the cemetery helps to reinforce the message, but the meaning of the consequences of the violence itself was created in the editing room.

When I saw this documentary, I found myself, days after watching it, reflecting on the meaning of violence and how it affects my life indirectly in the same way the violence affects Martin, el velador. It makes me wonder: how can the documentary

¹ MECKLER Jeremy, ALMADA Natalia, "Natalia Almada's Borderlands: Life, Death, and Mexico's Drug War", WALKER ART MAGAZINE, 20/09/2012, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/natalia-almada-el-velador-film>

steak to me in such an impactful way, despite not showing anything that relates to my personal life, or even not having strong images that force me to remember the film.

I started to think how powerful the fact was that the meaning of violence shines throughout the film but the director never shows a single frame of violence in itself. This led me to think about montage with images that I don't see directly in the film, and how this is a possibility for me, as an editor, to create meaning from images I don't have. That is why Peleshyan's theory is the main support I found to analyze this film. Even though I don't think Natalia Almada based her editing on Peleshyan's theory, she intuitively used the same principles of the theory. Of course, it is not similar in style and not as precise as Peleshyan formulates in his theory, however for me is also a very interesting to realize how everyone can reach the same conclusions of a theory that was created years ago.

I have deconstructed the film under the distance montage theory to see how it was built. Therefore, I listed the points of repetitions in the film to have a clearer vision of the film's structure, in order to see it in detail:

- **Martin, el velador**
- **Light (TV and bulb) and sound**
- **The widow**
- **Seller**
- **The construction**
- **Beginning and end**

Martin, el velador

Martin is the character that Natalia Almada decided to follow because, through him, we could see another angle of the violence that affects everybody. He is *El velador*, which in English translates as "the night watchman" but the meaning of the word in Spanish comes from the word "vela" which means "candle", "velador" is a support for the candles to light a place. So, if we took the exact meaning of the word, his presence is the support to light this place, and we can see that in the film when the night comes, the light of the TV, the lightbulb and his presence are the only light/living thing in the place.

Martin is the person who has to take care of the place from sunset until sunrise, looking after the big mausoleums and making sure nothing "bad" happens in this place, which for me is an irony: after the drug lords have died, what else could happen? But this is precisely the point of the director's choice in Martin. She states:

"For me, when I heard that they found a severed head in the cemetery, I thought: "imagine if you were a worker and that was what you faced as a possibility when you went to work every day". That's real violence against your human rights. We always focus on all the big dealers and all the money and all the drugs, but there's a whole other side that just gets lost." ²

Natalia Almada introduces the character with close-ups that later are going to be a recurring motif in the film when it comes to showing Martin's personality. As I pointed out previously, the director focused on details and gestures, since she didn't want to have interviews but still wanted to create a certain closeness with him, without words. She got to know Martin better by observing him rather than by talking to him. His presence in the film has many repetitions, in such a way that every time, he appears it reveals either something from his personality or the cemetery.

² ALMADA Natalia in the interview with MECKLER Jeremy, "Natalia Almada's Borderlands: Life, Death, and Mexico's Drug War", WALKER ART MAGAZINE, 20/09/2012, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/natalia-almada-el-velador-film>

For example, it is a constant during the documentary to repeat the same composition of his gestures, but in different moments of the film. Every time it is repeated, it gains a different meaning. In the first 3 minutes of the film, we see him observing, smoking, and he even talks about how dangerous it is to go walk at night in the cemetery because of the drug lords. At this point of the film, the audience understands how well he knows the place, how used he is to go there and how much it is a part of his life.



Later, in minute 6, we can see him in a similar composition as when he was first presented. This time, he is perceived as someone patient, the viewer can understand his job, and his routine, it is part of his duty to sit and wait.



Thirty-three minutes into the film, the viewer sees similar shots of his hand and face. This time it is not seen as part of his job, the audience got this meaning from the previous shots. Thanks to the separations of the same actions, the message is different: now he doesn't look as patient as before, and a feeling of restlessness and hopelessness is visible. In this third time, the hands are not shown anymore as a symbol of waiting for his shift to finish, but instead as waiting for the dead to appear again. It's like Peleshyan explains: the shots seem to be communicating through the whole timeline so that the viewer connects the elements given before, in order to complement and build the relations between them.



The last time Natalia Almada uses the shots of the hand next to Martin's face is in the 44th minute. He is inside his car, the news on the radio talks about one of the biggest drug lords found dead, and how for sure that man will be buried in this cemetery. And the meaning one more time is different from the one before. Martin has a tiny smile on his face, it is a smile of relief. Not because he was desiring the death of the man, but because the waiting for the dead has finished for the day, it is part of the cycle that he is part of. Tomorrow, he will wait for death again.



If we see this in the timeline of the film, we can see that the director repeats this motif four times, two of them are at the very beginning of the film and the other two are close to the end. From my point of view, this is a smart way to reveal the nuances of the character. At first, as the audience doesn't know yet anything about him, the first two times she shows his close-ups gives us the information that, on the surface, this is only his job, and routine.

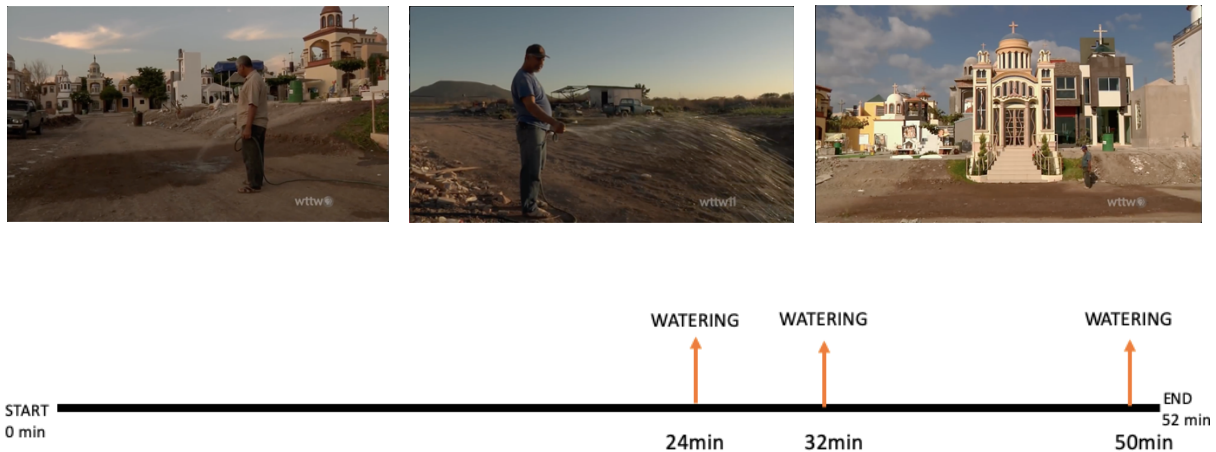


Then, in the third time, it is a revelation of the character, the viewer doesn't see Martin in the same way that 30 minutes before. Now, thanks to the distance which was created, when I see him for the third and fourth time, I find in his look more things about his character, and the empathy is increasing. These four moments

of closeness with Martin are “bearing shots” that nourished and built him as a character. Natalia Almada could have put the bearing shots closer to each other, or put this element more/less times during the film, but it is not only about repeating for the sake of repeating, it is important to be careful to hide or reveal information at the right moment. Consequently, the impact wouldn’t have been the same since the perception of him towards the place changes with the time in the film and changes for the viewer as well.

The director created several motifs with Martin during the documentary by doing repetitions and separating his actions, and these actions combined with the place give us the meaning which was intended, without being explicit i.e.:

Repetition of action; Martin watering the floor



When we see Martin water the floor for the first time, we, as the audience, get to see the different tasks that Martin has to do in his job. This motif is shown quite late in the film, in the second half of the documentary, but it is combined with another motif: the widow and the girl cleaning the grave as well. It feels like moments where the people, whose life is established there, had the duty to clean at the end of the day.

The second time we see him watering, Natalia Almada decides to show him from a place that looks empty, we can see Martin’s office in the back but there aren’t any graves around. This emptiness, in contrast with the third time we see him watering, is a revelation of the outcome. The emptiness has been filled up, the audience gets to see a finished construction of the mausoleum and more graves

around. In the distance, between the two shots (second and third watering), we could see how the construction of more graves took place. Even if it isn't the same place inside the cemetery, the intention is clear.

Thanks to the editing as well, we can't know how much time passes between the watering shots. This gives complexity to the time inside the film, in a very different way than how Peleshyan plays with time but with a similar result: prolonging the time. The gap of something as simple as watering and the surroundings of the shot carries in fact more meaning than it actually has. How much time could have passed to fill out the empty space with graves in this cemetery? Due to the sound of the TV and radio giving information about the number of dead, the answer to that question, unfortunately, is a simple deduction: a short time.

Repetition of action; Martin observing



The motif of Martin observing the landscape appears a total of five times in the film. In alternation between the sunrise and the sunset, these sequences of repetitive shots work as the passing of time: the audience cannot be sure of how many days have passed since we have entered the cemetery. The waiting of Martin for the sunset is also the waiting of the viewer. But when it is revealed in the middle of the film it can engender a feeling of anxiety, like a constant feeling that something bad is about to happen. But then, the next day comes.

Nothing seems to happen but, in the waiting, and in Martin's anxiety, the viewer can figure the protagonist knows something else. Martin can perceive the place in another way and when we see the last time that he is observing and waiting for

the sunrise, his colleague arrives with the news of the death of a big drug lord. We finally understand that Martin is waiting for the dead to come. His restlessness makes me think that, every day, he knows the danger of death can come, but his hope is that it won't come near him.

I consider the repetition of these actions is to help the viewer understand the context of war that all the inhabitants of the city are facing. There are more motifs of repetition, but I consider these to be the most meaningful ones. Every detail and repetition help understand the circumstances that Martin is living with. It is a character that is not related to the drug traffic at all, yet still, his life is affected by it, same as all the others who live here. This feeling is the actual reality that people live in Latin America, in this case, the people from Culiacán, who experienced it on a daily basis. The actual violence is happening somewhere else, but it is affecting everybody, one way or another.

In the shallow meaning of the shots, people could say that nothing happens in this film. But the more we, as viewers, stay in this seemingly calm place, the more it increases the feeling that something bad is about to happen. In the same way Peleshyan directed his films, it is not about telling a story with a very clear structure and arc of character but instead, "elaborate a continuum of impressions of the world."³ It is fascinating to see how the theory has been applied so far in terms of repetition, but with a different style than Peleshyan's films. Peleshyan is playing with the same shots but modifies them in speed, or even flips them, reverses them, and the cuts are invisible because some scenes are fast and dynamic. But still, I consider that both of them, Natalia Almada and Peleshyan, achieve the same objective by following the principle of repeat/reveal.

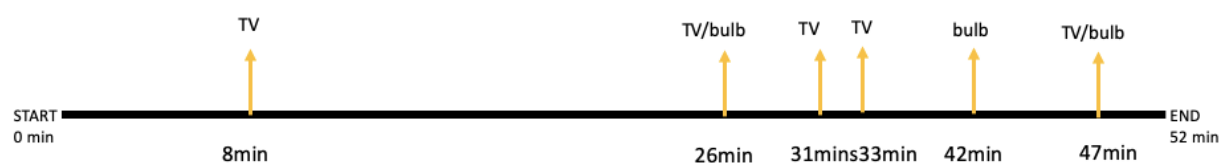
³ NINEY François, *Peleshyan: Reality Dismounted, Theory of distance montage*, Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematograficos CUEC, cuadernos FIUNAM, Mexico, 2011, p. 11-12. [Spanish translation of the theory distance montage]

Light (TV and bulb) and Sound

In the film, the TV is an element which reveals information about the drug traffic war, and it is used not only to set up the context of the year the documentary takes place in, but also to set up a contrast between how the violence is shown in the mass media and how it looks in reality. At the same time, it is combined with the light bulb, and both are shown as the only two things that bring light into Martin's space.



The TV is a very interesting element in the film, which we see repeated five times, in total, out of which three are combined with the lightbulb. Each time we see it, it brings new information, but it is also shown as a part of Martin's routine during the night, when everybody leaves. It is a tool that works as a light in the dark. Martin prefers to hear the sound of bad news, rather than the sound of silence. In addition, it is, more than anything, an element that is making the sound a big part of the repetitions and creating another layer of information that is not related directly with the image.



The first time the TV is shown in the film, it is presented as a tool that accompanies Martin. At first, the viewer hardly pays attention to the sound, the sound of the news is combined with the music of *corridos*⁴ that is heard in the distance. Later in the film, we will realize that it is the same type of music which is used to play

⁴ Mexican music is very famous in this part of the country. These songs have in common the narration of battles, death, killing, executions or accidents.

during burial ceremonies. Then, slowly, the sound of the TV takes over and, along with Martin, we get to know that the government of Mexico is having various confrontations with the cartels. When the director doesn't want to direct the attention to the news anymore, she cuts to Martin's face, and so the sound of the TV starts to get mixed again with the music in the distance.



The time passed and then, in the 26th minute, the lightbulb is first shown with the sound of the TV, then we can see that Martin is not paying attention to the news, he is moving the lightbulb near the entrance to be able to see inside that room. In the next shot, we no longer see the TV. Martin is grabbing some objects and placing them in a certain way while the sound increases. The TV works once again as the tool telling the "truth" to Mexicans in the news. This second time, the reporter is talking about the number of dead in one month due to the drug war. In this particular month, it 1100 people that have died. While we hear these statistics, the viewer gets to understand that Martin is pulling together some sort of bed where he can rest: the conditions of his job are pitiful. The sound of the news disappears and, after some silence, it is clear that in the distance a band is playing *corridos* once again.

The next two times we hear/see the TV, the focus is not on Martin, but there is a combination of shots of graves and loneliness, mixed with the terrible news of the tortured bodies, people who end up decapitated because of their involvement in bad business, who disappear. Then, as if nothing happened, the news jumps to the weather forecast, or commercials about banal things. This is how violence is normalized, we eat while we watch violence, we go to sleep while we watch violence, and we wake up to see how many more people die during the night.

The director really wanted to play with the sound of the TV and the silence of this place. The whole soundscape was created in the postproduction to support the the

director's idea of having a film without interviews and dialogues, bringing instead a soundscape which leads us to pay attention to the details. She experiments with holding and releasing tension through the sound. We can hear the very loud volume of the TV, which is suddenly interrupted by silence, the other way around, when the silence is interrupted by the sound of construction.⁵

Since there are no dialogues, the sound design was a long process where the director and sound designer created the whole atmosphere of the cemetery, in order to break the monotony of the film. Because Natalia Almada didn't want to give information about a specific person or point of view, the film acts like the words that she wanted to convey.⁶

The sound of the TV is one of the sources that the director found to complement the meaning given by the images, and at the same time create contrast. She states:

"What the newscasts give you is an idea of what is happening outside. You can add up the data, the numbers of deaths that are on the rise, the news of the drug lords that are falling, the young people murdered... Ultimately, it is our reality. But the tranquility that is perceived in the pantheon, with the soft light, the flowers, and the long shots, makes more sense when you understand that it is not the reality that is lived outside (which we learn from the news). That gives you the feeling that you are suspended between the moment just after the violence (which led to death) and just before the violence (the big hole anticipating the bodies)"⁷

The last sound that we hear from the radio is very specific since it is telling us about somebody's head that was found in the grave of one of the drug lords. While we hear "the head was found by an employee of the pantheon", we see the shot

⁵ This is my interpretation of Natalia's words during the Interview for the FICM festival <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRMADHdieU8>

⁶ This is my interpretation of Natalia's words during the interview: VELAZCO Salvador, El ojo que piensa. Revista de cine Iberoamericano, 2012 // e-ISSN:2007-4999, p. 8 <http://www.elojoquepiensa.cucsh.udg.mx/index.php/elajoquepiensa/article/view/107/108>

⁷ ALMADA Natalia in the interview with VELAZCO Salvador, "El ojo que piensa", Revista de cine Iberoamericano, 2012 // e-ISSN:2007-4999, p. 8.

of Martin's truck. The audience now understands that part of Martin's job is to literally face the dead and to continue his life as if nothing had happened, in order to avoid getting in trouble.

The silence in this place comes with the idea of respecting the ones who mourn, which further accompanies the intention of telling a documentary without words. Usually, in documentaries, the interviews give the information that makes us understand their reality, but in the case of this film, Natalia Almada uses the sound to emphasize the news, how they are colliding with the image we see. In addition, the sound focuses on the details, for instance, the music in the distance is a sign that someone is commemorating the dead with the *corridos*, that Martin is not alone there but that also, he doesn't dare to go near where the music comes from.

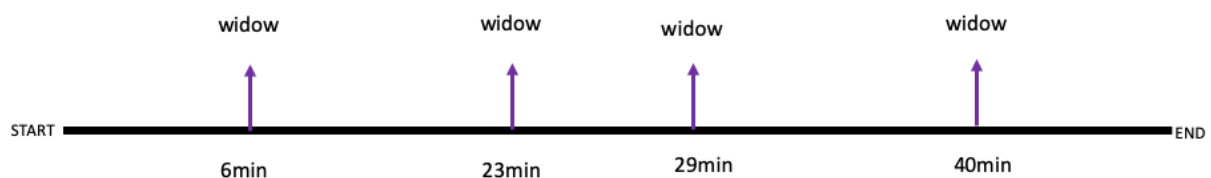
In my opinion, Natalia could have explored the sound in more depth, to allow it to be more precise and resonate with the deeper meaning of the film. Only after seeing the documentary several times did I get to hear sounds that brought more information while seeing the image. If the director were doing the editing with full awareness of Peleshyan's theory, the sound would have played a more important role in the film. For Peleshyan, the sound as well emphasizes the value and expressiveness, it is not only about hearing what we see. In many cases, I would say Natalia didn't explore all this potential.

The widow

The director had the clear intention of not focusing on the big drug lords, but rather on the common people whom the violence affects directly or indirectly. In this case, we see a widow in the film.



This widow appears always cleaning her husband's mausoleum. We also see in the shot that her husband was a police officer, or at least that he was implicated in the government's war on drugs. Going there every day to clean is part of her life, she has to maintain it clean and tidy, it is the place where he can be remembered by his daughter and sons who are growing up in this environment, which also adds to the meaning of violence that the director wishes to give.



For instance, the first time the widow appears it is night, she is cleaning before going back home. The audience might think she is just a cleaning lady of the cemetery. The second time, she is cleaning once again but we get to see her daughter next to her, and helping her to clean. We now focus more on details: it is the same grave as we saw before and it is the only grave she cleans, she is very young, she has been doing this for some time now, her husband's death is not recent, she is very much used to do this every day.

The third time the widow appears in the film, there is a shot that gains much more meaning than before, due to its distance from the other shots earlier in the film, even though she is doing the same actions as we have already seen. This time we not only see that she has more kids to take care of, but we can also see the grave of more people in front of her husband's grave. The differences are now very visible, from someone who can afford to have a mausoleum to someone who just has a simple grave, which most probably is from some worker that is related to drugs. They are facing each other even after they are dead. And the most disturbing aspect of this shot, in my opinion, is to see the daughter playing between the graves that are in front of her father's mausoleum. The meaning of death for her completely changes because of the environment that she has to grow up in.



Besides Martin, the director only shows close ups of the face of the widow, the fruit seller and the construction workers. For me, Natalia Almada is bringing to light the people we can find in this place that are affected by violence in one way or another. The fourth time that the widow appears, she is closing the pantheon and, for the first time, we see her going into her car and leaving the place. The exposure is complete now, her whole life revolves around her husband's death, and the children are close to their dad in this way. Thanks to the money he left, the only thing that she has to worry about is to maintain the pantheon completely clean. With this character, there is a strong metaphoric resonance due to the girl, it is not common and every time the widow appears, the viewer is looking for the kid that is used to go there, used to playing on top of the graves, since it has become her routine. Later, when the repetition comes and we see the siblings, it is even more disturbing, there is no need of interviews or words to fully explain their situation.

Seller

The seller is a very interesting character that we get to see a total of three times throughout the documentary. We see his car going and coming out of the cemetery several times, which contributes to building an uncertain idea of the passing of time. We see him for the first time in the 17th minute, which is a crucial moment of the film because not only can we see him working, but we are also seeing an actual burial ceremony, the only one in the entire film.

While we see him cutting a coconut or mango, the people, not far behind him, arrive to bury their dead. The band that plays *corridos* also arrives and, even though we don't see them playing the instruments, the sound is covering the whole ambiance of the place, thus we don't hear people crying. It is the same music we hear in the distance during the night when Martin is in silence. For me, this character brings an interesting and very obvious contrast to the drug war. While some are going there to say farewell to their loved ones, and to mourn the others, this seller is also waiting for dead people to come, so that he can make money to survive. I am not saying that he is desiring the death of others, rather that it is about seeing how some are trying to survive in this environment while others didn't make it.



The second time the audience sees the seller, the director does not show him again doing the same action of cutting fruits next to the burial site, but instead shows him smoking a cigarette and listening to the radio. It is the end of the day, no one is around him. When the director cuts to this point, the sound of the radio starts very loudly, interrupting the silence from before. We hear the radio news talking about an executed person that was found that day. The seller, just as much as the

other characters, is surrounded by death, hearing the people crying and mourning is part of his job. Once his day shift is done, the news also talks about death. One of the differences with the other characters, in general, is the fact that he looks at the camera, standing in front of it. This is the few moments I would say the director wanted to make her presence be felt in the film, thus supporting one of my previous comments regarding the style of the film, and why it is not a “the fly in the wall” kind of style.



The final repetition of this motif is in the 42nd minute. It is late in the night, he is about to go home but, unlike the other characters, he looks relieved to know the day is finished. Right before that shot, we see the widow leaving. In this part of the film, we start to see how everyone’s cycle is almost complete. This time, the radio is playing a song, which replaced the bad news about death. Once again, the seller is smoking and looking at the camera. This is the last time the audience sees him. It has now become clear that he is used to this: he doesn’t look sad, or tired or insecure in this place. It is part of his job, and of his life.

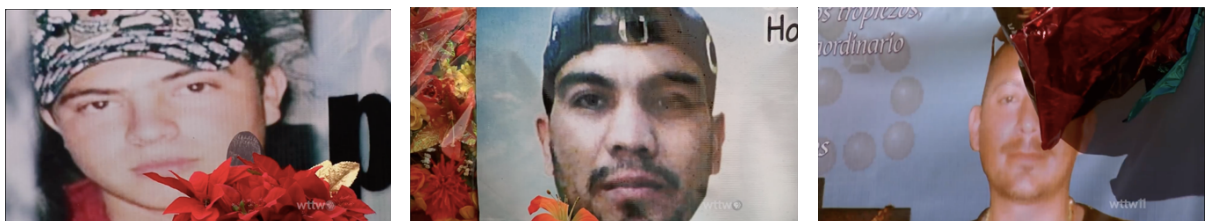
It was only necessary once, the first time, to understand that whenever he appears, a burial ceremony takes place. The editing shows him as a synonym of burial. Do we need to see in the other repetitions people around him crying and mourning? Do we need to see the sadness of the people to understand how difficult his job is? The importance is to give more evidence of him as character, he is another victim of the war, just like everyone else.

The construction

During the film, we can see the construction of new mausoleums in this deserted habitat, and how this goes against the regular Latin American cemeteries in order to become a place of remembrance. Even for the people of Culiacan, this is not a normal cemetery. Every time a drug lord dies, the construction of a bigger and better mausoleum begins. But in this place, next to the drug dealers, are also resting policemen, soldiers, and whoever is affected by the drug war. Jardines de Humaya cemetery became a place where the drug war can actually be seen without being part of it or murdered.



As it was established before, in this part of the world, and many places in Latin America, death is part of the landscape. Accepting that they are going to die young is known to everyone. All the people who are resting in this cemetery are under 40 years old and, because they knew they were going to die young, they invested a lot of money as a way to say *"yo existí, yo conté, yo fui alguien y aquí me pueden recordar o dar homenaje"* – "I existed, I told, I was someone and here you can remember me or give tribute".⁸

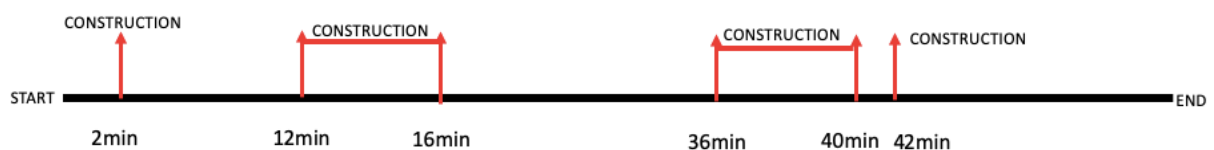


⁸ ALMADA Natalia in the interview with VELAZCO Salvador, *El ojo que piensa*. Revista de cine Iberoamericano, 2012 // e-ISSN:2007-4999, p. 4.
<http://www.elojoquepiensa.cucsh.udg.mx/index.php/elajoquepiensa/article/view/107/108>

Even though it is not a repetition of the same shot, it is a way to explain to the viewer how young these people die, how common it is, and how everyone is familiar with this fact, and at the same time, it is an interesting contrast with the shots of the workers that are building the mausoleums.

Natalia Almada alternates the shots between the workers and the dead men giving the meaning of the options that they have in this place. Either you work under very bad conditions for very low salaries, or you are part of the drug war and die young.

“Paying attention to class, here’s a construction worker who lays bricks in the hot sun for less than \$20 Mexican pesos a day, making a mausoleum that’s worth more than his house. It’s not hard to understand why he could be tempted to do a little trafficking on the side.”⁹



⁹ ALMADA Natalia in the interview with MECKLER Jeremy, “Natalia Almada's Borderlands: Life, Death, and Mexico's Drug War”, WALKER ART MAGAZINE, 20/09/2012, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/natalia-almada-el-velador-film>

If we pay attention to the timeline above of the construction elements, we can see that Natalia Almada focuses on big segments, in the editing, to tell this part of the cemetery. The first time the construction appears is at the very beginning of the film. In that moment, it is not clear if it is a house that is being built, or if it is an actual grave. Then in the 12th minute, after Martin leaves, comes the first block. Almada shows two sides of the men who are there: the hard workers, who earn the money legally yet still don't earn enough to have proper working conditions, and the dead that have enough money to have mausoleums built for their final rest.

In the second block, the director focuses more in showing the number of small graves they are building, and how fast they are filling up since the dead are coming relatively soon after. When we compare the size of the graves, it becomes obvious at this point of the film who are the ones buried in big mausoleums, and who are the ones buried in small graves. The last time we see the element of construction, it is almost night. It is the end of the day and the construction of a big mausoleum is finished. The workers are even decorating the place with roses. The audience was able to see, during the whole film, a construction of a pantheon from start to finish.

I found this mix of motifs (workers/dead) is a great way for the gaze of the viewer to evolve. The connections force the viewer to think beyond and to realize the terrible conditions these people are living in. As Peleshyan explained, the repetitions can give to the image either a political, philosophical, or spiritual dimension. It is on the audience to go beyond the shallow connotation of the shot and connect the elements to see what the author wants to say. Let's imagine the editing would have been done without combining these elements, on one side the construction and on the other, images of graves. Then it would be necessary to have something else, like words for instance, to explain how these two are related, namely, that these are the only options the workers have. The editor then should find the way to communicate by establishing the connections between the various motifs, and support them through the whole film in contrast with the other workers, such as Martin and the fruit seller.

Beginning and end

FIRST SHOT



FINAL SHOT



The opening shot of the film, the prologue, is from inside Martin's car. Not only can we see the character who we will follow throughout the film, but we are also, through this shot, entering the cemetery, the place where the documentary develops. Yet the meaning of this shot stays unclear for the audience, other than a simple "entering somewhere" meaning.

At the end of the film, as an epilogue, the director makes a final shot from the back of the car. We are no longer next to Martin and, contrary to the first shot, we are now leaving the cemetery. At this point, the audience is full of new information about this specific place where the deceased drug dealers/drug lords rest. In addition, the audience has witnessed throughout the film the different ways that the drug traffic war affects everyone, in many different ways.

Even though the shots are not exactly the same, the connotation that the director wanted to give to these shots is much stronger by putting them at the beginning and the end, in the prologue and epilogue. The separation of these two shots gives the meaning of something unfinished, a disclosure, restlessness even though it is a very calm place and, in the surface, we can see nothing happened. Yet under the surface, it is a very disturbing place with terrible sequels of violence.

We go out, literally and figuratively, with a different perspective of this cemetery. As Peleshyan explained: a shot will reveal the totality of the meaning after a lap of time. So, it is only at the end that the viewer can think about the beginning of the film and reflect on what s/he saw.

After the title, the director establishes the space where the documentary takes place. The audience guesses where the driver (Martin) is going, but at the same time, this is raising questions concerning his reason to be there. The first shot after the title – the open graves - confirms it is a cemetery. In the second shot, we see a construction, but the audience still doesn't know why or where the construction is exactly. The third shot shows Martin's parked truck, and the fourth shot is a picture of someone's tombstone with candles aligned on top of it. By the organization of these shots, we can deduce that the character is going to visit someone who passed away.

Shot 1



Shot 2



Shot 3



Shot 4

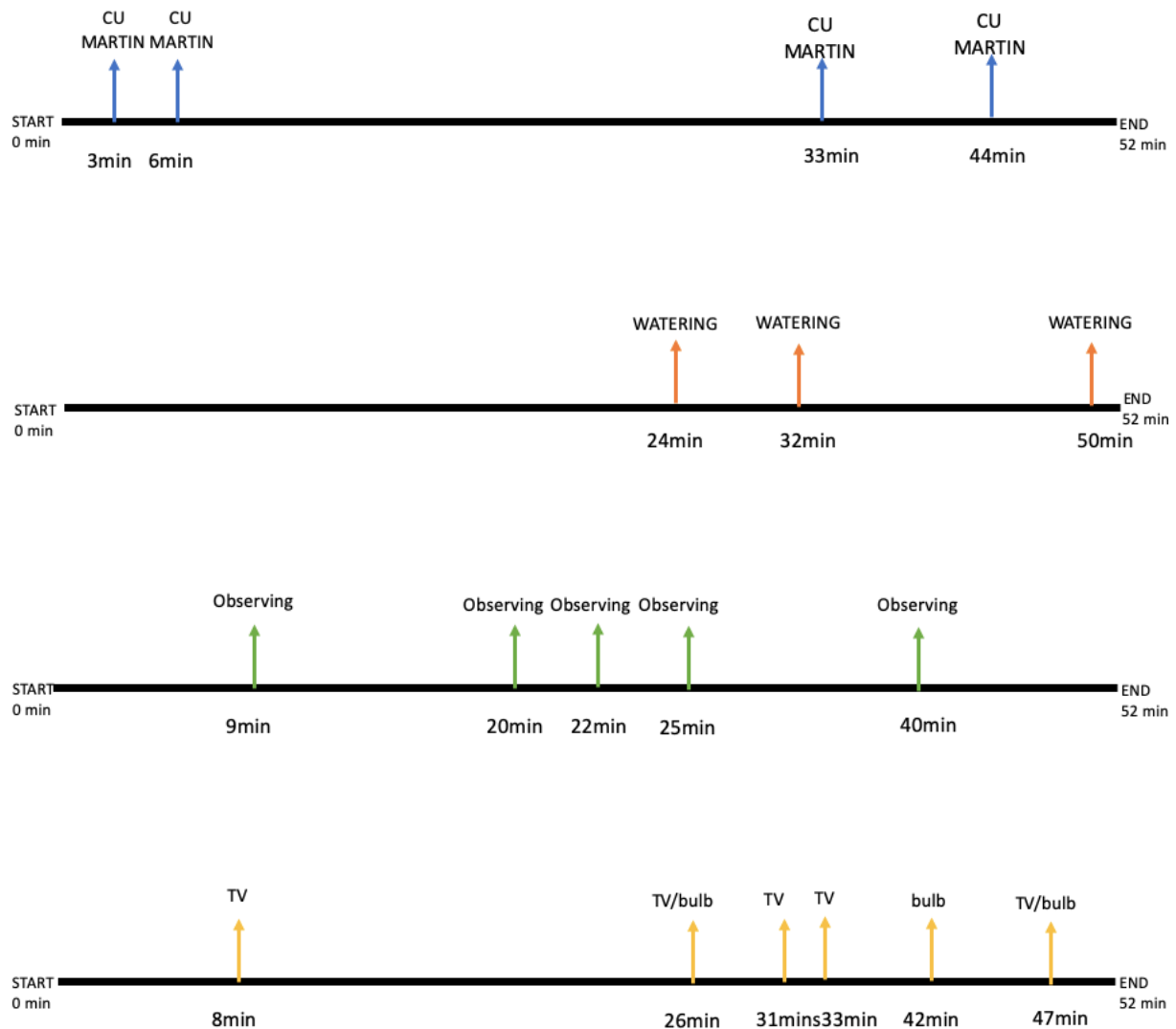
It was necessary, I believe, to start the film by entering the cemetery in the company of Martin. If the director had started the film with a shot already inside, contemplating the space with Martin, then the last shot wouldn't have the same connotation that it has.

The first and last shots create the feeling of welcoming. As if the camera was allowing us to enter a place where not everybody is allowed to be in. And during the rest of the film, we can see Martin coming and going, same as the other characters. In the entire film, camera and therefore viewer stay in the cemetery until the last shot, which is telling us that it is now time to leave. "The final shot seems to open a new cycle of thought, which waits for its continuation beyond the limits of the film."¹⁰ New questions, concerns, thoughts, ideas are in the mind of the viewer, some might feel relieved to leave the place, others may want to go back to catch things unseen. Until here, Natalia Almada's work is done.

I would like to close this chapter by making the editing of the whole film more visible through graphics. First, let's associate the different motifs of repetitions of Martin's character through the whole timeline to see how Martin was built in the editing room. At the beginning of the film, most of the motifs are presented as part of his routine, as part of his job. Then, Martin's first shift ends, and he goes home. There is a big distance between all these elements (see timelines on the next page), since from, the time Martin is no longer there, the director focuses more on the elements that are an integral part of the cemetery. In a way, the cemetery is the other character that Natalia Almada is unveiling with the other motifs. We have Martin only observing and waiting but at this point, the waiting doesn't carry any metaphoric meaning, that we know of yet.

Then, from the middle of the documentary, the elements of repetition are combined in order to understand Martin as the main character which, I believe, creates a metaphoric resonance with all the associations of his actions during the rest of the film. Combining the restlessness of his manners, the awaiting of death, seeing the number of graves that are being built endlessly, hearing the violence on the news and at the same time seeing the conditions of his job, creates a whole new meaning and layer of the image which, at the end of the film, when we leave the cemetery, start to make sense.

¹⁰ PELESHYAN Artavazd, *Montage-at-a-Distance, or: A Theory of Distance*, p. 13



In general, after going through each motif, it is clear to me that the theory of Peleshyan is present in the film through the repetitions, but also through the metaphoric resonance. Correspondingly, I can provide evidence that the structure of the documentary is in a cylindrical shape rather than linear. For instance, with Martin's timelines, even though I am showing linearity, once the film is over, we can easily go back to the beginning, we know him, his job, his routine, every time he leaves or enter the cemetery the cycle either start or ends, it is not clear and that makes it circular.

Personally, I consider that the Jardines de Humanya cemetery is a special place which forces the director to tell this story in a different way, in order to be able to clearly show how the violence is established there as something banal, another daily thing. It feels like a surreal place, because the time in it stands still.

Nonetheless, it works in a cyclical way (diagram 3), because all the motifs are based on a routine, all of them are doing the same every day and it doesn't matter from which point the viewer starts, because it will come to the same point. That is what allows Natalia Almada to play with the repetitions of actions, to unfold the meaning, little by little, deciding when and how to show, in order to give a strong meaning to a routine-driven life.

I decided to create a diagram in which the circular/cylindrical structure of the film could be visible. The design is based on the hyperbolic spiral of a helix but for the purpose of clarity I adapted it in such a way that it can be understandable. As we can see, the only vertical line are the points that are connecting the entire film: beginning/end, it goes through the whole shape. This is also what Myriam Semerjian explains in the analysis of *The Seasons*: "Due to its circular movement, it can pass several times "vertically" by points that it has already travelled through".¹¹

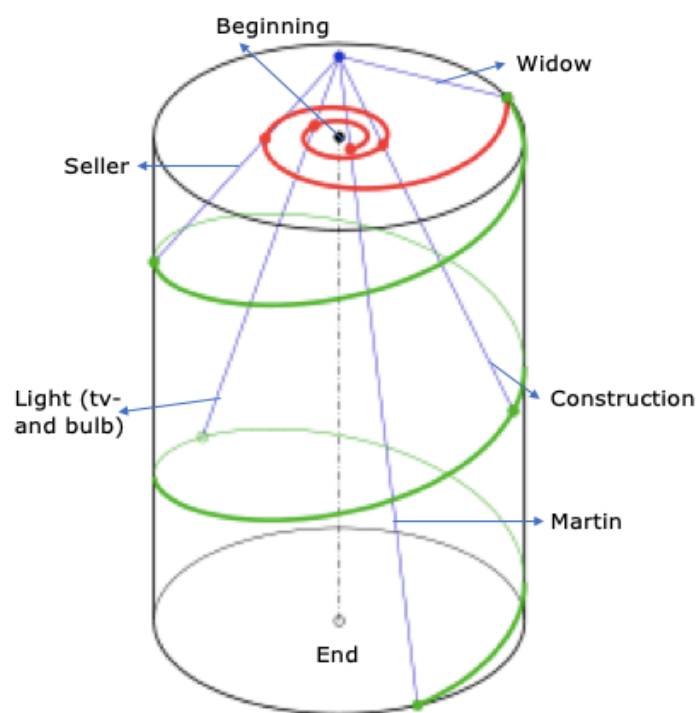


diagram 3

¹¹ SEMERJIAN Myriam, *Materia y Cosmos, El montaje a distancia de Artavazd Peleshyan*, Bogotá, IDARTES, 2011, p. 150.

The blue lines are all the motifs in which I deconstruct the film. Some are longer because they are affecting the circularity more than other points, i.e. Martin's line is crossing the whole shape and all the circles are passing at some point in his line. That is why the red circular shape starts on Martin's motif, he is the starting point that is connecting all the other motifs, and once all the motifs are presented, the green line starts, which then indicates the cycle in which all of them are living. This explains the repetitions of actions in different moments of the film and not just linear moments as if they weren't connected.

It is important to recognize that in a linear way the repetitions don't carry the same connotation. Indeed, in a linear structure, points do not meet again. Whereas in the cylindrical shape, the motifs are crossing the timeline, adding another layer when it reaches the repetition of the same motif. "From wherever you look at the earth, it is circular. An image must also be that way and the film in its entirety too... Montage at a distance offers the probabilities without an end."¹² Same as the circular/cylindrical structure, the beginning and the end of the cycle is blurry. Natalia Almada decided to take the viewer in and out of this cycle in a simple way: entering and leaving in Martin's car, but that does not mean the cycle finishes or starts in that exact point for the people who live there.

¹² PELESHYAN Artavazd in the interview with NINEY François, "Montage with Images that Don't Exist: Interview with Artavazd Peleshyan", Vol. 22, n° 1, SCREENING ETHNICITY, Winter 2000, p. 94-98.

CONCLUSION

After a breakdown of the different motifs in which I divided the documentary, it can be concluded that:

- Peleshyan's theory applies to the film. Natalia Almada did a very interesting job by building meaning through the repetitions of motifs and the creation of resonance between these elements that give clues to recognize the violence in different parts of the film. Natalia Almada and Artavazd Peleshyan used similar techniques with different styles. For example: the non-use of interviews, non-use of voice-over, and non-use of dialogues make both of them play with the footage in a way to find creative solutions to the lack of words. These are the connections that are communicating during the whole film.

Another common point is the desire not to tell a specific story, according to Peleshyan, but rather "to elaborate a continuum of impressions of the world"¹. Natalia elaborated a whole new impression of this place, (even for the people who have never seen it) in comparison with what the mass media has shown before.

She had the clear intention of not giving information about a specific person or point of view. She did lead the structure with Martin as the base, but when the film ends, what stands out in the memory of the viewer is this peculiar place, where drug war is truly visible and how, in general, everyone is a clear victim of this war, not only Martin. This is the same intention Peleshyan has:

"Through isolated people show not only the particular but also the common. So that the definition of the people represented would obey the knowledge of the typical so that in the viewer's

¹ NINEY François, *Peleshyan: Reality Dismounted, Theory of distance montage*, Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematograficos CUEC, cuadernos FIUNAM, Mexico, 2011 P. 9 Spanish translation of the theory distance montage. p. 11-12

consciousness the image of an isolated person would not be formed, but the image of the people.”²

- If this documentary would have been shot and edited in a different way, I am sure that it would not be as powerful. Let’s imagine that there are some interviews in the film, either as talking head or in voice-over, telling us about violence, death, about the drug war. For sure, it will be a topic that impacts the viewer and the tragedy these people face will be very clear. But the director rather wanted the audience to reflect on what is shown, just as Peleshyan also wished to have the audience in an active state of thought, and not be limited in what to think or what to conclude from the film.

Natalia Almada wanted to be as distant as possible from all the films that are talking about drug traffic, that is to say, many. The amount of content on this topic is so vast in Latin America that it doesn’t have an impact anymore. Following the desire of not having this “drug film style” and not having a clear story, the film and the place required Natalia Almada to have other techniques in order to be able to create a film about violence without these graphic images.

- In addition, I pointed out the importance of the repetitions of actions or motifs in the editing as Peleshyan established in his theory. It applies to any film, not just in his films or in *El velador*. In general, it is a tool that hasn’t been used for the sake of revealing and giving another layer/meaning to a shot. From my point of view, repetition nowadays is used for viewers to remember some parts of the film, not letting the audience build the connections but saying directly. Natalia Almada, without being conscious she was applying the same concepts Peleshyan developed years ago, managed to give a style to the film which is very different from Peleshyan’s style, whilst keeping the essence of the editing itself.

² PELESHYAN Artavazd, *Theory of distance montage*, Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematograficos CUEC, cuadernos FIUNAM, Mexico, 2011, p. 23. [Spanish translation of the theory distance montage]

- Thanks to the metaphoric resonance that carries a shot it is possible to edit with absent images. Natalia Almada never shows graphic images of violence nonetheless this film is about violence. All the motifs that she picked to be shown, that have been affected by the drug war, and all the consequences in the characters are visible through the repetitions that reveal the symbolic associations of violence that the viewer can decode. Similar to *Mapa mudo, un relato en trenza*, where the audience has to fill up the meaning of the shots with their own perception and collective memories.
- The theory of Peleshyan allows to have a nonlinear structure of the films, applied to *El velador*, it is more a cylindrical structure (diagram 3) rather than circular since it is not flat. The cycles are passing through the same motifs but not the same point. Since it is 3D, when there is a repetition of motifs, there is also a distance between the same points but deeper, allowing another layer of the meanings.

Lastly, I want to conclude that Natalia Almada made a film that is difficult to address to different types of audiences. What I am trying to say is that, on the one hand, there is the audience who has experienced violence and is used to see dead bodies and blood. On the other hand, there is the audience which is unaware of these problems in the world and, because it is not affecting them directly, these people are not as empathetic as the other part of the audience. So, how to make people react differently to a common situation? How to deliver a message or change the feeling toward something that is already established? How to explain, not only what violence has done because of drugs, but also explain how it is affecting everyone? The topic, the place, the violence, the dead, and the mourning relatives, lead Natalia Almada to find a way of addressing this issue for those who are willing to see under the surface, and beyond first impressions.

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<https://walkerart.org/magazine/natalia-almada-el-velador-film>
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FILMS USED

- *El Velador* [The Night Watchman] (2011), **directed by** Natalia ALMADA, **produced by:** Altamura Films & Natalia ALMADA; **written by** Natalia ALMADA; **director of photography:** Natalia ALMADA; **sound:** Alejandro DE ICAZA; **montage:** Natalia ALMADA
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- *Vremena goda* [The Seasons] (1975), **directed by** Artavazd PELESHYAN, **produced by:** Yerevan Film Studio; **written by** Artavazd PELESHYAN; **director of photography:** Mikhail VARTANOV
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