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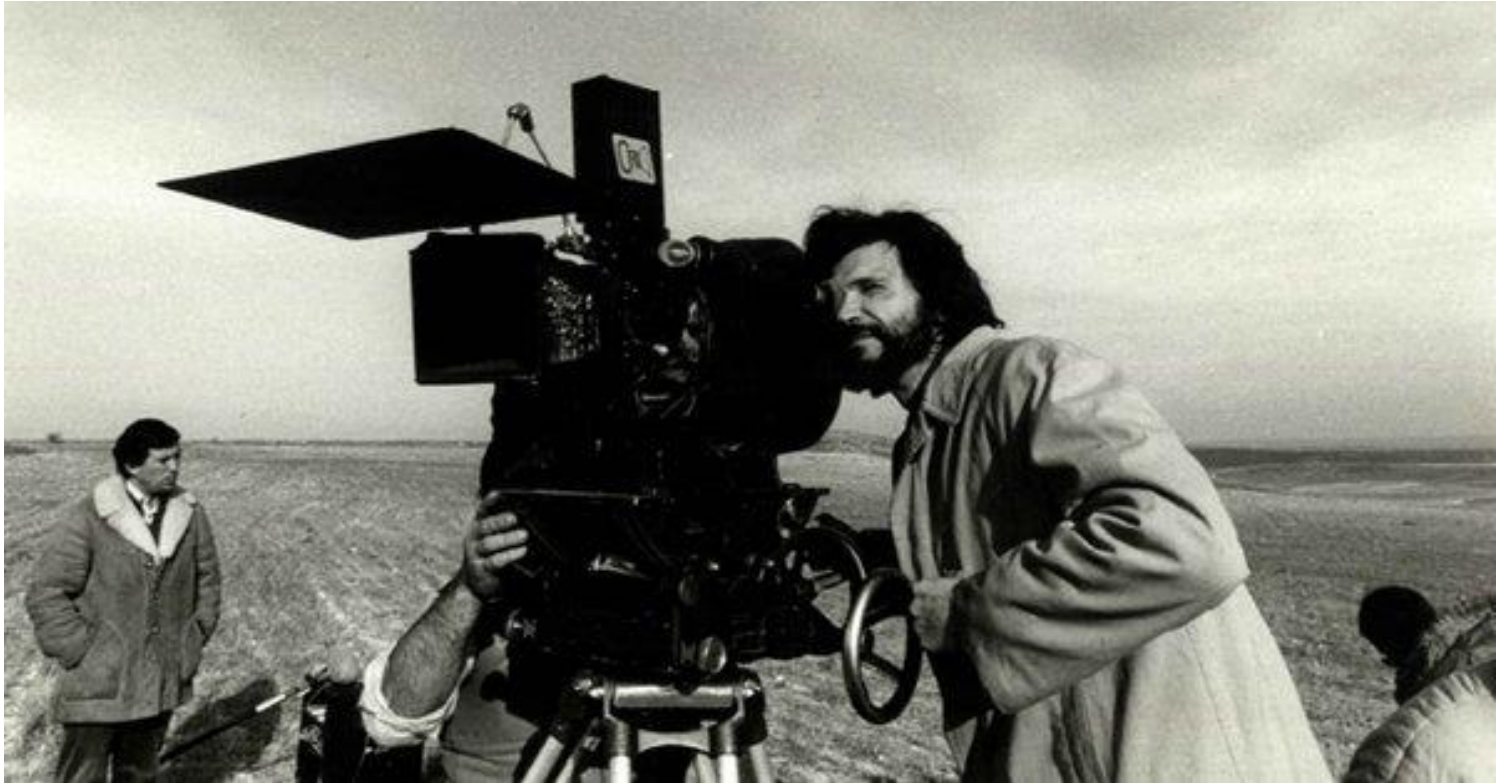


Image 1 A Master at Work

### An Analysis of 'Lifeline':

### Psychological Theories, Mise en scène, and Montage

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*Ten Minutes Older* is a collection of short films divided into two volumes – *The Cello* and *The Trumpet*. In this, fifteen world-renowned filmmakers cinematically reflect on the idea of ten minutes of physical time. Curiously, most, if not all

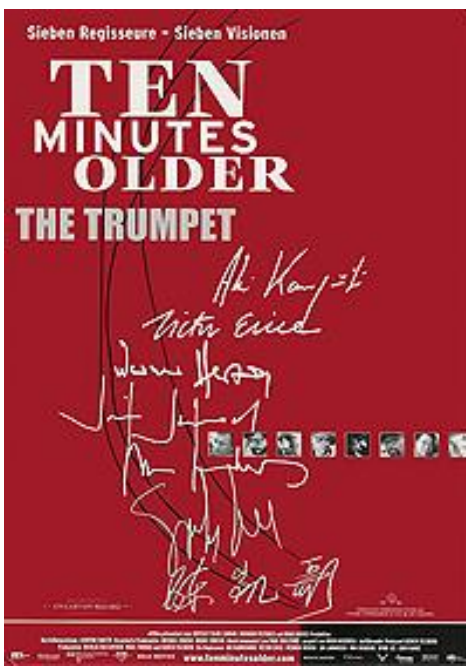


Image 2 Poster of the Collection Ten Minutes Older - Trumpet

of these filmmakers are known for their feature-length films. Hence, it becomes quite a rare ensemble of films where veteran filmmakers explore their unique languages and *mise en scènes* through the medium of short films. Hence, a collection like this acts as a treasure trove when it comes to the exploration of images. This short paper will study *Lifeline* by Victor Erice from the volume *The Trumpet* from the perspective of construction of image. Almost simultaneously with the beginning of cinema, some thinkers began to associate psychological theories with cinematic image. On one hand, this paper would explore the merits of such early claims in the contemporary context through the work of an auteur like Victor Erice. On the other hand, it will also explore mastery of the cinematic concepts, like that of *mise en scène* and montage that arose through the practice of cinema and gained distinct conceptual life of their own. Together, they might shine some light on the eminence of an artist like Victor Erice.

Since Hugo Munsterberg there has been an approach towards understanding cinema as a parallel to the conscious experience of the human mind. The best examples were with the techniques like close-up, flashback, flash forward. Munsterberg states that these devices are related to human phases like attention, memory and imagination, respectively. With the help of this film, an exploration will take place to find a possible parallel between the human unconscious and the structure of cinema.

One of the crucial propositions of Carl Jung is the pre-personal archetypal psyche that manifests through symbols across the world. Through this idea of archetype, one aims to accentuate the relationship between the human unconscious and cinema. Jung says, 'by psyche, I understand the totality of all psychic processes, conscious as well as unconscious' (Jung, CW6). The idea of psyche is divisible into constituent elements, where separate complexes and archetypal contents from differing patterns, myths and symbols are personified and independently operate as absolute secondary selves, rather than merely drives and processes. This idea of a prepersonal psyche creates an archetypal experience in the form of cinema as well. One of the most principle archetypal ideas proposed by Jung is that of self, the unifying centre of the psyche, both conscious and unconscious. The self is in whose image manifested the idea of god. In this film of Erice, there can be a trace of some aspects of the archetypal self.

In the figure of self, there is a navel, the central generative point. Similarly, herein this film, the images are structured around a navel. Following the relationship to the central navel, some of the images are placed closer and some, further away. In cinema, there is a movement. As the body of cinema progresses and changes, so is there a change in the position of the navel. This

repositioning shows through the manoeuvring of the images. The navel is never clearly seen. One definite image cannot be identified as the navel. The images that come closest to the centre give a glimpse of what it may be.

For example, in the beginning, the emphasis was on the ambience of the afternoon slumber. There is a small uncanny element added to this afternoon peace and drowse– the bleeding baby.



**Image 3 The Sleeping Baby  
at the Junction of Peace and Uncanny**

Against this calm environment the sense of uncanny increases. This is the first movement. There is a primal interaction between the baby and the cat. It is important to note that the animal chosen as a part of this reciprocation is a cat, an animal that has been a symbol of communication with the nether life throughout history in different cultures. After this, the third move occurs when the

house is awake, and the baby is taken care of. This move is marked with a sudden awakening and falling back into slumber.



**Image 4 Washbasin Close to  
the Centre of Slumber**

Now in the first movement, for example, the image of the baby is very close to the centre. Thus, the image of the baby recurs not only often but also underlines both the physical sleep and the uncanny sensation of bleeding. Another example can be that of the washbasin shot. When it comes the first time on screen, it is quite close to the centre of slumber, but the next

time it comes with the bloody clothes put into it, the relationship with the centre then has shifted.

In this regard, let us introduce a small aside – a reference to the possible death seems to be a continuous engagement in this film. The accident of the baby, the silent growth of the blood splatter, the snake in the garden amongst the fresh apples, the maimed man in contrast with the scarecrow – all of these images have a hint of death in them. Is it possible to think that the modern

man's desire for death or 'thanatos' as Freud would call it finds a subliminal presence in the schema of Erice's image construction?

Grounded in stasis, the film is predicated on inter-frame composition and a painterly schema. This is one face of time seen in Erice. Yet, there is a strong medium of movement through which the progression of Erice's film takes place. This is another presence of time altogether. It is the tension of the two that prevails in his film. Maybe Erice also approaches time as an archetype – an element of the human mind that is prepersonal, through which man seeks elemental permanence and at the same time an element that is sensed through the physical manifestations of it (instead of sensing it as it is). Thus his cinema also has time as a critical leitmotif. The idea of time is present in multiple layers. In one, time is placed as a perpetual present tense as humankind seeks permanence. In another, a palpable sense of time is introduced that cannot be completely experienced at one go. One must sense time through progression - shot after shot, moment after moment. The idea of time is present throughout the film in every sequence, but not specified in one object. One example of this is in the usage of the clock or newspaper in this film.

The date on a newspaper or the time shown on the clock becomes objects onto which an experience of time has been sketched through intrinsic micromovements, but the objects themselves do not measure time. The same can be stated about his usage of dissolves. In early cinema, especially in the studio era, a dissolve would usually notify the audience of the change of space and time, i.e. scene. Erice's use of dissolve goes beyond a simple scene change and adds to the sensing of the existence of tangible time. Since one cannot directly observe the archetype, Erice creates a presence of it that can be felt in the flow of the film. He refers to the dissolves as “a peculiar will to transcend itself within the camera”. He knows that the archetypes cannot be directly observed with the senses. The existence of archetypes is revealed by the arrangements they produce in consciousness. Maeda Hideki has a unique take on the usage of dissolve by Erice. She says that his dissolves are evocative of the Bergsonian “only time” (both one and many).



Before probing further into his mise en scène, it might deem helpful to see his commentary on his work.

As a director, I have the impression that I move between two poles: one crepuscular and nocturnal, and the other diurnal, solar, where I would like to always maintain the documentarist's capacity for direct observation, and in which reverberates a sense of nostalgia for a lost time, that of the cinema's Golden Age.

— Víctor Erice, *Objects Suspended in Light*, by Linda C. Ehrlich

There can only be cinema where there is an authentic journey, experience, and encounter.

— Víctor Erice, *Objects Suspended in Light*, by Linda C. Ehrlich

From these two quotations of Erice, one may get an idea of the kind of mise en scène he was working towards. *Lifeline* – the film in question here, is marked with a personal manner of thought,



**Image 6 The Sleeping Mother  
Clad in White**

a thought that has amalgamated imagination with reality. A short anecdote may be of some relevance here. Like his feature-length film *The Spirit of the Beehive*, this film is set in 1940 as well - the year of his birth. Thus, it might not be too far-fetched to imagine a sense of 'personal' in the literal sense as well. In this film, it is interesting to see the distance of the characters from the camera. It

might be helpful to go shot by shot here.

The first shot is a mid-shot of the sleeping baby.

The second shot is a mid-long of the mother sleeping almost in the same position.

The next shot is that of the statue of Mother Mary with a slightly tilted head.

Then comes a close shot of the baby.



**Image 7 The Gaze of a Sculpted Mother**

Finally, a close-up of the blood beginning to spread on the white dress follows.



**Image 8 The Introduction of the Ominous**

In the first two shots, we see that the dominant colour is white, giving us a larger, rather languid sense of space. The similarity in their position and the distance of the camera from them makes the image personal. The statue with the tilted gesture, especially from the angle it is captured, gives a sense of watching over them. The recurring white in this shot gives us a sense of continued languour. Whereas, the flicker of the candle and the duration of the shot impart a sense of wait. Preparing the audience for something to come. The stasis of the afternoon is situated. The child is introduced into this schema once more, this time a closer shot than before. The positioning of the statue in the previous shot juxtaposed with this one brings forth a sense of comfort. In the next shot, the dark tone of the blood, the increasing blotch, because of its tone and movement cause a sense of eeriness. The closeness with which the camera is looking at her, the continuation of the previous comfort is still there. This increases the impact on the blood. With a quiet documentative gaze, the filmmaker kindles imaginative possibilities. The light, the distance between camera and characters, the shot durations, the positioning of the characters, the tonality, the arrangement of objects within the frame, mapping the movements that take place within the frame – all of these come together in constituting his *mise en scène*. The film seamlessly embeds within it certain seemingly contradictory ideas - that of comfort and uncanny, quiet and sinister, calming with an impending sense of doom.

The images in this film are created as theatrical, highly restricted and formal, with a personal kindness to them. The images give rise to a sense of softness that comes from this personal engagement with the subjects. The fact that there is a strong placement that has taken place in creating the shot is evident, yet, because of the restraint with which the shots are designed, the placement is never evident, on the contrary, it looks quite natural. The shots are immobile, static. This stasis counterpoints and heightens the mobility that lies in each shot.

For example, the third sequence of the film opens with the pendulum of a clock, centralized,



**Image 10 The Afternoon Languour –  
Men of the House**



**Image 9 The Specific Time of Photographs  
Dissolving into the Immaculate  
Time of the Baby**

composed with its rhythmic minuteness, followed by the wall clock, central, with the photo frames on each side. Followed by this shot are the long shot of the room, the elderly man playing cards, and

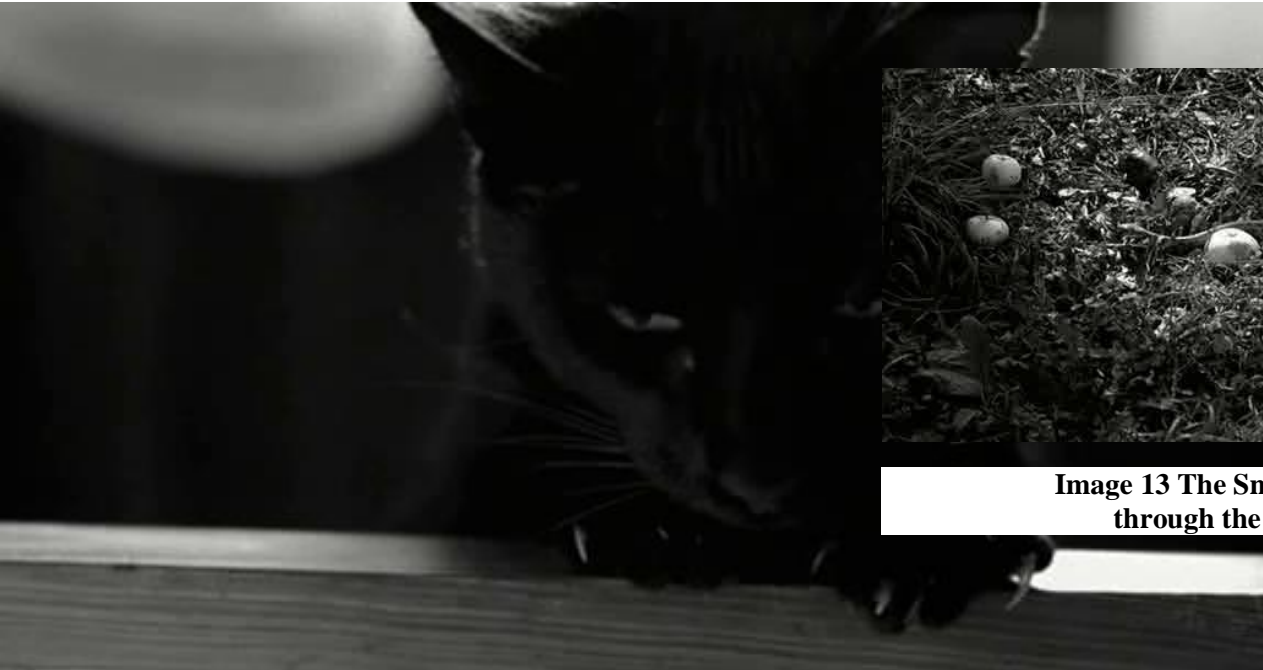


**Image 11 The Cat Finds the Child**

the father sleeping. Then comes the mid-shot of the elderly man. Followed by a tilt from the sleeping father to the photo frames above, dissolving into the face of the baby. The arrangement in each of the shots is extremely restricted, the equal still objects around the movement of the pendulum, the tilted light

from the window in the long shot, the movement of the hands playing card juxtaposed by the heavy static sitting, the sleeping man's stillness complemented by the camera movement. Each of these shots has a theatrical positioning, restricted, yet the gaze of the angles of the camera gives it an enamoured personal touch. The stasis is circumferential, the movement centralized, even the tilt-up (because of the central positioning of the man) seems to be cutting the frame from the centre. This is why the movement always seems to be underlined, even if it is very minute. His shots are self-contained units. The screen is captured by each of them separately and in their rights. They all carry equal weight or importance. The clock or the man playing cards are not differentiated in their presence. At the same time, the ensemble of these images forms a space that is greater than each of these combined. This is where the painterly qualities of the *mise en scène* lies. The elements, like that of in a painting, is there and present, but together their significance is broader than that of each of them.

Some similarities can be found between Erice’s sense of images and that of Ukrainian master Dovzhenko’s. Dovzhenko in his image construction went both towards the performative and the real of cinema – an image where the actor consciously acts for an audience and an image where actual appearances are also registered. In Erice as well, we see this tendency. The woman hanging clothes, the man cutting grass, the disabled man making a rope – each of these actions are acted out by performers, yet, the actuality with which these actions are followed give the characters the dynamicity of the real.



**Image 12 The Cat's Gaze - Beyond Worldly**



**Image 13 The Snake Slithers through the Apples**

“A

sign is a token of meaning that stands

for a known entity... A symbol, on the other hand, is an image or representation which points to something essentially unknown, a mystery. A sign communicates abstract, objective meaning whereas a symbol conveys living, subjective meaning.” - This statement from Edward Edinger’s *Ego and Archetype: Individuation and the Religious Function of the Psyche* can be useful to look at the usage of animals. Animals truly have played crucial roles in his mise en scène in this film. The bird, the snake, the dog and the cat – they are not just present, but all captured in a moment of action that becomes elemental. The bird is not just sitting on a tree, but does a specific action of plucking the fruit. The dog sleeps. The snake rolls through the apples. The cat, probably the most critical of all the animals in the film, interacts with the scenario through multiple actions. Each of these requires a prepared wait for real accidents to happen. These animals do not remain just animals, just signs, but acquire a character. They open up spaces for imagination and yet they



have a sense of documentative reality in them. From signs maybe they go towards becoming symbols that steer towards the essentially unknown.

Traversing into another anecdote might be of interest here. Luis Cuadrado, his cinematographer for *The Spirit of the Beehive* was almost losing his eyesight at the time of shooting this film. Hence, he used to describe the light and shot in its physical details. The intensity and positions of the light, the presumed unutterable of cinema, were articulated by him. Hence, from that communication pattern when Erice begins to work, he too literally articulated the visual pattern. This led to a sculptural quality of the light. Possibly it became a part of Erice's *mise en scène*, as visible in the film *lifeline* as well. Despite beautiful on a purely aesthetic level—the flickering candlelight in the shot of the statue looking down at the baby, the chiaroscuro light falling on the feet of the woman on the sewing machine, the titled light through the windows of the hall, the warm spots on the wall of photo frames, the tonal gradation in the exterior long shots – all of these have a three-dimensional sculptural quality. It emanates a temperature, a season. Is it possible to imagine that articulation of the physicality has taken him towards this path? Erice's films also document and favour small changes in composition, a technique that can make the audience 'feel' the light. Towards the end of his essay "On the Object of Figuration" Jean Louis Schefer mentions, "Pictures maintain a fiction of a place: a window through which a patch of color watches the enigmatic body floating free, away from painting's geometry."

From the visual, it is only natural to refer to the aural *mise en scène* of Erice. His work is proliferated with the idea of a stable, boxed frame. He uses sound to go beyond that stability, to induce movement. His sound is mostly of ambience, often isolated, and not always sourced. The sound calms one. The sound haunts. The sound is indicative of a world beyond. Sound evokes imagination. Here one must mention the cat's mewling as opposed to the baby's cry. Through its primal, animalistic being the cat can sense an unknown eeriness that the baby's voice then reacts to. Sound becomes a site of the imagination and the unknown. The expressive quality of sound is explored.

Not only the audio-visual, but it is important to look at the connection between the two shots as well. An element of Erice's *mise en scène* can also be found there. Erice uses both cut and dissolve. The influence of the silent filmmakers like Sternberg, Murnau and Sjöström is evident in his use of dissolve. But this dissolve is more of registration of minute changes, a flow and connection with these self-adequate shots so that they can come together in a way that palpability to the whole that he is creating. The boy drawing a watch and listening to it – a very ordinary action of the child, because of the dissolve one registers time – one registers the travel that the quality of the image does onto another. A conversation between two shots is possible. The dissolves are not continuous. There are distinct cuts. These cuts create an extension of the arc built by the dissolve. They help us be aware of the bridge between the two shots.

A collection of moments, observations, contemplations and manipulations construe both film and painting. Rather than exploring the distinction between these two states, Erice's films occupy a space in which, as Linda C. Ehrlich suggests, there is an "intermingling of life and death." Paul Julian Smith reminds us how Erice's cinema brings back the quality of rapture in cinema.

Victor Erice's film montage works in many different ways. As Deleuze states, resonating Eisenstein, 'Montage must proceed by alterations, conflicts, resolutions, and resonances, in short, an activity of selection and coordination, to give time its real dimension, and the whole its consistency.' Here the connection between the two shots creates a new pathway for the audience to sense temporality as well. Eisenstein's classic characterization of montage with the law of dialectics is explored in very many ways here. One such exploration take place throughout the film, through the content of the shots. Specifically speaking one is referring to the characters here. From infancy, childhood, young adulthood, youth, new parenthood, and old age – different ages are introduced in the film with their specific presences within which the conflict begins.

The law of dialectics is many. The first among them – a move from one quality to another

followed by an introduction of another qualitative image that is more summative. This does not come as the contrast of



**Image 15 The Man Weaves**



**Image 14 The Object Waits**

graphical elements as they do in other classical examples, rather it comes as a contrast of the movements. For example, the centrality of the movements throughout has been contrasted with the encircling, circumferential movement of the cutting of the grass. It does not starkly stand out as a conflict, but the conflict sometimes goes beyond the graphic element and towards the objects and the significance of the objects as they carry within them. An example of this can be the man without a leg, weaving a thread contrasted with that of the image of the scarecrow with a Republican soldier's helmet on its head. They are by themselves a man and an object. Erice explores how both of them have a specific trajectory hidden within them. Bringing them together is not just a visual affinity anymore, rather an affinity between these two trajectories. So the qualitative introduction of elements takes place here within the interaction between these two trajectories.

Within dialectics, there is also the relationship between one and the other. Here Erice



attempts at the montage between time and space – history and geography. The final return to the bleeding baby is followed by a newspaper onto which a jug of water was kept. At the beginning of the film, the newspaper achieves the state of an object – one that has its history, trajectory – used in a

very different context. Later when the newspaper returned to the film, there is a rupture within the image. Then it is now the news and the paper. The news bringing in history and a sense of geographical location through the German arrival at Hendaya, the border of Spain and France, and thus a time and place and the paper expresses a physical space that maps the movement of water onto its body – the triadic relationship between space, place and time is born here.

The physical relationship between the two shots is of course an important factor in a montage. As mentioned in the exploration of the mise en scène of *Lifeline*, the dissolve and cut not only provokes a relationship in the middle of the two shots but also within the shot. The duration and rhythm of the shots are elongated. Thus the spark of montage cannot happen at the cut point. The elongation of shots inherently carries over its elements and reverberations onto the next shot.

**Image 16 Newspaper as a Site of Contexts and Times**

There is a moment of overlap between the two shots. In this overlap, the montage, the effect of it, are

intermingled amid the two shots. That is why between similar images of the baby and the man, depending upon the centrality of importance both dissolve and a cut can occur and they both can

lead to the montage of arcs – where two arcs of the two shots come and meet each other with some overlapping in the middle. Then actually through this intermingling, the montage is displaced from its classical position of residing at the cut point and extended into both the shots as part of the shots.

An extension of this can be seen in the relationship he creates between the form of content and the form of montage. He has a preoccupation with death – relationships of death or possibilities of it come into his images. The differently abled man, the scarecrow's hat (that of a Republican soldier), the blood of the child, the snake's roll through the apples – all of these images hint at a possibility of death. Could his montage be an extension of his preoccupation with death as well? Pasolini spoke of 'significant moments' in montage and how montage has the property of 'making the present past', of transforming our unstable and uncertain present into 'a clear, stable and desirable past'. This becoming a past can be a reference to death. It is not a death that is done and dusted, a death that will never be looked at. It is a death in the living (or maybe even death as a being in life). It is possible to think of this becoming past as the modern man's desire for death or the Freudian 'thanatos'. In this way then there can be a similarity articulated between the content and the form of montage. The montage thus becomes a part of the shot, seeping into the content ideas of the shot in *Erice*.

As a concluding remark one may mention the montage of attractions. Attractions as in a circus or variety show the way different sorts of performances are assembled, different ways of engaging and affecting the audience are arranged in succession to produce a composite effect. In this manner, his film can be seen as a montage of attractions. The example of this can be found in the sequence where the child is being taken care of and the camera pans through the faces of the different audiences, the emptiness of the spaces that were filled before, the expression of the hands of the parents. The gradation of the differences in which our engagement with each face, space, expression (each introduced before) changes and creates a culminating effect – it is possible to envisage this as the montage of attractions.

In an interview with Tomás Pérez Turrent Victor Erice says, “The most important thing is that I never stopped living as a director, at any time, and I suppose that one can feel it in the films that I have finished, that are also the natural consequences of the ones I did not succeed to direct.” This short paper does not do justice to someone of the stature of Victor Erice, who went beyond the set and in his way translated the collective time of the process of filmmaking to an individual time for himself. Even in a short span of ten minutes, not only does he manage to play with the complexity of form and concept that he usually designs in his feature-length films, but also introduce a sense of longing long after the film is complete (a distinct feature of the short film). This paper only gives a cue to read his work a bit better by bringing forth some of the theoretical and practical concepts that play key roles in his work. Erice in an interview says, "I feel that the language of painting belongs to the dawn of our time and civilisation, and, in a similar way, cinema belongs to its sunset." With this sense of uninterrupted continuing circular time, Erice's ten-minute masterwork of multiplying and reinforcing distinct layers of time fades to black.



**Image 17 Time beyond the Film**

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