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In the place of abandonment: Rohrwacher, Martel and 'miracles'

ABSTRACT

*This essay analyses Italian director Alice Rohrwacher's *Corpo celeste* (2011) and Argentinean filmmaker Lucrecia Martel's *La ciénaga* (2001) and considers the relation between the two films. Attending to the films' shared interest in 'miracles' that are as minor and apparently inconsequential as they are elusive, I show that such miracles, reminiscent of others in recent critical theory, figure in both films as means of exiting or altering a present that otherwise appears foreclosed. Miracles become means of restoring what Gilles Deleuze calls 'belief in the world', however minimally. In this way, both *Corpo celeste* and *La ciénaga* point to the continued salience of Deleuze's account in *Cinema 2* of suspended action and subsequent 'learning to see'. But both films also foreground, differently and in ways that Deleuze could not have foreseen, the difficulties of such learning in contexts of *impasse*, economic crisis, austerity and abandonment.*

KEYWORDS

Alice Rohrwacher
Lucrecia Martel
Gilles Deleuze
miracles
abandonment
impasse
sensory-motor break
time-image

ROHRWACHER'S RELIGION

Early in Alice Rohrwacher's *Corpo celeste* ('Celestial body') (2011), a political billboard-on-wheels passes by, proclaiming a candidate 'the force of the future'. We both see and hear these words, which are printed on the billboard and repeated aloud by a campaign worker. But the slogan contrasts with the

1. Abandonment recurs in a different context in another of Rohrwacher's statements on her film (Odifreddi 2011: 241, quoted in Bondi 2012: 78). Here the director is discussing Santa (Pasqualina Scuncia), the catechism teacher in *Corpo celeste*: 'I wanted to recount the tragedy of someone who thinks she is part of a community, in this case an ecclesiastical one, but who is then completely abandoned to herself'.

surroundings in which it is thus repeated: on a grey day, in a field strewn with trash, a small crowd gathers for an annual church procession. A priest, Don Mario (Salvatore Cantalupo), struggles with a megaphone and microphone that do not work. He then addresses the assembled spectators, announcing a bishop's imminent arrival. An awkward silence follows, ending only when the bishop's car finally arrives and is greeted by applause and the music of a marching band, accompanying other marches as they carry a Madonna slowly towards the guest of honour. The scene is archaic, then, and emptied of enthusiasm. The sound equipment is fixed, and the show goes on. But devotion has become a matter of going through motions, and 'the force of the future' is nowhere to be seen.

Neither does the crowd seem capable of channelling the subversive 'force of the Past'. For Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose phrase the politician's slogan at once faintly echoes and reverses, the 'force of the Past' came 'from the ruins, from the Churches, / from the altarpieces, from the abandoned / villages' to address the present (1964: 26). In *Corpo celeste*, by contrast, ruins, churches, altarpieces and all the rest seem evacuated of potential in advance. From the first, it would appear, these past places and old forms are sites of empty, uncritical conformity, not sources of transformation, redemption or even relief.

Against this background of residual rituals and exhausted, emptied-out forms, *Corpo celeste* follows Marta (Yle Vianello), the twelve-year-old protagonist briefly introduced in the early procession scene. Soon after this scene, Marta begins attending catechism classes at Don Mario's church, preparing for the confirmation that organizes the film's narrative. Rohrwacher further lays out Marta's story and its context in her 'Director's Notes' for the film:

Marta has just returned [from Switzerland] to live in a place that she does not know, but to which in some way she belongs: her mother's city, Reggio Calabria, where she too was born. The return to the South is a very common phenomenon lately, so much so that one could speak of a sort of 'emigration of return': having abandoned the prospects of a better life in the North, where factories are closing and work is disappearing, many families have preferred to return to their places of origin, where they can at least be helped and sustained by relatives and friends.

But here Marta does not find awaiting her those colors and that communitarian feeling that are the stuff of family memories. Instead she encounters an immense periphery, where the sense of abandonment and solitude seems to be amplified. Buildings under construction that repeat themselves infinitely and the sea, in the background, a celestial, almost unreachable horizon.

(Rohrwacher 2012: 6)

'After the good life, an impasse' is Lauren Berlant's way of characterizing a comparable predicament, rendered in Laurent Cantet's 'Cinema of Precarity' (Berlant 2011: 201). Yet the affective tone that prevails in *Corpo celeste* – and already in Rohrwacher's brief account of the film's setting and narrative context, quoted above – is not quite Berlant's 'cruel optimism'. Note that Rohrwacher tellingly associates the closure of factories and the disappearance of jobs with the same bleak 'sense' that awaits emigrants returning to the south: abandonment.¹ These emigrants 'abandon' prospects, that is, only to find that the 'sense of abandonment' is amplified after they reach their destinations.

This sense cuts across the North and the South, then, even if it may be more palpable in the ‘immense peripher[ies]’ of southern cities.²

Yet Rohrwacher establishes early on that even these peripheries are relatively privileged: at dinner, one of Marta’s family members notes that she has stopped buying calamari from the sea; now she only buys it from the ocean. You never know, another relative explains, how many dead bodies there are in the Mediterranean – so that you could be ingesting residues of the bodies of ‘clandestini’ or ‘marocchini’, undocumented immigrants or so-called ‘Moroccans’, together with your meal. If the sea, in the director’s description, is a horizon that’s ‘almost unreachable’ for Marta, who is effectively landlocked in the endless construction site that is her new hometown, then Europe as a whole is really and truly unreachable for the other migrants named here, who attempt but fail to cross the sea (Rohrwacher 2012: 6). These people, too, have been abandoned, left to drown then to remain underwater, unburied.

For Rohrwacher, ‘abandonment’ thus emerges as a condition shared by northern workers who are now unemployed, by southern emigrants returning to their families, and by ‘clandestine’ migrants as well. That there are kinds and degrees of abandonment, better and worse ways to be abandoned, is therefore undeniable. This is, again, the upshot of the crucial but critically unremarked conversation about calamari shown early in *Corpo celeste*, which draws attention to the veritable gulf that separates one class of migrants from another: Marta’s family, gathered around the dinner table, are ‘helped and sustained’, in Rohrwacher’s words, in ways that the *clandestini* never will be. (‘Enough sadness’, the man who calls the migrants by that name says, before beginning a toast.) But the fact remains that Rohrwacher gestures towards what these incommensurable realities have in common: the sense of abandonment.

What does it mean to lay stress on such abandonment rather than, say, precarity? What does it mean to suggest, as Rohrwacher does, that ‘the sense of abandonment’ characterizes the present across the North and several Souths, European and non-European? For one thing, this suggestion inflects economic and political conditions theologically. Although ‘precarity’, too – a word derived from the Latin *prex*, meaning ‘prayer to a diety’ (Lewis and Short 1879) – has roots in devotional practice, in contemporary usage the term denotes exploitable vulnerability, economic dependency and, in the more affirmative and activist senses that give rise to the term ‘precariat’, possible social solidarity (During 2015). Abandonment, by contrast – which Rohrwacher is not alone in seeing as emblematic of the present (cf. Berlant 2011: 201; Biehl 2005; Povinelli 2011) – retains associations with Christianity, with the words of Jesus on the cross, that *Corpo celeste* takes pains to underscore.

To see this is also to begin to recognize that there is a Pasolinian ‘force of the Past’ operative in the film, after all. Churches and their worn-out forms, that is, do turn out dialectically to shelter transformative possibilities. But Marta must seek these out, with difficulty, and since we look with her so must we. There is thus an earnestness to the (non-Catholic and avowedly irreligious [Odifreddi 2011: 237]) director’s engagement with religion that a rushed or reflexively secular reading of the film obscures. Consider the late sequence in which a long-awaited crucifix – a *crocefisso figurativo* or figurative crucifix to be brought to Marta’s parish by Don Mario to replace the abstract cross made of neon lights that has adorned the church for years – is no sooner at last on its way than it falls into the sea (Figure 1). Rohrwacher points the camera

2. Bondi reads Rohrwacher’s film as an engagement with the southern question (2012: 77–79).

downwards, directly at the 'celestial, almost unreachable' sea only this once in *Corpo celeste*, and the sea's appearance late in the film is as arresting as it is long-awaited, like the crucifix itself. (Marta has long since asked to go to the beach and been told to wait.) The shot's anomalous vividness – the saturation of the sea's colours in a film full of washed-out interiors and grey exterior expanses (Figure 2) – contrasts with and visually compensates for the loss that it narratively records. At the same time, the camera's distance from the crucifix



Figure 1: *At Sea: The Crocefisso Figurativo*.



Figure 2: *Marta and the Other Cresimandi*.

renders these few, key frames nearly abstract, all but erasing the carefully wrought features of Christ on the cross. Rohrwacher thus registers, though indirectly, the loss that the shot's aesthetic payoff might have seemed to deny. The *crocefisso figurativo* will not arrive at its destination; morale in the shrinking congregation will not be boosted; the church will not be what it was or what its most ardent members hope it might yet become: the 'new, renewed church' that Don Mario calls for.

For her part, Marta will leave her confirmation ceremony – and, we gather, the whole petty world of the church. *Corpo celeste* builds towards this departure, which signals Marta's recognition that, as Rohrwacher writes, quoting Anna Maria Ortese, the beyond or 'overworld is already here' (Rohrwacher 2012: 7; Ortese 1997: 10). The way out of the present impasse is immanent, available and fleshly, not at all 'celestial' in fact – or 'celestial' only if the heavens are brought definitively down to earth. This, according to Rohrwacher, would be the lesson taught by the film: an anticlerical, atheist and no doubt still-necessary lesson in immanence.

Note, however, that it is the very church that Marta leaves behind that provides the film with its vocabulary, even at the moment when this lesson is learnt. Having quit the church in which her confirmation is underway, Marta comes across a boy on the beach who offers to show her 'a miracle'. The miracle turns out to be a cut-off lizard's tail, still squirming – or, as the boy says, 'still alive'. The tail looks like a worm, famously the lowliest of creatures. And this resemblance at first seems simply to underscore the film's secular message. Yet just as the fleshly 'miracle' is still, significantly called a 'miracle', the lizard's tail is arguably more, not less, reminiscent of Christian doctrine for being lowly.

Something similar happens at the level of the image; the church provides *Corpo celeste* with a visual as well as verbal vocabulary. The image of the crucifix afloat, for instance, tightens the connection to the Catholic visual tradition that it might appear meant to sever. Even while the shot commemorates the loss of the crucifix, it attests to the latter's visual if not spiritual power. At the moment when Marta seems about to disregard the lessons taught by her catechism teacher, the shot represents a sort of fulfilment of one of that teacher's first injunctions: 'It's through Him that you must look at the world'. 'The world' here, moreover, no longer refers only to the profilmic world. For the floating crucifix recalls Marta's family's dinner-table conversation about *clandestini*, and in this way – for the viewer, if not for Marta – retroactively aligns Jesus with the drowned migrants referred to but never shown, and these migrants with Jesus. In this way, without, of course, simply endorsing the church's teachings, Rohrwacher gestures towards the ways of looking that it makes available, if only inadvertently. Had the crucifix not fallen, we would not have come to see the sea as a place of abandonment. For the conversation about *clandestini* would not have been called to memory and visually, retroactively re-described. But that it *is* thus re-described means that we are startled out of our dinnertime complacency, if only momentarily, reminded of the difference seeing can make.

All the while, until just before this moment, Marta has been repeating a phrase from catechism class that she does not understand: 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' Viewers readily recognize these as words spoken by Jesus on the cross, according to Matthew: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (27: 46). Already in the Biblical account, these words pose a problem of comprehension. ('Some of them that stood there, when they heard *that*

said, This *man* calleth for Elias' [27: 47; original emphasis].) Marta is therefore likened at once to Jesus and to his listeners: she repeats the Aramaic words of the former, but, like the latter, does not know for whom the words call.

As it happens, these are also words spoken, in a slightly modified translation, by a victim in the libertines' villa during the final moments of Pasolini's *Salò* (1975). But if Pasolini's young, blonde, female victim in some ways resembles Marta, in another sense the cinematic allusion that complicates Rohrwacher's Biblical reference constitutes a misdirection. Or rather, the contrast between the two films proves as instructive as their shared recourse to the phrase from Matthew. While translation into Italian – 'Dio, dio, perchè ci hai abbandonati?' – means that Pasolini's victim is sacralized, rendered Christ-like and in this sense sacrificial, Marta's repetition of the phrase in Aramaic is the sign of her desire to know. For, as Augustine claims and Giorgio Agamben repeats, one 'does not love' the 'syllables' whose meaning one already knows; it is instead the 'dead word' that activates desire (Agamben 1999: 63). It is as if, for Marta, the question of abandonment were not rhetorical, but awaited an answer, not least because it is a question posed in a dead foreign language. Marta's repetition of 'Eli, eli ...' makes it clear that she is not a victim, but first and foremost a seeker, as we have already seen.

Her quest for answers leads to Roghudi – 'the abandoned village', Rohrwacher calls it, echoing Pasolini, though no doubt unwittingly (Rohrwacher 2012: 7; Pasolini 1964: 26). Here Marta enters the empty church, where the figurative crucifix is housed, and she meets a priest whose isolation contrasts with the social climbing – just as his rage contrasts with the resentment – of Don Mario. The exchange that follows marks a turning point in Marta's trajectory:

DON LORENZO: *Eli, eli ...* It's an outcry, it's Jesus screaming, 'my God, why have you abandoned me?'

MARTA: Why does he cry out?

DON LORENZO: Because he's angry. How do you imagine him?

MARTA: Good.

DON LORENZO: Smiling?

MARTA: Yes.

DON LORENZO: With blue eyes, and wanting to embrace you?

MARTA: Yes.

DON LORENZO: On the contrary, he's angry, furious. He's alone. He runs from one place to the other, and everywhere he goes people ask him for cures, for miracles. And he goes, he runs to everyone, with a group of ignorant disciples around him who do not understand anything. They always ask him for explanations, for clarifications. They don't have a bit of imagination. And they're scandalized.

The demand for miracles here figures as a failure of imagination, a symptom of mental incapacity and reliance on cliché. Yet, by prompting her to see otherwise – to see something other than blue eyes and goodness and consolation, to see imaginatively, without denying negativity – Don Lorenzo prepares Marta for the 'miracle' or counter-miracle at the film's end. And that the

church, albeit only at its abandoned margins, still houses the figure who can teach this lesson may itself be a small 'miracle'.

MARTEL'S MEDICINE

Rohrwacher has cited Argentinean director Lucrecia Martel as an influence, and has acknowledged a particular admiration for Martel's first feature, *La ciénaga* ('The swamp') (2001) (Dawson 2012).³ Together with Lisandro Alonso, Adrián Caetano, Albertina Carri and Martín Rejtman, among others, Martel is often associated with the Nuevo Cine Argentino, or New Argentine Cinema, a heterogeneous movement or, more broadly, a generation of film-makers whose works since the early 1990s have shown both remarkable range and an abiding commitment to formal and narrative risk-taking. Martel's films, including *La ciénaga*, exemplify this commitment, and they undoubtedly participate in the novel national tendency that is the New Argentine Cinema, even while they benefit from the support of European co-producers and enjoy exceptional success in the world of international art film.⁴

Rohrwacher's praise of Martel speaks to this success, to the international standing of films like *La ciénaga*. At the same time, however, the Italian director's comment indicates a receptivity to influences from outside the Euro-US that is noteworthy if not at all unique in contemporary Italian cinema. The comparative reading of *Corpo celeste* and *La ciénaga* that I undertake here is thus also meant to serve as a study of relations between Italian and Latin American film cultures. The case of Rohrwacher and Martel shows that these relations extend beyond neo-realism's celebrated global reach, and that they travel from south to north as well as from north to south. It is as if her exploration of Italy's south led Rohrwacher to other, more peripheral peripheries.

'More peripheral', that is, both because of Argentina's greater distance from the centres of Euro-US film production, distribution and critical consecration, and because Martel's films are set and shot in provincial locations far from the often-self-styled 'European' capital that is Buenos Aires. From within the already peripheral nation – peripheral, that is, but relatively prosperous before the economic depression that led to its 2001 default, a depression already underway when Martel made *La ciénaga* – Martel focuses on especially peripheral spaces in Salta, a province in the north-west of Argentina still sometimes labelled 'feudal'. Indeed, *La ciénaga* takes place mainly in and around the pseudo-feudal space of an estate. Here the film's main characters, two families and their servants, spend – or perhaps waste – a summer. And if Martel's bourgeois characters are much wealthier than Rohrwacher's struggling parishioners, they sense their painful distance from the world where things happen – where goals are met and futures planned for – all the same.

'Al final todo funciona igual', Tali (Mercedes Morán) notes, after she breaks a lock on a chain-link fence with a rock that's nearby: 'In the end, everything works the same'. To which we might add: or doesn't work, for in fact, in *La ciénaga*, Martel's camera watches as malfunction spreads. Tali's cousin Mecha (Graciela Borges) will later lament at the dinner table, concluding a list of broken items around the house: 'No funciona nada', 'Nothing works' (original emphasis). This conclusion confirms, even while it seems to counter, Tali's earlier assertion. Whereas the claim that all things function interchangeably bespeaks a willingness to improvise, to make do with what's ready to hand, Mecha's more pessimistic summing-up points to the futility of all such efforts at improvisation. These all end, Mecha suggests, in the same state of breakdown or disrepair.

3. Rohrwacher's singling out of *La ciénaga* for praise is striking, given that, as her interviewer suggests, *Corpo celeste* might seem to share more with Martel's second feature-length film, *La niña santa* (*The Holy Girl*) (2004). The latter film is less diffuse and disjointed, as well as less collective in its narrative construction, than *La ciénaga*. Like *Corpo celeste*, moreover, *La niña santa* centres on a young female protagonist and her relationship to Catholicism. I focus on *La ciénaga*, however, not only because I take my cue from Rohrwacher's reference, but also because of *La ciénaga*'s preoccupation with the miraculous.
4. On the implications of Martel's films' status as European co-productions, see Shaw (2013).

5. In an interview with Demetrios Matheou, Martel quotes a 'phrase by Ovid: *Gutta cavat lapidem, non vi, sed saepe cadendo*. "A drop hollows out a stone not by force, but with frequent falling" (2010). Sophia Mayer takes this phrase to emblemize the 'politics of change' in Martel's cinema, a politics that depends, she argues, not on the fully ideologically saturated, 'opaque' 'visual field' but on the senses of sound and touch, or on what Martel elusively names the 'knock-knock' that film can produce (2014: 200). For my part, I would note that the frequent falls in *La ciénaga*, from the poolside fall that inaugurates the film to the devastating death of Luchi (Sebastián Montagna), who falls from a ladder during the film's penultimate scene, all invite us see the logic of the Ovidian line at work in the film's diegesis even as we hear it, as Mayer urges us to, in the film's soundscape. It's as if *La ciénaga's* falling bodies were, like falling water in Ovid, the slow-moving mechanisms of change.
6. As in Shakespeare's *Othello*: 'Not poppy nor mandragora / Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world, / Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep / Which thou owedst yesterday' (III.3.340–43).
7. See, for instance, Oubiña (2007: 12). The influence of Antonioni is arguably strongest in Martel's third feature, *La mujer sin cabeza* (*The Headless Woman*, 2008), as reviews attest, and as Deborah Martin, for instance, has noted (2013: 153).

La ciénaga attests repeatedly to this stasis and stuckness, as Martel positions the camera close to scenes of stalled action and thwarted mobility – often uncomfortably close, making abandonment paradoxically coincide with over-proximity. Even the sequences that do centre on bodily movement – a fight in a crowded bar, where people dance, or a chase followed by wrestling between the creepily intimate siblings José (Juan Cruz Bordeu) and Verónica (Leonora Balcarce) – seem meant to draw attention to the prevalence of their opposites. These are, in other words, exceptions that prove the rule of impeded movement, or indeed of 'detention' and 'paralysis', that governs *La ciénaga* (Dillon 2014: 54). With a hand-held camera that redoubles the movement of bodies and contrasts markedly with Martel's quieter and more observant approach overall in the film, these sequences both account for and underscore the periods of bed-rest that follow, as injuries proliferate, illustrating what Martel means when she compares her filmmaking to 'playing doctor' (Matheou 2010).

Mecha's drunken poolside fall causes the first of these injuries, but others abound,⁵ and even the uninjured must recover from the fatigue caused by heat and humidity. A cow caught in the swamp that gives the film its title is put out of its misery, but misery persists for Salta's human inhabitants, who languish in lounge chairs and beds throughout the film – so much so that David Oubiña has noted aptly that *La ciénaga* could be called 'a film about beds' (2007: 45). Mecha's mother, Tali says, telling a family story to which the teenage Momi (Sofía Bertolotto) will later again refer, took to bed one day and stayed there until she died, 'fifteen years, twenty years, I don't know how many years later'. Here, then, on and around the estate Mandrágora (whose evocative name suggests lasting drowsiness rather than satisfying rest or 'sweet sleep'),⁶ time passes punitively, but without being measured: years blur together, becoming uncountable.

The TV news cycle mirrors and exacerbates this sense of endlessness. Televisions are on nearly all the time, and they always seem to be reporting on the same story: the story of a 'miracle'. A local woman claims to have seen the Virgin floating near a rooftop water tank. Others attest that they've seen the Virgin, too, and crowds gather at the scene, eager to bear witness to this sudden transfiguration of the commonplace. Even a Jewish woman, Tali reports, confirms that the Virgin is visible. TV news, seeping into family conversation, thus remains 'on' even when it's not strictly on. A 'miracle' or its aftermath hovers intermittently at the edges of our perception. But nothing ever comes of this miracle narratively.

If there was a subtle or buried reference to Pasolini in Rohrwacher's film, then Martel here pays indirect homage to Federico Fellini – surprisingly, perhaps, given that Michelangelo Antonioni is the Italian director more often adduced to describe her sensibility.⁷ The talked-about, televised 'miracle' in *La ciénaga* recalls the 'fake miracle' shown early in *La dolce vita* (Fellini, 1960). This association is strengthened in *La ciénaga's* last scene. We are poolside again, having come full circle, except now it is the young, not the old, who languish on lounge chairs. The sound of these chairs being dragged to their places across the pavement reminds us of the film's very first moments, and suggests a depressing, even deadening, form of intergenerationality. It's as if the teenagers who come to occupy the places of their parents really did not differ from them at all, as if the latter's torpor had been transmitted (just as Mecha's mother's invalidism threatened to be transmitted to her). Up until this point, the young Momi (Marta's counterpart, if *La ciénaga* has one) has been singularly curious and outspoken; unlike the adults who surround her, she has,



Figure 3: *Isabel and Momi in Bed, Illuminated.*

for instance, treated the family's servants like human beings. This makes it that much more striking when she reports, in the film's final words, 'I went to the place where the Virgin appeared. I didn't see anything [*No vi nada*]'.

Yet a pair of preceding sequences gives the lie to this disappointed and disappointing announcement. Momi may not have seen anything near the water tanks, but that she has seen – that, as Deleuze would say, 'She has learned to see' (1997b: 2) – these two earlier sequences confirm. In the first of these, Momi lies in bed with the servant Isabel, with whom she is smitten, not to say obsessed. The two exchange no words, but Momi swings a door back and forth with her foot. The sun's reflection off the door illuminates the two figures' faces and bodies, flickeringly (Figure 3). For a moment, someone's perception in *Mandrágora* – and our perception of the place – is quickened, sensitized, rather than made drowsy. This heightening of sensibilities then carries over into the next scene, although Momi is no longer on-screen. Instead, we see Tali's legs, distorted beautifully in what's retroactively shown to be a subjective shot of her son looking through a plastic school ruler (Figures 4 and 5). The ruler used to alter rather than regulate



Figure 4: *Tali's Legs.*

8. These attempts can be seen as instances of what Rei Terada (2009) calls 'phenomenophilia', in that they are deviant and fleeting perceptions cultivated in response to a sense – if only an inchoate, childish sense – of dissatisfaction with the given world.
9. For an analysis of this ambiguity in *Cinema 2*, see Rancière (2016) and Bewes (2015).
10. For a recent and trenchant critique of this key strand in Deleuze's argument, see Fabbri (2015).



Figure 5: *Seeing Otherwise*.

perception proves that there are other ways of seeing the given world. There may be nothing redemptive about these childish attempts to see otherwise, which Martel suggests may be the closest things there are to 'miracles'.⁸ But seeing otherwise and seeing nothing are not for all that the same.

LEARNING TO SEE

In different ways, Rohrwacher's film and Martel's prompt us to revisit Gilles Deleuze's account of 'the time-image' in *Cinema 2* (1997b). Readers may recall that this well-rehearsed account centres on what Deleuze calls a 'sensory-motor break' that renders inoperative the more narrative 'movement-image' privileged in classical cinema (1997b: 40). Here is one of Deleuze's many definitions of the 'sensory-motor break', an interruption or suspension that results in both a blockage of action and a privileging of the on-screen figures Deleuze calls 'pure seers':

perceptions and actions ceased to be linked together, and spaces are now neither coordinated nor filled. Some characters, caught in certain pure optical and sound situations, find themselves condemned to wander about or go off on a trip. These are pure seers, who no longer exist except in the interval of movement, and do not even have the consolation of the sublime ... They are rather given over to something intolerable which is simply their everydayness itself.

(1997b: 40–41)

The tense shift in Deleuze's first sentence above indexes an ambiguity in *Cinema 2* that commentators have noted: a hesitation or slippage between historical and formal or 'medium-specific' understandings of the time-image.⁹ That is, Deleuze suggests at times, controversially, that the sensory-motor break takes place in, and therefore comes to mark, historically delimited places and times – paradigmatically, post-war Italy.¹⁰ But *Cinema 2* elsewhere gives readers to understand that the break that separates perception and action is effected not 'out there', in the historical or profilmic world, but rather in and through the cinematic medium itself.

In any case, for Deleuze, 'Pure optical and sound situations' are moments of suspended narrative energies and 'faltering' motor abilities: 'the character has become a kind of viewer', or rather a perceiver of both sights and sounds, precisely because other, more active options have been foreclosed: 'He shifts, runs, and becomes animated in vain, the situation he is in outstrips his capacities on all sides, and makes him see and hear what is no longer subject to the rules of a response or an action' (Deleuze 1997b: 3). Seeing more than they can respond to, such characters are like us, given that, as Deleuze had already written in *Cinema 1*, 'We hardly believe any longer that a global situation can give rise to an action which is capable of modifying it' (1997a: 206). And in this sense, we are to the 'global situation' what children are to adults, as Deleuze writes arrestingly, in order to account for the centrality of children in neo-realist film: 'in the adult world, the child is affected by a certain motor helplessness, but one which makes him all the more capable of seeing and hearing' (1997b: 3). A situation of enforced incapacity, then, makes one 'all the more capable', only differently.

This logic clearly sheds light on both *La ciénaga* and *Corpo celeste*. So, too, does Deleuze's equation of the intolerable with the everyday anticipate the 'global situations' rendered by both later filmmakers. These are situations, like those Deleuze describes, that call into question the very possibility of bringing about a change in the world through action. Both Rohrwacher and Martel gesture instead towards perceptual changes, sensory rather than motor shifts, that remain available to characters and spectators otherwise 'caught' in swamps or immense urban peripheries.

Note, though, that the characters whom Deleuze identifies as 'pure seers', above, are at once 'caught' and wandering. Presumably, this is because their travels lead to looking rather than to the kind of efficacious, results-yielding action and reaction that impelled classical cinema's narratives. Still, read together, Rohrwacher's film and Martel's point up the meaningful difference between still and moving states, between 'caught' and less 'caught' responses to sensory-motor breaks. In this sense, the contrast between the two filmmakers' visions is marked: in *La ciénaga* the *escapadita*, the quick getaway to Bolivia for back-to-school shopping that Mecha proposes and that Tali longs for, is left unrealized. For the two families at the centre of *La ciénaga*, there is thus no going 'off on a trip' (Deleuze 1997b: 41). By contrast, that Marta is on the move is apparent from the first; we hardly need the verbal confirmation that, as she tells Don Mario, she has been out for a *passeggiata*, a walk. This makes her that much more of a seer in Deleuze's sense. Indeed, we see what she sees, whether looking over her shoulder (frequently throughout the film, we see the back of Marta's head), or in the subjective shots that recur as she surveys the rooftops of Reggio Calabria.

Yet this opposition between the stasis of *La ciénaga* and Marta's meandering in *Corpo celeste* should not be seen as definitive. For as we have already observed, Momi, delivering *La ciénaga's* last words, notes that she has been to see – or to attempt to see, then *not* to see – the apparition that we have long since heard about. A trip – a quest or pilgrimage, even – thus has taken place in Martel's film, after all; it is just that we have not been present to witness it. This withholding typifies the Argentinean director's oblique and challenging approach. For her part, Rohrwacher relies far less on ellipsis; her films seem meant more straightforwardly to aid impoverished or imperilled imaginations – to assist viewers in danger of becoming like Christ's disciples, in Don Lorenzo's description – by following young protagonists as they

11. This is true of Rohrwacher's *Le meraviglie* (*The Wonders*) (2014) as well as *Corpo celeste*.
12. In 'Looking at the Stars Forever', Terada at once leans on *Cinema 2* and takes distance from Deleuze's call for renewed 'belief in the world', concluding that with this call – an acceptance, Terada writes, of the 'blackmail' of 'an unquestionable "life"' – 'Deleuze shies away from the brutality of the historical condition that he proposes' (2011: 293–94). Whereas *Cinema 2* thus comes to lack the courage of its convictions, a figure like Keats is, in Terada's view, better able to face historical brutality. This is because the poet *stays with* this brutality without falling back on a belief in belief itself, without insisting that a 'subtle way out' remains available, as Deleuze, quoting Artaud, claims (1997b: 170). For Terada, this claim signals a double relapse: a return both to *Cinema 1*'s 'movement-image' (since action, motor response, is still implicitly possible, after all [Terada 2011: 293]) and to the 'path' that Deleuze had earlier managed to avoid: 'the modernist path in which some heightened awareness leads to a crack in the wall, if only temporarily and in thought' (Terada 2011: 291). This argument convincingly uncovers contradictions in *Cinema 2*. At the same time, though, 'Looking at the Stars Forever' indicates the value that Deleuze's analysis of the time-image still retains as an account of the post-war global situation that renders, even if it ultimately 'shies away from', an intolerable reality.

engage with images.¹¹ Thus *Corpo celeste* ends by showing a small 'miracle', one that elicits Marta's delighted laughter, whereas *La ciénaga* leaves viewers wondering, with Momi, whether miracles are ever really given to be seen. Granting Marta a final, minimal vision, Rohrwacher works openly to restore viewers' 'belief in the world' – and, even, in Deleuzian fashion, in life (for the film's last words are, 'it's still alive').¹² Martel, for her part, leaves this work of restoration pointedly undone, or suggests that under conditions of impasse the project of restoring 'belief in the world' can only be abortive, at best an aspiration.

In this way, Martel invites us to amend the Deleuzian account of the time-image, and we can begin to do so with the help of other theorists. Indeed, if Rohrwacher's film is more in keeping with this account (without, of course, being simply illustrative of it), both her approach to 'miracles' and Martel's find analogue in more recent critical theory. Joan Copjec, for instance, contrasts what she calls 'the state's retreat' with the withdrawal of the divine, a withdrawal that, following Islamic philosophies, she sees as enabling rather than strictly privative. For Copjec, this withdrawal, in fact, *produces* the potentiality and the relation that the 'State-in-retreat' effectively rules out. (Compare the fall of the figurative crucifix in *Corpo celeste*: this moment, too, marks the divine's enabling withdrawal.) What results from the state's retreat is therefore a deadening stasis, an '*absence of suspension*' that impedes imagination and all but prevents the realization of possibilities (Copjec 2012, original emphasis). Copjec's thesis is counter-intuitive: far from releasing us, the state's retreat – which is also neo-liberal capitalism's advance – weighs us down, enchains us to ourselves, enforces the self-sameness that suspension interrupts.¹³ Suspension, for Copjec, thus names a precondition for the transformation of both self and world, whereas the '*absence of suspension*' that follows from the state's retreat allows only for more of the same.¹⁴ Long gone, then, is the Deleuzian 'global situation' that took suspension as given (e.g. 1997b: 201). Hence the heaviness of *La ciénaga*, a film that treats suspension as scarce, not abundant (*pace* Oubiña 2007: 23).

Such a theory has the advantage of at once constituting a praise of potentiality and registering the devastating consequences of contemporary capitalism. In this way, even while she risks eliding a long history of state collusion with capital, Copjec avoids another risk: the romanticizing or redemptive risk run by theories that locate potentiality – that is, both seeing and *being* otherwise – squarely in spaces of deprivation and abandonment. As Alessia Riccardi notes, these often draw inspiration from Deleuze. In fact, Riccardi reminds us that Deleuze directly informs the still-influential philosophy of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Weighing Hardt and Negri's debts to Vittorio De Sica's *Miracolo a Milano* (1951), Riccardi (2007) powerfully defends the post-workerist account of 'immanent miracles' against the charge of wishful thinking.¹⁵

Levelling this charge precisely, David Graeber laments in a critique of post-workerist theories, including Negri's, that the future is now paradoxically figured as a past 'at once ir retrievable [and] always somehow there', or rather 'already here', already available, that is, if only fleetingly, in the present:

The revolutionary Future appears increasingly implausible to most of us, but neither can we simply get rid of it. As a result, it begins to collapse into the present. Hence, for instance, the insistence [on the part of theorists] that communism is already here, if only we knew how to see it. The

Future has become a kind of hidden dimension of reality, an immanent presence lying behind the mundane surface of the world, with a constant potential to break out but only in tiny, imperfect flashes.

(Graeber 2011: 103)

Siamo quel sovramondo, then: we are that overworld, even if we may only recognize this fact intermittently, imperfectly. This would be one way to translate Graeber's paraphrase of the post-workerists, by transposing the lapidary sentence that Rohrwacher takes from Ortese into the present tense (Rohrwacher 2012: 5; Ortese 1997: 10). For the present tense is indeed what is at issue according to Graeber, who claims that the 'revolutionary Future' becomes a small miracle immanent in the present only when other, more secular and sweeping Marxist visions of the future 'collapse'. Recall Deleuze's diagnosis: 'We hardly believe any longer that a global situation can give rise to an action which is capable of modifying it' (1997a: 206). Recall, too, the (miracle) cure that *Cinema 2* will prescribe: 'belief in the world' – for, Deleuze writes, 'the reaction of which man has been dispossessed can be replaced only by belief' (1997b: 172).

In Graeber's account, theology – or what Ricciardi calls faith and Deleuze belief – is revolutionary theory's last recourse.¹⁶ Desperate times call for it, but Graeber argues that the resulting 'prophesies' risk mystifying current, desperate conditions. Graeber invites us to consider the political limitations of the minor miracles that both Rohrwacher and (less so) Martel stage: 'tiny, imperfect flashes' that recast as immanently, if fleetingly, available a different future that is, in fact, 'implausible' because foreclosed. Like the wishfully thinking post-workerist theorists in Graeber's account, both filmmakers, but especially Rohrwacher, would thus seek out miraculous alternatives to the present, and they would locate these alternatives not beyond the temporal horizon but precisely *in* the mundane present that seems to have ruled them out. Insisting that another world is not only possible but 'already here, if only we knew how to see it', Rohrwacher and (less so) Martel would train us 'how to see' at the risk of encouraging us *not* to see the 'miserable realities' that they effectively, if only fleetingly, conjure away (Graeber 2011: 84).

Yet Graeber also concedes by way of conclusion: 'Perhaps communism has always been with us. We are just trained not to see it' (2011: 104).¹⁷ This assessment of our current training invites us to imagine other ways in which we might be trained, and is therefore also implicitly a call for learning to see that returns us to the Deleuze of *Cinema 2* (1997b). For Deleuze, the suspension of action caused by the 'sensory-motor break' in the post-war context allowed for a renewal of perception, a process of both diegetic and historical, both individual and collective 'learning to see' led by the time-image. To be sure, such an image, or what is left of it today, no longer promises the possibility of broad regeneration that Deleuze identified in an earlier Italian and international cinema. Still, *Corpo celeste* and *La ciénaga* alike point to the possibilities that remain latent in looking, though perhaps only during brief moments of reprieve. At these times, both films suggest, 'tiny, imperfect flashes' can become instances of what Mary Walling Blackburn and A. B. Huber (2011) call 'the flash made flesh': charged, even incandescent images with the potential to open 'a passage into politics'. Such a passage is, importantly, not yet itself a politics. But Rohrwacher and Martel can begin to train us, if not to traverse it, then to see where it might be.

Whether Rohrwacher and Martel are more like Deleuze or like Terada's Keats, who registers the intolerable as such, remains an open question for me; here I provisionally align Rohrwacher with the former, and Martel with the latter.

13. On neo-liberal subjectivity, see Feher (2009). And on the difficulty, as well as the necessity, of both cinematic and social efforts to interrupt the "overextended, repetitive, and fixed dimensions of crisis and endurance" under neo-liberal conditions, see Garcia (2017: 118).
14. For other, influential accounts of the capitalist present and the threat of an absence of suspension, see François (2003) and Kaufman (2002). On the related, increasing "incapacitation of daydream or of any mode of absent-minded introspection that would otherwise occur in intervals of slow and vacant time", see Crary (2014).
15. A critical belief in miracles may seem to be a contradiction in terms, given criticism's abiding association with secular disenchantment. Yet, in addition to Hardt, Negri and Ricciardi, recent theorists from Eric Santner to Kaja Silverman have insisted that 'miracles happen' (Santner 2005; see also Silverman 2015). I note, moreover, that Hannah Arendt already wrote in her 1958 *The Human Condition* that 'the new ... always appears in the guise of a miracle' (1998: 178). Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig, among others, Santner defends 'postsecular thinking' and notes

that this need not be equated with 'religious thinking' (2005: 133, original emphasis). The critique of secularism is by now extensive; not all versions of it engage with, let alone affirm belief in, miracles. For a volume that introduces readers to other strands in the critique of secularism, see Asad et al. (2009).

16. Ricciardi distinguishes between one form of faith that is 'theological' and another that is instead 'immanent and ontological', and she associates the latter, not the former, with the work of Hardt and Negri (2007: 1158–59). Graeber, for his part, implicitly refuses this distinction.
17. Martel notes, comparably, recasting her films as (Deleuzian-sounding) inducements to feeling: 'We should not accept ... inequality. We have to do something about it. The problem is that we are educated not to have emotions on the subject. We are educated to recognize, but not feel'. And Martel adds, in response to the interviewer's next question: 'to accept that the world is like this, reality is like this, it's impossible to change – this is hell for me' (Matheou 2010). On feeling as opposed to representation (related, I think, to what Martel calls recognition) in cinema and in *Cinema 2*, see Ffrench (2008).

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