

# Bones and Stardust: How *Nostalgia for the Light* Visually and Sensorially Connects the Sky with the Ground

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In its ontological sense, film could be described as an audio-visual expression of the human mind and its perceptual experience of the world. This philosophical dimension of cinema raises questions about representation and reception and can be approached from many different angles since there are infinite ways of seeing. The study of romantic film philosophy and phenomenology analyses how cinematic representations of the world trigger our senses and connect to our individual existential experiences. Some films also illustrate and amplify this through their form and content. Patricio Guzmán's 2010 documentary film *Nostalgia de la Luz* (Nostalgia for the Light) investigates the intangible experience of being and time by positioning astronomy and archaeology side by side. After briefly outlining *Nostalgia*'s political context, this paper describes how documentary film coincides with phenomenological methodology and then focuses on a close analysis of one visual pattern in *Nostalgia* that juxtaposes images of human bones and body parts with images of the moon and galaxy; specifically observing how this contrast reveals similarity. Instead of aiming to draw a fixed conclusion, the goal of this analysis is to openly investigate how the visual techniques communicate with the viewer.

*Nostalgia for the Light* (2010) literally digs into a painful political Chilean history while looking up at the universe's intangible experience of being and time, a contrast that is amplified through scientific versus nostalgic points of (inter)view. Director Patricio Guzmán was born and raised in Chile but moved to Europe after being imprisoned during the coup d'état in September 1973 ('Filmmaker Bio' 2012, par. 1-2). This reflects in his voiceover narration and the way he looks through the camera lens, feeling closely connected to the land but taking an outsider's point of view. The documentary explores the Atacama Desert in northern Chile where they have built huge telescopes because of the high altitude and perfect dry weather conditions. Resulting in a significant "new observatory in 1977 [which] promised to open up the country as a scientific

Mecca” (Bradshaw 2012, par. 1). Instead, Chile became a closed society under Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship. Dozens of people were executed after disappearing in October 1973. Wives and sisters continued searching for remains around the mass grave that was later found in the desert (Hardzinski 2014, par. 4). The documentary captures both the astronomy and archaeology perspective, sharing scientific insights as well as personal stories of Chilean citizens. This non-linear narrative structure intertwines the sky with the ground, two sides of the unknown, “piecing together the history of the Universe from the ancient light of distant stars, [...] largely unaware of the women below on the desert floor” (Abbott 2011, 1). Guzmán never explicitly voices or fixates an opinion, “the director interprets reality in a way that his materials and subjects in the movie offer us not only metaphorical but also literal meanings. And we are free in our interpretation” (Durak-Akser 2013, 132). Precisely this element of interpretation is key in the philosophical analysis of film.

The non-fictional nature of documentary allows for a more entangled relation with the viewer and his or her experience of the world, as it is “a creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson 1926, as cited in Utterback 1977, 31). Hence, documentary is a method of filmmaking that naturally invites a phenomenological approach; the philosophical study of feeling and experience of self. “A living dialogue between the body subject and its existential environment”, to Borrow Monika Langer’s phrasing of sensation (1989, 73). A key element when it comes to phenomenological methodology that “insists on an embodied as well as reflective engagement with the cinema” (Sobchack 2011, 192). This method is connected to romantic film philosophy as described by Robert Sinnerbrink. He invites film to be “philosophically self-reflexive” and in doing so, it also opens up “the possibility that philosophy might be transformed through its encounter with film” (Sinnerbrink 2011, 26). Documentary always presents a dialogue between the filmmaker, the content/subjects and the audience, so the element of reflection is one that occurs organically. In this written form, the line of reflection should continue as well, reflecting on the reflection.

In the example of Guzmán’s *Nostalgia*, astronomer Gaspar Galaz, at one point addresses the camera directly. He positions the audience in a reflective space that does not exist in the temporality of the film but inside the direct experience of the viewer. This lays bare the exact paradox of time that Galaz describes: “All of our life experiences happened in the past” (17:25 min). It might be milliseconds, but the light reflected in your retina or the camera’s iris takes a moment to arrive, so you do not actually see things the very instant you look at them. “The only present that might exist is the present in our minds” (18:30 min). One of the main thinkers in the field of phenomenology is Martin Heidegger. In his magnum opus *Being and Time*, he writes: “The nature of the ‘connection

of life' between birth and death [...] consists of a succession of experiences in time", and these so-called 'experiences' are perceived in *dasein*; our existence in the world, but "only the experience that is present in the actual now is really real" (Heidegger et al. 2010, 356). Still, we humans are inherently intrigued by our past and our origins.

Documentary film offers an interesting temporal window by allowing the viewer to perceive a part of the past in his or her present timeframe. Exactly this inspired Loht Shawn to explore how Heidegger's thought "could contribute to the philosophy of film" (2017, 2). He argues: "We can characterise film-viewing as an instance of being-in-the-world [...] of *dasein*'s essential projection beyond itself" (Loht 2017, 6). We will draw on this argument for a close analysis of *Nostalgia for the Light*, applying the "methodological meaning of phenomenological description" which Heidegger distinguishes as interpretation. Hence, we will employ Don Ihde's five hermeneutic rules as described and filmically applied by Vivian Sobchack (2011): Observing the embodied experience, describing all senses, keeping all phenomena on an equal plane, determining structures/patterns and reflecting on my personal experience as a viewer.

The embodied experience is mainly invited through *Nostalgia's* mise-en-scene and cinematography. The images of human body parts and bones viscerally stimulate physical aching as well as the emotion of disbelief. When we see shots of a human finger surfacing through the sand, it feels as if it belongs in a fiction film (fig. 1). The familiar sensation of pressing your fingers in warm sand becomes foreign when the lifeless hand and its movement seem to have frozen in time (fig. 2). Hands are a reoccurring element throughout the film. Halfway, we are introduced to the women who skim the desert floor in search of remains (fig. 3). We see a shot of a hand with several small pieces of bone (fig. 4). The process of pulverisation will make the pieces of bone smaller and



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

smaller over time, like the grains of sand. Here we find another visual pattern; that of particles. It is introduced early on in film as a stardust overlay effect (fig. 5). Towards the end of the film, it is directly referenced by a scientist who explains how the calcium in our bones connects to the story of the beginning of us. “Both were made shortly after the big bang” (1:05:15 min). In other words, we are made out of stardust (fig. 6). When a spirit disincarnates, we say; *ashes to ashes and dust to dust* during the burial, meaning that our bodies return to dust. This notion is further amplified in a montage with telescopic images of the moon (fig. 7/8), juxtaposed with closeup images of bones (fig. 9/10). Contrasting the most tangible and tenacious part of the human with the most intangible space of the universe. The contrast reveals their similarity. This is where astronomy and archeology congregate in their wish to uncover our origins. The more you zoom in on something, the grainier the image, but the same happens when you zoom out and galaxies turn into particles. This continuous experience of zooming in and zooming out is largely established without the actual use of the camera’s zoom technique but the accompanying soundscape guides our free association. We hear ambient of howling wind, the gentle tunes of a piano and the deep nostalgic echoing of a

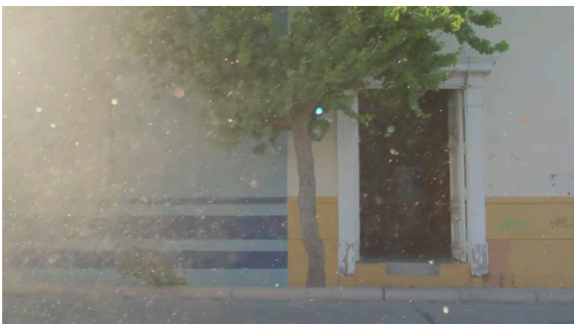


Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

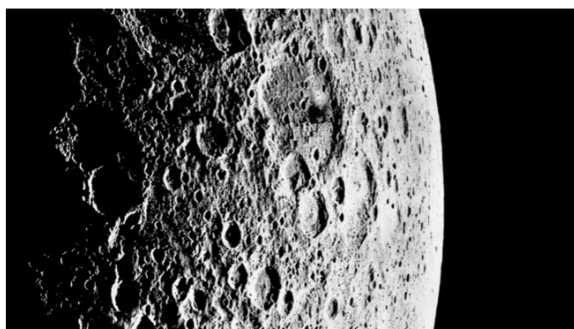


Fig.8

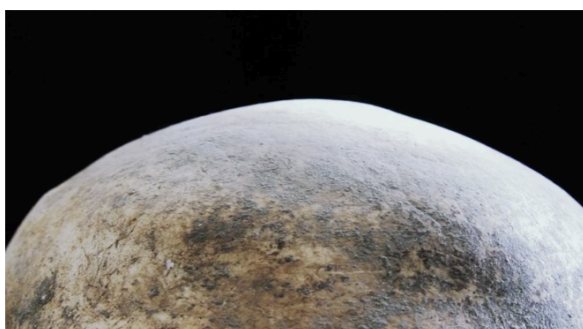


Fig. 9

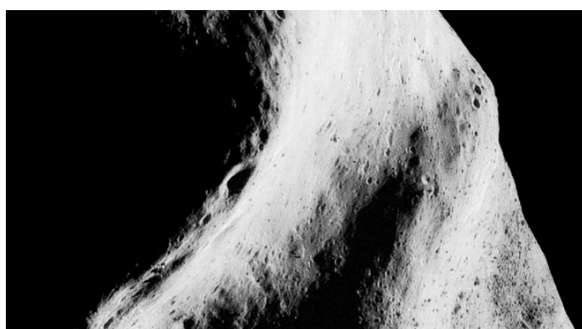


Fig. 10

double bass. As a viewer, this sequence hit me with a feeling of nostalgia for the light, realising that my place of belonging lies in the light of the stars, as is reflected in my bones and referenced by the title of the film. Overall, the montage evokes a feeling that I would describe as sand slipping through my fingers. “The existential and ontological constitution of the totality of dasein is grounded in temporality” (Heidegger et al. 2010, 415). We want to dig in the past to find answers about being in the now, but as soon as we describe it, the now is gone.

In conclusion, documentary film coincides perfectly with phenomenological analysis as it allows the viewer to experience a non-fictional part of the past in the present. *Nostalgia for the Light* further engages this by posing existential questions through the visceral visual matter of our bones and the spiritual unknown space of the universe. Placing astronomy and archaeology side by side in a montage with contrasting images ends up connoting their similarity. The sensorial reception of *Nostalgia's* aesthetic techniques and visual patterns evokes the feeling of heaviness and captivity in the buried bodies and their remains but simultaneously manages to convey immense vastness, looking up into an unknown universe. Connecting the past and the present in the sky and the ground implicitly explains how our wish to uncover our origins is shared by scientists as well as non-scientists. Above all, the film reaches beyond our intellect, engaging all our senses, to make us feel how intangible the human experience of being and time actually is.

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