

Weaponized ecologies: how cinema addresses nature's complicity in enforced disappearances

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Abstract. Enforced disappearance is a global problem, which has devastated communities on every continent of the world. Sometimes resolved by the eventual discovery and excavation of clandestine graves, more often the meticulous searching for the abducted and denied offers no lasting resolution as the body is never recovered. Due to the global nature of the problem, it has also taken place in every known environmental setting, from familiar places of human habitation to those defined by ecological hostility and impenetrable environmental conditions. This article looks at how cinematic works (including *Nostalgia for the Light*, *The Dupes* and *El Mar, La Mar*) deal with the weaponization of various ecologies in the context of enforced disappearances and how this particular aesthetic register offers insights on material witnessing in the context of mass atrocities.

Keywords. cinema • disappearance • documentary film • ecology • material witnessing • political violence

Encountering disappearance

Enforced disappearance is a global problem, which has devastated communities on every continent of the world. Sometimes resolved by the eventual discovery and excavation of clandestine graves, more often the meticulous searching for the abducted offers no lasting resolution as the body is never recovered. Disappearance thus becomes a permanent state. Such a condition has raised a number of distinct problems, which have included the challenge of bringing about any kind of justice in the absence of a body that is still assumed to be the surest way of evidencing the crime. It also raises the equally vexed question of memorialization, which is underwritten by the ambition to ensure the disappeared do not endure another kind of disappearance through the violence of forgetting. Given these demands, as we see it, cinema is integral to what we might call the memory-making

processes for the disappeared, which are inseparable from a remembering of a person's rightful claim to inhabit the world. We might even say that it is precisely in response to disappearance where art finds its most portent expressions, for as Jacques Rancière (2014) insisted, the purpose of art is precisely to make visible that which is invisible, including in terms of that which has been taken. Faced with atrocity, art as such gives rise to what Michael Shapiro (2015) has labelled 'literary justice', which we could extend to being a more encompassing 'poetic justice'. This is less about juridical outcomes, but instead foregrounds and expresses the life of the victims beyond legalistic paradigms. Thus conceived, poetic justice attends to what Gilles Deleuze (1989) labelled as being the 'people who are missing', so that a more affirmative conception of justice can be imagined. Or as Bruno Tackels (2000: 303) writes, whilst art is normally thought of as a device that retains and records appearances, one can further complicate this picture by asking how the arts 'keep track of practices of disappearance'. Hence, in the very process of revealing how society refuses to surrender to oblivion, art's focus shifts away from the demand to represent the unrepresentable towards a form of transgressive witnessing to those forces that seek to annihilate a life (Evans, 2021).

Enforced disappearance is not simply a modality of terror, but the most extreme form of violence, which both tries to deny the possibility of witnessing and in that very act makes of witnessing a political and cultural imperative that cannot be ignored. Mindful of this, the purpose of this article is to offer an original reading of cinematic responses to disappearance so that the politics of the artform can be more visibly claimed. In particular, this article considers an undertheorized terrain by looking at nature's complicity in disappearance through the conscious weaponization of ecologies and how cinema has been instructive in critically rethinking this nexus. Indeed, it is by dealing with the weaponization of ecologies that we learn how cinema provides a crucial role in the memory-making processes for the disappeared. Not only does cinema bear witness to conditions that only those who endure the suffering could possibly testify as empirically true but, through cinema, the violence of the material world can be more critically explained and the intolerability of the suffering at both the hands of perpetrators and the mouth of nature made visible. In this way, what is removed from sight can be reimagined and resisted anew.

Filming disappearance

Mirroring the crisis in post-war European thought, notably as a result of the Holocaust, the arts in general and cinema in particular have sought to do justice to the annihilation of the human subject and the horror of its vanishment. Notable here would be Alain Resnais' *Nuit et Brouillard* (Night

and Fog) (1956), Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* (1964), Alan J Pakula's *Sophie's Choice* (1982), along with Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), all of which try to do justice to an event that was recognized by some to be the first systematic attempt to consciously annihilate an entire people. However, instead of ending the practice, in the decades that followed, the practice of disappearance proliferated, with its centre of gravity following many fleeing Nazis down into the Southern Cone of the Americas. A key state here would be Argentina, which from the 1970s onwards became synonymous with the practice. This would soon be extended throughout the Americas, notably led by the influence and military training of the US, through which the practice of enforced disappearances became normalized. The arts would duly respond. If a feature of early Holocaust movies was to take seriously the witness imperative and the importance of testimony as noted by survivors such as Primo Levi (1989), the cinematic focus in Latin America sought to highlight the systematic nature of the terror, along with the courage of individuals who were tasked with both searching for the missing and also justice. Notable in this regard have been Costa-Gravas's *Missing* (1982), Linda Yellen's *Jacobo Timerman* (1983), Luis Puenzo's *La Historia Oficial* (The Official Story) (1985), Susana Blaustein Munoz and Lourdes Portillo's *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo) (1985), Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1986), Hector Olivera's *La Noche de los Lápices* (Night of the Pencils) (1986), Jeanine Meerapfel's *La Amiga* (The Girlfriend) (1988), Pablo Torre's *La Cara del Ángel* (Angel Face) (1998), Marco Bechis's *Garage Olímpico* (Olympic Garage) (1999), Christopher Hampton's *Imagining Argentina* (2003), Jonathan Perel's *Camouflage* (2022), Santiago Mitre's *Argentina 1985* (2022) and Ulises de la Orden's *El Juicio* (The Trial) (2023), all of which have the theme of justice and memory-making at their core.

Given that the country has become the global epicentre for the practice in recent years, it is no surprise to see the issue of disappearance featuring more prominently in Mexican cinema and long-form series productions depicting the country which is in the throes of a brutal narcotics war that involves various state and non-state actors. What has been notable to observe with many of the recent productions is the attention given to Mexico's diverse topographies, from depictions of disappearances in remote drug producing regions such as Tatiana Huezo's *Noche de Fuego* (Prayers for the Stolen) (2021) and Fernanda Valadez's *Sin Señas Particulares* (Identifying Features) (2020) to those abducted bodies either from city or town environments as in Zayre Ferrer and Daniel Posada's *Tijuana* (2019) series that deals with the rising problem of disappeared journalists, to James Schamus' *Somos* (2021), which over several episodes depicts the brutal destruction of the northern Mexican town of Allende.¹ This was based on a true story, in which the links between the cartels and the practice were exposed by the Pulitzer-winning journalist Ginger Thompson as los Zetas murdered and burned some 300

bodies in 2011. Dealing more broadly with the complex history of violence and culture in Mexico's many diverse landscapes, arguably the most masterful scene concerning disappearance in all these productions appears in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Bardo, False Chronicle of a Handful of Truths* (2022). Following the story of the key protagonist, Silverio Gama, who is a journalist journeying around the surreal history that defines Mexico's past and present, in one scene he appears walking in the downtown area of Mexico City. With his attention caught by the alien presence of a large desert tarantula on a Quinceanera dress (associated with a 15-year-old girl's rite of passage) appearing in a store window on the busy street, he feels a premonition of a dark past that is soon to return. About to purchase a taco, Silverio turns and sees a woman lying on the ground in front of a church, with people walking past oblivious to her existence. As Silverio tries to engage in a conversation with the angry woman, two men appear standing over her and one explains, 'Leave her. They do this all the time. They go missing yet they keep pestering everyone. They neither return nor die . . . They stay by not staying' As the unknown woman then responds to Silverio's question about why she's lying there by adding 'it's better you do not know', bodies all around start falling to the street in a performance that is both balletic and unsettling. Soon the protagonist is standing alone in a street full of unknown collapsed bodies, until the sun sets in a time-sequenced move that returns the city fully back to nature's enveloping. All of this is watched over by a military general, who observes a violence that is ultimately orchestrated by him. Iñárritu has explained this scene as a direct commentary on the nation's 130,000 disappeared, who have been taken since 2006 and the acceleration of the war on drugs. The director also subtly shows how, even in urban settings, disappearance is inseparable from ecology as spiders and the sun collapses Mexico's urban and rural landscapes into one cast by a dark silencing shadow.

When dealing with disappearance, filmmakers have also sought to break out of linear narratives, given that neat chronological portrayals fail to properly capture the inherent logics to the violence of disappearance. What makes disappearance so terrifying is precisely the ways in which it weaponizes time, haunting the past and present, while projecting an irresolvable violence into the future. Arguably, no director has dealt better with these ecological and temporal dimensions than the Chilean filmmaker Patricio Guzmán. Having already engaged with the brutality and horrors concerning the rise of the Augusto Pinochet regime in his trilogy on *La batalla de Chile* (1975, 1977, 1979), his *Nostalgia de la Luz* (*Nostalgia for the Light*) (2010), *El Botón de Nácar* (*The Pearl Button*) (2015) and *La Cordillera de los Sueños* (*The Cordillera of Dreams*) (2019) constitute a trilogy for the disappeared of history. These three films are ecologically framed, and disrupt comfortable and easily accessible notions of time. In doing so, they ward against reductive explanations and simplistic responses.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest Guzmán was the first to take seriously the ecological dimensions to such violence. We might recall, for example, the closing sequence to Resnais' *Night and Fog*. Having pieced together some of the most harrowing images of the Third Reich's systematic attempt to annihilate an entire people, the brilliance of the final scene is marked by depopulation. As the camera moves across the emptied expanse of the now desolate landscape, the focus returns back to the ecological conditions of the camp that now looks like a mere abandoned ruin that nature has reclaimed. Nature is therefore presented here as being overlaid with meaning and far from indifferent.² Indeed, the ecology will always be touched by the demonic as much as it is haunted by ground-soaked history. Lanzmann's *Shoah* is caught in a similar movement and insists in various ways on the erasure of traces in the Polish countryside. The film's opening sequence at Chelmno, on the banks of the Narew river, is telling as we hear the singing voice of a man travelling on a small barge. This is Simon Srebnik, one of only two survivors of the Chelmno camp. The camera films Srebnik walking around an apparently serene forest. He stops to look somewhere beyond the frame, and says: 'it is hard to recognize, but it was here. They burned people here. A lot of people were burned here. Yes, this is the place.' As Srebnik falls silent, the camera performs a slow right to left pan showing a green and peaceful forest clearing backed by a line of tall pine trees. At Chelmno, 400,000 Jews were murdered using gas vans. Writing on the preparatory work that went into *Shoah*, Lanzman remarked how he was especially attracted by the fact there was nothing to see in the locations he visited. He visited places that bore no trace:

I started precisely from the impossibility of telling this story. I placed this impossibility at the very beginning. What constituted the beginning of the film is the disappearance of all traces: there is nothing anymore, it is nothing and it was necessary to make a film starting from this nothing. (Lanzmann, 1990: 410)

In his epic trilogy, Guzmán shows how disappearances present in equal measure a challenge and an opportunity to cinema, something that makes the medium's position somehow unique as an artform. Mirroring the logic of violent disappearances, his films unsettle the logics of time and space, which each of his instalments deals with in compelling ways. Guzmán responds to a problem that exists in and produces a very peculiar and ruptured temporality. What is the time of the disappeared, given that as Alejandro Moreira has it, disappearance is 'by definition, an unfinished fact' that cannot be accommodated within a narrative order (see Irusta, 2000: 311)? For Guzmán, the time of the disappeared is *now*, inasmuch as the absence is felt and occupies the present. We see this tragically play out in *Nostalgia for the Light*, notably when attention turns to the searching mothers who are central to the film's narrative and who struggle to make it through another tortuous

day. Yet the time of the disappeared is also the past, inasmuch as the act of disappearing cannot be divorced from both the history of the abduction and the processes that enabled it. In *The Pearl Button* (2015), Guzmán connects this to the history of colonization in South America. Moreover, as *The Cordillera of Dreams* (2019) makes clear, the time of the disappeared equally resonates in the future, in the form of hope or by splitting a potential future appearance along two registers: the disappeared might return, alive, and take their place again in the family unit, in their community and society. The disappeared might alternatively be found in a clandestine grave, their skeletal remains might be exhumed or parts of them retrieved in a particular environment. The future in this sense is consumed by questions around the forms of this potential re-appearance (which the families work extremely hard to bring about). The time of disappearance is therefore, as Guzman articulates, non-linear and caught up in various speculative predictions.

Presented this way, cinema is both a crucial memory-making form and also a critical mode of disruption that is more than just constructing the past since it has access like no other medium to a non-linear time, which can bring it close to witnessing the ruptured temporality of disappearances. From this also comes the challenge to cinema and in particular to assumptions most often addressed to documentary cinema, its focus on 'argument-led' narrative and 'facticity', intended as a certain ill-defined objectivity. Disappearances unsettle both the possibility of narrative closure (the very denial of death makes closure impossible) and disturb the idea of 'facts' as knowable entities. These narrative and representational mechanisms are foreclosed from the outset, not only by the form, but by disappearance as a subject matter that denies all recovery, which means that cinema (as a time-machine) needs to re-invent its procedures. Yet, such reinvention also has its own ethical, political and artistic risks, which can be as complex and indeed as damaging as the violence itself. The films discussed here all invite a specific kind of spectatorship and they do so primarily because they put forward both a critical and an aesthetic appeal to their audience, one inseparably woven into the other. The aesthetic appeal translates in a demand for a different way of looking or more precisely for a specific, unique way of looking. Each film demands to be seen in a certain way and in its unfolding lays down the conditions for its reception. The critical appeal is intimately connected to this former point and suggests that the film gives a unique form to the events it concerns itself with (putting under erasure our pre-conceptions and accepted, given interpretations), but also that our reception of these events cannot be completely dissociated from the film's form. A consequence of this double appeal is that the voices we hear and the images we see always perform a renegotiation of what we have seen and heard before about specific events. This renegotiation happens both at the level of what one could call the interpretation of these events (the systems of judgments in place) and at a more explicitly aesthetic level, namely how these events are felt and experienced.³

Weaponized ecologies

Filmmakers have long sought to solicit a response about mass atrocities and other violent events from environments, landscapes and ecologies. Scholars in recent years have also pointed out the relationship between ecology and witnessing in order to decentre the privileged site of the human (Walker, 2010), which had once been an important corrective to the absence of victims' concerns. In a similar vein, whilst previous research has emphasized the connection between violence and landscape (Lübecker and Rugo, 2017), more recently, attention has been drawn to explaining how cinema has been pivotal in the imaginings of what we elected to call 'annihilated landscapes', which traverse sites of disappearance, desolation and the memory of an abyss (Evans and Rugo, 2025). The Japanese filmmakers of the so-called Fukeiron movement (Furuhata, 2013: 117) in fact suggested precisely this: a look at the landscape as a way to articulate a discourse on violence. Starting with AKA *Serial Killer* (1969), the documentary produced by Adachi and Matsuda on Nagayama Norio, the young perpetrator of four homicides, the Fukeiron filmmakers showed how 'filming a banal landscape became a critical strategy to counteract and question the codified media representations of violence and activism, and, furthermore, to explore a new way of conceptualizing state power' (Furuhata, 2013: 117). Adachi made another remarkable film on the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, called *PFLP: Declaration Of World War* (1971), which also foregrounds ecological and environmental questions as crucial to the understanding of both violence and power. Adachi, Matsuda and Nagisa Oshima produced instances of ecological cinema of violence, where human characters either move to the background or disappear entirely, to be replaced by attention to how natural/material/physical ecologies structure systems of governance, control and violence. Various filmmakers have adhered to this method of centring environmental features in order to give agency to the environment. Artists such as James Benning, Éric Baudelaire and Jonathan Perel have more or less explicitly confronted atrocity from within the ecological framework that was set up by the Japanese Fukeiron movement. It should also be mentioned that these returns to nature are prevalent in other artistic engagements beyond filmmaking, with the issue of disappearance, from the pioneering anthropomorphic images of Ana Mendieta, to the monumental installations of Doris Salcedo, the photography of David Farrell who imaged Coghalstown Wood in Ireland,⁴ on to Chantal Meza's *Fragments of a Catastrophe* for her disappearance series, which asks directly about what the earth witnesses once the body has been taken; so depopulation is a familiar theme by those sensitized to the problem.

Due to the global nature of the problem, enforced disappearance has taken place in every known environmental setting, from familiar places of human habitation to those defined by ecological hostility and impenetrable

environmental conditions (see Gatti and Casado-Neira, 2021). In Argentina, for example, the logics of disappearance were marked by urban environments (Franco, 2013). The technical mastery of space was used to devastating effect as Buenos Aires became an urban space marked by fear, matched by the strategic use of waters of the Plata to add another layer to the psychological terror, whereas, in Colombia, perpetrators have used a range of habitats, from dense jungle thickets to rivers and outer city landfill sites (Portilla Benavides and Malagón Díaz, 2023). While bodies of water and rivers in particular, have been used to conceal and move human remains, and have earned the name of 'liquid graves' (Rudling and Vega Dueñas, 2021; Uribe, 2013), there is something especially tragic about landfills as the discarded human body is covered over by the detritus waste of modern societies, thus consigning it to the kind of disposability we have come to accept for objects of consumption (Bauman, 2003, Evans and Giroux, 2015). Surveying the global topography of enforced disappearance, it seems no landscape is immune. Recognizing this, questions should be asked about how the body and its remains are intimately connected and dependent on the environments that have been weaponized for their disposal? Which in turn should further compel us to question, what happens if ecology is factored into our notions of perpetration, victimization and witnessing, and what does that mean for memory-making processes?

Undertaking ecological framings of political issues is now a well-established practice. There has already been, for example, some discussion of the need to rethink disappearance in environmental terms (Gatti and Casado-Neira, 2021), which has rightly noted how a focus on the environment allows researchers to overcome (especially forensically) the privileging of human testimony (Fuller and Weizman, 2021). This has been seen as pertinent when testimony is notably missing, as is often the case when dealing with the disappeared. However, studies have also noted limitations and concerns with eco-sensorial approaches (Buell, 2017; Çaylı, 2021; Herscher, 2014), not least in relation to how the shift away from bodies may unhelpfully turn attention away from the demand for justice (Saldanha, 2012). Mindful of these debates, it is important to rethink the weaponization of ecologies to account for the ecologies into which life is immersed, and disappearance is performed. At the same time, one should take great care not to lose sight of human agency, such that the body is subjected to a different kind of abstention or once again relegated in our concerns as was all too common in studies of International Affairs and the primacy it has afforded to territoriality. To achieve this, it will be important to: (1) consider how the body is concealed/disappeared according to the ecology in which it is placed; (2) understand how the body in the act of decomposition becomes part of that ecology and contribute to it (nutrients for the soil, flowers and so on; and (3) finally, ask how the body re-socializes these ecologies, which become not simply natural environments anymore, but political spaces through search committees started by families, creative

interventions, theoretical/thinking work and, in the very process of working, show that memory-making is possible.

A poignant example of this is *Ruido (Noise)* (2022) directed by the Mexican filmmaker Natalia Beristain, which turns the spotlight directly on the gendered-based dimensions to the violence of disappearance, as a mother searches in vain for her stolen daughter. Despite plot and narrative limitations, what is compelling in this film is the appearance of mothers from 'Voz y Dignidad Por Los Nuestros SLP A.C', which is a civil association searching for missing persons and clandestine graves in San Luis Potosi. Their appearance, although given the fact they are not professional actors is expectedly awkward at times, still invites audiences to acknowledge how their rudimentary methods create an unsettling link between humans and embodied ecologies. Mexico's families have developed knowledge and learned to read landscapes and look for anomalies in nature. This is shown in the film in a number of compelling scenes. Indeed, across the country there are some 130 'search collectives'⁵ tasked with trying to recover the remains of the missing in a land in which one family member observed where 'the whole country is a clandestine grave'. Marked by tragedy and humour, *Noise* shows how the families' labour of care, in the very act of searching, speaks of a refusal to accept the absence. But, as it also testifies, this work is gruelling, laborious, financially burdening, not to mention physically and emotionally exhausting. Humour and laughter are often a refuge. The collectives rely on tip-offs, though often they simply search abandoned places, disused wells, jungled forests, and open fields. There are clues they look out for, including traces of lime that is frequently used to cover over bodies to accelerate decomposition. Tools, as realistically shown, are rudimentary and even rely upon the insertion of a thin metal pole or what is called a *varilla* into the ground to release the potential stench of rotting remains. Many testimonies from the searching collectives speak of how the decomposing remains of a human gives off its own unique odour. What must this kind of ritual do to the psyche? And how does a person retain a sense of humane-ness through this? The film tries to attend to these issues, as difficult as they must have been for the mothers to re-enact what are ultimately daily rituals and memory-making processes.

The agency of nature

In his inventive work on ecology, Felix Guattari (1989) forced us to consider the subjective and social qualities to the environments we inhabit. Such a position, we might argue, has been fully absorbed into both complexity sciences and mainstream anthropocentric thought insomuch as any mediation of human life is presented as inseparable from the health or deterioration of the world's biosphere. But what does this all mean when dealing with ecologies of disappearance? If Guattari's work encourages us to consider the ways in

which vital ecologies are key to establishing vibrant communities – hence the earth itself could be a key player in how we understand peaceful relations among the world of peoples – might it not also be the case that ecology could become weaponized? Some authors have noted for quite some time how the power of Gaia is unrivalled, and her vengeance is being more felt as the human species is becoming more aware of its ecological violence (Kaplan, 1994). That may be true, but what concerns us are some of the reductives of these explanations that lend themselves to linear or correlative thinking and invariably sanction further militarization of the eco-sphere. Ever mindful of the ways in which ideas concerning harsh ecologies have too often been translated into deeply Orientalizing accounts of savage peoples, there is also a need to avoid direct correlations between ecological conditions and the desire for peace amongst those who inhabit them. Having said that, as the military learned as far back as 1914 (Doel, 2017; Gregory, 2015; Sloterdijk, 2002), there is an undeniable ability to openly recruit ecologies into weapons of war with devastating effects and which also suggests a rethinking of the history of disappearance too. How many young men were after all left to be consumed by the mud on the Flanders fields, their abandoned bodies fertilizing the poppies that grew and were worn on chests in a fashion that seldom commemorates that fact?

Clearly, for many environmentalists who look upon nature as some kind of sacred wonderment that would be harmonious and peaceful were it left to its own devices (especially for some if the human species fully left the scene and disappeared for good), the idea of presenting the ecology as violent would be intellectually and ethically challenging. Yet, if we accept that ecologies have agency, as Guattari maintained, and that the subjectivity of nature can be shown to be an accomplice in helping create healthy and vibrant worlds – the biosphere as both a life form and a giver of life – it must also be the case that ecologies can be vengeful, violent and full of unforgiving rage that can be complicit in the denial of life. Having said this, we also need to be mindful here of flattening our conception of violence so that it becomes anything that brings out some kind of unexpected forceful change. It is important to hold onto the idea that, for violence to be named as such, there needs to be some kind of intention. Arguably utterly indifferent to the plight of humans, there is perhaps a need for nuance then, for while an ecology cannot be seen as being intentionally violent to human life, it can nevertheless be shown to evidence non-intentional complicities. As the conceptual framework of slow violence (Nixon, 2011) amply demonstrates, an ecology can be an accessory to murder as much as it can be the most important element in denying justice. Such slowness is a defining element of disappearance, which has been explained by the Mexican artist Chantal Meza as opening a ‘wound in time’ (Evans and Meza, 2023).

The logics and methods for disappearing a life are often dictated by the local ecologies where perpetrators and victims dwell (Hagerty, 2023). There is in fact a notable difference between what we might call 'hostile ecologies' as opposed to everyday urban or rural settings where humans most frequently live. Precisely because of their ability to consume and conceal bodies, hostile landscapes, places that are too hot, too dry, too impenetrable, too cold or too open, are frequently used also by state agencies as natural border enforcers. The US has long ago developed *Protection Through Deterrence*, a system of border control that uses the natural environment as a way to prevent border crossings (De León, 2015; Doty, 2011). The EU can be also said to put the Mediterranean sea to the same use, by virtually closing down every other possible route (Basaran, 2015; Cacciaguidi-Fahy 2007). This politics of letting-die and letting-disappear institutionalizes the physical properties of specific ecologies to mask the workings of social and political power, which has demanded rethinking the spatial figuration of oceans as similar to camps (Evans, 2021). Having said this, it is also important to acknowledge the non-linearity of ecological transformation and how this demands certain appreciations. While it is tempting to mark out distinct fertile/hostile framings, fixed and determinable binaries are always problematic when it comes to complex systems. Indeed, it is possible to appreciate both a *becoming-fertile* of hostile ecologies as much as we can appreciate a *becoming-hostile* of the fertile. That is to say, while the former points to a kind of eco-natality as the earth is replenished by the bodies of the disappeared, romantically celebrated even with the appearance of flowers from the grave, the latter show how no ecology is immune to the violence and how everyday landscapes can also become haunted by intrusive memories and overlaid with haunted memories and feelings of shame.

Recent theoretical engagements with disappearance have sought to attend to these complexities, which have included extending its meaning to consider its more protracted spatial histories (Evans and Meza, 2023). This has also led to a rethinking of the ontology of disappearance, which has highlighted the complex relationship between presence and absence (Anidjar, 2023; Weber, 2023). Building on from this, what now concerns us is not just the ways in which violence invariably takes place in specific locations, which no doubt has a considerable bearing on its logics and strategies, not to mention what weapons are produced to best suit environments, but to deal with the double connotation of the ecological, both as a site that is weaponized and as the agent that configures acts of violence. This drawing closer of human history and natural history invites us to ask, among other things, what kind of 'visibility' these ecologies both make possible and occlude. And, in doing so, it further considers how we might see ecology as part of the organizational and strategic design of disappearance? What would it mean, as scholars have recently suggested, to think of violence as 'an environment, a landscape'

(Khayyat, 2022)? A question that would lead us to ask how ecologies become at once victim (Lyons, 2022), accomplice and witness to the drama of the most extreme form of violence, the total deprivation of a person's right to belong in the world?

In a text on the politics of nature at former Nazi extermination camps in Poland, for example, Małczyński (2019: 206) discusses the figure of the tree-witness at Auschwitz-Birkenau as a way to overcome the anthropocentric understanding of witnessing in favour of witnessing as an act that is not exclusively human, 'but one common to all living organisms' (p. 208). While writing on the environmental history of mass graves from the Holocaust, Domanska (2020: 250) asks how 'philosophy and an ethics of soil impact our understanding of history as a specific approach to the past'. Inaugurating a field she names Necrohumanities, her contention is that reflecting on soil can not only probe our accepted understanding of past violence but generate new ways to face these questions in the future. This ecological dimension also suggests a different understanding of the temporality of violence, in particular in relation to the victims and their relatives. For instance the human body's decomposition into nature might allow one to speak of a certain form of survival, of becoming-soil, which would show that survival goes beyond and differs importantly from that of human memory and how we keep alive the memories of beloved ones who have disappeared and whose traces are no longer visible. We can attend more to this by focusing more intently on hostile ecologies and how cinema responds to these.

Hostile ecologies of disappearance

Deserts are recurring sites in promoting ideas of hostility, from biblical stories of banishment from Eden in which the desert appears as a site of punishment, onto the latest military strategy documents that still recount its untameability. While ecological framings can be problematic inasmuch as it is easy to correlate in all too explicit Orientalist ways hostile ecologies with hostile peoples, it nevertheless remains the case that some ecological conditions can be more easily weaponized since they bring us closer to the question of survival. Violence is often more pronounced when a sense of survivalism is made more explicit and one's very existence is brought into question. This is not about survival of the fittest but it is certainly to appreciate how the sense of threat has a profound bearing on whether a life assumes a defensive position. In Ghassan Kanafani's (1963) novella *Rijal fi al-Shams* (Men in the Sun, 1998), three Palestinians stuck in Basra, Iraq, try to cross into Kuwait hidden inside an empty water tank. The lorry with the three men hiding in the tank has to cross the desert for a brief, but very intense, moment in the unbearable midday heat. Whilst Kanafani's prose explores with great success the particular sense of loss experienced in the desert, the

film's version of the novella – Tewfik Saleh's *Al-Makhdumun* (The Dupes) (1973) manages to offer a particularly striking rendition of the desert-as-weapon. The opening sequence of the film is exemplary. As the credits roll in, the camera brings us into a rocky and sandy desert via a slow zoom out; this is followed by a quicker zoom in the same environment, but this time bringing us closer to the desert's surface. These two shots are then followed by a quick close-up of the sun and a wide shot of the desert ground. In this last shot, we can make out two or three bones and an out-of-focus human figure, walking or perhaps stumbling in the shot's background. We are then taken back to the sun and finally we can make out the human figure, walking towards the bones in the middle ground of the shot. As the man approaches the camera, it becomes clear that these are skeletal remains. Following this opening scene, the film's black and white cinematography insists on the desert as a no-man's-land too deadly to be patrolled, without any landmark to orient our gaze, blinding the three men and their driver with its brightness, drenching them in sweat, covering them in sand and ultimately suffocating them under its heat.

In a formally different way, Bonnetta and Sniadecki's documentary *El Mar, La Mar* (2017) charts the Sonoran desert, the unforgiving terrain that makes up a substantial portion of the border between the US and Mexico in search of human traces. Here again, the film finds very little, almost nothing, and what it does find are objects forgotten or purposefully left behind. As mentioned, the fencing policies adopted by the US elsewhere along the border are not incidentally but deliberately designed to funnel people through the desert, thus turning nature into an agent of violence. Anthropologist Jason De León (2015) has called this environment a 'land of open graves'. In the opening pages of his ethnographic account of migrant trails through the Sonora, De León recalls his own experience of walking the desert:

Despite the protection of my wide-brimmed cowboy hat, the sides of my face are sunburned after only a few minutes of exposure. Tiny water-filled blisters are starting to form on my temples, cheeks, and other places that get exposed to the sun when I lift my head or stare up at the empty blue. (p. 23)

The small expedition that De León has joined is precisely designed to retrieve 'fragmented and skeletonized remains of a border crosser' (p. 24). The expedition finds only faint traces, small bones that turn to dust as soon as they are handled (p. 28). Both De León's ethnography and *El Mar, La Mar* capture the particular aesthetic regime of this ecology, which is marked by an unrelenting process of erasure and the possibility of looking (and therefore of finding) is only possible through traces (meaning that wholeness is already denied since the beginning). We are here in a regime of limited visuality: the visual field is limited spatially and temporally. The

spatial limitation has to do with the expanse, the sheer size of the desert, the lack of landmarks, and the intensity of its light. In *El Mar, La Mar* the voice of a migrant at some point says:

The desert at night is just like the day and your sky is like a roof of light. By night you can see the reflection of the moon and the stars on the sand. It's like a room, illuminated. You don't get lost because you can't see, you get lost because you don't know where you are.

The temporal limitation has to do with the processes enacted by this particularly hostile ecology (dry and hot) which – as mentioned – is constantly erasing, consuming, reducing things to dust, therefore limiting the time available for those looking to find the things they are looking for (we learn in the film that migrants try to follow the tracks of those ahead of them, but the wind quickly erases them). As another voice says, 'when shit sits up in the sun here, it fades like that.' Before things are reduced to dust, they are stripped of their distinctiveness and everything – organic forms of life as well as inorganic matter such as plastic bottles, shoes and so on – fades into indistinguishability. A female voice in the film tells the fragmentary story of finding the human remains of a female migrant, announced by the voice of a colleague announcing that they had found 'something or someone'. At the end of her testimony, after the group had gathered photos for evidence, the female voice says: 'the thing that enraged me was that something so horrible was no different to the many cattle corpses we had found.' Only a few scattered voices dot the film, which is dominated by the land, its meteorological qualities (from the blazing sun to the final storm shot in black and white that closes the film), its colour palette (blue and pink clouds leaping over a steep black hill), its eerie sounds. At the same time, the film is composing a catalogue of traces, as if to rescue them from certain obliteration: shoe marks, water bottles hanging, a pair of jeans nearly engulfed by a dry bush, an ants' nest, a pair of glasses, a broken branch that doesn't belong to the landscape, a mobile phone.

Beyond proximity or necessity of travel, arguably the most pernicious cases of the desert's weaponization occurs when people from other habitats are uprooted and taken there in order to be consciously removed from the world. The case of Chile under the dictatorship of Pinochet is instructive here, especially the political prisoners who were taken to Calama in the Atacama Desert region. During the Pinochet years, 1,100 persons were officially registered as forcibly disappeared with only 104 bodies having been found, though affected communities have placed the figure as much higher.

In Guzmán's *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010), the desert is both a site of erasure, as well as one of witnessing and even one of resonance. Guzmán shows, without contradiction, how the openness can be suffocating, the expanse

debilitating. What begins as an astronomical mediation on the telescoping search into the galaxies and stars, slowly turns the lens to the uninhabitable desert and the appearance of distant figures – the women still searching amongst the dust for the remains of their husbands. As Guzman's film narrates, decades of searching have allowed them to tell the difference between white stones and human fragments. Theirs is a story revealing the chasm of power, which fatally reaches across time. The relatives search the Atacama desert looking for remains and small fragments of bones whilst, at the same time and in the same landscape, astronomers search the sky for the secrets of the stars. Guzman elaborates a number of parallels between these two activities: 'These women's search never crossed paths with that of the astronomers who were tracking another kind of body: celestial bodies.' As she goes through the impossible motions of another day, one of the women laments, 'I wish telescopes didn't just look at the sky but could go through the earth to be able to locate them.' However the most important resonance in the film is material. As the voiceover says: 'there are other skeletons that are not in a museum. They are made of calcium, the same calcium that stars are made of.' A similar conversation takes place between two astronomers. As they read the calcium lines produced by stars. one of them says:

I always tell people when I give public lectures that I'll tell them the story of how the calcium in their bones was made. It is the story of the beginning of us. Some of the calcium in my bones was made shortly after the Big Bang . . . We live among the trees, but we also live among the stars.

The ecological connection between the disappeared and their environment is therefore not just in the desert, but in the sky above it too.

Ecologies often disrupt linear causal thinking and can often work in what might seem to be contradictory or surprising ways. As Grove (2019: 6) writes, an ecological approach to violence 'looks for relations, heterogeneous actors, things, technics, racializations, territorializations, and practices', thus privileging processes and influences over fixed objects of analysis. Furthermore an ecological approach to questions of violence and its manifestation needs to be able to loosen the exceptionalism of human agency without bypassing human responsibility, in order to attend to collaborations, encounters, relations with non-human agents. For this, our focus should turn to consider distributed and connected agencies, which in our case concerns the complex agency of specific ecologies – understood as the set of material/chemical/geological/elemental properties of an environment – which play a crucial role in the way violence is administered and maintains itself. Moreover, the material witnessing enacted by the soil can be of crucial importance: this is, for instance, the case when it comes to the bodies of the disappeared that can actually enrich arid lands. Bodies in fact can even contribute to the

replenishing of arid soil which, in the process of transformation, can be revealing of what lies beneath. In a short video released by the FOUND program run out of Jalisco in Mexico, forensic analysts have partnered with ecologists to understand more about these phenomena. Appreciating how nitrogen enrichment affects nutrient contents of the earth follows the decomposition of bodies, so studies can make sense of increased chlorophyll activities. With similarities to the mentioned poppy fields of Europe, as Tunuari Chavez of COBUPEJ notes:

There have been various instances of individuals in search of missing persons, especially the mothers of the missing who, while searching for their sons or daughters, have come across flowers. They've interpreted these flowers and found the buried body.

Through the study of organic life, death can be revealed. From this point of view, then, human remains become 'elements of a symbiotic collective formed of organic and non-organic beings that exist in various spheres that constantly commingle with each other in various ways' (Domanska, 2020: 253). The body becomes soil, but in this becoming it changes the element it is coming into contact with, literally turning deserts into fertile lands. This is another moment where our thinking's desire for discreteness and for objects that can be neatly detached from one another for the sake of analysis, finds a significant limit and needs to give way to a relational form of thinking.

It is important to emphasize that what we are facing here is a different form of witnessing, reconceived as a non-anthropocentric activity that is fundamentally elemental. The use of the idea of witnessing here is not metaphorical, but rather literal. The ecological approach highlighted here helps us to see how the recording of violence also happens – and crucially so – through bio-chemical changes in what we will call hostile spaces. These changes, as the Mexican mothers have learnt to detect, are often visible: the changes in the soil below translate into anomalous visibilities on the surface – flowers or grass where there should not be any or the other way around, depending on the terrain; the presence of specific insects that would not normally be seen there. However, in other cases, such as the millennia-old deserts and the sea, it is not 'strange' appearances that mark an ecology, but the latter's ability to hide or permanently obscure traces of human death.

Conclusions

At the beginning of this article, we indicated that our goal was to analyse how the arts and cinema in particular can illuminate the practice of enforced disappearances and lead to novel forms of memory-making, which

are also part of any attempt to resist those forces which seek to annihilate human life. After setting out the ways cinema has dealt with the issue and then considering the role of ecology, especially its weaponization, a better appreciation of the aesthetics of disappearance becomes possible. Through this, it is possible to: (1) consider how the body is disappeared and then concealed according to the specific physical qualities of the ecology in which it is placed; (2) understand how the act of decomposition produces a becoming of the body, whose remains contribute to this ecological milieu, and in turn how these ecologies then become not only weapons, but material witnesses of disappearances; and (3) appreciate how disappeared bodies re-socialize ecologies such as the desert and the sea, turning them from natural environments to socio-political-cultural spaces strongly marked by the work of search committees run by the families, but also by other creative interventions and/or political networks who are all concerned in one way or another with justice and memory.

Throughout the article, we have pointed out how the arts can play a pivotal role in memory-making and truth-finding processes in relation to the disappeared, precisely because they can catalyse experiential horrors where none is possible (the disappeared), relay epistemic forms of knowledge production and resistance through everyday practices (such as those of the mothers) and articulate discourses and express positions that are not (in some cases not yet) available within the political-institutional space. We have furthermore emphasized how cinema is particularly apt at imagining ecologies of disappearance and their weaponization, precisely under the pressure of the challenges that these pose to the medium's characteristics and, thanks to the medium's faculties, a certain ability to treat time elastically and a certain presence to the physical world.

In these conclusions, we would like to express two more thoughts that help us to offer a more complete picture. The first has to do precisely with the role of the arts in relation to ecologies of disappearance. On the one hand, as we have said, it is precisely through the aesthetic/poetics approach that we can get closer to the fundamentally ambiguous and double function of the ecologies as witnesses and weapons of disappearance, and therefore doubly involved. However, the arts are only capable of offering this double picture, precisely once they begin to act under the weight of disappearances themselves. In other words, the question of disappearances and in particular the focus on their ecologies also affects the poetic/aesthetic register. All these works, for instance, exist in between nature and culture, and not somewhere inside only one or the other. All these works also exist between a natural inclination to making visible and the impossibility to fully do so. These works necessarily need to come up against the limit of the medium; therefore they are caught between their ability to materialize disappearances, precisely through the

attention they bring to the physical register of ecologies, and the limit that disappearances pose to media that work by always having to register some kind of presence. This back-and-forth movement between visibility and invisibility is what characterizes these ecologies. As a consequence, it is also the distinctive feature of poetic/aesthetic attempts to grapple with them. For instance, Elias Khoury's lyrical text 'The White Sea' that opens Daniele Rugo's documentary film *The Soil and the Sea* (2023), explores the sea both as a repository of bodies ('the largest mass grave', 'a vast, boundless cemetery') and as an ecology weaponized precisely because it is inaccessible and capable of disappearing bodies and their traces ('Who can dig in the water?'; 'The White Sea hides the black death in its guts'; 'The blue in which the whites of the waves shine is nothing but an optical illusion'). The only resistance afforded here is precisely a poetic one. As Khoury says 'We will write in black ink on black water/the story of our resistance to death amid the waves of the sea of death/We write and resist, so the sea appears in front of us.' As Khoury's voice takes us through the weaponization of the sea during Lebanon's Civil War, the camera very quietly shows Beirut's sea front via a drone shot. The surface of the sea looks calm, blue and serene, hardly the site of violence. The sea has erased all traces, but the aesthetic gesture performed by Khoury is an attempt to retrieve something out of invisibility, whilst acknowledging the limits of this task. Both *El Mar La Mar* and *The Soil and the Sea* for instance contain significant parts where the screen is black and we only hear voices. Similarly, in Saleh's *The Duples* the screen is often taken over by a blinding white light that erases the contours of objects. In Guzman's *Nostalgia for the Light*, on the other hand, the astronomers look at the sky through special visioning devices, which the mothers searching for their loved ones would like to, but do not possess. Cinema is condemned to presencing something, even when what it makes present is an absence. It is going through this experience that puts cinema in front of its extremities (what it can naturally do and what it cannot do at all) that we can engage with ecologies of disappearance.

This then brings us to a second and final point. To engage with disappearances we need to engage with their ecologies as these are crucial witnesses that can help us in efforts to retrieve remains. However, these ecologies are witnesses because they have first been a weapon, because perpetrators knew that they could rely on their 'complicity' to conceal and consume. This calls for an approach that treats these sites as more than passive repositories of violent acts or backgrounds to political violence. They are actors of sorts and help us to sense this violence, precisely because they themselves continue to sense and articulate the presence of human remains. This is an approach to the landscape and the natural environment that various decolonial scholars have insisted upon. Western social and political theory inevitably relies on the binary nature vs culture, which tends to bypass the acting of ecologies in relation to political violence. Looking at ecologies in relation to violence disrupts and

complicates this binary. It is here that, in order to better understand the weaponization of ecologies, one could tap into Arturo Escobar's (2016) idea of *sentipensar con la tierra* (feeling-thinking with the earth). For Escobar, who adopts the concept of feeling-thinking from Fals-Borda and whose work is heavily indebted to the relational ontologies and practices of the Nasa people living in the southwestern highlands of Colombia, we need to be able to produce a knowledge from within the relation (nature-culture, human-soil, nature-violence) as opposed to a knowledge merely about these relations. The cinematic works discussed here offer precisely an example of how to appeal to this 'relational (non-dualist) and pluri-ontological understanding of life' (pp. 21–22), showing ways to attend to ecologies as if we belong to them, as opposed to the other way around. If it is true, as Aníbal Quijano (2024: 64) writes, that 'the transformation of the world takes place first as an aesthetic transfiguration', then it is a matter of building on these works to attend to the various active ways in which ecologies are intertwined with our politics of disappearance.

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Notes

1. On this, see: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/podcast-dept/the-making-of-a-mass-acre-explores-the-ideas-role-in-a-mexican-tragedy>
2. In his short and compelling text *Bark* (Didi-Huberman and Martin, 2017), Georges Didi-Huberman insists on this dimension too.
3. For a more extended discussion of this, please see Shapiro (2016) and Rancière (2008).
4. It is worth pointing out here that, whilst the situation in Northern Ireland concerns a relatively small number of victims in comparison to other global cases, it does remind us just how emotive and fraught the memory of the disappeared is and how the issue of unlocated bodies still remains an impediment when dealing with questions of lasting peace.
5. See: <https://www.reforma.com/fallan-busquedas-arman-colectivos/ar2084682>

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