

**THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC FRAME:
a study on the 'límit' of the two-dimensional image.**

PhD Dissertation



Limite (Mário Peixoto, 1931)

PhD Candidate
Dolores Martínez Ramírez

DIRECTOR
Atxu Amman Alcocer

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Abstract

The scopic regime, far from being an increasingly obsolete language, prevails today as the main mediator of communication in globalized society.

Therefore it is a language that must be studied and reviewed constantly, because it builds our relationship with the world and with the others. Semiotic studies are fairly frequent in this regard, but studies through its *Morphometry* - scientific study of the shape and dimensions of something - are less frequent.

With the form as a premise, this research establishes relationships - sometimes free and disparate - that reveal clues about its anthropological, sociological and philosophical condition. In other words, through the study form, it is revealed the intimate relation of the two-dimensional image to the construction of thought and the prevailing paradigms in each epoch.

The doctoral thesis proposes the *frame-limes* as a strategy of approach to the anthropogenesis and the genesis of the two-dimensional image. By constructing an inoperative, useless visual approach devoid of history and meanings, it approaches a stage of openness that can give rise to new meanings if one is willing to risk the loss of certainty.

**Notes on the Thematic Universe: The black continent.
and
Epilogue**

Notes on the Thematic Universe: The black continent¹.

A model against limitlessness: the emergence of the poetics of the limit in the cinematographic frame

The question posed by this investigation, previously mentioned in the introduction, was the following: Where are the ungovernable limits of the frame located?

This doctoral dissertation proposed another way to frame within the limits of the visual: the *frame-limes*. As a critical strategy of visual language itself, the *frame-limes* can recover specific horizons and act as an instrument of resistance against the dominant socio-cultural model based on limitlessness.

To that end, this study revised singular and innovative works of art, including that of Mário Peixoto and Michelangelo Antonioni who, years before the debate on the limit of natural resources became as evident as it is today (let's remember that one of the most critical issues today is the United States' withdrawal from the 2017 Paris climate agreement), coincided in their predictions of the dangers of the 20th Century built on the distancing and destroying of horizons and on the absolute rejection of the imposition of certain limits, especially ecological ones, using Latouche's concept, which constitute the make up of our existence. These artists coincide in their belief that the absence of limits is a matter of disappearing *horizons* (Trías, 1991: 401). This parallel is already reflected in the very language:

orismós (ορισμός). *Orismos* has the same root word as the word *orio (όριο)*, which in Spanish means *limit* (...) The definition (*orismos*) has the same root word as the word *orizontas*, which in Spanish means horizon. Horizon in Greek has two meanings: one is the same as the Spanish language, the other is the gerund of the verb to delineate or define (Giannopoulou, 2016: 261).

Faced with the scenario of disappearing horizons and the search for limitlessness, the proposed artists assumed a position of resistance. This position was founded in the *being of limes*, reflected not only in their narratives, or scripts, but also in their images and framing of shots, or *einstellung*. Their characters become drifters as an act of resistance against a model of society founded on productivity and, as Ordine describes, comprised of slaves and robots, all prisoners of necessity. Their framing of shots, or *einstellung*, defined as the combination of the selection of

¹ Term employed by Jean-Louis Comolli.

what is seen and the responsibility in the construction of meaning, takes on a composition that alone is already *being of limes*, a *frame-limes* that works as an active opponent to the limitless model. This framing strategy does not propose a recession but rather the more complicated task of constant approximation and equilibrium by way of tension between overflow and limitlessness, rooted in the physical. The limit presents a being and an image that is in constant approximation to itself. During this process of approximation, the thought or, in this case, the image, encounters and makes visible the *borders of finitude*. Through this contact, the conventional visual codes of cinematographic framing are transformed into *singularity* and *paradox*². The traditional purpose of the image is deactivated and new uses and meanings become possible.

The *frame-limes* contains in itself a resistance which prevents it from carrying out its conventional functions. By *rendering all action inoperative* the poetic condition of the *frame-limes* is revealed, to use Agamben's terms, as well as its capacity to assist in the contemplation of anthropogenesis, an event that is never quite over, "given that the homo sapiens never stops its process of becoming human and perhaps has not yet achieved the language and nature of a native" (Agamben, 2011: 24). This language is understood as the broadest form of communication and, in this case, also includes visual language.

By refusing to utilize all the known functions of human action on visual language, the *poetics of inoperativity* facilitates the continuation of the never-ending road to language. It does not halt the initial creative act, quite the contrary; just as the poem with the written word, it allows it to flourish in its most pure form. The poetics of inoperability reveal, to use Agamben's words, *what the body can*, that is, what the body is capable of. This is because when all constructed and internalized functions are disabled, the human being can free himself of history and eventualities. He can begin again, from zero, in the process of asking and wondering, for example, about the nature of thought, language, drawing, the frame, or Architecture. In this way, the *poetics of inoperativity* become a tool for the contemplation of anthropogenesis.

For Trías and Agamben, as well as for scholars of aesthetics like Didi-Huberman, to establish a solid critical revision of language is to confront the *revision of the medium on its own terms and deactivate its primary functions* in order to open it to new uses and recover its *poetic potential*.

2 Trías claims, however, that in this moment of contact singularities and paradoxes appear, as if it were a new element.

The *frame-limes* allows a restoration of the *potency* of language in the cinematographic frame, that is liberated, in Agamben's use of the term, from the imperative of passing inextricably to the event. In a globalized context that is founded on premises established by the West, the event resides in the image's legibility.

Therefore, in order to deactivate the conventional functions of the image, one must disable *almost* entirely its legibility within the accepted canons of representation and visual codification.

Once these are entirely disabled only then we can enter into the terrain of the unmentionable, an area that has been studied at length by the masters of Oriental painting, and on which François Jullien meditates in his comments on *the great image without form*.

The *frame-limes* does not depend on the opposition West-East, nor on the elimination of the form, the image, or the frame. To the contrary, as Jullien also observes, it needs the contact between the two sides, between the West and the East, the form and the formless, figuration and *spacing*, in order for the true nature of an *image-poiesis* to appear. The image-poiesis exists in the limit between its own operability and inoperability, and the where its visual, technical and narrative capacities and incapacities are active. To that end, a "liberation of the concrete without abandonment of the concrete (Jullien, 2008: 148)" is necessary, so that representation will move beyond the anecdotal without surpassing the infinitely indistinguishable, sustained between the limits of the physical world and the intangible, between the trace and what cannot be represented, between the frame and the space outside the frame. This is the *momentum* where all possibilities are equally probable and certainty is nonexistent.

An ungovernable model

What is behind the *image-border* of the *frame-limes* is its incapacity to be ruled, for as Trías recalls, its reality and existence reside precisely in its *rupture* (Trías, 1985:168), and as Jullian observes, things do not age in vain, but due to their "evasive" aspect (Jullien, 2008: 143). The *frame-limes* is neither resolved in a measurable and canonical system nor are they capable of generating their own system and thus becoming a norm. This is why they present an ungovernable model and unveil a tragic episteme and an already mentioned interior rupture, similar to the desperate vitality of *the neutral* in Roland Barthes or Didi-Huberman's concept of *excision*. In this constantly escaping and ungovernable excision, the image is freed of its condition

as an “operative image”³.

Once all the utilitarian functions are deactivated, all that remains is an inoperative image that assists the spectator in the contemplation of what is known as visual language⁴, preparing him/her for a new yet-to-be-determined stage, located on the limit, or on the cliff, to borrow Jean-Paul Michel’s formulation⁵. This is also the place where Peixoto puts *Muhler 2*. To place oneself on the cliff is to put oneself in the limit. This permits knowledge without acquisition or possession; the ability to ask a question without ever having to answer it. Only here it is possible to converse with the enigma, without abandoning the borders of the physical, and as Trías describes, stand with one foot in the world and the other *advancing* towards all that transcends it. This continuous dialogue with *the mysterious*, as Einstein says, is the most beautiful experience that one can have. It is the most fundamental emotion; at the core of all true art and all true science.

A responsible information model: to imagine a world is to feel responsible, morally responsible, for this world.

This intimate relation between the thought and the frame is even more pertinent in the first half of the 21st Century where, far from what Jay imagined, the scopic dominates as the main transmitter of information and communication and as the substitute for reality in its new forms: Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Google, and even Drones.

If we are to address Gaston Bachelard’s claim that: “To imagine a world is to feel responsible, morally responsible, for that world. All doctrine of imaginary casualty is a doctrine of responsibility” (Bachelard, 1993:118), and if we are to relate this claim to the ideas expressed by Slavoj Žižek, of the importance of dealing responsibly with images because they are intimately connected to the experience of reality (they no longer represent reality but create it), then it becomes clear that it is necessary to call attention to the foundations or the *morphometrics* of the cinematographic image since it is this image which constructs and at times even substitutes our perception of reality.

The *frame-limes* does not offer an alternative *per se*, nor does it create the images that are to come, it is only a strategy-tool for them to appear in the future and ultimately, to debate the function of the frame. As Jullien suggests in his “Treatment on effectiveness” (1999), more than a concrete

3 Terms used by Didi-Huberman in the prologue to Harun Farocki’s “Desconfiar de las imágenes” (2015).

4 In the same manner that Agamben refers to Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* as the contemplation of the Italian language, or Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* as the contemplation of the French language, etc.

5 In reference to the work of the French philosopher Jean-Paul Michel “Un acantilado como la existencia” (2013).

result, what “substitutes the directed action is an implicated transformation” (Jullien, 1999: 143). The substitution of the *direction* of the cinematographic image with the generation of a space for transformation is part of the destruction of the ego, both of the image and its creator⁶. In other words, the cinematographic creator must not direct the image but rather assist in its process of emergence. He or she must fabricate the visual space necessary to make the image’s becoming, and all of its possible becomings, take place, while at the same time allowing the image to remain in a state of perpetual construction and revision.

A model-strategy for the discovery of the apparatus: distancing, estrangement and mediation.

The discovery of the physical border of the apparatus permits both an analysis of the frame and a dialogue between the operability of the human being and the strictly mechanical idiosyncrasy of the cinematographic machine. As Walter Benjamin has already noted, the nature that speaks to the camera is different from the nature that speaks to the eye, mostly because a “space that is elaborated unconsciously appears in the place of a space elaborated consciously by man” (Benjamin, 1985: 67). The machine transforms into an elaborated “two-dimensional tool” which serves to reveal clues and, more importantly, to unveil the existence of the mysterious in three-dimensional space. The different ways to frame are in fact different methods of organizing the space on a two-dimensional surface, an archive of human beings’ spatial relationships, with its own limits, scale and territorial relationship; not because of its ability to capture what escapes the human eye, but because it allows for the observation of the properties of three-dimensional space through its response to the space’s confinement within an autonomous system that has its own idiosyncrasies, namely, a surface that is smooth, homogenous and rectangular.

The reconfiguration and comprehension of three-dimensional space through the manipulation of a two-dimensional format can and will reveal clues about its own nature. Through distancing, estrangement and mediation, this operation makes possible a critical study of the very nature of three-dimensional space as well as that of the apparatus, or cinematographic camera, itself.

This dialogue between two and three-dimensional spaces mediated by the frame reveals the artificial or prosthetic condition of an apparatus which seeks to contain a three-dimensional

⁶ Jullien explains this idea in his analysis of the Chinese Wu Wei, where far from absolute non-action (or paralysis), the creator must act, but “only at the root of becoming” (Jullien, 1999:144), and in doing so, help in the natural development of immanence.

space that is always at risk of, to use Derridá's words, overflowing.

Therefore it is more correct to compare the apparatus to an operator with a certain degree of "*poetic coercion*" (Erice, 2011: 264), to irrevocably forget the illusion of objectivity that it creates, and to accept the instrument as a strategy for mediation and reflection on the relationship of understanding between the human being and the three-dimensional space.

To look at the past as future: The limit as tool.

Throughout the entire history of representation an apparent struggle has developed between, on the one hand, its employment at the service of narratives that are tangent to its own nature and, on the other, its primal capacity for *poetics* as an act of creation, or what Nuccio Ordine calls useless knowledge.

These past few years, a special sensibility has appeared towards visual studies as a field that takes responsibility for a language that must free itself from its own utilitarianism. But it still remains a question as to how this must occur.

As a result of the combination between responsibility and disaffection in regard to images, numerous studies have emerged that address topics such as the downfall of the scopic regime as described by Martin Jay, the death of visual language anticipated by Jean-Luc Godard or Peter Greenaway, and the farewell to the body and the empowering of the machine from Dziga Vertov to Michael Snow. Or closer still are other currents of Positivist thought that propose new models for the autonomous development for the free-exchange of the globalized image, like the author Susan Buck-Morss who, in her *Aesthetics III*, eliminates authorship and implicit narratives that are reconfigured in montage, or in the case of Irmgard Emmelhainz, who calls for a third mediator for communication.

All these models are based on the premise of *eradicating* or resignifying visual representation.

The theory of the frame as *limit* or *image-output*, however, proposes, as in the case of Pascal Bonitzer, to save representation in spite of itself and the clichés that stifle it and to recover its *poetic* potential. This approach, perhaps, offers an escape of a certain tendency in the arts that is excessively obsessed with progress, understood always as innovation or the free *montage* of the ruins of the past. In the words of Agamben, originality, which has been entirely misunderstood in the contemporary context, is what remains in lasting relation to the original (Agamben, 2005: 100).

What is proposed here is more aligned with what is postulated by Claude Parent when he writes: “we should read the past as a future to be discovered” (Parent, 2009: 6). In a contemporary context which is prisoner to productivity, what is necessary for the future of the image seems to reside in an act that is far from simple: the elimination of the image’s capacity to be useful.

The inoperative image, or *frame-limes*, constructs an image out of its own incapacity. Free of ego and unproductive, this image is on the limit of legibility. As Jullien says, the operation is methodic but never simple. The method is to locate the image on the limit between two infinite spaces: the spaced frame and the off-screen, sustained in a perpetual and restrained fugue which makes the image ungovernable, inoperative and useless. At this moment the *poetic* capacity of the image appears. The image adheres to the prevailing paradigms of each era. In this case, the contemporary paradigm is founded on the eradication of certainty and on finding peace with probability⁷. The inoperative image is prepared to give up certainty in order to gain access to knowledge.

Epilogue: Dialogue with Trías, Agamben and Jullien.

To write a doctoral thesis is to learn to lose one’s voice.

Therefore, when one is finally given permission, or rather is impelled, to speak on their own terms, without appealing to the already known arguments made by authorities on whom they have depended on during years, it is logical that the author can no longer find his or her voice.

To write a thesis is to unlearn to speak for oneself in order to be able to speak through others.

Any basic literature course will teach students that the way to make a text interesting is, precisely, for the author to find his/her voice. The opposite system.

The titanic task of compiling all of the voices of history to create an argument is not enough. Right at the moment when the doctoral candidate is physically and psychologically worn out, he or she is asked to unlearn all the knowledge that has been acquired and to write a story, that even if untrue, should at least be exciting.

I cannot but wish good luck and emphatically hug all the doctoral candidates who find themselves, like me, in this current position:

⁷ Many thanks to Dr. Martínez Garrido, professor of the Architecture School of Madrid, for his clarifications on the contemporary paradigm of probability, including his remarks on Laplace as well as the insights of Jacob Bronowski in his work “The Ascent of Man”, as well as others.

How can you write your own story, how can you write a conclusion, when you have lost yourself in the voices of so many others?

Silence would be the easy road. More so in an investigation that defends the idea that to be able to write conclusions will lead to the restriction of the truth.

What's more, the very act of having to conclude the future of the visual language through the written one is a complete oxymoron.

But the oxymoron, the contradiction *in terminis*, generates a third meaning which forces the receiver to accept the metaphor.

So let what follows here be understood as metaphor, a poetic coercion, that will perhaps reveal certain key-truths for the reader who has the strength or will, in this final text, to abandon the need to resolve questions, to recognize certainties or to glimpse at conclusions.

From the etymology of the word "conclusion", I want to keep the prefix *con-*, from Latin, convergence or reunion, and throw out *clusio* from the verb *concludre*, to conclude or to close (also present in "claustrophobia", which I have commented on in the previous background of this dissertation).

To be brief, an immense claustrophobia overwhelms me when I think of having to conclude thought and then make it, through the efficiency of the correct words, turn to action.

Nevertheless, I propose the *spacing* needed for the convergence or reunion around a poetic coercion that is always open, with potential and ready to resist, in its interior, in its passing to action.

To place oneself on the limit is just this: to remain with one foot firmly in the world, this being the written word, and with the other calling upon the infinite human imagination, thereby making evident the unresolvable void between the two.

The *frame-limes* provides the spacing and visual space necessary, not for understanding neither the image, nor its future nor its finitude, but rather the contemplation of the impossible distance between the legible and the unintelligible.

It follows then that the words escape me when I try to describe a situation in which reality is

precisely in the escape. That is the case of the limit, as Trías knew well.

Knowledge, in all its forms, implies taking a position. This is why I choose to position myself in the limit of language and from here will try to explain the limit of visual language and to converse with my own incapacity and inoperability, and resist all impulse of resolution or closure (to enclose would be to render thought anecdotal). I will try, therefore, to ripen thought on the basis of its evasiveness, as Jullien would say.

In the limit between this prologue and the inoperative epilogue lies the key of the *frame-limes*.

The first inoperable dialogue appears with the attempt to sustain that the limit appears in the contact made between the visible (the screen) and the undifferentiated space (the off-screen), since this contact is just another way of *hallucinating* the possibility to control or contain the infinite. The contact is not real; there is a *between*⁸, a void of indeterminate, indeterminable and unnamable distance.

The void produces terror in human thought and that is why the limit, through approximation, is used as a way to understand it. Thus the conclusions offered by Trías which state that the limit generates, in the end, a tragic episteme, as well as an experience and an adventure.

With the deactivation of the *frame-limes*'s conventional functions, including its legibility, and thanks to the artist's ability to create deviations from their own constructions, it becomes possible to *contemplate*, to use Agamben's term, the origin of the image.

All that remains is the frame as a theoretical operator that reveals to itself what an image is capable of, as well as a small trace-figuration that retains the visual before its absolute disappearance. Neither adherence nor abandon, as Jullien would say; neither the Renaissance nor Supremacy; neither *Ulysses' Gaze*, nor *Transformers*.

Nevertheless, *Limit* (which is not film and yet, never stops being film; neither frames nor un-frames) maintains the legible within the frame through a small gesture of figuration, distributing it (spacing it) so that it can implicitly contain a resistance which impedes it from showing itself and

⁸ Here the term "between" is borrowed from the concept developed by Dr. Efipraxia Giannopoulou in her doctoral dissertation: Giannopoulou, Efpraxia (2016). *Between: suddenly, endless, the unnamable*. Doctoral Dissertation. E.T.S. Architecture (UPM). Available online: <https://doi.org/10.20868/UPM.thesis.40332>.

from disappearing. *Limit* assists framing, only in what concerns its primal question: what is a frame? What is visual language?

This question cannot and should not be resolved because as long as it remains open the spectator of *Limit* will be a spectator of his or her own anthropogenesis and thought. He or she will have glimpsed or will be able to glimpse that *We are the limits of the world, with one foot on the inside and the other on the outside. We are the world's limits* (Trías, 1985: 45), and will have understood that an inoperative image is a limit for one's own contemplation, where all future images are probable and will not necessarily come into existence.

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Haz lo que debes (Do the right thing, Spike Lee, 1984)
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Birdman (Alejandro. G. Iñárritu, 2014)
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Soy Cuba (Mihail Kalatozov, 1964)
It’s all about love (Thomas Vinterberg, 2003)
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Vértigo (Vertigo, Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)
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La dama de Shangai (The lady of Shangai, Orson Welles, 1947)
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¹ Disponible en: <https://vimeo.com/13079214>

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