

# GUIDEBOOK FOR THE NEW MELODRAMATIC METHOD

A publication for the Artistic Research

“Super (im) positions: Subverting melodramatic  
representation through personal unpredictability”

by Emilio Santoyo

Master of Film  
Artistic Research - In and through cinema  
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“Super (im) positions: Subverting melodramatic representation through  
personal unpredictability” by Emilio Santoyo.

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## Preface

**“My wound existed before me, I was born to embody it.”**

— Joe Bousquet

Officially, I started working on film sets when I was 14 years old, but my life has always been entangled with audiovisual production. Since I recall having memories, I always loved going with my dad — who makes commercials — to film shoots, and being fascinated with the cinematic machinery: the cameras, actors and cables were part of a world where anything could be possible. After attending film school, and learning how films should be made, I entered the “film business,” where I worked on dozens of feature films in all the possible positions. Eventually — after years of frustration, effort, and disappointments — I could manage to direct two fictional feature films, through an intense collaboration with some close friends, and above all, with my producer; which was also my partner in real-life. We spent almost a decade making films together, and cinema mediated almost all of our interactions. It was an extremely productive, loving and exciting period of my life, but also, one with lot of conflict. No matter how fair, how horizontal we wanted to be, the film production always made a huge,

negative impact on our personal lives. Not only did it consume time and money, it also generated inherent power imbalances that were impossible to dismantle while within the system, such as the problematic hierarchy distinctions between the author - director and the “rest” of the crew.

When problems arose, the toll was on my personal relationship. With every film my partner and I made together, the conflict reached unsuspected levels of intensity, until it became impossible to continue our relationship. That’s when I decided to take a pause in my career — and in some ways, also in my life — and reflect on what had happened. Instead of “settling down” in Mexico, as I had planned before the breakup, I ended up moving to the Netherlands to conduct my MA studies. I started to think about the huge scars that filmmaking was leaving on my existence, and the influence the medium had on my way of perceiving love, particularly as a Mexican artist and filmmaker.

The breakup with my life partner generated a rupture between me and a more “traditional” way of filmmaking. It came at a moment of exhaustion and disappointment with the film industry. I realised that the very notion of singularity was being lost. Among film institutions and film industries

around the world, there's a reluctance to difference, as film productions success depends on the notion that nothing is left to chance. I have the feeling that everything is being standardised, even in the traditionally "avant garde" spaces. Films look and feel the same, as if they were interchangeable. Homogeneity, by discarding individuality and subjectivity, threatens to flatten cinema, and to make it irrelevant in a world where thousands of images are generated every second.

On the other hand, I started to feel the impact that fiction had on the way I understood love, as it was clear that the idea of romantic love was deeply engraved on my subconscious. I wondered if my intense, performatic and dramatic way of loving — and falling out of love — was only a mirror of the melodramatic audiovisual culture that surrounded me as I was growing up. For someone else, who doesn't come from the Latin American context, it might be difficult to imagine the power that telenovelas — Mexican soap operas — have on the culture. To this day, melodrama floats in the air, in living rooms full with families, in kitchens where moms are making breakfast, in restaurants, in hotel lobbies, and in virtually every public space. Melodrama, in Mexico, feels and looks different than in Europe, since our melodrama is a direct

product of colonisation. It usually portrays shallow representations of race, class, and gender dynamics through a plastic, cheap, and artificial aesthetic that exoticizes Mexicanity, and in which love justifies doing anything for another person, even if it implies killing or dying for love.

So, reflecting on my practice and my relationships at this pivotal moment, and recognizing the formative role that Melodrama played in my life, I became interested in what could be discovered at that intersection. By reconsidering and engaging in a dialogue about what making cinema means — through a research process — maybe I can try to make sense of my existence as a person and as a filmmaker.











## Introduction

As a Mexican filmmaker, few things are as humiliating as being associated with telenovelas, or being called melodramatic. As a director, I tried my best to move away from this kind of extreme representation, but still my private life resembled a soap opera. So, when my loving and professional relationship came to an end, I felt that my own melodrama was finished. And, as my whole reality was tinted with the color of an intense heartbreak, I suddenly felt the need to question the genre, with the hope of understanding my life a little bit better.

This work is imagined within the particular context of Mexican audiovisual culture, where melodrama is intertwined with the culture in every possible aspect of life. Soap operas have shaped the way society interacts, starting with individual relationships, between family members and partners, and then paving the path for bigger systemic oppressions.

In the process of this research, I realised that melodramatic culture also invades every audiovisual expression in Mexico. As it happens, also art-house films are influenced by its themes, even if they attempt to work in opposition to that form of

representation. In my case as a filmmaker, I understood that I was working against melodrama, and I wondered what would happen if I could use the genre as a tool to talk about something different; something that was at the same time critical, honest, and poetic. I had the intuition that I could change the system within the system. I aimed to use melodrama to create fiction in a novel way, by pushing its boundaries, contesting its violence with reflective qualities, changing the production methodologies, and challenging the formal explorations behind it.

I love fiction, but I am still critical about the way I was taught that it should be produced. This research publication invited me to re-think the implications of representation, through critical reflection and an approach that doesn't deny, but builds upon, the conventions of Melodrama. Through essayistic methodologies, documentary practices, and experimental techniques, I apply critical theories of fictional activism<sup>1</sup>, de-colonial feminism<sup>2</sup>,

1 "Fictional activism" is an artistic term coined by UK artist filmmaker Michelle Williams Gamaker. It is centered in the practice of the restoration of marginalised characters as central figures, who return in art works as vocal protagonists challenging the fictional injustices to which they have been historically consigned.

2 Decolonial feminism is a philosophical, epistemological, academic and socio-political movement that centers on dismantling colonial ideologies and structures that perpetuate oppression, particularly for women and gender minorities.

and meta-modernism<sup>3</sup> to investigate how fiction can become a vehicle to question the ethics of representation within melodramatic production. Such a tool would aim to dismantle the hierarchical power dynamics inherent to collaboration within the image-making apparatus and reveal the violent gender relations that still operate within almost every contemporary Mexican fiction film and soap opera.

I am still in an early phase of investigating these questions. But, I would like to share some of my working methodologies, which are based on a concept I refer to as ‘melodramatic superimpositions’. These are tools that allow me to play with the tropes and grammar of fictional cinema, challenging the role of performativity inside these codes, and then, to reinterpret them (charging them with personal history and uncertainty) to create new narrative and poetic structures that reflect on the medium itself.

By dissolving the intersection between the personal and the fictional, and by using a contemporary,

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<sup>3</sup> The term “Metamodern” was first proposed by Dutch cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in their 2010 essay, *Notes on Metamodernism*, spawning a research project of the same name. It describes a cultural paradigm that oscillates between modernism and postmodernism, embracing both irony and sincerity. It blends contradictory elements like hope and doubt to create a nuanced understanding of reality.



polyphonic, and playful film language, I aim to propose a different form of melodrama. Perhaps one that, by acknowledging its perversity, can challenge its toxic knowledge, portraying a contemporary, complex, and personal way of feeling. A critical, boundary-pushing, and relevant melodrama of self-reflexive possibilities. I'm temporarily calling this genre deviation, this redemptive act of filmmaking and knowledge production proposal, the "New Melodrama": a trojan horse that makes a valid critique of the genre, through the use of the very system that is being criticized.

On a practical level, this publication is my attempt at generating a dialogue with fiction film using experimental methods. It considers what cinema could be, by questioning the medium in itself. Following a description of my understanding and use of the term Artistic Research, the rest of the text is divided into four parts.

In the first part, "On melodrama in Latin America," I dive into the genre as my contextual source of inspiration, both thematically and as an archival source which I could re-mix and formally intervene.

In the second part, "New Melodrama," I explain in

depth my current ideas, thoughts, and contradictions around the proposition.

In the third part, "Methodologies and reflections," I describe some reflections and propositions on the filmmaking practice, as well as methodological steps that I am taking in the process of making the essayistic feature film "Vera, Vera, Vera (or the bizarre behaviour of broken hearts)".

Finally, "Politics and poetics of collaboration," the fourth part, is an exploration of ideas and questions about working with friends, the idea of collective creation, and the challenges of creating in a non- hierarchical way.

The following conceptualizations don't pretend in anyway to be conclusive, they are mobile and constantly changing, since undertaking this research means to test, play, make, and dabble in the process. I am experimenting with things that are very different for me, using the medium as a thinking tool and stepping out of my comfort zone. Even if it is difficult, I have allowed myself to be playful and to enjoy the process, and this has made me re-gain the pleasure of making cinema, which was partially lost after some years of industrial practice. I have challenged myself to accept the un-

known and embrace the mystery of everyday uncertainties, which is leading me to understand that not knowing is okay, and that some answers will only come through the practice.

I'm writing this to share a process which revolves around doubt, hope, and imagination. For me, and for seven other researchers, these concepts have played a central role as we question the possibilities for the common medium that each of us loves from a unique and personal angle: cinema. Also, being afforded this level of experimentation is a huge privilege generated by these two years of freedom, during which there was no pressure on me to deliver a specific outcome.

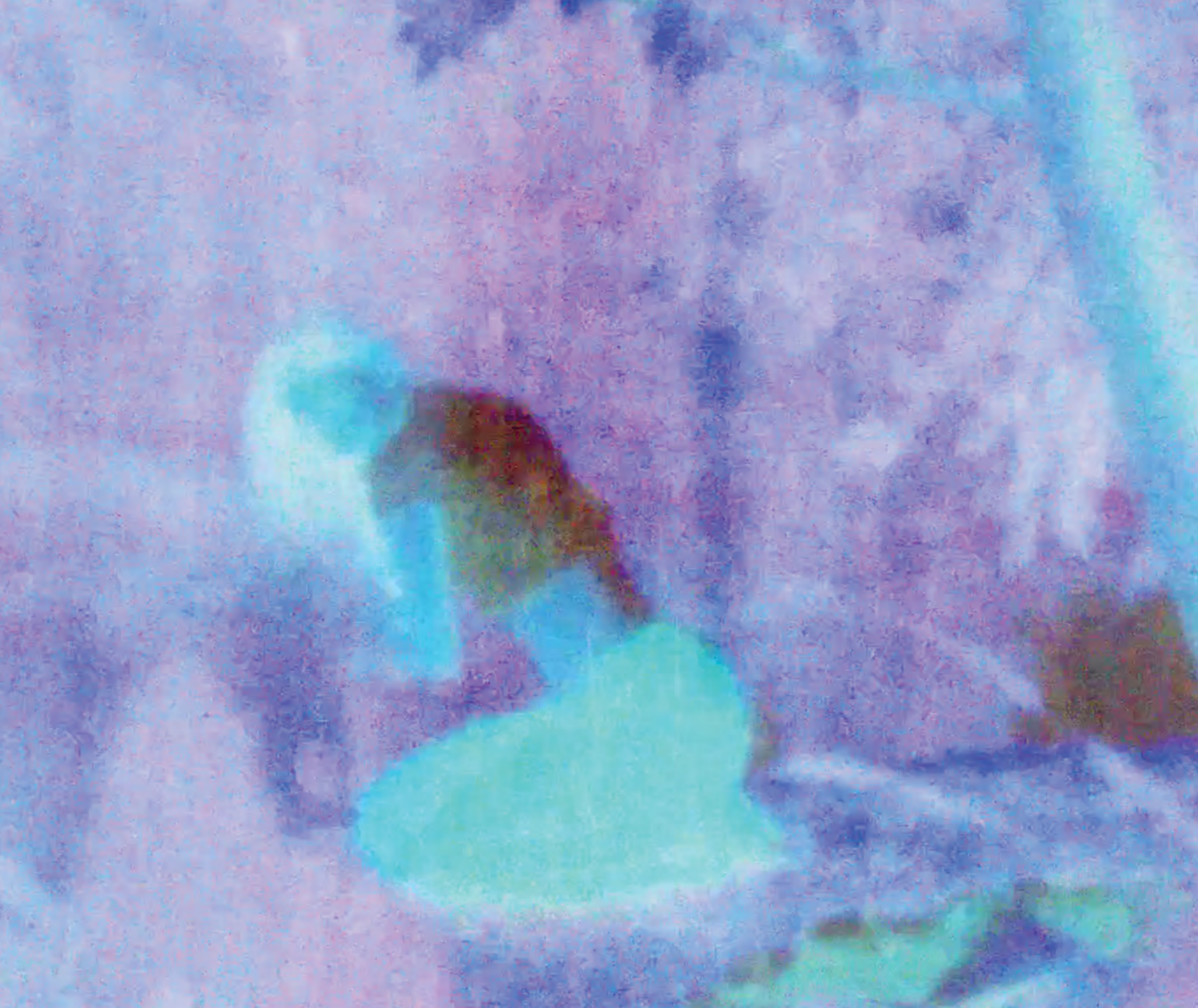
Because of the relevance of melodramatic concepts, maybe this text will speak firstly to the Mexican context, but I hope that some of its reflections can find resonance in people that, like me, are suspicious about the notion that there is only one way of making cinema.

Of course, I'm not trying to convince anyone, neither with my work nor with this publication, since the research process has just begun. This is just a personal guideline, or a set of reflections, that reflect this moment of my career, and that might very

well change in the future. More than answers, I hope to trigger new questions about a practice that I love, which I hope can change not only fiction but also reality.







## My take on Artistic Research

**“The most radical art is not protest art, but works that takes us to another place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling”.**

— Robin D.G. Kelley

Coming from the film industry, the term “Artistic Research” is difficult to understand, and the process of researching is a continuous source of frustration. At its core, it defies categorizations and embraces ambiguity. It is a continuous process of boundary-blurring, both conceptually and methodologically, where we — as researchers — are invited to challenge, interrogate and transcend conventional frameworks. In the way I understand it, “Artistic Research in and through cinema” is as an attitude, which; first of all; is deliberate in its rejection of the violent and unidirectional modes of knowledge production within academia and the film industry, seeking to carve out alternative modes of thinking through our own practice, position and experience.

On the other hand, it’s possible to see Artistic Research as an epistemological tool, in the

sense that questions how we know; and why we know certain things. With this in mind, one of the first things that I understood in this process is that knowledge production is inherently subjective. When researching, I can only aim to create some form of “non-knowledge”: a departure from the “objective” truth-seeking, that speaks only, and specifically, from my position, which is, at the same time, always changing. My knowing is always in the process of making, evolving.

Also, researching in cinema means that — besides this text — I am formulating my questions using the cinematic language. By researching through the medium, the act of inquiry is not a linear progression but rather a multifaceted exploration that has forced me to challenge conventional power structures and understand the codependent relationship between form and content. This way of working invited me to chart my own course, making a unique path that calls for uncertainty. Since many answers can only come through the practice, and even then, more questions will arrive, failure has been an integral (and permanent) part of my creative process. Through experimentation and unexpected encounters, I’m constantly walking towards the unknown in an



open-ended journey of discovery, guided by my instinct and fueled by the need to understand myself, my practice, and the complexities of the world around me.

Lastly, by opening my process and questioning the way I interact with the medium through my position, I was forced to ask myself questions concerning agency: Who is behind the camera? Who is represented? What kind of power dynamics govern my artistic interactions?



## On Melodrama in Latin America

**“Melodrama features narrative conflicts and character relationships that are often expressed through extreme and concentrated emotions. Formal elements like camera , editing and music articulate and amplify sensations in a way that draws the viewer’s engagement with the emotional fiber of the story”**

— Barbara Klinger

While Hollywood may have defined the conventions of genre cinema, it is possible that Mexicans invented soap operas as we think of them.

In Mexico, melodramatic culture is invisible. As audiences, we are blinded to its hyperbolic mode of representation because we have absorbed it into our real lives and adopted its conventions into our behaviour. Our social interactions and romantic relationships are mediated by codes that once belonged to the screen, but that now form part of our everyday lives: heteronormative relations, patriarchal modes of representation, and the

hyper-sexualization of female identities. One could argue that the proliferation of melodramatic representation, particularly through television, served as a mechanism of social control, particularly among working class audiences. By simplifying emotions and erasing complexities, melodramas accustomed audiences to readily digestible narratives, reinforcing binary roles and discouraging critical questioning of reality.

In that sense: what is the role of the audience watching melodrama? Are they just observers or do they play a part within the system? We’re all victims and oppressors in the melodrama culture, since melodrama haunts our lives, shaping our relations with concepts that we cannot shake off.

Contemporary re-formulations on the genre have become useful for narratives about how women’s agency and bodies remain tethered to patriarchal systems. Indeed, melodrama’s connection to women’s stories has been central to its reformulation in the twenty-first century. With it’s work, female latin American directors such as Lucrecia Mariel, Lucia Puenzo and Alejandra Marquez Abella, confront melodramatic representation, claiming it as an oppositional force to their own storytelling and utilising it as a tool for exposing and dismantling patriarchal



structures, thereby reclaiming the genre as a platform for feminist storytelling. On the other hand, some other re-formulations of melodramatic tropes, such as Clara Anastacia's <sup>1</sup> "Melodrama Decolonial"<sup>2</sup> in Brazil (with its first film "Escasso" premiering in the Rotterdam film Festival, where I watched it for the first time), put the focus on regaining agency of the race discourse by foregrounding the blackness on and off screen, through a contemporary, playful, meta cinematographic and joyful — yet critical — approach. The ongoing dialogue between melodrama and gender norms also underscores its significance for questioning heteronormativity, especially when LGBTQ and non-binary voices shape the dialogue.

In this context: what's the significance of using melodrama as a site of resistance and negotiation even when coming from the same demographic — call it male, heteronormative, white, or privileged — group of people that has used the genre to inflict violence and control? I dare to say that fighting, subverting, and contesting melodramatic conventions, is part

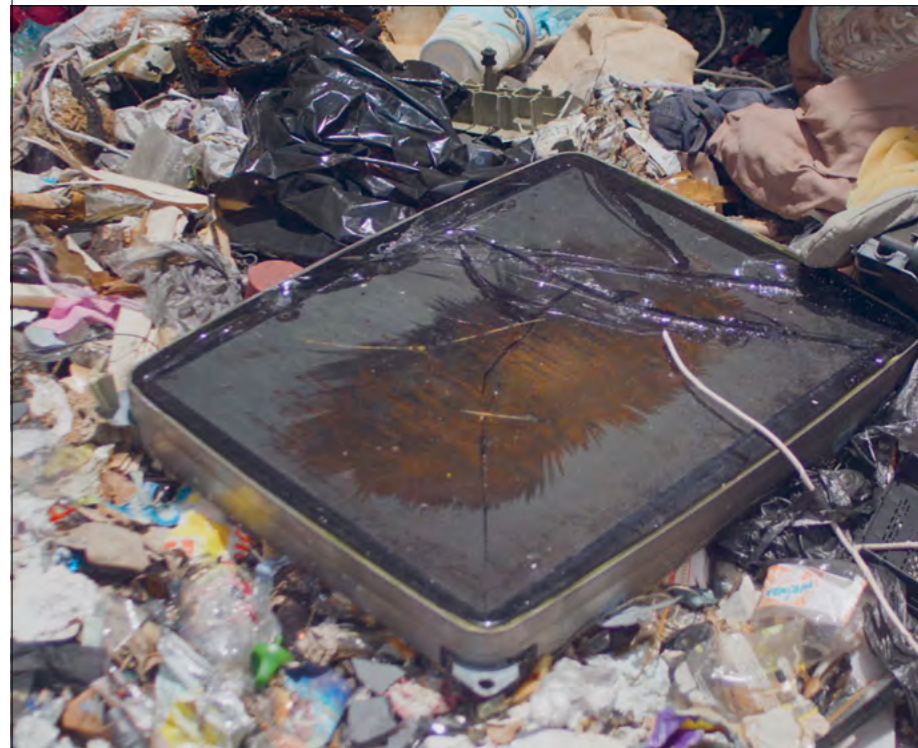
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1 Clara Anastácia was born in Pavuna, a suburb of Rio de Janeiro, and is a screenwriter and filmmaker. Self-taught, she has been developing work aimed at inclusion and diversity. She is the creator of the "Melodrama Decolonial" concept.

2 An artistic and academic approach coined by artist, filmmaker and academic Clara Anastacia, which explores "...How the melodrama genre is reconfigured in audiovisual narratives, serving as a decolonial weapon for a new cinematic language that evokes a different path: from scarcity to the original source".

of the Latin American filmmaker's chronic struggle against entrenched patriarchal ideologies. By having a voice, I feel endowed with the responsibility of — at least — undressing the melodramatic machinery in order to reduce its power over the audience.

While filmmakers can distance themselves from melodramatic forms and themes, taking into account the vast audience appeal and cultural influence of melodrama opens the door to consider its potential as a politically effective genre: a vehicle for social critique and change. I wonder: can melodrama be strategically employed to address social and political issues in contemporary society?



What does it mean to superimpose?

## **super (im) positions**

I'm

### **Positions**

#### **impositions**

Going back to the basics of audiovisual history; superimpositions are the cinematic equivalent of palimpsests<sup>3</sup>, in the way that Palimpsests “rely on the core principle of in(ter)dependency, wherein each element or layer is both independent and interdependent, inherently affecting the significance of other elements around it and being affected in turn by those other elements” (Luedke, 2021).

Moving forward in time, when Jean Luc Godard<sup>4</sup> stated that “there is not an image. There are only images. And there is a certain form of the assemblage of images... There are only relations of images”, he was certainly pointing towards the act of juxtaposing, but also other forms of editing,

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<sup>3</sup> A palimpsest is a manuscript or a piece of writing material (such as a parchment or tablet) used one or more times, on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Luc Godard was a French and Swiss film director, screenwriter, and film critic. He rose to prominence as a pioneer of the French New Wave film movement of the 1960s.

among them, superimpositions, which are a fundamental part of the “Godardian” montage as they amount to the sum of all possible means with which to make meaningful associations between images. When superimposing, images are not connected according to the rules of logical association based on the spatial and causal relationships between “parts” and a “whole”. Instead, images are integrated in a new “continuum”<sup>5</sup> in which they directly confront one another in the network of continual transformations.

Superimpositions produce new associations between disparate images. By combining two images, a third one is created: a new dimension that lives in between two others. In that sense, superimpositions work in the same spirit as the soviet dialect theory of montage, but without necessarily including cuts. Quoting again one of Godard’s major concepts about montage, “One image does not necessarily show. A true image is a group of images”. But superimpositions, in the framework of this research, are not just an editing tool, but also a conceptual device that aims to subvert melodramatic conventions through a polyphony of voices.

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<sup>5</sup> A continuum is something that changes in character gradually or in very slight stages without any clear dividing points.

Superimpositions create layers of imagined space in which opposites can have a dialogue where everything is a fictional construction: presence and representation, reality and imagination, matter and dreams. Superimposing is about portraying the multiplicity of times, by gathering and superimposing co-existing temporalities. In the act, the resulting image makes a “membrane” where different layers of the fluid time and space can overlap and coexist simultaneously on top of each other, like stratification of different moments that trigger complex connections through an act of collapsing time. Superimpositions also use sound to expand the meaning, experience, narrative and tone of the images.

When superimposing, everything exists in the same place, creating a kaleidoscopic multiplicity of perspectives, narratives and vantage points. But this interdimensional encounter occurs only in a virtual way; it only exists inside cinema.

The result of superimposing images is that elements of both fascination and uncertainty, are released through an immediate, synthetic relation that forces the audience to see from different visual, auditive and conceptual perspectives. This transformation dismantles the viewer’s trust in the image’s

transparency, while also exploding its material registers to create a feeling of tension, a shock effect evocative of silent cinema’s “double exposures”. While this anchors superimpositions to the History of cinema, they are also “emblematic of the post-cinematic conditions under which today’s cinema redefines and transforms itself by negotiating with and containing its neighboring media forms, functions, and aesthetics” (Kim 2018).

Superimpositions, in this case, are one of the formal methodologies proposed in the conceptual framework of the “New Melodrama”, described in the next part.









The new melodrama

**“...To celebrate melodrama as a radical aesthetic strategy to offer a social critique of our times, one that is visually splendid and tragic, grand and raw.”**

— Karim Aïnouz

With this research, I investigate new possibilities for fiction within my context (Mexican cinema) through the use of irony, personal sincerity and incorporating the unknown in the making. This need of change points towards the “new”, in a genre that I am fluent in as a viewer and as a maker: the melodrama.

As a part of my process, and understanding art as a form of contribution and innovation, I’m daring to propose a new term: a genre-bending deviation that only starts to exist in the framework of this Artistic Research, but that is influenced by an expansive genealogy of critical studies, experimental art practices, and film theories. My proposal is to explore the idea of a new melodrama: a cross-border, image-making guideline to subvert the melodramatic representation through personal uncertainties; without necessarily seeking answers, but instead,

proposing working methodologies, intuitions, and useful contradictions that have been helpful in the making of my own future cinematic vocabulary.

The ideas behind this “new melodrama” are born from the desire to push cinema to its ontological, aesthetic, and material limits. To “undomesticate” fiction by rethinking the grammar of melodrama. To make a conceptual defamiliarization of its representational modes by collapsing their meaning.

Behind all my thoughts and reflections, I’m putting my personal experience as a lover and as a filmmaker, which is directly influenced by the way I lived and conceptualised my heartbreak story. I’m conceiving this to test a form of multimedia poetry that could push narrative cinema closer to its borders by proposing methodological and political concepts that could help me subvert and weaponise conventions of the melodramatic genre. This comes from a personal need to be self-reflective on hetero-patriarchial narrative forms, to question binary roles and the desire to find a different way of producing films, through a cinema of friendship, resistance and liberation. The proposition is to use melodrama as a trojan horse <sup>6</sup>: a simple de-

<sup>6</sup> In Greek mythology, the Trojan Horse was a wooden horse said to have been used by the Greeks during the Trojan War to enter the city of Troy and win the war.

vice that opens the possibility for a representational antidote to the melodramatic poison. Making a systematic critique but by using the same system that is being critiqued.

In this way, the new melodrama takes a simple concept (subverting melodramatic representations of love and multiplies it) until several layers of formal complexity start popping out.

*What's "new" about melodrama?*

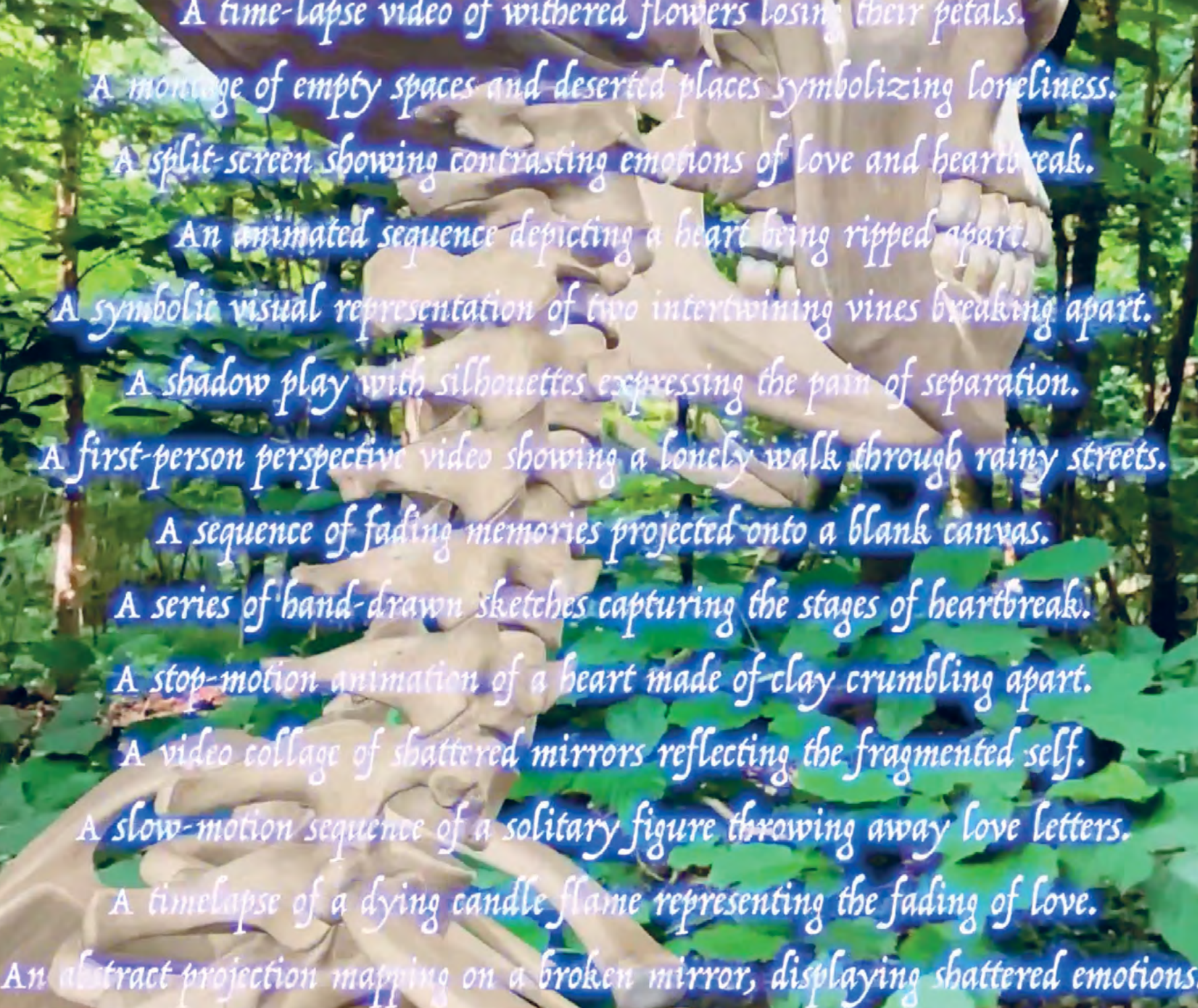
Traditional melodrama is known by its excess in diegetic <sup>7</sup> emotions, drama (the plot) and aesthetics, including set designs, costumes, and makeup. In contrast, what I'm trying to convey with the new melodrama proposition is to apply this excess directly onto the medium itself, manipulating time, space, pace, and rhythm to create a highly sensorial experience. It only points to melodramatic conventions such as framing, acting, and editing, not to retain their original meanings but to expose and deconstruct them, twisting them until they are undone, unbound and demystified. This process of subversion involves breaking the conventional melodramatic contract while using its emotional impact to redefine its significance.

<sup>7</sup> Diegesis is a style of fiction storytelling which presents an interior view of a world in which the narrator presents the actions of the characters to the audience.

While melodramas are continuous, and stand for continuity — like a literary novel — the new melodrama should be fragmented and poetic, emphasizing formal experimentation over narrative continuity. It needs to transform melodramatic tropes into vehicles for discussing broader societal issues such as male violence, patriarchal oppression, and colonialism. It's meant to spark discussions about the power dynamics at play both on and off the screen, addressing intersectional questions of race, gender, and power, thus subverting the genre from within.

Even if I recognise the need to be critical and reflective, I don't want to reproduce corrosive realities that might be unbearable. Instead, I would like to create imaginaries: cinematic infrastructures that only hint or suggest what the world could be, critiquing the past (and present) with an eye toward a possible utopian future.

In the wake of machismo violence in Mexico, where on average 10 women are killed every day from passion crimes — resulting in over 3,400 femicides last year (ONU Mujeres, 2024) — maybe the poetic knowledge of cinema can find its social relevance by foregrounding the overwhelming complicity that melodramas — especially soap operas — have in preserving patriarchal, heteronormative and co-



A time-lapse video of withered flowers losing their petals.

A montage of empty spaces and deserted places symbolizing loneliness.

A split-screen showing contrasting emotions of love and heartbreak.

An animated sequence depicting a heart being ripped apart.

A symbolic visual representation of two intertwining vines breaking apart.

A shadow play with silhouettes expressing the pain of separation.

A first-person perspective video showing a lonely walk through rainy streets.

A sequence of fading memories projected onto a blank canvas.

A series of hand-drawn sketches capturing the stages of heartbreak.

A stop-motion animation of a heart made of clay crumbling apart.

A video collage of shattered mirrors reflecting the fragmented self.

A slow-motion sequence of a solitary figure throwing away love letters.

A timelapse of a dying candle flame representing the fading of love.

An abstract projection mapping on a broken mirror, displaying shattered emotions.



lonial structures. In this sense, the new melodrama intends to be a revolt, an emancipation of the old ways of thinking and making fictional narratives in Mexico. For me, its power might lie in the potential for redemption: Art making and film optimism despite of despair and injustice. It reminds me that things don't need to remain as they are. That's why I want to address melodramatic violence and artificiality through the opposite mechanisms: care, kindness and tenderness. Bringing a personal vulnerability to the filmmaking process as a discourse in itself.

Contemporary methods of capturing images also bring new possibilities for change. The better technology gets at capturing the "reality", the more it allows me to manipulate the interpretation of that reality. As I acknowledge the need to make films that are not trying to be a reflection of reality, but a composition of it, I'm proposing a formal approach that looks into the past and the future at the same time: on one hand, investigating melodramatic historical and ontological specificities, while on the other hand expanding into other media, diverse capturing formats and contemporary art methodologies, which can mix realism and artifice. In this sense, the new melodrama is intended to be both cinematic and post cinematic, embracing the grey area within tradition and innovation.





### *Principles and goals*

Once again, the new melodrama is just a term that I'm proposing with the goal of using cinema as a transformative tool and a space to challenge hegemonic forms of representation. It is political because it disrupts the genre, defies storytelling expectations, and alters production methods. It's oppositional because it facilitates devices of deconstruction and (in)communication. It is "undisciplinary", because it disobeys the "rules" of traditional filmmaking and questions the motivations (why do I want to do this? What does it mean to me?) and the ways of making it (how am I crafting these images and sounds?).

I aimed to create a polyphony of voices by superimposing distinct vantage points, using an aesthetic of heterogeneity and uncertainty, which jumps between different narrative levels and pushes the viewer to be out of balance. By using different languages, I try to make the audience think differently, dissolving the traditional melodramatic language and changing thought structures by shifting the position from where we see, hear, feel and understand the audiovisual language. This approach replaces, at least to a certain extent, manipulation for aesthetic experience, prioritizing the experiential over the explanatory

and emphasizing sensation — the unleashed flow of emotions that operate beneath conscious thought and bypass our rational minds.

Instead of a moment of planned execution, I'm using the shooting as a place for discovery, letting myself be driven by desire and putting the unknown in the centre, while channeling love and imagination. This way of shooting is porous in the sense that it allows reality to filtrate through it, by collapsing the boundaries between scripted moments, documentary footage, essayistic moments and imagination; resulting in something that can not be easily classified. I'm using doubt as a space for the audience to feel and experience the work in a way that challenges melodramatic representation.

Being humans, we are storyteller animals. We tend to find narratives everywhere, as our associative minds search from causality between unrelated phenomena. The link between A and B is our own subjective experience of the world and thus, we're creating the connections inside ourselves. I realise that, as a filmmaker, I can use that to my advantage. I don't need to make the links, as the audience will still work to make them. In fact, I think that the less present a link is in the narrative,

the harder the audience will work to create it. This activates the audience through the creation of an open space.

I consider that, since narrative is an inherent quality of cinema — even the most experimental expanded cinema pieces have a beginning and an end, while narrative is created by the viewer's brain by the mere existence of a cut — it's not on the story-telling, but the formal choices we choose, that we as artists can truly innovate within the medium. This has encouraged me to take typical melodramatic film structures and start making small formal changes, one by one, until the form reached a certain level of disorientation. Sometimes being extremely specific and other times, embracing open-mindedness. With this proposition, I want to make a cinema that creates space and opens possibilities for imagination. By not being didactic, and opening the narrative, I'm trying to give space for the audience to project their own meaning and, above all, to feel.

Opening space means embracing emptiness as opposed to saturation. Traditional Mexican melodramas fill every aspect of the narrative, in the sense that we're told what the characters are feeling, with quite a predicable form. There is an over saturation

of imposed emotional and narrative meaning, but a shallow, obvious and repetitive formal execution. I'm proposing doing exactly the opposite: making an over-saturation of formal experiments, but trying to leave the narrative meaning as "empty" as possible, opening space for interpretation, not pretending to control the way the audience should feel or think about what they are experiencing.

Even if the concept is in-the-making, I do know that the new melodrama is inconclusive. By creating a space beyond what is shown, and using images that are more "tentative" than "definitive", it praises the incomplete in the sense that its form denies certainties, but allows for options and possibilities. The "openness" then, invites the audience to enter the film and to inhabit it with their own thoughts and subjective experiences.

In a way, this open journey — on which the audience becomes active spectators who need to learn for themselves — can allow them to question their own assumptions and to create their own film, by imagining a new world. The narrative, in this aspect, is not trying to convey anything in particular. Meaning and interpretation can break free from my impositions.



## Methodologies and reflections

As one of my main methodologies during the research, I developed this manifesto, as a personal guideline to help me navigate through the process of shooting, writing and editing the film project “Vera, Vera, Vera (or the bizarre behaviour of broken hearts)”. It summarises some thoughts that anchored my position, which I’m sharing to serve as a base for other methodologies in the following sections.

### *New melodrama manifesto*

1. *As a Mexican artist, I recognise the influence of Melodramatic representations in every aspect of my life, on my way to understanding love and relationships.*
2. *I see the force of storytelling in my life and in the lives of others. I admit my affection for the Melodramatic genre, and still, I need to be critical towards it.* <sup>8</sup>
3. *I understand that Melodrama was a vehicle to install violent ideas in me, through racist, misogynistic, heteronormative, patriarchal, colonial and classist representations of life.*

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<sup>8</sup> The UK artist-filmmaker Michelle Williams Gamaker coined the term “critical affection,” an ambivalent position involving both aesthetic appreciation and a recognition of the racial injustices and structural violence embedded within the film industry of the time and imprinted on the celluloid. She shared this concept, among others, in the Workshop “Filmmaking as Fictional Activism”, during the academic activities of the Master of Film – Artistic Research in and through cinema, of the Netherlands Film Academy.

4. *I recognise the need to questioning the power relations within the context of image-making production.*
5. *I acknowledge the power of emotions and the need to make art that stimulates our sensations.*
6. *I will produce images, sounds and meaning that answer to - and acknowledge - the position where I’m speaking from.*
7. *I will not hide my racial, socio-economic class or academic privilege.*
8. *I understand that I cannot dismantle Melodrama working only within the Diegesis of storytelling, or having an invisible narrator. So, I will generate a polyphony of narrative voices, through the use of documentary practices, meta-filmmaking, abundance of formats and materiality.*
9. *I will use the quotidian, the every day life, chance and unpredictability as my main sources of inspiration.*<sup>9</sup>
10. *I will challenge the melodramatic conventions of representation, both on and off screen, i.e., during the processes, methodologies and production circumstances behind my images and sounds, as well as during the distribution and exhibition of them.*

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<sup>9</sup> This idea was inspired by the Workshop “Interconnected Uncertainties”, that the Argentinian filmmaker Eduardo “Teddy” Williams gave during the academic activities of the Master of Film – Artistic Research in and through cinema, of the Netherlands Film Academy. Born in 1987, Teddy first studied at Universidad del Cine in Buenos Aires, and then in Fresnoy, France, under the tutorship of Portuguese director Miguel Gomes. He used his theory of interconnected uncertainties in the development of his films “The human surge” and “The human surge 3”





I am making this project at a moment in my career where I wonder what artistic expression through the cinematic medium could become. I started from where I was (in a new place, being a foreigner, confused, disoriented and heartbroken). I didn't know what exactly I wanted but I did know what I didn't like: I needed to run away from traditional storytelling, from continuity in fiction and from an industrial way of producing. I was at a point in my life where I didn't want to lose time doing something that I didn't believe in and I was interested in creating something that could help me grow and help the world, rather than just entertaining an audience.

Having my long-time references contested, I started to work with the form of an essay film <sup>10</sup>, understanding it as the radical suspension of the signifying regimes under which certain images are traditionally imagined. By working with essayistic methodologies, I'm also trying to pull the audience's imagination out of the frame: building worlds beyond the screen.

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10 An essay film is a hybrid genre that combines elements of documentary and fiction to explore ideas, themes, and personal reflections in a more subjective and expressive manner. This genre is characterized by its use of various cinematic techniques, such as voiceover narration, personal anecdotes, archival footage, interviews, and experimental visuals, to present a narrative that is less focused on traditional storytelling and more on the exploration of concepts and the filmmaker's personal viewpoint.

I'm using the tools of fiction to help me think about what could have happened in my past love story, and what could happen with my characters. Using filmmaking as a motif that helps me to make sense of life and the time spent on a relationship. The film project "Vera, Vera Vera (or the bizarre behaviour of broken hearts)" was the path that I found for channeling the breakup story and turning it into a prism that refracts different perspectives on melodramatic representation, making a rupture on reality, shifting narration and stylistic modes.

The temporality of the film project is non-linear, as it bounces freely through space and time, changing registers through the use of different narrative voices. The film questions my own relationship with the "official narration", as it makes clear that nothing is objective because it foregrounds a fluctuating notion of the self: the consciousness that guides the narration is unstable, volatile. There are different kinds of "voices" and vantage points embodied. There is a loss of the "I" in the narrative devices.

The film has an extremely simple plot: a filmmaker tries to make a film in order to overcome a romantic separation, and in the process of doing so,







falls in love again. But actually, I think that the film is not about something, but instead, it tries to do something to the audience. Even if I'm framing it within the concepts of the melodrama, the film is not about love, but about how narrators relate to the representation of love. By tuning melodrama and finding melodramatic resonance in my life, I'm using the film to understand the relationship between love, its representation and filmmaking, while navigating the ethics of my own positionality.

The film became the container of my research, and my way to engage practically with my concepts through the material practice. I thought that everything could go into it, as long as it was related to my research interests. The iterative nature of the project, allows me to go back; the "unused" ideas of a certain version can be reused in a later iteration of the project, or possibly, make its way into a totally different project. I didn't start the film with the idea of making a masterpiece, and I'm still in the process of finding the essence of it, since I became more interested in the scattered, the fragmented, and the cumulative.

By avoiding rigid dichotomies between the traditional phases of industrial filmmaking (writing/shooting/ editing), by making the characters indis-

tinguishable from the actors and by merging the act of filmmaking with everyday life, this film allowed me to reclaim the day-to-day as a form of creation. By becoming my sketchbook, my container and my social connection, this film is part of a continuous thinking practice in which the material and conceptual explorations happened in-the-making. One in which I also include myself and my process in the work through an intertwined, open-ended investigation, which most likely, will result in an open-ended object.

Most of the time, the process of making this film has been chaotic and confusing, without knowing exactly what the outcome would be. I have been shooting this film without a script and without "production" money, but I did have a lot of time, trust and the conviction that friendship, love and intuition would eventually put everything in the right place. Although it represented new challenges, for me — coming from the more conventional filmmaking practice — making a film where imagination and playfulness are welcome to exist in the process, has been absolutely freeing.

I had to surrender to the idea that the process would lead me to find an object and a story, and I needed to be comfortable with discomfort. Some

of the experiments that I was running, didn't make sense in an immediate way, because the connections were not obvious. I was shooting using my subconscious, without over-thinking or analyzing. Mostly, intuition was guiding the images and sounds that I collected, framing chance as an organisational device in my research. I needed to trust that the process and the narrative (the heartbroken filmmaker making a film about love) would link up with each other afterwards, slowly focusing and narrowing my search. I am shooting only moments, fragments of a film that could function on their own as stand-alone pieces, but that could also be part of a larger narrative in a linear timeline (because I established the same creative boundaries and methodological guidelines).

Even when my intuition told me that I was working around one big project, for a long time, the film has contained "holes" without clear scenes or information. I am still sitting on the side of discomfort and I need to be happy with that. Sometimes, I feel stuck, dealing with boredom and frustration. It is only later that I can fill those "holes", but I always need time and perspective to continue developing the narrative, using the editing software as my writing methodology.

During the process, I praise the mistakes, and my goal is to be ready to capture the moment in which "errors" come into the *mise-en-scène*<sup>11</sup>, creating a contrast between the intentionality of planned representation and the spontaneity of the unexpected moment.

Even if the whole project is being guided by open-endedness, it started from a central point, which was my emotional /sensorial state. I wondered how my filmmaking process was entangled with my personal life. I didn't know exactly what I was looking for, but I knew where the emotion started. Incorporating contradiction and intuition, I decided to trust the process and to explore serendipity, with an associative approach, relational thinking and a sort of hyperlinking mindset, in which revelatory connections between disparate elements and ideas started linking one to one, until forming a branching structure that slowly revealed, just by repetition and iteration, the main forms and contents of my research process. By abandoning the aspiration of creating something that made sense, something new appeared. I needed to understand inspiration retroactively, because the connections were made

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<sup>11</sup> *Mise-en-scène* is a French concept that –when used in cinema – refers to the arrangement of everything that appears in the frame of a film shot. This includes the set design, lighting, space, costume, and the positioning and movement of actors.

after the shooting process. In this sense, editing is a research tool, and also a writing methodology in which I can connect to a more logical part of my thinking, figuring out what was the meaning and importance of a shot afterwards. Working like this, I'm not letting the deception of my judgement complicate my image-making creation.

On a conceptual level, I'm interested in two worlds: on one side, the fascination for melodramatic imagery and on the other, the revealing of the process behind its production in the physical environment. By rethinking the "behind the scenes" and dismantling the idea of the "invisible camera", the narrative includes the idea of labor. While traditionally, fiction relies on the suspension and erasure of the film crew, in this film the effort behind the image-making apparatus becomes a central part of the plot. Therefore, the film plays with the "classi-

cal idea" of cinema (continuity editing, hiding the means of production, making the audience "fall" for the story) for some moments, but it breaks this form constantly by revealing the mechanisms behind it. The form is constantly playing with expectations and what the audience expects from a "normal" film.

Making this film also means writing it on the spot, since I'm not using a script, but a simple outline that only needed to have all the resonances and excesses of a classic melodrama: a journey, postponement and tragedy, betrayal, fidelity, guilt, heartbreak, love and "melos" <sup>12</sup>. Since I have unpredictable sources of footage, and new scenes are emerging from the most unexpected places, I decided to have one thread that could bring together the different experiments. It takes the form of a nar-

<sup>12</sup> melos: the Greek word for music





rator — a consciousness that is also editing the images we see — trying to make sense of his life, by making this film.

As a structuring device, I'm proposing ten chapters that are inspired by the narrative of Mexican Melodramas <sup>13</sup>. These, together with one prologue (in which I'm trying to disclose the tools and interfaces before inviting the audience to the fiction) and one epilogue (where the narrator is revealed), make a total of 12 parts that follow the logic of a soap opera dramatic arch.

#### *Formal choices*

Regarding the formal choices, the project lies at the intersection of two different melodramatic codes: the "aura" of high-end Mexican golden-era films (made after the 1940s) <sup>14</sup>, that had high production values and were shot on analogue film, and the "cheap" telenovela aesthetics, which are made for the Television — usually on a budget, and in a rush. These soap operas always use an over-saturated, plastic and cliché look that became a source of inspiration in the research process,

<sup>13</sup> In Mexico, telenovelas are transmitted in one-hour episodes, every day, for a long period of time.

<sup>14</sup> The Mexican Golden Age of Cinema, known as "Época de Oro del Cine Mexicano," was a prolific period in Mexican filmmaking that roughly spanned from the 1930s to the 1950s. This era is celebrated for its significant cultural impact, high-quality productions, and the emergence of iconic filmmakers and actors who contributed to the global recognition of Mexican cinema.

which started operating on a heightened multi-sensorial level, achieved by means of saturated colours, sounds and superimpositions.

For me, researching means making a laboratory, and using every chance that I have to shoot and experiment with multiple registers and methodologies, with the belief that "everything can be cinema" (Brody, 2008). Quite early in the process, I understood that the film was able to contain lots of different registers and ideas, both in a narrative way and in the formal approach.

I'm producing images in ways that are new to me, exploring the tools at my disposition with different capabilities: cameras, softwares, sensors, emulations, film stocks and archive footage form a heterogenous palette that contributes to the form in a technical and political way. I explored a huge pool of melodramatic constellations: From the true "cinematic" 16mm film footage of a Bolex <sup>15</sup> camera, passing by the high-end 6K footage of professional digital cinema devices, all the way to augmented reality, broken phone 3D scans, fried handycam sensors and pinhole <sup>16</sup> cameras. The project became a kaleidoscope of different ma-

<sup>15</sup> A brand and a type of motion picture film camera widely used by filmmakers, particularly in the mid-20th century.

<sup>16</sup> A pinhole camera is a simple type of camera that uses a tiny aperture—a pinhole—instead of a lens to capture images.

terials and heterogeneous image sources that invoke, question and problematize the melodramatic representation. In this audiovisual collage of palimpsestic images, very different formats asked for different ways of working, thus reverberating in the way I was seeing and feeling each different approach. This way of putting things together slowly made a map in which the emotions were the navigational tool between different moments; in a cartography of pain that aims to make the film feel like a heartbreak.

I aimed to find lyric poetry in everyday life: looking for self-contained moments of ephemeral, unclosed beauty that speak about so much more than just the “story” of the film, generating moments of encounter with the ordinary, yet overwhelming reality. I made an effort to look at the ordinary in an extraordinary way, trying to defamiliarise the quotidian: in the film, a shell can become a communication device, a lamp can start have an intercontinental dance with an old tire, and an elevator can transport us to another dimension. By removing objects from the automatised perception, cinema allows me to bring new light into them; through editing and superimposing different meanings.

During these two years of experimentation, I was always bringing a camera with me to capture the reali-

ty, but filtrated by my own subjective research process and in an attempt to tune my emotional radar, to be more and more sensitive towards my environment. Using everyday moments in the shooting process allowed me to challenge their meaning and find things that I was not originally looking for. It also invited me to be surprised by otherwise “normal moments” with my characters: sometimes, just letting time pass by with some cameras by our side. After all, tediousness is one the most beautiful things that you can experience with someone: aren’t we all, when in love, craving for “wasting” time with our lover?

Which events are worthy of being narrated? By giving more time to quotidian things, to moments that are never “used” in fiction, I try to sig-









nify them in a way that traditional melodramas would never do, and that are more associated to a certain kind of slow cinema <sup>17</sup> or art house films. The process of collecting the extensive amount of footage and accumulating several hours of material was already an analytical task. It allowed me to — in a further step — mix the simple and mundane with the complex and grandiloquent; with the potential of opening new layers of complexity.

I'm also playing with the appropriation of films and soap operas, but adding some digital and analogical intervention. The audiovisual fragments of these films are used in a way that they no longer belong to the narrative strategies of the representative mode, but belong instead to the territory of the material sensation. The archival sources stop working in the realm of fiction and are treated as matter. In this case, choosing the materials is more important than creating them.

With the film, I want to articulate new questions without necessarily providing answers. By mixing a lot of different sources, I start to articulate imaginary geographies, distorted realities, and emotional

<sup>17</sup> Slow cinema is a film movement characterized by its deliberate pacing, minimalist style, and contemplative approach to storytelling. This style emphasizes long takes, minimal narrative action, and a focus on the passage of time, inviting viewers to engage deeply with the images and sounds on screen.

cartographies of love and pain. This approach helps me to deal with the pain inflicted by melodramatic violence, both in my own life and in the context where I learned how to love.

### *Positioning and subjectivity*

This research process also explores the relationship between a male filmmaker and the female main character in the film. There is a certain film History baggage to this director-actress relationship, and a cinematic genealogy that generates a tension <sup>18</sup> between my characters and me, because even if I try to be a nice and self-critical man, I'm still a man making a film, pointing my camera towards a woman. This reflection led me to re-think my relationality towards the performers. Besides using casting methodologies as a narrative tool, there are political implications behind the casting choices. Choosing my actors, even if guided by serendipity and chance, brought totally different experiences, cultural backgrounds and associations to the project.

I met Mei Liu and Malaz Usta just as I arrived to Amsterdam. They were my peers in the Master programme. The day we met, Mei gave me a little quartz

<sup>18</sup> The History of cinema is fraught with a complex and often problematic dynamic between male directors and actresses, shaped by broader societal norms, power structures, and gender relations. This “baggage” reflects issues of power imbalance, objectification, exploitation, and the impact on the representation of women in film.

crystal that she got in Mexico as a present and that same day, I shared a room with Malaz. We became friends quite quickly. Casting Mei allowed me to work with my best friend in my new life, but also to see the Latin American melodramatic tradition in a new light, looking at it as an outsider would do it: a female, foreign Chinese gaze on the Mexican romantic values perpetrated by melodramatic fiction films and soap operas. It was an active way to find a new point of view and understand things in a different way. On the other hand, casting Malaz was just natural,

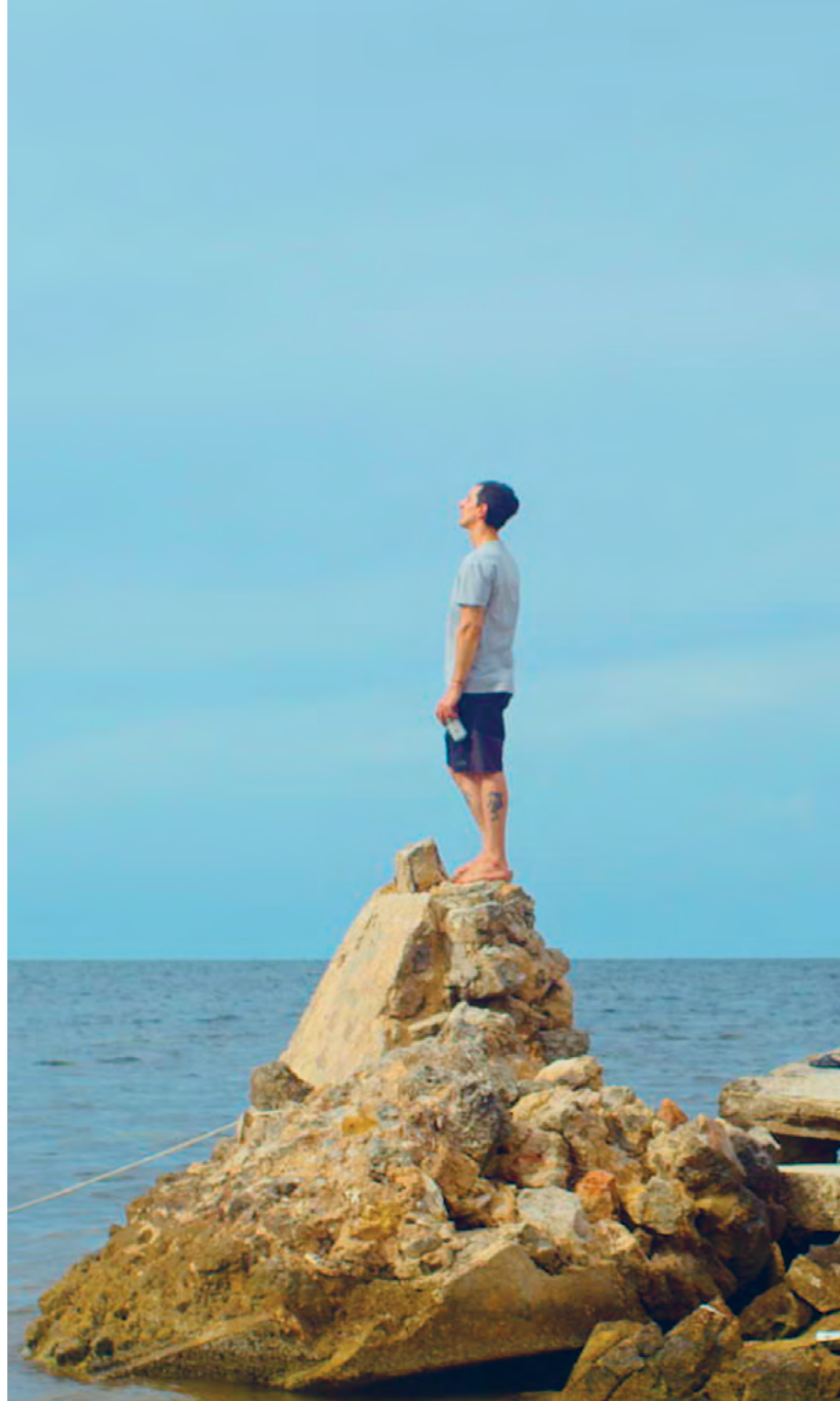
since the three of us were hanging out together a lot, and I started shooting him, observing through my lens how our relations were evolving.

By making the film with my MA peers, I have been able to hear their feedback, and for me it's important to allow them to express their opinion, giving them agency by not putting in the film things that they don't want. I wanted to give them the opportunity to decide how they are represented: how are they portrayed, what is shown of them, and even how I'm



using the Color correction to show their skin tones. With the other two actors, serendipity and experience guided the casting process. I met Valeryia Le after one of the work days with Mei. We were hungry after a shooting, and Valeryia was working in a restaurant near the Filmacademie, where we study. She was the kindest person to us, and after a couple of minutes talking to her — and realising she was a professional performer —, I invited her to collaborate. By working with her, I started thinking about using choreographic methodologies, and reflecting on the artificial (female) human body movement that melodramatic fiction produces.

On the other hand, I've known David Calderón for a long time, since he was one of the main actors of my first feature film, "Ana's Desire" (2019). I wanted to work with him again, and I found that, in the context of my research, he could add an interesting layer to the project, since he had witnessed my past process as director, and also had seen how I interacted with my collaborators, including my ex partner and producer. By making his character an editor, I was trying to foreground the manipulative process of montage in the narrative, and it was important to shed some light on the male perspective of romantic love, imposed by melodrama.





### *Working with actors*

I worked closely with my four actors, without forgetting that they were also my friends. The camera acted as an intermediary between me — both as director and character — and them. The lens is put in the space of dialogue between us, serving as a form of non-verbal communication: I see them, they know I see them through the camera, and we have a small ritual, a shared live choreography in which we follow each other.

I explored the idea that people are always performing themselves, and acknowledging their desire to be represented in a specific way. In this sense, imagination and playfulness are allowed, since we're not looking at the reality anymore: we're in the medium. We're making a film.

Another methodology I employed was reframing without cutting <sup>19</sup>. Even if I used this tool very little in the editing, it significantly influenced my collaboration with the actors, creating a sense of urgency similar to the one that came with the analogue shooting in 16mm: each take was unique and unrepeatable. By doing this, we tried to surf representation as a wave: diving into it, and coming out of

19 In the sense that traditional fiction-making uses several shots, with different angles (each one made separately) to narrate a scene; while I included the re-framing, directing notes and "lost time" in the same continuous shot.

it to see the reality, to capture the presence of the actors, without their mascara, mistakes and truth in their raw state. I played with the idea that they were permanently performing themselves as characters. Also, I let their personal biographies contribute to the research, since they all came from different backgrounds and experiences.

### *Camera and cinematography*

Throughout this process, in which I have constantly filmed my friends, I wonder how the presence of a camera affects our friendship — does it strengthen it or make it fake? Perhaps the camera can capture subtle nuances missed by the naked eye, breaking down the walls of performativity. By having the camera as a mediator, I kept myself in a permanent state of shooting: adhering to a strict discipline of always having the image-capture device with me (nowadays we all have phones, but I tried to have at least an extra handycam). This presence allowed me to witness and capture my surroundings, observing the relationships between my subjects — my friends — until something unexpected happened. My aim was to capture these moments without being invasive, flowing within the events and maintaining their natural course. I asked myself: how am I using the camera? As a power tool? Or as a tool for communicating with others?



When thinking about cinematography, I wanted to create a free flow of camera movement, sound, shapes, color and distinct formats. When shooting “planned” sequences, I tried to have as many cameras, with different textures and ways of interacting, shooting at the same time. Some of the cameras were in the diegetic space of fiction and some of them pointed towards me as a maker.

By making the setup obvious, I wanted to reveal the artificiality of melodrama’s mise-en-scène. In this way, the very simple story concept of the heartbreak story of a filmmaker was a guide that, by being multiplied in different contexts, started generating some layers of complexity.

While I’m exploring in a very deliberate way the difference (and possibilities of integration) between analogue and digital technologies, other formats contribute to the narrative just by inserting them into the context of fiction. For example, the use of tridimensional scanning of the space is useful for talking about a broken image: the flawed images generated by the iPhone scanning app<sup>20</sup> offer a poetic reflection on the fragility of the image-making apparatus, even in a digital world. Similarly, pixel

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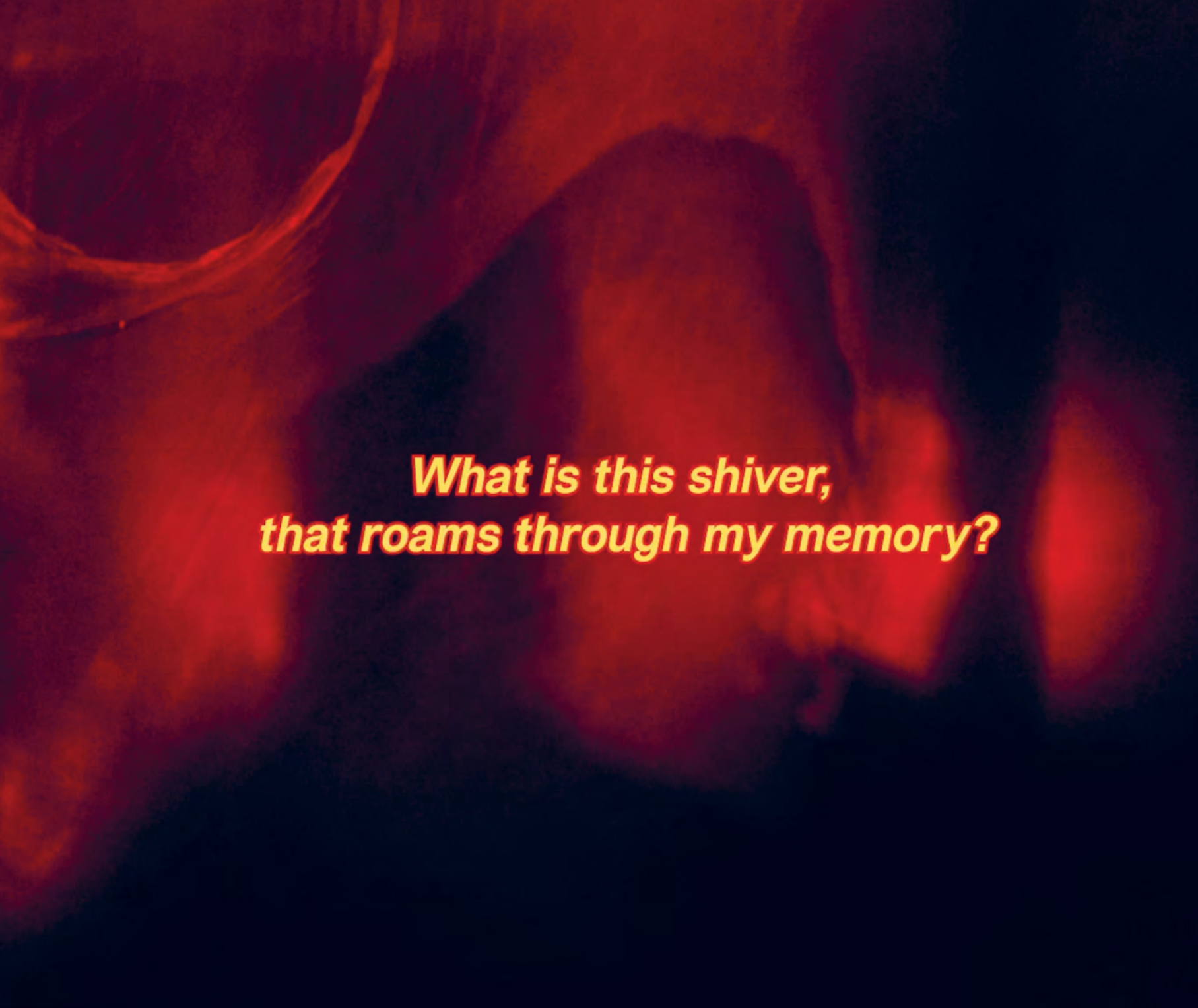
<sup>20</sup> The smartphone app is called Canvas 3D, and it’s used in architecture. I also used medical apps and pixel moshing apps for the iPad.

moshing and glitches become tools to reflect on the medium, representing the idea of broken hearts and broken images. They emphasize that there is no absolute truth behind images, as everything is subject to manipulation.

### *Subtitles as voice over*

A constant element in my research process has been the use of colorful subtitles as a form of “voice over.” Inspired by soap opera titles, these stylized subtitles foreground my subjectivity as a creator and include my thoughts in the film. By doing this, I aim to inscribe my personal experiences and reveal my history as both a person and an artist within the narrative, taking ownership of the story I am telling. I quickly understood that unlike in my past directorial efforts, I needed to share who was telling the film, revealing my position, discomfort, and insecurities. I couldn’t be “invisible” in this project. After all, why should I be? Filmmakers always embed their own ideas, backgrounds, and beliefs in their projects, whether subconsciously (as in traditional, diegetic fiction) or consciously. By being more intimate with the narration, perhaps the project can achieve a more universal resonance. I had to ask myself: where do I speak from, and to whom am I speaking?





***What is this shiver,  
that roams through my memory?***

The use of subtitles positions me as both a perpetrator and victim of melodramatic love, addressing a lost love in the form of a confessional farewell letter to someone unreachable. This love is both metaphorical, as a universal idea, and personal, as a subjective, auto-fictional matter. The audience understands that fiction is the real-life narrator's tool for healing ("I need to understand"), created from the "future," implying that the subtitles were added after the film was shot and edited.

The subtitles also allow me to integrate my experience as a foreigner in Amsterdam, introducing myself without leaving the fiction. The first voice over, presented through subtitles, operates in an extra-diegetic way. The second voice over, delivered as spoken narration in the soundtrack, shifts from an omnipresent narrator to an on-screen diegetic character played by Valeryia Le. However, both voice overs are unreliable narrators, as their perspectives sometimes differ.

Later in the film, the subtitle voice over narration shifts to the actress (Mei Liu), changing the language from Spanish to Chinese. This shift questions the film's relationship with my own narration, granting the performer agency to influence the story, the editing, and her representation. The idea of

objectivity in the story is dismantled as the voice over remains subjective. This use of subtitles positions the project in an intersectional space between classic fiction and contemporary, multilayered essay film, making my subjectivity more evident.

### *Editing and sound design*

I'm writing this in the middle of the process of editing the film. When thinking about montage, my aim is to be suspicious of continuity — even when using it —, of realism and naturalism, and intentionally looking for a certain melodramatic artificiality in the form, aiming to create a "multilayered and polymorphous evolution of the fictional montage" (Kim, 2018).

My main editing tools are juxtaposition, layering, contrast, collage, superimposition, combination of formats and desynchronization of image and sound. The use of voice, graphics, effects and digital manipulation aim to open up the material. In this process, editing is not an executional process, as it has its own agency and requires an embodied experience. As for the rhythm, I am trying to let the "nothingness" and the "void" of the heartbreak to live within the characters, the narrative and the form, while interrupting the flow with sound disruption and image punctuation (i.e abrupt cuts, switch-

ing to alternate realities or jumping between formats) as a formal device to produce poetic meaning and irony, calling the viewer's attention to the manipulation and foregrounding the cinematic construction. Sometimes, using this multiplicity




of audiovisual forms can offer a slight possibility of narrative, but without closing the meaning.

In the sound design, I'm using different elements of melodrama (music, soap opera dialogues, etc), and repeating them until they create a new meaning. Finding the sound perspective of a melodramatic breakup, and capturing the altered state that results from a heartbreak, I ask myself: How can sound could help me to produce an open space that further enhances the experience? What is the sonic sphere of Melodrama? Sounds can spark images that you can't access otherwise. The physicality of sound produces experiences, more than just ideas. Also, it triggers imagination, generating the viewer's mind better images than the ones we can produce.

This has been, and still is, a labor-intensive process that has involved taking a lot of risks. I've spent months of my life just looking at the gargantuan amount of footage that I have collected, and trying to order it in the best possible way. However, I don't regret having this extensive material. I wanted to arrive to the editing moment with the widest range of possibilities, having collected almost all the elements that will allow me to create meaning, and feeling, through super (im) posing them together.



A person wearing a dark jacket is shown in profile, holding a camera. The scene is dimly lit, with a strong light source visible in the background, creating a silhouette effect. The person's face is partially illuminated by the light from the camera or the background light. The overall mood is artistic and contemplative.

When finished, the film will contain all the failures and wrong paths that were not used. In this sense, making mistakes was an absolute necessity for the creative process.

For me, it's important that this project is presented as a "Work in progress". In the same way artists open their studios to share the process, this is my attempt to show to an audience my process of enquiry through film, with the means, resources and tools I had at my disposal; and more importantly, from the place where I am.

## Reformulating the production schemes

My previous projects were all low-budget films. Nevertheless, they were produced using standardized industry methods, which didn't allow me to work through time, because the main goal was to produce as fast as possible, reducing costs to the minimum <sup>21</sup>. During this research process, I came to understand that working outside of this industrial model allows for a deliberate slowing down of time, giving ample space for shooting, rewriting, and editing. Slowing the process and having patience become key to being rebellious and subversive.

Making a film in the context of the Master of Film (a semi autonomous, utopic and experimental space inside the institutional bureaucracy of the more classical-oriented Netherlands Film Academy), put me in a very specific place, which opened up creative possibilities during these two years. I wonder, how can we — as a group of friends and artists — reinvent production outside academia? How can we fund our projects? It's important to question what our relationship is with the state and the institutions, and to use them as supplemental support for our artistic projects,

<sup>21</sup> In Mexico, a fiction film is usually shot in 4 or 5 weeks.

rather than a vital necessity for their existence. At the same time, it would be useful to think about film production as a part of the *mise-en-scène*, and understand that limitations can also mean freedom.

I think that when the means of production are limited, our creative ambitions need to be higher and more risky. In this sense, working with big ideas on a small scale could be the key for bypassing the institutional and industrial bottle-neck of funding. In my case working in the smallest and most modest scale possible meant trying to make a film with the least amount of people possible. By doing technical tasks mainly by myself (except for three days, in which I had the help of Malaz Usta and Janina Frye with the sound recording), I was liberated from the budgetary and temporal strains of “film production”. By doing this, and by collaborating with close friends that were in a very similar position to me, the work merged with my life in unsuspected — and sometimes beautiful — moments. The research became a tool for exploring how cinema has always left its scars on my life, and showed me to look at the ordinary in an extraordinary way: to give back the world some of its magic and ambiguity through cinema.

## Politics and poetics of collaboration

I think I started shooting my friends because I was feeling lonely. At some point, the promise of having a film became an excuse to meet, and to become closer to them in a place where we were all foreign, where we didn't belong. Slowly, we adopted the path of the shooting to follow the natural path of our existence in Europe.

The film works as a farewell letter for several aspects of my life. Ironically, as this two years of the MA programme come to an end, I'm facing a potential new farewell; with my new friends and collaborators. As I think about our future as a group, and get ready to go back to Mexico — at least for a period of time —, this little community that we formed, gave me new insights on the politics and poetics of collaboration. Since filmmaking is a highly collaborative practice — and it mirrors society — how do I mobilise the idea of collective working at the intersection between politics and aesthetics?

Because friendship can prescribe, and social relations are a living thing, it's worth considering what effect the work has on the relationality between us as collaborators: cinema is not a neutral medium,

and as I'm trying to portray in the film, it takes a toll on people, relationships and lives. As much as creating is important, it's also necessary to reflect on the things that have to change within the image-making apparatus.

I wonder: How can I navigate the politics of friendship and production in a world that often glorifies the film director as a genius, overshadowing the contributions of the others? Our goal should be to allow ourselves as collaborators to learn from each other, and to balance recognition in a more horizontal way. To make films in closeness, in an attempt to break through the competitive and capitalist mode of working in the arts, and instead trying to embrace the idea of a collective filmmaking. This implies defying power relationships and hierarchies: denying the film system and its labels. Instead, working together as an organism, in the same sense that brain, lungs and stomach need to collaborate to make the body work.

What does it mean to share the means of production? In the past, I thought that owning the machines (cameras, microphones, hard drives, etc.) was enough to create a self-sustainable ecosystem for film production. Now, I realise that we should also aim to make a collective space, interacting with



others and their ideas, materials and methodologies, while letting the others using ours, using the collective “we” as an authorship without abandoning our own styles, personalities and ambitions. We need to find agreements between different sensibilities and expressions, to find new ways of creating together and to foreground collaboration.

What are the personal and professional contours of this relationality? Furthermore, how can we acknowledge our positions and relationship dynamics taking into account our different backgrounds, in terms of socio-political privilege, race, status and nationality <sup>22</sup>? Of course, I don’t have the definitive answer, but the first step might be, trying to have radical empathy towards each other. But also, through love, sense of humour, and irony.

Even in the context of low-to-no-budget production, it’s important to create our own economy, and to understand how the members of the collective are being paid, or in which ways we’re interacting through reciprocity (and budgeting that reciprocity). Why can’t time and love be part of a project’s financial plan and schedule? In this sense, expanding the production

time allowed me and my friends (especially with Mei Liu) to collaborate in more depth, carefully alternating from one project to the other constantly. I hope to expand this idea in the future, further fostering the idea of shooting several films at the same time, entangling life, work, friendship and love in a more just and caring way.



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<sup>22</sup> We’re all coming from different backgrounds: China, Syria, Belarus and Mexico.

As this is a process that just started, and I have more doubts than answers, I dare to propose some open questions that can help me in the next steps. Maybe they are a nice way to start thinking that utopia is possible, but first, we need to imagine it.

\*

Am I using friendship to make a film?

\*

Or am I using a film to make friends?

\*

How can I explore the intimacy of temporary bonds?

\*

How can I grant agency to my collaborators?

\*

How can I contribute to provide a safe space for everyone?

\*

How can I include sensuality, care and affection in my process?

\*

Does the filmmaking process enhance our friendship or erodes it?

\*

What is the structure of a “cinematic family”?

\*

How can we avoid the replication of patriarchal family structures in our collective efforts?

\*

What does it mean to capture peoples lives?

\*

How can filmmaking avoid exploitation?

\*

How do we think together and make of the shooting process a truly communal experience?

\*

How can the process question the notion of authorship?

\*

How to distribute recognition between all the collaborators?

\*

How can we still make room for love in the filmmaking process?

\*





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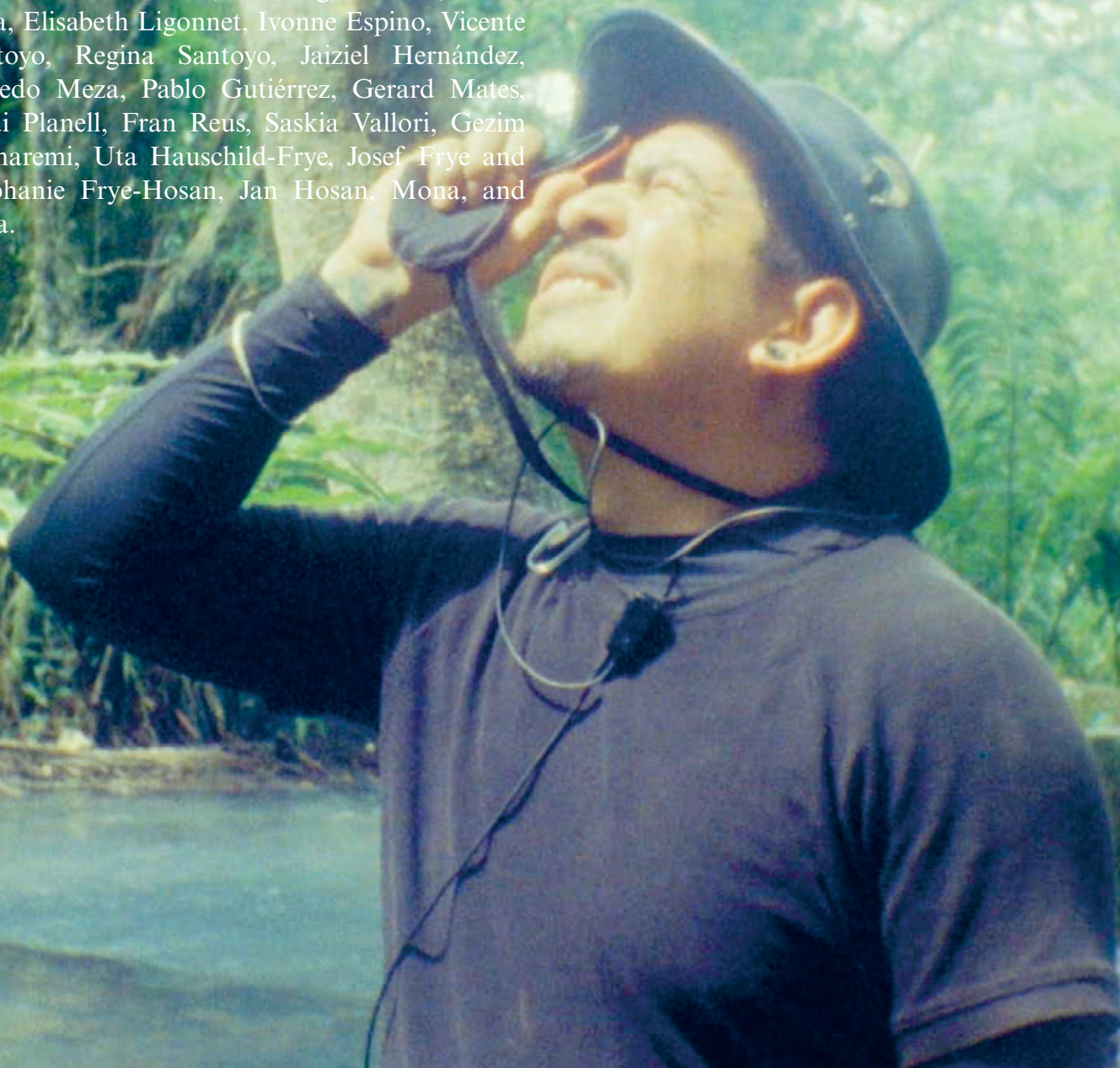
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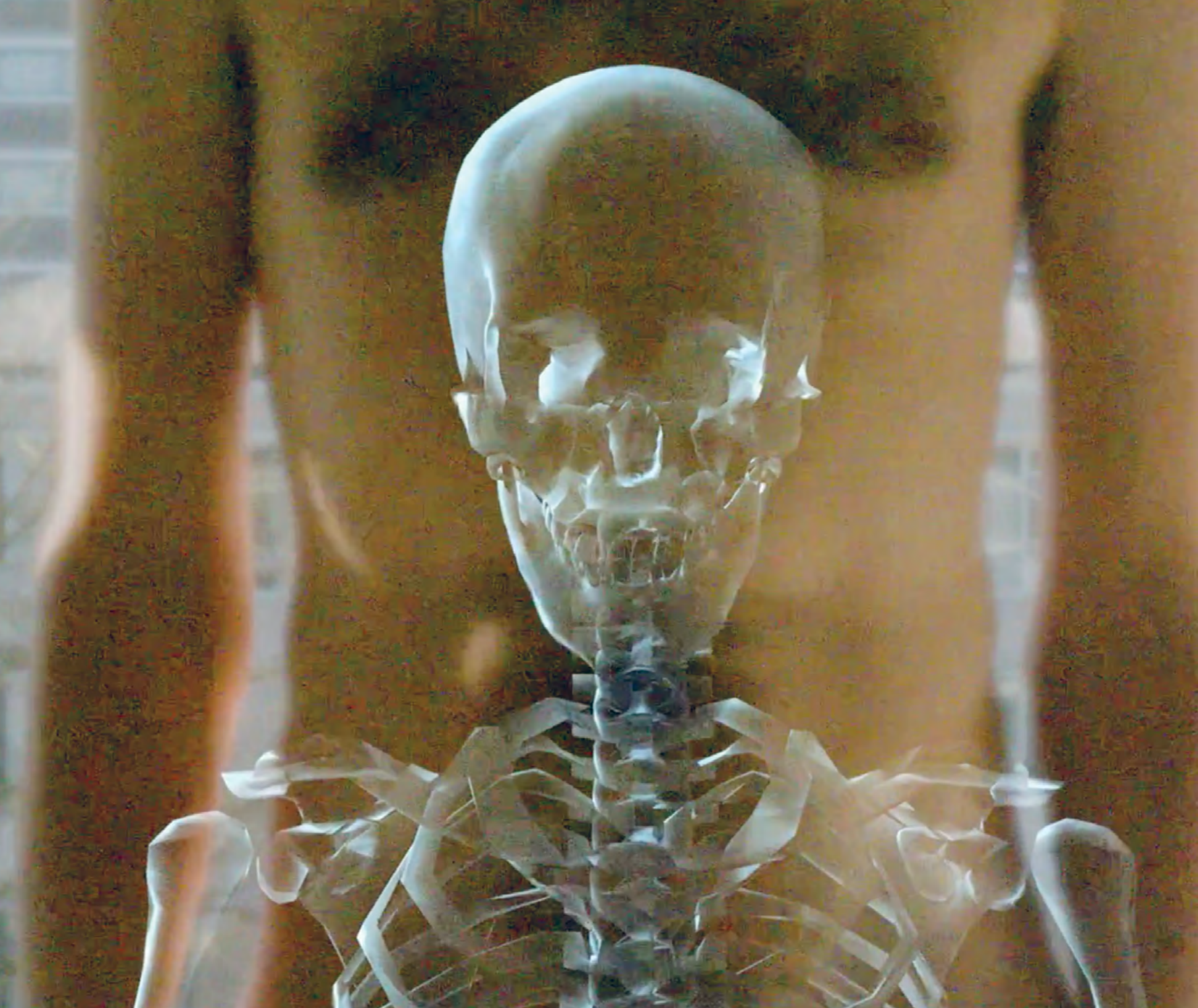




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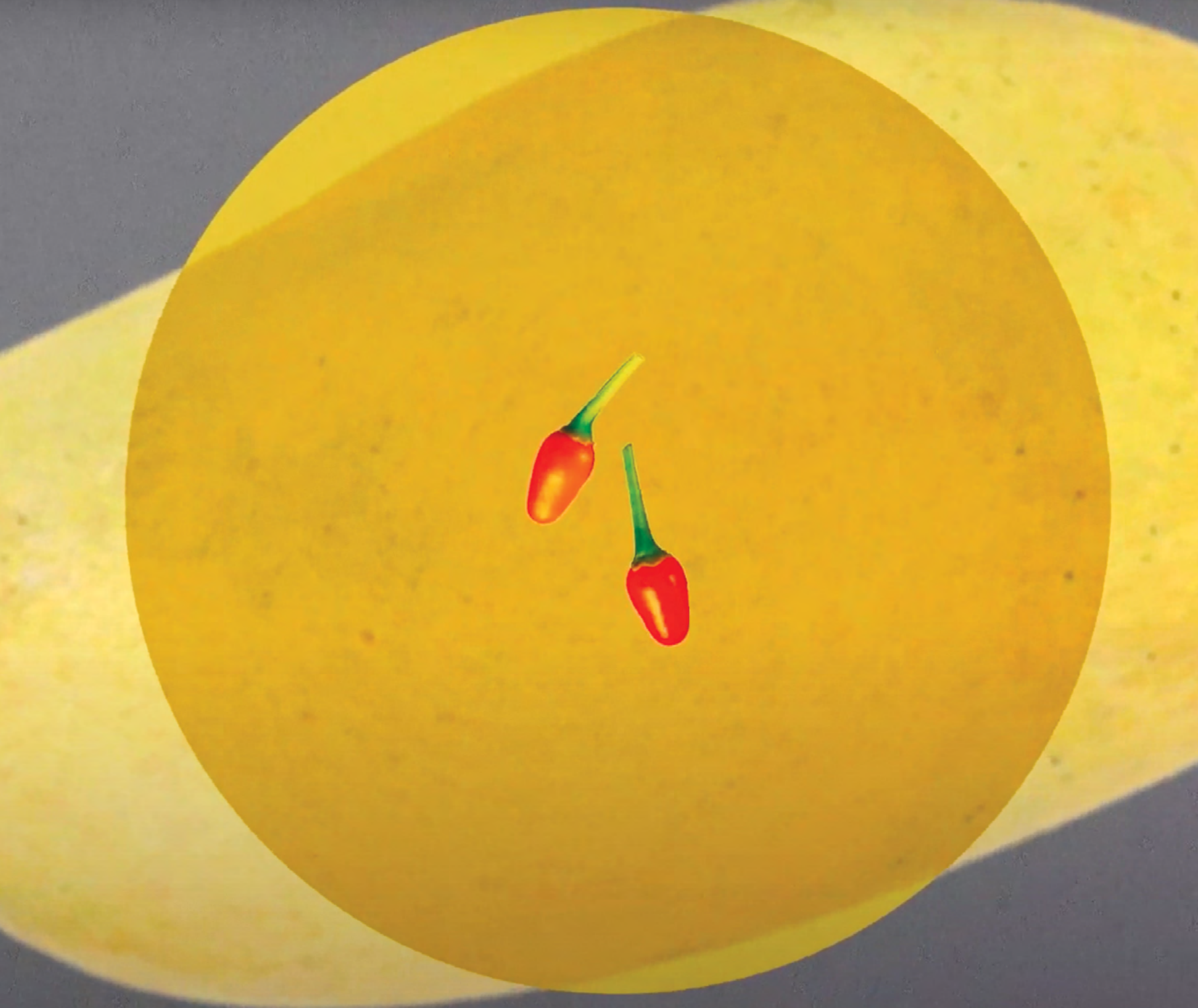
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