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EXPROPRIATIONS. Literary Confidences between Life and Death

Abstract

This paper proposes the delimitation of a literary territory, or of certain speech acts as a form of expression specifically dissociated from religious and philosophical discourses, and the corresponding adaptation of such acts to the small and big screens. *Expropriations*, or confidences by characters on the verge of death, are used as a trope to convey this specific idea. They refer to a kind of speech that no longer bears the weight of worldly events, but that does not attempt to ignore the consequences of having been in the world. With this reconceptualization of the term, this article seeks to identify an ethics of the human intensity in three specific sequences: two stories for cinema and television –Visconti’s *The Leopard*, and the final episode of *Brideshead Revisited*– and André Gide’s “literary testament,” *Et nunc manet in te*.

Keywords

Expropriation, pedagogy of fragments, testamentary speech, death, ethics, film adaptation, film and literature.

1. Introduction: Methodology

Bearing in mind the qualitative and interdisciplinary research method adopted for this research, it is our intention in this article to delimit the meaning of the term “expropriation” as both an object of study and a concept that could serve to identify certain “testamentary” speeches by characters on the verge of death. For the audiovisual texts examined here –Luchino Visconti’s *The Leopard* (*Il gattopardo*, 1963) and the final episode of *Brideshead Revisited* (John Mortimer and Evelyn Waugh, Granada Television: 1981)– we will begin with an empirical analysis of excerpts chosen based on a critical assessment of screenplay and *mise-en-scène*, as well as a comparison with their respective literary sources (Lampedusa and Waugh, respectively). To this end, a preliminary conceptualization and delimitation of the object of study will be necessary, although the main objective in our case actually involves a *re*-conceptualization of an existing term, stripping it of its administrative dimension (expropriation, according to the Oxford Dictionary, refers to “the action by the state or an authority of taking property from its owner for public use or benefit;” or “the action of dispossessing someone of property”) to apply it to literary and cinematic contexts. This process will require an interpretation both of the rhetoric used in the literary soliloquies that we will be sampling and of their corresponding adaptations to the small and big screens. In this last respect, we will focus particularly on an analysis of the performances of Lawrence Olivier and Burt Lancaster and of the way that the respective *mises-en-scène* are arranged to place the central focus on them.

Our study thus draws on the concept of media literacy, on the understanding –as Alain Bergala argues in *The Cinema Hypothesis*– that “the pedagogy of fragments often combines the virtues of concision, freshness and a more precise and lasting impression of images in the memory” (2007, p. 119). In the case of cinema, often when we view films, certain scenes go by unnoticed, because we are immersed in the flow of images accumulated in our aesthetic experience as spectators. Their individuality is eclipsed not only by our cinematic or literary baggage, but also more specifically by our viewing of the film as a whole, so that we overlook the importance that some details acquire in the *mise-en-scène*: an actor’s gesture, a particular lighting effect, a frame, etc. By identifying and analyzing the excerpts independently, as well as partially and autonomously, they assume a new meaning for us: “Viewing a film fragment, in isolation from the narrative flow and from the visual adaptation it provokes, makes it visible again,” explains Bergala (2007, p. 120). From this perspective, applying Barthesian terminology to the sequential image, we could argue that this type of differentiated analysis of expropriation scenes would reveal their *studium* –given that it exposes how the excerpts have been planned or constructed– while at the same time it would share a *punctum* that could help us advance from the signifier to the signified of a given sequence, from visual language to visual message. In this case, the stigma associated with the *punctum* would not be found so much in the form or detail that attracts or wounds us as in the intensity dictated by the times (Barthes, 1981, p. 92):

For death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere: perhaps in this image which produces death while trying to preserve life.

As occurs in Barthes’ analysis of the *Portrait of Lewis Payne* (1865), photographed by Alexander Gardner shortly before its subject was hanged, in our case, the *punctum* of the scenes analyzed would lie in the acts of expropriation themselves, which express to us the future death of the characters who enact them. In Barthes’ words, “what pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence,” the “*that* is dead and *that* is going to die,” “the lacerating emphasis of the noeme ‘*that-has-been*’” (1981, p. 96)¹.

2. A prebuttal of expropriation: literary considerations on the counterpoint of faith and philosophy

Our objective is to identify an ethics of the human intensity that still inhabits a body animated by a spirit ready to withdraw from the world. To this end, with respect to philosophy, it is clear that its harsh rigor, which is the cutting edge of its incorruptible solitude or insularity, would be enough to set it apart from these dramatic, somewhat theatrical or self-indulgent moments of a voice too dominated by circumstances to have been endowed with an eloquence exhibited only at the end of life. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that the metaphor of expropriation was suggested to us by a passage in Thoreau’s *Walden* in which he describes himself as a “sort of real-estate broker,” having inhabited houses and inspected lands that he has bought and sold in his imagination: “Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly” (Thoreau, 1995, p. 78).

The figure of Thoreau has emerged as the unexpected prebuttal of these expropriations and, to a certain extent, reserved a space for another literary experiment: that of American literature. It is a space which, in another sense, is non-existent in old Europe, due either to

¹ We are aware that Barthes found it difficult to apply his theory of *punctum* to cinema, precisely because of the “voracity” of the flow of images mentioned above: “in front of the screen, I am not free to shut my eyes; otherwise, opening them again, I would not discover the same image; I am constrained to a continuous voracity; a host of other qualities, but not *pensiveness*; whence the interest, for me, of the photogram” (1981, p. 55). However, we believe that the excerpt “viewed again,” as Bergala suggests, would make it compatible with Barthes’ theory, at least in the terms outlined above, insofar as it shifts us away from the usual point of view. The objective of our use of it here is to help understand and define the excerpts on their own, classified as expropriations.

the advancements of democracy out of a tradition with feudal roots, or to the confusion into which we were plunged in terms of religious perspective with the destruction or disappearance of Judaism after centuries of self-styled or imaginary Christianity. It is worth highlighting the point that the principal sacramental event of Christianity, the Eucharist, is a kind of “super-expropriation,” whose acceptance requires the grace of faith: “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is my body’” (Matthew 26: 26).

The Jews would have been left out of the communion that restored divine authority to Jesus’ self-expropriated body. Is it a mere coincidence that this theme should reappear in Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist,” in which the protagonist now appears quite obviously to be a Jew expropriated *a fortiori* by the Christian spectators? On the other hand, Kafka continues to constitute a final point for the art of storytelling that can no longer rely on the background of a common faith in reading and writing. His hunger artist is a ruin, a piece of refuse, a remnant that will not last (in contrast with Isaiah’s claim) among the spectacles of the post-Christian carnival. Certain lines of Antonio Machado’s poetry can be read as a final Spanish note to this series of eminent literary voices. To hold back nothing is a requirement of the expropriated speaker, which in our context is important to remember and reiterate: the objective of the battle “on the fields of the Lord” (an old Puritan image) is to inject new energy at a point beyond self-confessed exhaustion: “I’m unable to sing,” confesses Machado’s poet to Xavier Valcarce. But this other poet will have to take over, and Valcarce, with his beautiful name embedded in Machado’s verse, is the very invocation to keep the tradition of letters from extinction, even there where specters loom over “fields without ploughs.”²

3. Definition of expropriation and proposed analysis

There are three expropriations that we will analyze below, in the manner of a triptych, both for their number and their pictorial quality. We will refer to them as sequences, because two of the objects of study form part of stories for cinema and television –Visconti’s *The Leopard* and the final episode of *Brideshead Revisited*– while the third is a “literary testament” by André Gide, *Et nunc manet in te*³. The passages that we will be commenting on have a twilight air suggestive of the final moments or decline of the day and of life. Their protagonists invest their last moments of lucidity in articulating a kind of confidence to a small audience, with barely a human present, perhaps limited to themselves alone; a soliloquy, reflected in the thinning of the voice, representing what Robinson Jeffers calls the thinning of one’s humanity “between the invulnerable diamonds” (2006, p. 182-183). The speaker is a man on the verge of death who has not resigned himself to complete annihilation; he still aspires to a kind of perpetuation, an echo of the old fame associated with the way he has tried to live. It could be said that his final statements, marked by reluctance to accept expropriation, also follow a changed tradition that speaks for him. The tradition seeks to perpetuate itself, and this value is incorporated in the confidence, as is the knowledge that the times represent a threat to continuity, to the survival of excellence. Excellence was the aspiration of the aristocracy, and this involved demands that separated the men (because these are male voices) from their era (motherhood, real or potential, would be incompatible with the limits marked by expropriation).

² See “To Xavier Valcarce,” in Antonio Machado (2007, p. 168-173). Cf. “On the Banks of the Duero,” p. 4-7.

³ These are moments that are seen and heard, in contrast with the pictorial and literary “moments of vision” described by Kenneth Clark: “But there are moments of heightened perception, the most numerous and most blissful, when the familiar tree is still itself, only for some reason we are able to possess it. Possession: here is a word which in most of its varying senses, seems to throw some light on our problem. In a moment of vision we possess, and we are possessed” (1981, p. 10).

The Leopard still frightens his noble equals. Lord Marchmain stands at the center of the conflicts in his family, as the main centrifugal force because of the hatred for what his wife represented, and the main centripetal force because his death can only take place on the “set” of Brideshead: the “Queen’s bed” in the Chinese drawing room. His is the true return to Brideshead, rather than Charles Ryder’s return at the beginning of the story. We refer to these moments of Visconti’s film and of Sturridge’s series⁴ as “expropriations” because, in effect, we are compelled to imagine an impulse toward democratization looming over the protagonists like the Fates, and yet they themselves are the ones who, despite it all, as if suffering from a kind of fatal vertigo, long to be expropriated. The expropriation of their lives would leave their merit unblemished for the memory of future generations, the only “immortality” conceivable for these men who lack the guarantee of salvation. This has the effect of reshaping their respect for tradition, which constitutes the chain along which they can transmit these pretensions to the transcendence that they are unable to believe in literally.

This brings us back to the metaphorical starting point of these confessions on the edge of death, a type of speech that no longer bears the weight of worldly events –the nationalist revolution in *The Leopard*; the Second World War in *Brideshead Revisited*– but that does not seek to ignore the consequences of having been in the world, the harsh reality of immanence. Yet the confidential tone places these speeches outside the realm of conversation, or suggests a kind of deferred conversation, a dialogue that entailed what John Ruskin, in his theory on reading, called the “concourse of the dead” (Ruskin, 1997, p. 305). They are literary enunciations, more characteristic of books than real life, but not without the human drama that marks the moments of extreme unction. The scope of biography is not enough to explain this “mystery of life and its arts,” and this acknowledgement is expressed as a kind of almost superhuman abnegation, a sacrifice of rebellion, which would be consumed by the frenzied sign of the times to give rise to a reconciliation of these *leopardesque* characters with the sources of their education.

A philosopher once remarked that he disliked people who thought themselves too good for this world, as if wisdom should serve to rein in such hubris. Yet there is no form of education that does not involve distinguishing ourselves, overcoming the guilty conscience of believing ourselves to be above conventional perspectives, aspiring to a fruit of everyday life that is out of the reach of the average palate, and glimpsing a realm of experience that cannot be inhabited, that cannot be bought or sold, but that we cannot ignore without succumbing to what Julia Flyte in *Brideshead* calls “vulgarity” when her lover, Charles Ryder, tries to sketch or “write” the drama of their crisis. Julia, Lord Marchmain’s favorite daughter, who later, on his deathbed, will speak of his ancestor “Aunt Julia,” gives voice to the frustration caused by a life that fails to measure up to the faith in which she has been raised, the mold set by her own education.

3.1. “The time of death”

Expropriation affects individuals on the brink of death for whom religion no longer contains a message of hope; it is not salvation that they contemplate, but a certain troubled assessment of the good and evil of this world, a meditation on what is to come, a philosophical tone (rather than a method) for their twilight thoughts. However, philosophy, which is morning work according to Thoreau, cannot prevail here, because it would mean seeing things from a distance that is insuperable at the time of death. The philosopher reflects impartially on loss at all moments of life, practicing a parsimonious levelling of the experience of living without considering the intransigence of the end of all moments. Philosophy, which is in its way

⁴ Waugh’s novel was the subject of a film adaptation by Julian Jarrold in 2008. Bearing the same title as the book and the television series, the film omits the passage of the expropriation, which is why we have not included it in our analysis.

intransigent with that intransigence, seeks an early victory over the meaning of the defeat inherent in mortality, according to the Socratic paradigm:

My friends, I have not convinced Crito that I am the Socrates who has been conversing with you and arranging his arguments in order. He thinks I am the body which you will presently see a corpse, and he asks how he is to bury me. [...] So you must be of good cheer, and say that you are burying my body; and you may bury it as you please and as you think right (Plato, 1990, p. 115b).

Socrates reproaches his disciple Crito for confusing the two realms of life and death in his mourning for him; he will not allow death to affect his manner of expressing himself while he is still alive. The teacher seems to know that all grief is disappointing because it proves superficial.

Our expropriated characters, on the other hand, seem to resist the pressure of mortality up to the moment when they give vent to their sorrow. This venting cannot be done beforehand, and in general it is inseparable from what they feel pressed to say. They are not words with any validity outside what Ruskin referred to as the “time of death” (Ruskin, 1903-1912, p. 584). If there is a time of death in human lives, it is not ordained that it must be silent. If every man is eloquent at least once in his life, perhaps that moment will occur then, in a flash of lucidity in which his view opens out onto a great beyond corresponding to this world, to a future that does not hold a greater dose of joy than that already known. It is the joy of the past or Arcadia⁵, which was still good land for ploughing, before other methods would usurp the measurement of human strength and fatigue (Waugh, 2003, p. 316-317), as Lord Marchmain alludes to in his final soliloquy, whose *mise-en-scène* is shown in the *decoupage* in Figure 1:

Better today. Better today... I can see now where the geese are flying over the lilies, where yesterday I was confused and took the lilies for swans. Soon I shall see where the geese are headed when they gather to fly over the looking glass. Better tomorrow. We live long in our family and marry late. Seventy-three is no great age. Aunt Julia, my father's aunt, lived to be eighty-eight. Born and died here, never married, saw the fire on Beacon Hill for the battle of Trafalgar. And she always called it “the New House.” That was the name they had for it in the nursery and in the fields when unlettered men had long memories. You can see where the old house stood near the village church. They call the field “Castle Hill.” Horlick's field, where the ground's uneven and most of it waste, nettle and brier, in hollows too deep for ploughing. Those were our roots in the waste hollows of Castle Hill. We were knights then, barons since Agincourt. the larger honors came the last and they'll go the first. The barony goes on. When Brideshead is buried, Julia's son will be called by the name his fathers bore before the fat days. The days of wool shearing and the wide corn lands, the days of growth and building, when the marshes were drained and the waste land brought under the plough. When one built the house, his son added the dome, his son spread the wings and dammed the river. (*Brideshead Revisited* (#1X11: Charles Sturridge, Granada Television, 1981, 35:20-38:47)⁶.

⁵ For Pau Gilabert, the literary and artistic expression “Et in Arcadia ego,” “interpreted as a medieval *memento mori*: ‘remember that you have to die,’ one of the great themes of Christian moral theology adapted to the classical pastoral world,” plays a central role throughout Waugh's novel, beyond being the frontispiece for Book One and the title of the pilot episode for Sturridge's series, as the whole novel –like the television series with the use of flashbacks– is posited as a memory or reminiscence of the happiness experienced in past times far removed from the tragedy (Gilabert, 2013, p. 3, 22).

⁶ The expropriation soliloquy contains recognizable details of Waugh's own life. Compare the quote with this other excerpt taken from *A Little Learning*, in which Waugh discusses the ailments of his father, whose acting talents he later claims were second only to Lawrence Olivier's: “The illusion of old age was much enhanced by his own utterances [...] he often adverted to his imminent demise [...]. Throughout much of the year he was troubled, and sometimes incapacitated, by asthma and bronchitis. He sometimes spoke of this constriction of breath as ‘tightness’ and once caused surprise for answering an inquiry for his health: *Better today*” (Waugh, 1964, p. 64). In *The Leopard* too, Lampedusa's point of view is his character Prince Fabrizio's, and Visconti's as well: “I agree with him not only with respect to the analysis of the historical events and the psychological situations derived from them; my agreement

Figure 1: Expropriation sequence in *Brideshead Revisited* (#1x11). Lord Marchmain (Lawrence Olivier) utters the soliloquy to his family.



3.2. Pedagogy of the expropriation excerpt

We will now offer an analysis from the perspective of visual literacy of the way that these expropriation speeches are translated onto the screen in formal terms, for the purposes of drawing some more wide-ranging conclusions. According to Bergala, “a well-chosen film shot can be enough to simultaneously bear witness to a filmmaker’s art and to a moment in film history, as it entails a state of language and at the same time an aesthetic (necessarily inscribed

goes further, to the point at which the work is overshadowed by his pessimistic reflections on the events” (quoted in Marín, 1995, p. 73).

in a particular era), but also a style, the unique signature of its author” (2007, p. 122-123). The excerpt is therefore used, by virtue of its pedagogical capacity, as an autonomous piece, which expands its value beyond the text of which it forms a part⁷. In the case of the excerpts from *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Leopard*, this autonomous pedagogical capacity is all the greater because the story they tell (with introduction, climax and denouement) places the focus of attention on the expropriation factor. The excerpts are thus perfect for “an approach ‘by pieces’ that are easily engraved in the memory” (*ibid.*, p. 117), as they are representative of each film chosen on a formal level, because they exhibit the same aesthetic and rhetorical codes as the rest of the film. Even when they are not especially striking, given that on their own these sequences might go by unnoticed in the story as a whole, the selective viewing we propose below teases out some especially significant elements.

Given the dramatic weight of the excerpts analyzed, it is reasonable to expect that of all the factors that influence their respective *mises-en-scène* (lighting, camera movements, props, etc.) the focus would fall on the direction of the actors. In fact, these are somewhat theatrical sequences, in which all the elements contributing to the imaginary universe of the *mise-en-scène* are placed at the service of the actor’s performance; hence, the focus is on the body of the actor and, in relation to it, what he does with his face. As Visconti himself describes it, this is an “anthropomorphic” cinema, in which “people’s humblest gestures, their gait, their hesitations and impulses in themselves give poetry and vibrations to the things that surround them and frame them” (Visconti, 2010, p. 191)⁸. It should thus be understood that the expropriation scenes analyzed here use different forms of visual and discursive construction with the aim of focusing the spectator’s attention on the actor’s face. In the examples analyzed the emphasis is therefore achieved at the moment of the expropriation’s greatest intensity through two different expressive devices that underscore the actor’s facial expressions: in *The Leopard*, by means of a shift from overhead to chiaroscuro lighting that gives the Prince’s face a spectral appearance, and in *Brideshead Revisited* through a kind of expressive calligraphy of camera movements.

Thus, in *Brideshead* there are two horizontal pans from left to right that mark the space of the dying man’s room with a narrative gesture that contributes to the flow of the story. The camera sweeps over the space while at the same time underscoring Lord Marchmain’s thoughts as he speaks them aloud. The first pan begins when, while fixing his gaze on the patterns on the wallpaper, he acknowledges death as an imminent fact: “Soon I shall see where the geese go when they meet to fly over the mirror.” The pan, which begins with a long shot of the geese, continues its sweep and stops when it reaches the table containing the medicines to alleviate the sick man’s pain (see Figure 1, still-frames 10-12), reminding the spectator that his assertion that he will be “better tomorrow,” which he says immediately thereafter, is not so much a reflection of his “marvelous desire to live” as of his “great fear of dying,” as the doctor will tell Charles Ryder a few minutes later (Figure 2).

⁷ The procedure is not new. Mark Cousins implements it in *Scene by Scene* (2002), selecting interviews in which he chooses one of the participants in the production of a film (actor, producer or director) to comment on a representative excerpt from the film in which he or she took part.

⁸ This is therefore not an innovative set direction in visual terms, but rather a classical approach, as traditionally the face in cinematography has been analyzed as a substantial part of the actor’s performance. There are major authors in film theory who have explored the narrative importance of acting, such as James Naremore (1988). Also in the context of film studies, an overview of the narratives of the face has recently been compiled by Santa Cruz (2015). Another recent contribution that updates the study of the actor’s work can be found in Hernández Miñano and Martín Núñez (2015).

Figure 2: Charles Ryder's conversation with the doctor about Lord Marchmain in *Brideshead Revisited* (#1x11).

- He has a wonderful will to live, hasn't he?
- Would you put it like that? I would say a great fear of death.
- Is there a difference?
- Oh dear me, yes. He doesn't derive any strength from his fear. It's wearing him out.



The fear consumes him, but it does not prevent the emphasis from being placed on affairs of the past. It is precisely the second of the two pans, which begins on Lord Marchmain's face, that accompanies his memories of the family lineage while showing the expressions of each of the people present: first his daughter Cordelia, then Cara, Lord Marchmain's mistress, and finally, the faces of Charles and Lord Marchmain's daughter Julia (Figure 1, f. 12-16). "The barony goes on" or so he believes, as in fact Julia will not be able to have the son who will bear the name that their ancestors bore. Like "the waste land" of bygone days, from one shot to the next, the camera's movement ploughs through the mind not only of the protagonist, but also of his audience; and more importantly still, produces a sensation of uniformity and gradual guidance of the narration towards the most intense point of the dying man's confidence: the fact that the spectator knows that Julia is aware of what her infertility means (see the change in Julia's facial expression when she hears the final part of the soliloquy: cf. f. 16 and 18). This noeme (what the spectator believes Julia is thinking) will act as a turning point (or *punctum*) in the cinematic narrative, since after her father's death she decides not to marry the agnostic Charles, with whom she has maintained an extramarital relationship (like Lord Marchmain's with Cara) that has constituted a betrayal of the Catholic faith of her ancestors: "But the worse I am, the more I need God. I can't shut myself out from His mercy. That is what it would mean: starting a new life with you, without Him" (Waugh, 2003, p. 324), Julia confesses to Charles after her father's death⁹.

On the other hand, in *The Leopard*, Visconti chooses to underscore Lancaster's performance through the cinematography, as the simple, functional visual planning is limited to a shot-reverse shot approach. There are three atmospheres created in the Prince's room, thereby fragmenting the space of the scene: the ambient lighting of the lamps in the area of the desk (Figure 3, f. 1-11), the overhead lighting, when he walks around the room (f. 12-13),

⁹Julia's decision is inspired by her witnessing the deathbed conversion of her father, who returns with a "twitch upon the thread" to the family tradition, accepting the forgiveness and grace of God in his last rites (Waugh, 2003, p. 322), something that does not seem likely to happen to Charles, who does not share her religious sensibility: "I had no religion [...]. The view implicit in my education was that the basic narrative of Christianity had long been exposed as a myth [...], religion was a hobby [...], at the best it was slightly ornamental, at the worst it was the providence of complexes and inhibitions [...]. No one had ever suggested to me that these quaint observances expressed a coherent philosophic system and intransigent historical claims; nor, had they done so, would I have been much interested" (Waugh, 1993, p. 102). It should be noted that this passage from the original edition of the 1945 novel, which was used in the Spanish translation and which remains in the script of the TV series, was modified in the second edition by Waugh, where he mitigates Charles's hostility towards Christianity. The religious issue in the novel has been studied by authors such as Wilson (2008) and Johnson (2012) and has been respected in its adaptation to the screen.

and the flickering light of the fire when he sits in front of the fireplace (f. 14-15). Of these three, it will be the chiaroscuro of the overhead lighting that coincides with the most despondent moment of his speech: when he speaks to Chevalley the Sicilians' "longing for death." It is quite deliberately the only moment in the sequence when the cinematography turns harsher, veiling his face, highlighting the shadows and obscuring the eye sockets (f. 12). His face is now a specter, emphasizing in visual terms not only the "longing of the Sicilian people for oblivion," but the impending death of the expropriated Prince himself. His consumption or "petrification" will be confirmed shortly thereafter, in the scene of the ball, when he kneels before the Greuze painting (Figure 4):

The attitude of the Prince, isolated in the library, constitutes a form of consumption. Raising his hand to his forehead in a gesture of weariness, or leaning in contemplation of the Greuze painting *The Punished Son* (titled *La mort du juste* in the screenplay and in Lampedusa's novel), the Prince offers a series of variations on the portrait of an individual, philosopher or not, alone in his intimacy and meditative. In this theme appears the figure of Melancholy. The Greuze painting is a kind of secular Deposition (Liandrat-Guigues, 1997, p. 159-160)¹⁰.

Figure 3: Expropriation sequence from *The Leopard*, in which the Prince of Salina (Burt Lancaster) delivers his testamentary speech to Chevalley (Leslie French): "We shoot and stab because we long for death. Our laziness, the penetrating sweetness of our ice-cream are a longing for voluptuous immobility. That is, again, for death."



¹⁰ For Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Visconti identifies himself with the central figure in the ball scene by adopting the protagonist's point of view; the film shifts from indirectly showing a critical attitude toward the historical events presented to acquire "a character of unquestioning nostalgia" in the "virtual transfiguration of the Sicilian aristocracy" (Nowell-Smith, 2003, p. 110). It is worth noting that "both Lampedusa and Visconti were themselves aristocrats, representatives of the very order whose demise their works present" (Said, 2006, p. 95). This was why critics at the time, like Bernard Dort, would describe *The Leopard* as "Viscontian narcissism," comparing it with Proust's *Pleasures and Days*. Visconti rejected the analysis of those who sought to "pull this work out of the realm of realism [...], to locate it in that kind of vague Elysium [...] constituted by the so-called literature of anguish" (Trombadori, 2007, p. 48).



These are moments in which, with an operatic cadence and a clear poetic intention, the filmmaker stops the action. His achievement is to condense the whole narrative meaning of the film in such moments, transforming the image into something more powerful than written language, designing a frame that the spectator will retain as key to the story (Figure 4). In formal terms, the contemplation of the Greuze painting serves as the visual *expropriatory* counterpoint to the Prince's conversation with Chevalley: "Its formal beauty [...] arises from its central frames with an eminently dramatic objective: to modestly underline the nostalgia of characters with death circulating in their veins" (Marín, 1995, p. 138).

Figure 4: Portraits of decline. The contemplation of the painting *La mort du juste* by Greuze would be the *expropriatory* counterpoint in visual terms to the Prince's conversation with Chevalley in *The Leopard*.



In contrast, the conversation with Chevalley (1:59:45-2:03:48; Figure 3) has a political purpose: to infuse the new post-revolutionary perspective with the experience of the noble, "a member of the old class [...] swinging between two worlds," who seems to understand in advance that it will be useless to try to change things: "I doubt that the new Kingdom has any gift for us." The *Leopard's* negative response is grounded in history: the Sicilian people are impervious to civilization, to the many different "wonderful civilizations" that have left their mark on the island; "they all came from outside; we didn't create them." No improvement to living conditions could combat the deep-seated conviction that death will rise up in victory in the end:

Here, any action, even the most violent, represents a longing for oblivion. Our sensuality is a longing for oblivion. We shoot and stab because we long for death. Our laziness, the penetrating sweetness of our ice-cream are a longing for a voluptuous immobility, that is, again, for death (Figure 3; f. 11-15).

The uniqueness of Sicily (“this atmosphere, the violence of the landscape, the cruelty of the climate, the ever-lasting tension...”) lies in the fact that its natives have this fatalism ingrained in their nature, to the point of inverting the meaning of the choice that could have led to their future redemption. The Sicilians, as described by the Prince, would be the counterpoint to the Jews: they carry on through history with the awareness that there is something in human nature that cannot be reformed: “I don’t deny that if you bring a Sicilian off this island he might awake. But they must go away while still young. At twenty they’re too old. They’ve already been molded.”

Instead, the openness to reform that would be a starting point for ethics is nullified by the conviction that everything will remain the same: “I know you mean well, but you’re late. Sleep, my dear Chevalley, that’s what Sicilians want, a long sleep. They will always hate those who want to wake them up, were it even to give them beautiful gifts.” What is notable about this confidence is that it is placed in the mouth of the aristocrat who could have reaped the biggest benefits from the age-old inequality that afflicts his compatriots. Yet if he had accepted Chevalley’s offer, the Prince would have betrayed that telluric knowledge, at once crude and brilliant, whose fruit seems to fall under its own weight like a master class in Sicilian history. Prince Fabrizio’s sincerity is therefore due to the fact that he himself is a victim of the cheerless, disenchanting, almost inhuman vision of a shared fate marked by a lack of hope (“we are tired, void, and lack vitality”)¹¹. But to live without hope, like beasts (recall the anecdotes the Count tells Chevalley during the card game) or gods (recall the answer given by the Prince to the Englishmen who visit him), does not mean to live in desperation. Containment, as strange as it may seem, is the end result of all this refined education that has made the Prince the most respected and feared figure among his peers, as revealed in the banquet scene; and the final point of the Leopard’s confidence to the learned Chevalley, between the life that still arouses sensuality and the death that wipes out all hope, consists in speaking sincerely about the irreversible demise of his class and about the fact that its disappearance will not make a substantial difference, given the incorrigible vanity of human beings. In Visconti’s words,

[...] in the funeral shroud that looms over the film’s characters, from the moment of the line “for everything to remain the same everything must change,” I would like there to resonate the same sense of death and love-hate for a world fated to die among dazzling splendors that Lampedusa took both from the Sicilians’ immortal, Verga esque intuition of fate, and from the chiaroscuros of *Recherche du temps perdu*. Apart from that, the central motif of *The Leopard* –“for everything to remain the same everything must change”– interested me not only for its merciless critique of the *trasformismo* that weighs like lead on our country and has kept it from changing to this day, but also as a more universal and, unfortunately, fiercely current phenomenon: the submission of the impulse toward the new that the world is experiencing to the rules of the old, making those rules govern over it (Trombadori, 2007, p. 50).

3.3. Gide’s testimony of expropriation

The final point to the analysis of these sequences can be offered by the barely thirty pages that André Gide wrote after the death of his wife, *Et nunc manet in te*. Reading this work of Gide’s has an effect similar to that of swallowing a razor blade: every written line cuts, right from the first, which is so reminiscent of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophüls, 1948) that it might have been the female rejoinder to those masculine farewells. *Et nunc manet in te* and its

¹¹ In political terms, this vision corresponds to the “Southern response” of hopelessness, placed in the mouth of the Prince of Salina, in answer to the “Southern question” raised by Gramsci in his last work, which Lampedusa may have known, according to Edward W. Said’s analysis (2009, p. 65–67). In any case, these words should not be construed as a declaration of reactionary principles on Lampedusa’s part. Rather, it would be a way of calling out the “mystification” used by the friends of the new to exploit the most fallacious instruments of the old in order to advance their plans, according to Visconti (Trombadori, 2007, p. 51).

intimate sequel in the *Journals* are Gide's confidence to someone who, he says, could "feel less alone in his distress": it is the posthumous confidence on the impossibility of staunching the wound that his love for his wife has caused him. Indeed, the phrase would be incongruous if we failed to take into account the direction of Gide's instincts, that which produced the schism that inspired his books. This is thus no less a literary text than his previous works, despite the fact that it deals with the author's conduct towards Madèleine, now stripped of the pseudonyms he used to disguise her in his fiction. Gide goes on writing, beyond his desolation, out of a question of "method," as he puts it, out of a habit that drives him to articulate a state of desolation or irremediable abandonment. Note the adjectives used to describe the noises of a world that she no longer inhabits: "profane, opaque, faint, and desperate." These words seem the antithesis of those associated with her presence: "constant, latent, secret, essential."¹² The narrative, and the personal portrait, allows this approach, but respects the singularity and differences of the spouses, the element of "nature" (Gide, 1952, p. 70) as an impassable boundary in the movements of his moods, which range from doubt to grief to remorse. The supreme value of these paragraphs as a testimony of expropriation lies mainly in the impossible nature of separating these "cracks" from the writing process itself, as if Gide knew that the only occasion for talking about these things had arrived. A different type of writer would have waited to overcome his grief before starting the search for the appropriate expression. But for Gide, it is not the appropriateness of the expression that matters to him most but what it contains, even if from the experience accumulated we can already be sure of a certain contagious invulnerability or infallibility in the voice. The expropriated speaker gives into an impulse that goes beyond himself, and beyond the right choices for educating his listeners, who may be viewed, in a certain way, as dispossessed beings.

The voices of expropriation have no hope for the world they leave behind, nor do they have any respect for those left in it: "[...] you say that Sicilians want to better themselves. They never will, because they think they're perfect. Their vanity is stronger than their misery," the Prince of Salina tells Chevalley in *The Leopard* (2:05:38). The listeners are strangely written off in the relationship, even if an aspect of care to preserve the property received remains present. This is more visible in the cases of Prince Fabrizio and Lord Marchman, less so in the case of Gide. But what if it were effectively a whole literary tradition, the French tradition of *belles-lettres*, so devoted, as the critic Edmund Wilson suggested, to the triumph of form, which rebels here against the reported absolute breakdown ("finished, ruined, undone") that is the culmination of this intimate journal?¹³ And what if literature made use of the writer to perpetuate, with the excuse of "method," a picture of human reality –the "silver thread" (Gide, 1952, p. 11)– that serves as a last support in the midst of a crumbling world, or "the poor results of all" in that devastating verse of Whitman's (2008, p. 544)? Expropriation might thus be the most secret subgenre¹⁴ in literature, an underground stream to preserve the clean and clear

¹² See Gide (1952, p. 49): "What is hidden behind the deceptive exterior that I recapture and recognize as the same through the dilapidations? Something immaterial, harmonious, radiant, which must be called 'soul', but what does the word matter! She believed in immortality; and I am the one who ought to believe in it, for it is she who left me." (Cf. Gide, 2011, p. 66, 76).

¹³ Cf. Lampedusa (1982, p. 186): "But even so we're worn out and exhausted." In the film: "But we are tired, void, and lack vitality."

¹⁴ The term 'subgenre' here refers broadly to a narrative type, cultural model or universal story that can be associated with the works with which it has the greatest contact or with which it shares particular features or expectations. Its precursors would respond to classical artistic categories that facilitated production and reading and which cinema would subsequently inherit, codify and institutionalize. In the words of Jordi Balló and Xavier Pérez, "the stories that the cinema has told and tells us would be none other than a particular, unique, latest way of recreating the immortal seeds that the evolution of drama has been linking together and multiplying" (2018, p. 11). In this respect, while identifying the fall of the leopards in "the old and the new" as a universal story that provides not only a theme and dramatic atmosphere, but also an expository structure or way of telling a story, they add: "The lost past at the same time means, as we have learned from Chekhov, the collapse of a space, depopulation or dispossession." The cinema

waters in which the generations need to purify themselves when they cannot find the consolation of religion or have not learned to follow the arduous road of philosophy. If this is the case, it could be suggested that literature has provided, in the impersonal testimonies of these characters, including Gide as an author, a means whereby the most attentive readers will face the change of climate that comes upon us in old age without resorting to the expedient of self-deceit or hypocrisy: a way of digging out the truth that does not mean filling in the tunnels men follow to pursue their dreams.

Above all, it is important to note that an expropriation is the opposite of an explanation. Gide reiterates that between his wife Madeleine and him there was no explanation at all, nor does he intend to explain anything in these final pages. At best, they will be his retaliation against repression: "It is to be able finally to speak out some day that I restrained myself all lifelong" (1952, p. 59). The Leopard's expropriation is not an explanation either; rather, it is a confirmation. An explanation is given for a problem that it is hoped can be solved, but on the horizon of these considerations we assume that there are problems that cannot be solved, which we must learn to live with until the very moment when life itself loosens its grip on us. But to describe a problem is not to explain it. Expropriation leaves the individual's past intact without adding a space for new decisions that may change the course of the future. It is a final intervention in a conflict that is born out of age-old mortality, that which, being final, transcends all explanation. As in Lord Marchmain's case, expropriation meanders over the exclusive territory of the past and allows us to smell the fragrances that the wind brings from those fields. It is an episode of maximum sensation and low emotional intensity. The ideas of the expropriated individual are easily legible to him, but not translatable to a language outside that scene, as in the case of the Prince's last words, barely audible to Chevalley (see Figure 5). The ideas cling to the words in which they are expressed like the flotsam of a shipwreck. They rise to the surface for the last time, before sinking once and for all into the deep. They resonate with a curious mixture of agony and relief⁵.

Property is our oldest connection to the world. Expropriation thus appeals to a state before time, a kind of metaphorical eternity that would only be conceivable for those who have taken the greatest care to protect their inheritance, the transmission of that which the generations have possessed and have bequeathed before disappearing. If property is sacred, then expropriation has something of sacrilege, of fulfilling a condition of sincerity which, nevertheless, cannot restore the harmony lost. The loss of harmony is another ingredient of the degradation of expropriation.

has transmitted this dispossession or "expropriation," adapting it to its particular style. Unlike Waugh, Visconti does not narrate the whole evolution of the Salina family, the survivors of historical change. He makes use of a regal sequence: the great banquet offered by the Sicilian aristocracy, to hint at the fate of each character, including the impending death of the Prince. The series of waltzes and mazurkas are merely the mirage of splendor of a lineage that will soon face its demise: "It is the clearest image that cinema has given of the end of an era at the hands of that great destroyer, time" (*ibid.*, p. 119).

⁵ "Deep memories yield no epitaphs," wrote Melville (1926, p. 103). Expropriations could be considered the remains of the shipwreck, a "scattered chapter" of our existence, a "livid hieroglyph" that can be decoded, as Hart Crane wrote in his epitaph-poem, "At Melville's Tomb" (Baym, 1998, p. 1649-50). The shipwreck of all history would be the failure of man to preserve any testimony. Literature and cinema, through these acts of eloquence at the gates of death, would document the meaning of the lives of the noble characters as consciousnesses linked to the material plane of memory. Consider the Prince's final soliloquy in Visconti's *The Leopard*: "It shouldn't last, but it will, forever. It's the human 'forever', a couple of centuries. Only then it will be different, but worse [...] We were the servals, the lions. Our place will be taken by the jackals, by hyenas. We all, the servals, the lions, the jackals and the sheep will keep on believing we're the salt of the earth"(2:08:43-2:09:30; Figure 5).

Figure 5: Screenshots from *The Leopard* (2:08:43-2:09:30). Don Fabrizio Salina accompanies Chevalley to the carriage. On the way they contemplate the misery in which the people live (still-frames 1-3): “It shouldn’t last, but it will, forever” (f. 5). As he bids farewell, he whispers his prophesy of what is to come (f. 6), which Chevalley does not manage to hear (f. 7): “We all, the servals, the lions, the jackals and the sheep will keep on believing we’re the salt of the earth.”



4. Conclusions: qualities of expropriation

According to our analysis, despite the human drama it represents, the concept of expropriation refers to those enunciations (and their corresponding visual depictions) which, for their rhetorical nature and their ostensible magnanimity, are speeches more characteristic of literature than of real life. The solemnity of the soliloquies is in turn determined by the significance of the moment: for the individual to be considered expropriated, the confidence must be offered when he is on the verge of death, to a small audience of chosen people who assume not only the role of intradiegetic listeners in the story, but also of extradiegetic spectators, implied emotionally in the story although located outside it. This description has been confirmed by the cases analyzed. Lord Marchmain offers a confession that goes beyond the smart selfishness with which he has planned his own return to Brideshead; the Prince of Salina embodies the aristocrat swept along by history to witness a slight that is merely another episode in the eternal mortality of the Sicilian people, the incomprehensible arrogance of humankind. *Et nunc manet in te* is the ultimate expression of dispossession by a writer whose final justification cannot be in the subject matter, but in his way of life, sacrificed at the altar of a tradition whose bonds vanish as style itself achieves its definitive crystallization.

These acts of transparent eloquence and lucidity are in no way intended to indoctrinate the listeners, but to share with them the fragmented gaze of the dispossessed witness, given that the expropriated individual holds out no hope for the world he is leaving behind or his successors. There is no self-deceit or hypocrisy: it is a venting that still aims to dig into the truth. The expropriation should not be construed as an explanation (in the didactic sense) but rather as a confirmation of the facts. These confidences must also contain a claim to permanence on the part of the protagonist, who is always male, wherein lies its particular distinction: it is only conceivable for those who have taken great care to protect their inheritance, the bequest represented by tradition in the aristocratic family. Moreover, what the expropriated individuals say should constitute a reconciliation more with the sources of a liberal education than with the dogmatic terms of their religious instruction, as their

testament contains no redemptive message; nor is philosophy present in this “all too human” setting, because of its distance or imperturbability in the face of death.

The concept could probably be applied to other contexts or works beyond the examples examined here, despite the fact that the conclusions we draw in this study depend largely on the materiality of audiovisual discourse. We are aware of the difficulties of generalizing, as well as the need to search the field of artistic expressions for a certain type of deathbed utterance in which the crisis brought on by the end of an era can be taken as a parallel for the difficulty faced by the artist to reveal to and communicate effectively with his audience in modernity, when shared values no longer offer a guarantee of universal understanding of those things in which humankind has encoded the secrets of tradition.

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