

EUGENIO DI STEFANO

The Rules of the Game
in Carlos Reygadas's *Serenghetti*

At first glance, Mexican filmmaker Carlos Reygadas' *Serenghetti* (2009) appears to be a documentary, capturing nothing more than an amateur women's soccer match filmed in Santo Domingo Ocotitlán (Morelos, Mexico). Commentary on the film has focused on social issues such as urban development, anthropocentrism, and sport as spectacle. This essay, however, argues that *Serenghetti* is much more interested in examining the aesthetic dimension of cinema, or what Reygadas calls the film's "fiction." In some respects, *Serenghetti* recalls Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006), as both movies record complete soccer matches. But where Gordon and Parreno's film engages, as Michael Fried contends, with the issue of absorption in contemporary art, this essay suggests that Reygadas's film is concerned with contesting an anti-representational account of cinema, particularly the question of time, which has been central to how slow cinema scholarship has understood his work. Indeed, since his Cannes award-winning film *Japón* (2001), Reygadas' films have been labeled as slow cinema—films that are understood less as a representation of time than as what Thiago de Luca calls "duration itself." This essay proposes that through the concept of the soccer game, *Serenghetti* not only asserts itself as fiction but also, in doing so, provides a reading of cinematic time that challenges many political and aesthetic fantasies endorsed by contemporary cultural criticism.

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In art today, any attempt to establish a connection with the audience risks reducing art to a mere tool for satisfying consumer desires. This challenge is heightened within the film industry where the concern often revolves around producing films that cater to consumer demands, aiming for profitability. It is in response to this dilemma—the degree to which every viewer is seemingly and unavoidably also a consumer and every work of art a commodity—that I would like to frame Carlos Reygadas's¹ *Serenghetti* (2009); at first glance, the film seems to have little to do with the status of the work of art, let alone art's relationship to the consumer.² The subject of the film is rather straightforward; it consists of a recording of an amateur football match between two women's teams, shot in what seems to be a rather isolated area near the Sierra de Tepoztlán in Santo Domingo Ocotitlán (Morelos, Mexico) in 2008. The 72-minute

1 I want to express my gratitude to Carlos Reygadas for generously providing access to several of his films, including *Serenghetti*, which greatly aided in conducting my research.

2 The film was commissioned by the Rotterdam Film Festival for their Urban Screens project in 2009 and played in several theaters and galleries since then. Unlike Reygadas's narrative films, very little has been written about *Serenghetti*. The synopsis of the film at the Rotterdam Film Festival frames the film in this way:

Reygadas (a great soccer fan) made a football film for his urban screen. The game between two women's elevens takes place on a pitch in the middle of a surrealistic mountain landscape where corrosion has done its job. The game has all elements of a professional match as these are generally seen on TV: colourful club kits, camera recording from all possible angles, statistics, the score, slow motion repeats, a preview, interviews with the players etc. A greater contrast between the daunting mountain landscape and the clean urban façade on which this is screened is almost inconceivable. Add to that the mixture of two almost incompatible worlds - that of commercial football broadcasts on TV and the artistic cinema of Reygadas - and a special viewing experience is born. (Rotterdam n.d.)

Since it played at the festival's Urban Screens project, *Serenghetti* has been framed as a commentary on urban development and anthropogenic environmental damage. In this case, the title of the film, a reference to Serengeti National Park in Tanzania, could be understood as a metaphor for those issues. Indeed, the addition of the added 'h' and 't' playfully draws the title closer to the word 'spaghetti' and perhaps gestures to the great folly of human destruction on Earth, as humans trample on it, much like football players on the pitch, with little regard for the consequences. Other possible readings could draw on a parodic critique of sport as a spectacle. My reading of the title, instead, sees the alteration in the title as another means in which Reygadas takes on the real and the indexical and insists on remaking it into something aesthetically its own.

film is almost exclusively a recording of the football game, which is divided by 30-minute halves with some added injury time.³ There are also eight cameras, which are placed around the field, offering different perspectives of the action on the pitch, while also glimpsing the sublime mountainous landscape that surrounds it. And yet, as I will argue later, this rather straightforward description of a simply shot, roughly cut football game will reveal a deeper engagement with the presence of the consumer as a kind of obstacle to overcome or defeat in the contemporary moment.

For now, however, what should be highlighted is precisely how ordinary this football game is: there is really nothing extraordinary about it. There are no star players or records to be broken; no explicit political statements made, or important events that surround it. The viewer doesn't know whether the teams are vying for first or last place because there are no commentators or voiceovers that could provide a compelling backstory. Nor does the film care who wins or loses the game.⁴ *Serenghetti*, simply put, lacks the kind of drama that one is accustomed to experiencing when watching a televised sporting event, which seems to be part of its point. The ordinariness of the game also appears to be confirmed in the lack of supporters who are there to watch it. The viewer of the film glimpses several spectators, no more than twenty, who stand on the sidelines, and whose presence is almost rendered invisible by the trees and brush immediately behind them. (One probably wouldn't be wrong to speculate that those who are there are mostly family and friends).⁵ But insofar as the lack of fans signals a certain irrelevance of the sporting event as televised or filmed drama, it also immediately raises for the viewer a series of questions about the film itself. Perhaps the most imme-

3 The game includes an opening sequence, several instant replays throughout, and intertitles at the beginning, halftime, and fulltime, which account for the remaining minutes of the film.

4 The two teams playing are La Hoja of Tepoztlán, Morelos and Amatlán (Amatlán, Morelos); Amatlán wins 1-0.

5 The personal or intimate aspect of the film, where a few family members and friends attend the game, may also remind one of Barthes's claims about the famous Winter Garden photo of his mother which doesn't appear in his book *Camera Lucida* because he believes it has no importance to those who do not know her. But by not showing it, Barthes is also saying something deeper about the ontology of photography, particularly the distinction between the *studium* and the *punctum*. In a similar fashion, the fact that *Serenghetti* captures a game, which draws very few fans but rather family and friends raises the question of the ontology of film. What does *Serenghetti* tell us about the filmic medium? What does it say about the filmic medium's relationship to the audience?

diate question would be: Why should this game warrant one, let alone eight, cameras to capture it?

No doubt, Reygadas is an unconventional director, but even this biographical note doesn't resolve the marked difference between *Serenghetti* and his other films. Indeed, *Serenghetti* represents a departure from his other films such as *Japón* (2002), *Batalla en el cielo* (2005), *Stellet Licht* (2007), *Post Tenebras Lux* (2012), and *Nuestro tiempo* (2018). The most obvious difference is that those movies are narrative films, with recognizable fictional conventions in plot development, themes, and conflicts. Those conventions are more aligned with auteur- rather than commercial cinema, but they are nevertheless recognizable as fiction. And yet, what is striking about *Serenghetti* is that Reygadas himself doesn't see the film as a documentary, but rather calls it a "fiction," which undoubtedly raises other questions, the most immediate of which is what exactly he means by the term.⁶ One can begin to answer this question by pointing out that there are aspects of *Serenghetti* that recall Reygadas's other films, such as shooting in natural light, working with non-actors, filming in non-urban settings, and recording ambient sounds (horses neighing, flies buzzing). But these aspects seem somewhat unsatisfactory since they are, after all, characteristics of the filmmaker's style and creative interests. That is, there is still a notion of fictionality in these other films that is entirely absent in *Serenghetti*.

Another characteristic that *Serenghetti* shares with these other films is its slow pace, which would perhaps place it within the genre of "slow cinema." In a previous article on Reygadas's first feature, the Cannes-award winning film *Japón*, I noted that slow cinema scholars often attributed the importance of Reygadas's films to how they blur the lines between art and life by emphasizing the camera's indexical relationship with the world and capturing life as it is (Di Stefano 2019, 63-64). The camera, on this account, is not representing but rather recording reality.

6 It is true that Reygadas finds the divisions between genres to be somewhat beside the point, but this is because, ultimately, it is the medium of cinema that must shine through, not a particular category in which it is defined. In an interview with José Castillo about whether *Serenghetti* is in a "documentary vein," Reygadas responds as follows:

I shot a match in a nearby soccer field, but it's not a documentary. In my own experience, the difference between genres has vanished. My film is "fiction," though I used "real" materials. *Silent Light* could be seen as a better documentary on Mennonites in Mexico than one produced by National Geographic. They'll tell you the whereabouts and indexes of Mennonites in Mexico, but you'll never see them making love, having an intimate conversation, bathing with their families in a pool, or dying. (Castillo 2010)

By insisting on this indexical relationship between the camera and what is the reality caught, this scholarship, I argued, sought to push aside not only the status of fiction, but also the filmmaker's intention to create an artwork. Often what is being applauded, instead, is the films' ability to record the contingent, the spontaneous, and the authentic lives of those who live outside the Global North by minimizing or disavowing the notion of the filmmaker who, much like any director, is simply creating a film that tells a fictional story. What I argued in that piece is that this de-differentiation of art, the interest in blurring what is and what isn't fiction, is completely at odds with Reygadas's own intention, which is less about capturing contingency and spontaneity and more about building what he calls "a new world, a whole, complete self-contained world" ("Conversation"). What this "self-contained world" entails, in other words, is the creation of an autonomous object that wasn't there before the film existed. That is, it is the creation of a work of art.

There is, undoubtedly, a political reading that accompanies this anti-intentional and anti-representational position, which sees this slowness, or what Tiago De Luca terms, "duration itself," as a means to challenge an aesthetics of neoliberalism or what Song Hwee Lim calls "capitalist-modernist ideology" (De Luca 2016, 28-29; Lim 2014, 24). I contested this political reading by suggesting that it is quite compatible with neoliberal logic, by which I meant that it offered a conception of the world where questions about intentions, beliefs, and disagreements (about the work) were redescribed as experiences, options, and interests which ultimately reinforce the neoliberal world of consumers and commodities. In this way, I contended that slow cinema criticism supported a neoliberal worldview that seeks to eliminate all disagreements by disavowing a normative conceptual logic to neoliberalism.

In what follows, I propose that *Serenghetti* should be read less as a departure than as an intensification of Reygadas's commitment to establishing a "fiction" or a "whole, complete self-contained world" as a way of rejecting this anti-intentional and anti-representational logic that is at the center of contemporary theory, as exemplified in slow cinema scholarship. What this means is that *Serenghetti* will approach these aesthetic and political concerns with a degree of seriousness. However, in contrast to his previously mentioned films, which remain tethered to narrative conventions, *Serenghetti's* football game offers an opportunity for a more intentional investigation into the challenges central to contemporary cultural theory, including anti-representational and anti-intentional accounts of space and time in art and the emphasis on the consumer. One of the primary challenges, as we will see, is the very

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inability to conceptually distinguish between the viewer/spectator and the consumer precisely because both are determined in part by the experience of the subject. For this reason, we can say that for Reygadas the assertion of “a whole, complete self-contained world,” will require something closer to the absence of the spectator as a means to distinguish art from nonart—and, by extension, from a commodity.⁷ As such, Reygadas’s notion of “fiction,” I will argue, reflects the filmmaker’s intent to create an autonomous work by way of negating the viewer’s experience.

But if the assertion of aesthetic form serves as a means to repudiate the neoliberal logic, which aims to transform all objects into commodities that satisfy consumers’ wants and desires, it makes sense to understand this consumer logic within in the particular context of Mexican cinema. No doubt, Reygadas is an outlier when contrasted with other Mexican filmmakers from his generation, namely Alejandro González Iñárritu, Alfonso Cuarón, and Guillermo del Toro. The contrast between their commercial and his more experimental films may raise questions about whether “New Mexican Cinema,” the term used since the turn of the century to classify their works, should be applied to him.⁸ Nevertheless, there are notable commonalities among their films. These filmmakers, for instance, show a certain unease, or exhaustion, with the notion of *mexicanidad* [Mexicanness], which played such a primary role in Mexican culture and politics until the 1990s.⁹ Instead, they embrace

7 For a brilliant account of that distinction, see Nicholas Brown’s, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism*.

8 Indeed, Reygadas is an outlier in this conversation about New Mexican Cinema, an auteur who has been vocal about his anathema to Hollywood cinema, and equally vocal in his insistence on creating what he calls “real cinema” (Higgins 2005); for which he means an ontological account of cinema that centers on its visual elements, and its opposition to other media, especially literature and theater. For this reason, the conventional critical narrative understands Reygadas and filmmakers such as Iñárritu in oppositional terms (commercial vs independent cinema); or if they are brought together, it is primarily within a sociological paradigm, where both simply satisfy market demands, (mainstream vs niche market). In my larger project on the topics I analyze here, I bring them together within the aesthetic realm to argue that their shared interest in the viewer is motivated by a desire to assert or even deepen the understanding of the medium, especially against a theatrical project that ultimately considers art as nothing more than an opportunity to affirm the presence of the consumer.

9 Prior to the 1990s, Mexican cinema often endorsed the philosophy of *mexicanidad*, which aimed to establish a more uniform concept of Mexican identity. However, this concept was deeply problematic and often aligned with the state ideology of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). *Mexicanidad* specifically focused on the national myth of the mestizo, which emerged as the

a more global, innovative style, often experimenting with narrative structures, visual techniques, and storytelling approaches that depart from the more melodramatic and political themes that informed earlier Mexican cinema. There is also a raw and gritty form of realism, notably present in Iñárritu's work, that highlight the accidental, spontaneous, and contingent.¹⁰

Another crucial shared aspect among these filmmakers is their approach to film financing. Mexican cinema, for most of the 20th century, heavily relied on state subsidies. This meant that Mexican cinema was characterized by substantial budgets and a star-system, with the government's ownership of the largest film studio granting it the power to approve all major productions. However, in the 1980s, Mexico experienced a profound transformation as it embraced neoliberal measures, replacing the national-developmental model that had previously governed film funding. By the 1990s, during the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the Mexican film industry had been deregulated, as the state also divested itself of the state-owned studio. Undoubtedly, the national-developmental model had limitations, such as political censorship and the perpetuation of a hegemonic discourse surrounding *mexicanidad*, which despite its apparent inclusivity, often upheld conservative and reactionary state policies. Nevertheless, the national-developmental model provided certain safeguards that protected the industry from the free market. From this standpoint, the neoliberal model

dominant identity in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution. The Revolution sought to bring significant economic and social changes to those who had been marginalized since the period of conquest and colonialism. From the 1940s onward, the concept of *mexicanidad* increasingly aligned with market-oriented policies, displacing more progressive initiatives such as land reform that had emerged from the Revolution. See both Legrás (2008) and Epplin (2012) for a more detailed account of the limitations of *Mexicanidad*.

10 In an excellent article on the Mexican "new wave," Jeff Menne writes that many films, including what is regarded as the first Mexican new wave film, Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Amores Perros*, depict "characters that are both cross-hatched by... international influence and prospects, free markets, and private enterprise — and formed by contingency." For Menne, what is important about the term "new wave" is the "self-contemplative" aspects of the film as it is related to "the national in the onslaught of the global" (Menne 2007, 72-73). And yet, what needs to be stressed here is that the new wave is also a "self-contemplative" engagement with past national and global films; and thus, films such as *Amores perros* mark a developing recognition of the importance of contingency in the history of the medium. For an brilliant study on this same period in Mexican film, see Sánchez Prado (2014); for another article on the importance of contingency in New Mexican Cinema, see Baer and Long (2004).

of film financing represented a significant departure from the national-developmental model in Mexico, as the objective now became less about endorsing the vision of the party in power, and more about satisfying the demands of the consumer. In short, the new model is primarily concerned with creators producing products for consumers.

I do not mean to suggest that films were not commodities in previous eras. Nor do I want to argue in this essay that *Serenghetti* offers a direct critique of neoliberalism by challenging this model of film financing. All of Reygadas's movies, and, in fact, nearly all New Mexican Cinema films, are privately financed. Nor am I proposing that this critique of the market is driven by a kind of anti-capitalist ethos that permeates Reygadas's films, which would imagine that Reygadas is somehow rejecting neoliberalism by making films that do not sell as many tickets as his peers. The point is neither about the attitude of the director nor about the cultural capital of those who purchase tickets. Instead, what I want to argue here is that in *Serenghetti* the consumer becomes a paramount formal concern that must be overcome or defeated within the film itself. This entails a keen aesthetic awareness on the part of Reygadas regarding the viewer's complete identification with the consumer. In other words, as consumer demands increasingly drive investment, what comes to be understood as a key element in *Serenghetti* is the film's ability to assert its aesthetic form as a way of negating the consumer's experience.

From this same economic and political standpoint, one can begin to make sense of Reygadas's use of sports as a subject in the film. Indeed, roughly in the same period, professional sports, especially football, undergo a similar restructuring that occurs in the film industry. This restructuring includes the push to monetize all aspects of the game, including, but not limited to, sponsorship, pay-per-view, and digital platforms.¹¹ The fact that *Serenghetti* also focuses on a women's football

11 The point of the piece is not to provide a leftist analysis of the sports, where, for example, football is regarded as a distraction, or what Terry Eagleton understands as the opiate of the masses. For a more positive notion of sport in the neoliberal period, see Peter Kennedy and David Kennedy (2017). This essay, instead, aims to understand the football game at the center of *Serenghetti* as deeply concerned with the medium of film, which in the last section of the essay, I align with a leftist critique today. Nor does this mean that I wish to present a sociological reading of sports, where sports become a reflection of one's class tastes. One is reminded of Bourdieu's essay "How Can One Be a Sports Fan?" where his approach to sport becomes almost interchangeable with art, as nothing more than a reflection of cultural capital. Bourdieu, for example, notes that "It is doubtless among the professions and the well-established business bourgeoisie that the health-giving and aesthetic functions are combined with social functions; there,

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game invites consideration of how women in sports have been largely excluded from these developments in men's sports, both as national and economic projects, and how this is now experiencing a transformation. In fact, in recent years, women's football has grown globally, and in Mexico, the creation of La Liga Mexicana de Fútbol Femenil in 2007 and Liga MX Femenil in 2016 has led to aspirations for the same gains in TV rights and sponsorship. It also prompts us to uncover the histories of women's football that have been ignored. For example, women's football also gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s across Europe and Latin America, including Mexico.¹² In 1971, Mexico hosted the Women's World Cup; the final, which saw Denmark defeat Mexico, drew over 110,000 fans.¹³ It holds the record for the highest attended women's sporting event, even though FIFA only recently recognized it. The boom of this period had much to do with women's rights movements, the development of grassroots programs, and the support of the Mexican media itself. There was also plenty of money to be made from it.¹⁴

sports take their place, along with parlour games and social exchanges (receptions, dinners etc.), among the 'gratuitous' and 'disinterested' activities which enable the accumulation of social capital" (Bourdieu 1999, 439). What this passage highlights is how the uniqueness of the work of art essentially becomes interchangeable with other objects of taste. Hence, even Bourdieu's idea of "relative autonomy" can never go far enough to provide an accurate account of what makes the work of art unique.

12 In their book *Futbolera: A History of Women and Sports in Latin America*, Brenda Elsey and Joshua Nadel write that

By the end of 1970, women's football was a regular part of the sporting scene, both in terms of media coverage and play. In the Mexico City area alone, the Liga América had over forty teams in three separate divisions. The Valley of Mexico had its own league, with sixteen teams, while Cuernavaca had a fourteen-team championship. Naucalpan, Veracruz, Puebla, and Ciudad Juárez all had leagues, some of which began to affiliate with the AMFF. As mentioned earlier, Monterrey had over two hundred teams. In Mexico City, the Liga Iztaacihuatl had over fifty teams. (Elsey and Nadel 2019, 230-231)

13 There are several documentaries that have been released in the last year about this event, including James Erskine and Rachel Ramsay's *Copa '71* (2023) and Carolina Gil Solari and Carolina Fernández's *México '71* (2023).

14 In their last chapter, "The Boom and Bust of Mexican Women's Football," Elsey and Nadal speak to the importance and support of the media in Mexico, "Media attention was paramount to attract spectators to games" (Elsey and Nadal 2019, 206). In particular, the newspaper *El Heraldo de Mexico*, often showed photos where the crowd was present and cheering for these players (Fig.6). It is also interesting to note the rise of football in this period was framed within the national discourse of *mexicanidad* (Elsey and Nadal 2019, 215), where the success of football was framed as a national success.



PUBLICO... La afición por ver en acción a las chamacas del futbol, está creciendo a pasos agigantados. Maria Elena López inicia un avance teniendo como marco a una multitud de aficionados.

Fig. 6. *El Herald de México*, December 28, 1969. Cited in Brenda Elsey and Joshua Nadel's *Futbolera: A History of Women and Sports in Latin America* (2019)



Fig. 6. A photo that captures a well-attended Mexico vs. Italy at the second women's world football championship, 1971. *El Sol de México*, August 30, 1971. Cited in Brenda Elsey and Joshua Nadel's *Futbolera: A History of Women and Sports in Latin America* (2019)

This rise in the popularity of women's football in Mexico was followed by a decline, which can also be explained by continuing sexism and economic exploitation. Indeed, for much of the boom period, women football players were not paid, but starting in 1971, they began to demand payment for their work. Once these demands were made, the national and international support for women's football in Mexico mostly disappeared. Certainly, these economic and sociological questions offer a productive political, social, and ideological basis for comparison, serving as key material to consider in relation to the game at the center of Reygadas's film.¹⁵ Having now discussed the material significance of the neoliberalization of films and sports, which both directly and indirectly shapes the content of the film, we will shift our focus to the aesthetic project at the core of *Serenghetti* in order to grasp its aesthetic significance.

It might initially seem odd to look to sports as a space not only to reflect on but to insist on the work of art. Nonetheless, sports and art share a long history, exemplified not simply in representations of sports in art, but also in aesthetic terms, such as beauty, elegance, and grace, that are used to talk about sports. Football, after all, is called “o jogo bonito” [the beautiful game]. Furthermore, watching sports can generate emotional responses that often are characterized as aesthetic. In his book *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*, Hans Gumbrecht holds that there is, in fact, a deep affinity between sports and art; even claiming that viewing sports today is the “most popular and potent contemporary form of aesthetic experience” (Gumbrecht 2006).¹⁶ Later, we will explore Gumbrecht's claims in more detail. But for now, what is important to highlight is that if sports can be associated with these emotionally charged responses, what is significant about *Serenghetti* is how the question of these intense reactions is largely bracketed by Reygadas's decision to record an ordinary amateur football game, rather than, say, a Women's World Cup game. Thus, as a point of entry into the film, we might simply make clear that Reygadas's interest in the game, as a subject to explore the intersections between art and sports, is not one that follows the aesthetic notion of affective intensity; much less, in what Gumbrecht would understand as the popularity and potency that sports elicit. Rather, I will suggest that the turn away from affective responses, such as excitement, drama, tension, in *Serenghetti* becomes the first indication of

15 The area where *Serenghetti* was filmed has a strong presence of women's football as depicted in the ESPN's series, *Greenland*.

16 The citation is found in the book description.

Reygadas's concern to negate or neutralizing the type of shared immersive experience that in the neoliberal moment is increasingly often allied with sports and art. We might simply say that by focusing on the amateur game, Reygadas is asserting a sense of aesthetic meaning that can't be reduced to the kind of effects that are often associated with not just sports but spectacles of all sorts, including Hollywood blockbusters.

To be sure, *Serenghetti* is not the only film that has used football as a subject of aesthetic creation and exploration. Indeed, one can see Reygadas's film following a clear line of art films on sport, and football in particular, such as Hellmuth Costard's 1971 *Fussball wie noch nie* (Football as Never Before) and more recently, Douglas Gordon and Phillipe Parreno's *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006).¹⁷ In a brilliant reading of *Zidane*, Michael Fried suggests that Gordon and Parreno's film continues an antitheatrical tradition that began in French painting in the middle of the 18th century.¹⁸ Certainly, for Fried, the term "portrait" serves as one of the initial indicators that the film is precisely concerned with the status of the work of art. More specifically, the focus is on absorption, as Zidane immerses himself in the game,

17 While *Fussball wie noch nie* undoubtedly revolves around a star player, the English footballer George Best, it places less emphasis on the question of spectatorship. Instead, by focusing primarily on his movements and not the surrounding action, it often seems as if he is wandering aimlessly across the field. One could argue that this evokes a sense of being adrift, even suggesting a profound existential inquiry. A good point of comparison between *Zidane* and *Fussball*, which are very much committed to deepening our understanding of the philosophy of art, is Spike Lee's *Kobe Doin' Work* (2009), which offers a prime example of a documentary that aims mostly to capitalize on the commodification of the cult of the figure by giving viewers an all-access pass into the day in the life of a star player.

18 This reading is presented in Fried's *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, a text that, in addition to photography, delves into the realm of film. However, the concept of absorption is first elaborated in his book *Absorption and Theatricality*, where Fried explores eighteenth-century paintings through the critical lens of Denis Diderot. Fried contends that, according to Diderot, "the most ambitious paintings rested ultimately upon the supreme fiction that the beholder did not exist, that he was not really there, standing before the canvas; and that the dramatic representation of action and passion, and the causal and instantaneous mode of unity that came with it, provided the best available medium for establishing that fiction in the painting itself" (Fried 1980, 103). While the traditional absorptive project in painting comes to an end toward the close of that century and into the 19th century, other antitheatrical devices emerge. These devices are primarily explored in two other masterful works, *Courbet's Realism* (1990) and *Manet's Modernism* (1996), ultimately aiming to assert the status of the work of art and defeat theatricality.

despite his acute awareness that 80,000 fans are watching, cheering, and filming his every move. For this reason, according to Fried, the film makes available “a possibility of sustaining absorption under a condition of maximum publicity” (Fried 2014, 2016).¹⁹

But if *Zidane* presents a world in which the work can be sustained “under a condition of maximum publicity” because there are 80,000 spectators, *Serenghetti* seems to be suggesting something different precisely because there aren't. Indeed, one might consider that the absence of a star player like Zidane and the choice to film an ordinary amateur game instead of a spectacle like a Champions League final or World Cup match as motivated by Reygadas's desire not to draw a crowd of spectators. It is also a plausible reason why Reygadas chooses a women's team over a men's team, since, as Doyle suggests in her examination of media broadcasting in women's sport, “the elements that make the men's game feel spectacular are totally absent from feminist engagements with the sport” (Doyle 2019, 125).²⁰ Thus we can begin to see that the lack of a crowd in *Serenghetti* is both acknowledging and responding to the centrality of the viewer in the contemporary moment, and the degree to which every viewer is unavoidably also a consumer. Indeed, what brings all these points together, I want to suggest, is that they are all motivated by the attempt to overcome the real threat that the consumer poses. The lack of spectators in *Serenghetti*, in other words, is not a claim about evasion but rather an attempt to repudiate a logic which turns the work into a situation or product to affirm the consumer's experience.

Which is just to say that *Serenghetti* is less interested in the issue of absorption than committed to mobilizing other antitheatrical elements to assert its status as a work of art.²¹ From this position, one can consider certain visual features of the film, including how the film denies the movie viewer's field of vision, which is apparent in the film's opening shot. Rather than, for instance, an open, sweeping aerial shot of the stadium and field, as we are accustomed to seeing in conventional live TV sporting broadcasts, what appears is a static extreme close-up of blades of grass swaying in the wind, which lasts nearly thirty seconds before the shot finally comes to focus on a football pitch and the two teams present (fig.1). In contrast to the conventional aerial view,

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19 Although found in Fried's text *Another Light*, this reference is to Fried's reading of *Zidane* in *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*.

20 To be sure, with the rise in the popularity of women's football in recent years, this “absence” of the spectacle has also changed.

21 For a more in-depth discussion on antitheatricality in photography and film, see again Fried's *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*.



Fig. 1 Stills from *Serengeti*

Serenghetti's opening shot suggests a blocking or denial of the spectator's visual field. This negation also plays out in other shots throughout the film. There are long shots that are so distant that it is difficult to see the action on the field (fig.2); close-ups with handheld cameras that are so uncomfortably close that Reygadas actually interferes with the player's movements (fig.3). There are many shots, in fact, where the ball is entirely out of the frame.



Fig. 2 Still from *Serenghetti*



Fig. 3 Still from *Serenghetti*

Considering this denial of seeing the game, it is important to take into account the features that do appear on the screen. In the frame, throughout the film, we see both the score of the game and the time, which is standard enough, but what is unusual here are the retro graphics (fig.4), which are clearly a throwback to 1980s and 1990s live sports broadcasting or even video games. Normally the function of graphics in televised sports is to inform and immerse viewers into the spectacle of sports. Jennifer Doyle notes that “Especially in the televised sports spectacle, media itself becomes the platform through which the spectator experiences his passion for the sport. Glossy production, rapid edits, dynamic graphics, and elaborate sound effects theatricalize spectatorship in terms of technology and, implicitly, gender” (Doyle 2019, 125).²² We will return to Doyle’s account below, but for now it is important to signal that in *Serenghetti* the appearance of graphics ultimately serves to raise more questions (Why are the retro graphics needed? Why this particular font?) than to immerse the viewer into the game.



22 In her reading of women’s sports and spectacle, Doyle continues “Statistical forms of analysis turn bodies into arrows, diagrams, and numbers. The distance between the visual experience of watching a World Cup match and the visual geometry of a game like EA Sports’ FIFA decreases with each revolution in product development (moving now toward VR and 3-D). Such technological rituals organize an enormous amount of attention and desire around the male athlete’s body, for the pleasures of the presumed male spectator/consumer” (Doyle 2019, 132).

As I will note below, Reygadas’s film, in part, emphasizes the soccer game as a kind of analogy of the work of art. The focus on a women’s soccer game in the film is a further attempt to make this point. I do not suggest, however, that this aesthetic claim can be reduced to a question of gender. Nor is my point that women’s soccer is outside of commodity production. Within neoliberal logic, the recent rise of women’s soccer doesn’t offer an alternative to the market but rather affirms that money can also be made in women’s football.



Fig. 4 Still from *Serengetti*

The soundscape has a similar effect. For instance, the sounds of horses neighing, and donkeys braying are more noticeable than the cheers from the crowd. Regarding this crowd, as noted, there are only a few people who surround the field, rendered even smaller by the mountains that envelop them. The film's most exciting moment arises when a goal is scored from a set piece, and as the ball crosses the goal line, it strikes Reygadas, who is recording the game, in the head (Fig. 5). Everybody laughs, including Reygadas. All these aspects complicate the viewer's relationship to the football game; it's as though Reygadas were not asking the viewer to see or feel the game but to refuse that position as a possibility. And that awareness of a certain absence of effects automatically gives rise to a series of questions about the meaning of the film itself. Or put differently, in place of emotions, we are left with only interpretive questions. Why does the opening shot begin with blades of grass? What do the outdated graphics on the screen mean?

Certainly, if Reygadas's film aims to raise questions about its meaning, it also serves to underscore the distinction between watching a film and watching a game, that is, between interpreting a work of art, and experiencing an event. To discern this dissimilarity, one can revisit Gumbrecht's assertions regarding the "aesthetic experience" in sport, where he contrasts two dimensions: "meaning" and "presence" (Gumbrecht 2006, 62).²³ For him, meaning is associated with the cognitive and interpretive, which does play a role in aesthetic appreciation, but cannot, according to him, account for what makes watching sports enjoyable. Instead of cognition, it's the performance and the presence of bodies that makes us appreciate this form of beauty. Gumbrecht writes that, unlike cognition, "[i]n the presence dimension ... [i]t would not occur to a soccer player to ask himself what the ball could possibly 'mean'" (Gumbrecht 2006, 62); and this lack of meaning also extends to the spectator's own gratification: "people feel that they are part of and contiguous with objects in the physical world" (Gumbrecht 2006, 62). This "presence dimension" stresses not just the relationship between bodies on the pitch and in the stands, but also the immediacy between

23 There are limitations to Gumbrecht's account of aesthetics. Nevertheless, his framework does begin to tease out an aesthetics of sports. It also gives us another point of entry to grasp certain tendencies within contemporary cultural theory; namely, the tendency to treat art as an event or situation to be experienced affectively rather than understood critically. This emphasis on experience is fundamental to how many scholars have approached the discourse of slow cinema, especially when framed as a political intervention. For a refutation of this approach to slow cinema, see Di Stefano (2019).

these bodies (Gumbrecht 2006, 64). It's not only that the notion of presence is contrasted with meaning and cognition, but rather that it is constitutive of the subordination of meaning and cognition. For the spectator, for instance, to ask what the player's intention is when she kicks the ball is, according to Gumbrecht, to take away from the immersive experience which would otherwise bring the player and spectator together.



Fig. 5 Still from *Serengetti*

What Reygadas is attempting to make appear is something like the structure of intentionality, which becomes visible by examining the conceptual difference between experiencing a game and interpreting a film.

The point here, of course, is not to imply that players don't have intentions, a topic I will return to shortly when talking about the rules of the game. Instead, the notion is that posing such questions hinders the ability to fully immerse oneself in the game. But if these types of questions, as we are already beginning to see, take away from immersing oneself in the game, they are at the center of Reygadas's film, since all the interpretive questions posed above (Why does the opening shot begin with blades of grass? Why are there outdated graphics on the screen? etc.) cannot be answered without recourse to the question of intentionality. What I mean is that, unlike watching a football game, what Reygadas's film is deeply interested in is creating a fictional film where viewing the film itself cannot escape the question of intention. The aim of the film, in short, is to take what is seemingly an anti-intentional event and transform it into something that is *aesthetically meaningful*. Indeed, what I want to argue later is that what Reygadas is attempting to make appear is something like the structure of intentionality, which becomes visible by examining the conceptual difference between experiencing a game and interpreting a film.

For now, however, it is important to stress the extent to which the insistence on experience or presence effectively renders irrelevant the concept of fiction, and the question of art more generally. This is what Gumbrecht himself suggests when he claims that “[n]othing is ever fictional in the presence dimension, even a sports event such as Hulk Hogan's ‘wrestling’” (Gumbrecht 2006, 66). Of course, in a certain way, this can simply mean that part of enjoying or immersing oneself means feeling as if it isn't fiction but something immediate and real. But it also entails something more radical about the idea of ‘presence’ or ‘force,’ which is that once what is primary is the experience one feels, it matters very little whether that object is a work of art, a sporting event, or a walk in the park. Indeed, the whole point of presence is not the object but rather the experience one has regardless of the object. No doubt, Gumbrecht is interested in the question of beauty in sports, and thus there must be a cognitive level of distinction, but the force of presence as a theoretical question is the complete irrelevance of the object, and in this case of the art object, and the type of interpretive questions that are raised by the object.²⁴

24 It should be stressed that Gumbrecht's claim on presence point directly to certain limitations to Gumbrecht's aesthetic reading of sports, a reading that very much aligns athletic beauty with other beautiful things, including skies, rivers, flowers, animals, and people. What I mean here is that Gumbrecht's aesthetics is less an account of a particular object, than of one's subjective experience

From this position, we can discern not only a distinction between interpreting a film and watching a sporting event, but also a contrast between Reygadas's film and a current scholarly perspective on slow cinema, which redescribe Reygadas's works of art as events, and the interpretive questions these works of art pose, as affective responses and experiences. Tiago de Luca, who has written extensively on Reygadas's films, maintains that slow cinema is defined by its uncomfortably long and static takes that ultimately stress "silence, stillness, minimalism, and an emphasis on duration itself" (de Luca 2016, 28-29). Examining Reygadas's *Japón*, de Luca underscores the film's indexical quality, notably showcased through its extensive use of long takes and pans. These techniques not only capture unintentional elements but also inadvertently seize unanticipated aspects (de Luca 2015, 224). By insisting on these contingent and accidental aspects, de Luca insists that *Japón* confirms what Mary Anne Doane calls "a denial of the frame as boundary and hence promised access to a seemingly limitless vision" (Doane 2002, 154).²⁵ This denial of the frame and the "emphasis on duration itself," rather than a representation of time, signal not only the de-differentiation

regardless of the object (trees, rivers, sports, etc.) These same aesthetic limitations are not unique to Gumbrecht's aesthetic account and can be found as far back as Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750). Instead, it is only with Hegel that we see the clearest attempt to examine the notion of aesthetics in its distinct relationship to the work of art. In the opening paragraph of his *Aesthetics*, Hegel makes this point clear when he notes that his study is not an examination of "the beautiful as such but simply with the beauty of art" (Hegel 1975, 1). And an art object, unlike a natural object, requires a notion of authorial intent. In short, while Gumbrecht's reading provides us with an aesthetic theory, he doesn't offer us a philosophy of art. In my reading of *Serenghetti*, I attempt to address the limitations of the former to offer a better account of the latter. Furthermore, the general lack of serious engagement with the ontology of the work of art in the 1980s and 1990s is crucial to the rise of cultural studies and the seemingly paradoxical commitment to a post-Kantian aesthetics of failure, residues, and fragments. What I mean here is a doubling down on the subjective (and largely aesthetic) side of the relationship and an almost complete irrelevance of the objective, ontological one. The turn to cultural studies, in this way, is very much committed to seeing all objects as mere opportunities to affirm the subject's experience. The slow cinema scholarship noted above is nothing more than a continuation of this project. But insofar as slow cinema scholarship eliminates the aesthetic object, it also forces one to acknowledge that Gumbrecht's own aesthetic examination of sport presents perhaps an intensification of the same contemporary interest in criticism, not only disavowing the work of art but also emphasizing the notion of presence, immediacy, and anti-intentionalism that ultimately aligns athletic beauty with other beautiful things, including skies, rivers, flowers, animals, and people.

25 Doane's text is cited in de Luca (2015, 225).

of art, but also a desire to imagine the shared experience between the film and the viewer (de Luca 2016, 28-29). Unlike Reygadas's idea of a "self-contained world," the importance of slow cinema, for de Luca, is found precisely in its ability to overcome the aesthetic "frame," so the film and the viewer come to experience same space and time (de Luca 2015, 225).

By emphasizing not only the unintended, but also the spontaneous, contingent, and material aspects of the film, de Luca argues not only for the elimination of the aesthetic frame between film and viewer but also for a political reading of the film which makes visible a more egalitarian ecocritical perspective on society that seeks to "relativize and diminish human presence in relation to the nonhuman world" (de Luca 2015, 224). By no means is de Luca the only scholar who believes that this blurring of the line between art and life by way of insisting on the materiality of time (instead of the aesthetic representation of it) challenges or undermines the status quo. For example, in his reading of slow cinema, Song Hwee Lim believes that the "excessive temporality" of slow cinema "points to that extratextual space beyond the frame to raise questions about the politics of time, the value of speed, and the material forms in which different temporalities manifest their ideological investments" (Lim 2014, 33).²⁶ What he means here is that slow cinema overcomes the frame, and thus challenges "capitalist-modernist ideology" (Lim 2014, 24). In a similar manner, the film scholar Richard Misek notes that slow cinema's commitment to dead time fosters an "ethics," as it involves "an appreciation of the fact that time is not under our control" (Misek 2010, 778). From this position, this lack of control frees cinematic time from its aesthetic constraints, liberating this temporal experience, and giving rise to what Rancière refers to as "configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity" (Rancière 2004, 9).²⁷

All these readings treat the work of art as nothing more than a situation or opportunity that brings the screen and viewer into the same physical space. To be sure, slowness is a product of cinematic form, but for these scholars what is crucial is precisely the effect that quickly gives way to an intensification of the viewer's experience. In other words, the force of slow cinema for them is located in how the preservation of other "temporal structures" gives rise to a vision of film that "quickly exhausts the image's representational dimension," enabling the emergence of a new-

26 Ibid, 33.

27 Rancière is cited in Lim (2014, 32).

found “collective situation” (de Luca 2015, 38-39).²⁸ We will return to the political implications of this scholarship later on, but for now, it should be noted that this conceptual account of slow cinema is strikingly similar to Gumbrecht’s aesthetic experience of watching a game, where “people feel that they are part of and contiguous with objects in the physical world” (Gumbrecht 2006, 62). Indeed, it provides an account of the “presence dimension” that effectively eliminates the notion of fiction, and the work of art, more generally. But more importantly still, this insistence on the subject’s experience obfuscates Reygadas’s intent to create a work of art; that is, to create an autonomous object that stands independent of the viewer’s experience.

And as I have been arguing, the women’s football game in *Serenghetti* functions as a motif to assert this autonomous space that not only repudiates the spectacle of watching a sporting event but also stands outside of the experience of the spectator as such. In her essay, Doyle notes that “Because [women’s soccer] is less mediatized, access to the game is less mediated;” what this means, from the standpoint of this essay, is that the filmmaker’s intention to capture a woman’s soccer game can also be understood as an opportunity to focus on the concept of game itself (Doyle 2019, 130). That is, insofar as the game is less mediatized, it brings us one step closer to the main objective of the film which develops the notion of the game as an element to assert the cinematic medium.

28 I have written more about de Luca’s account in my essay “Toward an Aesthetics of Dead Time in Carlos Reygadas’s *Japón*.” I cite a portion of it below to point to his commitment to experience, and the effect of boredom in particular. For example, De Luca asserts that:

the discomfort or boredom provoked by extended shots of characters wandering pointlessly from one place to another, which stubbornly delay narrative gratification, may prompt the spectator to look around and see whether such feelings are being shared by other spectators or make one wonder what other viewers within the same site are making of such a film. (de Luca 2015, 38-39)

Although it may seem that this account goes against de Luca’s frameless vision proposed above, it ultimately ends up reinforcing the primacy of the beholder’s experience. Politics in this reading, in other words, is conceived as redescribing representation as a situation, which, in turn, “provides the conditions for an ethical spectatorship” (de Luca 2015, 41-42). For de Luca, the politics of slow cinema has less to do with the representation of time than with an experience that affords a “collective situation.” But this also means that the force of slow cinema is located in how the slowness in the film “restores a sense of time and experience” outside of the film (de Luca 2015, 41). In short, slow cinema, on de Luca’s account, wishes to overcome the film’s status as film in order to become an object that gives rise to a shared temporal experience between film and spectator.

Indeed, it is precisely because of the lack of spectators in *Serenghetti* that we can begin to trace in the game itself a deeper commitment to creating an antitheatrical work of art, or what Reygadas names as a “whole, complete self-contained world.”

Hence, the need at this point to consider the notion of the game itself as an affirmation or a thematization of what it means to be a work of art. We can begin by noting that games, like art, are rule governed, which also means that without these rules, they become indistinguishable from other types of play. But, of course, different sports have different rules. Reygadas’s deliberate choice of a football game is significant in several key ways, especially when it is considered in light of contemporary slow cinema scholarship, which wishes to disregard temporal constraints, and understand itself as an “emphasis on duration itself” (de Luca 2016, 28-29). Indeed, football is regimented by an exact time that determines the beginning and end of the contest. When the time is up, the game is over.²⁹ This is not the case with other sports, such as boxing, tennis, or baseball, where time is secondary to determining the contest’s end. In *Serenghetti*, Reygadas places the formal feature of the clock at the center left of the screen, which renders visible the importance of time not only to the game, but also to cinema as an aesthetic medium.

As such, *Serenghetti* creates a built-in critique of slow cinema’s immersive fantasy of film as a continual emptying out of presence or “a denial of the frame as boundary and hence promised access to a seemingly limitless vision.” (Doane 2002, 154).³⁰ (In this way, it makes sense to think of *Serenghetti* as a kind of aesthetic manifesto against slow cinema.) In fact, part of this slow cinema fantasy is to imagine time breaking through the aesthetic frame, as if the time of the film and time in the actual world were materially one. From this position, the notion of a rule governed game in *Serenghetti* serves as a way of insisting on aesthetic autonomy, as a means of marking a difference between not only meaning and effect, but also the work and the spectator. What I mean here is that while football games need players to be a game, they do not need spec-

29 Of course, there is injury time in football, but it’s not as if injury time somehow deconstructs or problematizes the status of the game as such. Which is just to say, it is accounted for in the rules of the game.

30 Doane’s text is cited in de Luca (2015, 225). It’s crucial to highlight that the slow cinema claims made by de Luca, or even Gumbrecht’s concept of “presence,” bear a remarkable resemblance to the idea of ‘presence’ in literalism (minimalism) criticized by Fried in “Art and Objecthood.” Indeed, as Fried argues, the temporal point of literalism is “essentially a presentment of endless, or indefinite, duration” (Fried 1988, 166).

tators. That is, the identity and legibility of the game is maintained regardless of whether a spectator attends. In short, spectators are secondary.³¹ In this way, one can push the analogy a bit further by noting that the absence of spectators also renders visible something essential about the medium of cinema itself. Part of what it means to be a film, as Stanley Cavell reminds us in the *World Viewed*, is that it allows “the audience to be mechanically absent” (Cavell 1979, 25). What one can draw from Cavell’s point is that the action on the screen, much like the action of the game, maintains a certain structural indifference in regard to the presence of the spectator. Thus, by making the game the subject of his film, Reygadas brings to bear a notion of the cinematic medium that acknowledges a fundamental division between the action on the screen and the viewer’s absence from it.

But, of course, this analogy between the game and the medium of film only goes so far before it begins to break down, reducing Reygadas’s desire to create a cinematic world to a mere indexing of a rather uninteresting game. It breaks down not because of the boringness of the game, or any effect for that matter. The analogy doesn’t hold instead because it effectively erases the notion of authorial intent, which is just as essential to “fiction” as it is irrelevant to the game itself. This marked difference between a meaningful work of art, and the non-intentional game, is made clear by Cavell when he suggests that: “Games are places where intention does not count, human activities in which intention need not generally be taken into account. Because in games what happens is described solely in terms set by the game itself, because the consequences one is responsible for are limited a priori by the rules of the game” (Cavell 2002, 236). My idea here is not to suggest that players do not have intentions, they surely do, but rather that these intentions are merely descriptive here. One doesn’t have to know what the player means

31 At the same time, the game as “rule-governed” also evokes the idea that art is a self-constituting or self-legislative object, reintroducing the concept of the work’s autonomy. Brown observes that “To claim that something is a work of art is to claim that it is a self-legislating artifact, that its form is intelligible, but not by reference to any eternal end. Since it is fundamentally true of artworks that their contingent material substrate is legible as being uncontingently assumed—that is what it means to be self-legislating—works of art are sites at which some of the most controversial claims of the dialect are thematized as holding sway” (Brown 2019, 31). In *After the Beautiful*, Robert Pippin explicitly connects the two in his reading of Hegel’s *Aesthetics* when he suggests that “[Art] norms are collectively self-legislated over time; in other words, in the same basic way that the rules for a game could be formulated collectively over time” (Pippin 2013, 43).

when she is passing the ball because the objective of the game itself renders those intentions beside the point. Using the analogy of a chess game, Walter Benn Michaels makes a similar point about the rules of the game: “No one cares what you meant by moving your rook four spaces to the left—you don’t need to mean to checkmate your opponent in order to do it. (You can just as effectively, although not just as easily, do it by accident.) And if the meaning of your move is irrelevant to the question of whether your opponent has been checkmated, your opponent’s understanding of the meaning is equally irrelevant. Indeed, this point can be put more generally just by saying that the moves in a game don’t have any meaning. Which is just to say ... that they have force” (Michaels 2004, 189).

The point is not that Reygadas simply intends to capture a game, but rather that he intends to use the game as a subject matter to transform the film into an independent and unified whole.

I’d like to suggest that it is Reygadas’s acknowledgement of the risk of conflating art and the game (or even the risk of conflating art and life as such) that we can turn again to several moments in the film as attempts to make intentionality legible. That is, the point is not that Reygadas simply intends to capture a game, but rather that he intends to use the game as a subject matter to transform the film into an independent and unified whole. That is, the idea here is to transform the film from the experience of the game into an object that needs to be analyzed in its status as an artwork. Perhaps the most illustrative examples of this point are to be found in the appearance of Reygadas himself in the film; for example, as noted, there are moments where Reygadas is so physically close to the players that he risks interfering with the play (fig.3). Or when Reygadas accidentally gets hit on the head by the ball. The reason he is hit, in part, is because he is so absorbed in filming the game. But more importantly here is not the accident or the laughter that it produces, but that the event is replayed four times from four different camera angles, the last from Reygadas’s own (fig. 5). What I mean is that Reygadas is drawing our attention to the idea of cinematic editing, which clearly problematizes the notion of cinema as simply contingency, chance, or accident that is so prevalent in the fantasy of slow cinema; and he does so precisely to neutralize this sense of contingency, chance, and accident. Or perhaps better said, the sequence thematizes the conceptual transformation from contingency into cinematic meaning. The same desire to transform actual life into cinematic meaning also finds form in the appearance of the game clock on the screen, which mechanically tracks the time of the game, but doesn’t correspond to the duration of the film itself. The game and the film, in short, are irreducible.³² All

32 The assertion of cinematic meaning is already registered in *Serenghetti* in

these choices become a way of affirming that the filmmaker's hand and head is everywhere in the film. That is, the difference between watching a rule-governed game and interpreting a work of art is not found from without, but rather is constitutive of the filmmaker's intention to make the work meaningful.

At the same time, what *Serenghetti* all but forces the viewer to recognize is the difference between effects and meaning, where effects are primary to watching the game (and even more so to the broadcasting of a game), they are secondary to interpreting the work of art. The virtual absence of the spectator in *Serenghetti* points to this logic, but it is, as it were, there every time one engages with art. That is, the truth that the film lays bare is that interpretation is something that is demanded by the work of art as an intentional object. Which is just to say that we would somehow be missing the point of *Serenghetti* if we were upset by the quality of play of one of the teams, or the lack of focus of a player, or disappointed that a coach subbed off a player. In short, we would be missing the point if we treated *Serenghetti* as if it were like watching a game. Instead, what we find ourselves doing is asking questions about the meaning of *Serenghetti* as a film. Why does Reygadas decide to film these teams? What do these camera angles mean? Why does Reygadas decide to put himself in the film? These types of questions that art brings forth, instead, are completely unlike watching a sporting event since their interpretation excludes an *a priori* claim about one's experience. From this position, we might simply conclude by noting that the camera in *Serenghetti*, and cinema as art, does not simply record what is there, but rather is an extension of the filmmaker's intention to create a work of art.

But this theoretical point about the work of art also lays bare a political claim for the Left in the neoliberal moment. The political importance of film is found not in the recognition of the consumer's experience, but rather in the assertion of the work's meaning. The rise of neoliberalism in Mexico and its continued global expansion is supported by the claim that there is no alternative to capitalism. In 1991, Francis Fukuy-

the temporal disjuncture between watching a live football game and watching this film in a movie theater or gallery. *Serenghetti* was created with an idea that it would not be transmitted as a live broadcast; that is, from its conception, it is meant to be viewed at a later moment. The film is past, which already subtracts from the kind of immediacy that one may experience when watching a game live on TV. As such, *Serenghetti* already begins to assert a notion of the cinematic, which rejects the type of immediacy and presence that live sports offer, and a Blockbuster movie aims at achieving.

ama made this point when he stated that “the triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism” and free market capitalism (Fukuyama 1989, 3). Michaels reminds us that the neoliberal world is one in which ideological disagreements are increasingly redefined as mere differences of subject positions. When elucidating the distinction between disagreements and differences in subject positions, Michaels employs, as noted above, the analogy of a game. He posits that two opposing players can differ without necessarily disagreeing. “In chess, for example, the person playing white doesn’t think the person playing black is mistaken; the conflict between them is not about who is right but who will win: what matters in a game is not what you believe to be true but which side you’re on” (Michaels 2004, 32). And he goes on to note that

The whole point of posthistoricism (the whole point, that is, of the commitment to difference) is to understand all differences as differences in what we are and thus to make it seem that the fundamental question—the question that separates the postideological Left from the Postideological Right—is the question of our attitude toward difference: the Left want to insist on it, the Right wants to eliminate it. (Michaels 2004, 32)

Michaels’s argument, of course, goes beyond politics and extends to the realm of art, where interpretive disagreements are transformed into differences of perspectives or experience.

Throughout this essay, I have argued that one of the primary means of insisting on this difference of perspective is through the redescription of fiction or a “self-contained world” as a situation or an event. This approach replaces the idea of the interpretation of the work as right or wrong and instead fosters an immersive notion that eliminates the question of right or wrong by turning these normative claims into an affective relation where “people feel that they are part of and contiguous with objects in the physical world” (Gumbrecht 2006, 62). This same logic lies at the core of de Luca’s analysis of slow cinema, where the denial of the frame presents an opportunity to redefine interpretation as an experience or situation. The advantage of this notion of experience is that, while interpretations can certainly be wrong, experiences cannot. What distinguishes experience is not what you believe but where you stand. From my position, I might see or hear one thing, and you might perceive another, but it would be inaccurate to say that I am right or you are wrong when discussing

those experiences. What holds value with experiences is that everybody has one, and it is uniquely yours.

The other point that Michaels makes is that the commitment to experience in politics and aesthetics is not truly a critique of capitalism but rather deeply compatible with it. Undoubtedly, Latin American cultural production offers a plethora of films that directly and transparently criticize modern-day capitalism or the devastating effects of past dictatorships. However, what I want to suggest is that more than the explicit politics portrayed in these films, their aesthetics should be considered within and against the backdrop of this neoliberal logic which redefines disagreements as difference. In fact, in many ways these films, along with the scholarship that supports them, demand to be understood as eradicating the division between the film and the audience, so that the viewer can no longer be understood as someone who interprets what the film means, but rather as someone who witnesses, or even comes to share the pain of the victim. According to this point of view, films do not represent but *simply are* events or situations, and they are for those who witness them as well.³³ This implies that contemporary cultural logic is deeply committed to envisioning art as determined by experience rather than the interpretive disagreements that arise from the artwork itself. As such, *Serenghetti* should not be understood as an escape from neoliberalism in Mexico today, but rather as offering a repudiation of this ideology by emphasizing interpretation over mere experience. To be clear, my point about *Serenghetti* is not just to insist that my interpretation is right while others are wrong, but rather to acknowledge that this normative structure of agreement versus disagreement is inherent in the very assertion of a work's status as art. While these disagreements are not reducible to politics, they do define the normative structure that also characterizes politics itself. Which is just to say, if one aims to offer an alternative to neoliberal ideology from within art, it is important to recognize in this contemporary neoliberal moment a notion of disagreement from which such a claim could, at least in theory, be made.

33 For an extensive conversation on Latin American cultural production, especially on the question of human rights as a cultural logic that pushes aside questions about aesthetic form and economic equality, see Di Stefano (2018).

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Tytuł: Zasady gry w *Serenghetti* Carlosa Reygadasa

Abstrakt: Na pierwszy rzut oka *Serenghetti* (2009) meksykańskiego reżysera Carlosa Reygadasa wydaje się filmem dokumentalnym, rejestrującym jedynie amatorski mecz piłki nożnej kobiet w Santo Domingo Ocotitlán (Morelos, Meksyk). Dotychczasowa recepcja filmu koncentrowała się na kwestiach społecznych, takich jak rozwój miast, antropocentryzm i sport jako widowisko. Niniejszy esej dowodzi jednak, że *Serenghetti* jest o wiele bardziej zainteresowany badaniem estetycznego wymiaru kina lub tego, co Reygadas nazywa „fikcją” filmu. Pod pewnymi względami *Serenghetti* przypomina film *Zidane: Portret XXI wieku* (2006) Douglasa Gordona i Philippe’a Parreno, ponieważ oba filmy rejestrują pełne mecze piłki nożnej. Jednak podczas gdy film Gordona i Parreno angażuje się, jak twierdzi Michael Fried, w kwestii absorpcji w sztuce współczesnej, niniejszy esej sugeruje, że film Reygadasa dąży do zakwestionowania antyrepresentacyjnego ujęcia kina, w szczególności kwestii czasu, która była kluczowa dla tego, jak badacze zajmujący się slow cinema rozumieili jego twórczość. Rzeczywiście, od czasu nagrodzonego w Cannes filmu *Japón* (2001),

filmy Reygadasa są określane jako *slow cinema* - filmy, które są rozumiane mniej jako reprezentacja czasu, a bardziej jako to, co Thiago de Luca nazywa „samym trwaniem”. Niniejszy esej sugeruje, że poprzez koncepcję gry w piłkę nożną *Serenghetti* nie tylko ustanawia się jako fikcję, ale także, czyniąc to, zapewnia odczytanie czasu kinowego, które podważa wiele politycznych i estetycznych fantazji wspieranych przez współczesną krytykę kulturę.

Słowa kluczowe: *slow cinema*, sztuka współczesna, konsumpcjonizm, autonomia sztuki, indeksalność, sport, kino południowoamerykańskie, kino meksykańskie