

The most beautiful film ever made
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The most beautiful film ever made is seven minutes long. It was shot in 1969 in Tangiers, Morocco, with an 8-mm camera during a summer afternoon. It stars photographs of Greta Garbo, Carole Lombard, Lupe Vélez, Dolores del Río, Claudette Colbert, Marlene Dietrich, Jean Harlow, Anna May Wong, amongst many other female stars from the classical age of Hollywood. It is indeed a very impressive cast; we rarely get to enjoy so many stars together as stars appear sparsely in film to sustain the image of a unique individuality. This intense visual track is accompanied in the film by a sound track consisting of two songs sung by Marlene Dietrich, 'Lili Marlen' in English and 'Frag' Nicht Warum Ich Gehe' in German. One feels this most beautiful of films was made just like that, without much intention, without much planning, but out of a chance encounter with this collection of photographs, the one belonging to the Spanish film critic and Tangiers resident Emilio Sanz de Soto.¹ The film is called *Estrellas de Ayer* (Stars of Yesterday) and was directed by the Mexican filmmaker Teo Hernández. I am certain that this brief description has already convinced the reader that this is indeed the most beautiful film ever made: Tangiers, 8 mm, summer Mediterranean light, 1969, Dolores del Río, the voice of Dietrich, chance, not much planning, yesterday. That the reader already shares my conviction about the unparalleled splendour of this film is not only agreeable; it is also a relief since now I can write these lines without needing to justify the enthusiastic and somewhat mysterious warmth I feel watching it. In this text, I allow myself to linger a bit in this sensation of 'the most beautiful' not so much to explain or defend it, but rather to prolong it, to attempt to spread it, to feel it for a little bit longer. Perhaps writing about it, with it, I will even be able to indulge in it. Perhaps such warmth is able to make the act of writing not such an arduous task, not even a task.²

The film itself operates and proceeds without any justification or explanation – and this particularly in relation to a much maligned affect that impregnates and animates these images and sounds, that of nostalgia. If nostalgia is often read as politically useless and/or reactionary by a proper critical position, *Estrellas de Ayer* performs an exercise in nostalgia that offers no excuse for itself. Here we see no hint of irony, soft or otherwise, no nod towards self-reflectivity or any other form of more or less partial critical distance from such feeling. This approach of embracing nostalgia without reserve distinguishes *Estrellas de Ayer* from the fan films of other artists. Here the powers of the 'militant nostalgia' that, for instance, Thom Andersen engages with in his films are not active in any obvious form (Andersen 2011: 72). And there is no analysis of the stars from the past, as in the case of the handsomely digressive video essays of Mark Rappaport. In *Estrellas de Ayer*, the sentimental songs of Dietrich, the old portraits of young female stars and the golden Mediterranean light all coincide to perform a nostalgic feast or, dare I say, orgy. These images and sounds encourage the viewer to feel nostalgia as an affect to bask in. Film appears here as a formidable tool for filmmakers and spectators alike to experience the warmth of an imagined yesterday – and this without reason or measure. Teo Hernández gives himself permission to indulge in these images of the past, these remnants of a mythical past, the golden age of cinema, which is to say the cinema of childhood and adolescence. The filmmaker invites the viewer to partake in this unbounded nostalgia and to experience it without the need of a pretext, without the excuse of a means for an end, without suspicion. Cinema, as practised by Hernández, is an art to give oneself permission and to invite others to give themselves permission, to feel more and to feel otherwise. In the words of Hernández: 'We must restore to film its vital capacity' (Bouhours 1997: 48).³

Hernández practises this vital nostalgia in *Estrellas de Ayer* through the warm coincidence of the visual track and the sound track. The steamy warmth of this association differentiates this film from the usual experimental dissonance but also from the institutional coincidence between sound and image seeking a reality effect. Here we have a synchronicity of feeling, a stickiness between sound and image that is both formal and affective. In short, we could say that the film organizes a coincidence between Hernández filming and Dietrich singing. As I mentioned, Hernández has chosen two songs by Marlene Dietrich for the sound track. More exactly, he has chosen two versions of these songs performed by the film legend in one

of her late concerts from the 1960s to the 1970s. These concerts, some of which are accessible via online video platforms such as YouTube, are singular sentimental one-woman shows in which Dietrich weaves her songs with recollections from the past. Dietrich looks magnificent, because of her looks and attire, but also because of her attitude that seems indistinguishably arrogant and sad. In these performances she barely sings, barely talks, barely moves, as if half-paralysed or half-blinded by the flickering lights of the past. It is the barely factor of her act, the performative quality of this barely, that allows the viewer to feel nostalgically with her and to feel oneself feeling nostalgically. In the sound track of *Estrellas de Ayer*, we hear Dietrich not only (barely) singing but introducing her songs by sharing some memories from when she first sang them or memories about lost friends. For instance, introducing 'Frag' *Nicht Warum Ich Gehe*, we hear her say, accompanied by a soft piano: 'This song was the favourite song of a dear friend of mine, who was a great musician and singer, Richard Talberg. It is a song of goodbye and of tears, and of long parting'. The film associates in the coincidence between image and sound two different nostalgias: that of Dietrich (the glorious past of the star, the lost friend) and that of Hernández (looking at photographs of stars from the golden age of Hollywood, the first encounter with the cinema). It is a sticky agreement that warms the spectator up to the vigorous powers of (re)dreaming the past.

The words and songs of Dietrich do not simply accentuate the melancholic mood of the images, as an institutional soundtrack would do with regards to the needs of the storyline and its intended effects on the spectators. The rhythms of her speaking and singing voice, and of the music, tend to coincide with the rhythms Hernández introduces in the visual track. The editing of the images tends to match with the music; the visual rhythms accelerate or slow down with the music. Moreover, this coincidence between the rhythm of words and music and what we see in the visual track also occurs, as it were, within the images themselves, for instance in the opening sequence. The film opens, with the image still black, with Dietrich saying in her habitual unhurried pace and low tone: 'This is a song that is very close to my heart'.⁴ Then the image track begins. The camera slowly moves from left to right, documenting the objects displayed on top of a piece of furniture, a chest of drawers perhaps. We see photographic portraits of movie stars interspersed between elegant silver objects (pitchers, bowls, boxes). I recognize Crawford, Dietrich, Garbo posing in the typical glamour portraits Hollywood studios made in the 1930s. The camera slowly films these objects and images whilst we hear Dietrich say, very slowly, 'I sang it during the war. I sang it for three long years. All through Africa, Sicily, Italy, Iceland, through England, through France, through Belgium and Holland, through Germany and Czechoslovakia'.⁵ In this opening sequence, Dietrich languorously lists the countries where decades ago she sang 'Lili Marlen' as Hernández languorously records with the camera the portraits of the film stars between the silver objects. Both, Dietrich and Hernández, unhurriedly and caressingly (re)collect images from the past (places, people). Hernández wrote in one of his notebooks: 'One is not to film a jaguar if one is not a jaguar' (Bouhours 1997: 40). We could say, following his remark, that one does not film an old photograph of Marlene Dietrich without becoming oneself Marlene Dietrich reminiscing about luminous and faded images of yesterday. *Estrellas de Ayer* verifies that making a film, but also looking at a film, offers an excellent opportunity to play with such transformative (dis)identifications between images and sounds, between stars, filmmakers and spectators, between past and present.⁶

Between the visual track and the sound track, between Dietrich's and Hernández's nostalgias, there is an association that does not exhaust its components and their relationship through a perfect or mathematical coincidence. The film performs and affirms a coincidence that is all the more affective because it is also informal, because it is also open to the contingent. The film generates a sticky feeling of nostalgia through a coincidence that does not cease to be accidental, hence inexhaustible. After all, Hernández practises in *Estrellas de Ayer* a cinema of no importance, not a cinema of measurements and conclusions. By 'cinema of no importance' I do not mean an informal or amateurish cinema – but more generally a cinema not so preoccupied with its own (self)importance, a cinema not so burdened by standard film expectations and grammars, experimental or otherwise. If the cinema of no importance is made by and for amateurs, it is so in the etymological sense of the term amateur, 'the one who loves'. The French cinema critic Dominique Noguez has ordered, somewhat conventionally, the films of Teo Hernández in various periods, and has considered *Estrellas de Ayer* to be 'an early work' – another way of calling it amateurish. Noguez understands that *Estrellas de Ayer* was made before his 'more ambitious works', before the films 'that truly mark his entry in the world of experimental cinema' (Bouhours 1997: 16). *Estrellas de Ayer* would be, as it happens with any work classified as an early work, less worthy of critical attention or only valuable

inasmuch as it helps us see and understand mature works. *Estrellas de Ayer* has indeed been ignored in the very limited literature dedicated to the filmography of Teo Hernández, as we often underappreciate the beauty of works we equate with, as Mark Rappaport would say, youthful recklessness.⁷ The films that tend to be overlooked, ignored, undervalued in such a way have received the suggestive name of ‘orphan films’.⁸ The term is often used to encompass films such as home movies, students films, medical films, training films – categories that tend to mark the films they describe as easily ignorable. To this list of orphan films we could add youthful films such as *Estrellas de Ayer* made by filmmakers at the margins such as Teo Hernández. The term ‘orphan film’ suggests to me that the history of the moving image resembles an orphanage without adults inhabited by countless ignored films and orphaned spectators waiting to meet each other. It suggests encounters to come, encounters that break with mature conceptual codes directing and conditioning our attention and our hearts. It suggests encounters that make possible again the feeling of ‘the most beautiful’.

I would emphasize, however, that the cinema of no importance I am thinking about here is not simply composed of a series of films waiting to be discovered or appreciated by adventurous cinephiles and online users. It is the cinema practised by filmmakers and spectators alike who are not so much preoccupied with a pre-existing history, be it its periods and frameworks or its exclusions and gaps, but who are first and foremost agitated by the unexpectedness of ‘the most beautiful’ feeling. The cinema of no importance, and the beauty of its attendant affects, has a key role to play in, as Hernández puts it, the restoration of vitality to film. Such restoration involves not only what films we pay attention to, but how we pay attention to them, how we let our own agitation shake us. The cinema of no importance describes the opportunity to render ourselves capable of letting in agitation, with its joys and disorientations. This idea of ‘restoring to film its vitality’ certainly sounds like an eminently nostalgic idea, presupposing a past vivacity that has been somehow lost or always already threatened by disappearance. *Estrellas de Ayer*, for one, practises and demonstrates the animating powers of a nostalgic and childlike approach to the cinema of no importance. But we can find countless examples of such stimulation in the ways similar forms of nostalgia are practised today online, for instance in the myriad of YouTube fan videos that pay homage to dead stars. These are videos with titles such as ‘Tribute to Greta Garbo’, ‘Tribute to Lena Horne’, ‘Tribute to Gene Tierney’ and usually composed with still images of the remembered star and one or two of her songs – basically the same elements we find in Hernández’s film. In the comments sections of these videos, we can read things like: ‘she was the most beautiful’, ‘the most elegant’, ‘the most talented’. *Estrellas de Ayer* is a YouTube fan video from before the invention of the internet; it is the most beautiful of all these fan films. It is a film that, like all fan films, demonstrates that the experience of what I am calling the cinema of no importance has to do not so much with a particular type of film but above all with an attitude or disposition towards the most beautiful. *Estrellas de Ayer* both registers such as a disposition (Hernández’s) and also warms us up to it.

To practise the attitude of the cinema of no importance, also in its nostalgic version, fills the everyday with excitement and adventure. For Hernández making films was an ordinary practice (‘all my films are a diary’) engaged with the extraordinary (‘a diary of solitude, of anticipation, of hope, of dreams and, in fact, of death’) (Bouhours 1997: 64). *Estrellas de Ayer* is part of a series of films he made during his sojourn in 1969–70 in Tangiers, a city that, it is worth remembering, had become since the middle of the twentieth century an important destination for western queer artists and travellers. Other works he made in Morocco include travelogues and film portraits (Serge, Juanito, Michel La-Bas and *Images Au Bord de La Mer*). All the films he made there manifest his excitement for the representational possibilities offered by the camera. Singular close-ups, low angles, zoomings and so on exude a Vertovian enthusiasm for the camera. *Estrellas de Ayer* is no exception; Hernández offers here a myriad of ways of filming still photographs. The portraits of the film stars are posed against a wall, or arranged on the apartment floor or filmed as if the viewer was leafing through a fan magazine. To film some of these photographic arrangements in the way he does, Hernández must have adopted various acrobatic positions. For him the act of filming always meant to put his body off balance (Bouhours 1997: 42–43). Such gymnastics are apparent in *Estrellas de Ayer* as we see glimpses of his body on the image: a finger when holding a photograph to the camera or a toe when squatting on the floor to film a set of Joan Crawford portraits. Also, different stars deserve different forms of treatment in the film. Careful arrangements are organized for the photographs of Garbo, Crawford, Dietrich; compositions that are filmed in an unhurried way. Or we see various photographs of the same star (Dolores del Río). Other stars only appear once and briefly (Norma Shearer). Hernández wants to film all

of the stars from this photographic collection; but as a fan, he also has his favourites. The images of Garbo, Crawford, Dietrich are thus also honoured and embellished with feathers, flowers, the smoke of a cigarette – elements that allow the image to register that a gentle breeze moved through the apartment in Tangiers that day. The everyday luxury of these offerings (feathers, flowers, smoke) certifies the death of the stars but also the delicate and warm exuberance it is possible to experience when remembering them. *Estrellas de Ayer* arranges fleeting altars that the camera of Hernández, with its multiple approaches and physicality, more than documenting accompanies and vivifies. Fan films of no importance such as *Estrellas de Ayer* are home-made altars with which to give another life to the transience of the past in the present.

The last section of the film emphasizes the fleetingness of the images from the past. After five minutes, the visual track abruptly stops in the middle of a song, leaving a black image for the rest of the film, whilst the sound track continues. For the remaining two minutes of the film, Marlene Dietrich continues to sing, until the end of her song 'Frag' Nicht Warum Ich Gehe'. Such an ending respects the integrity of Dietrich's recording and therefore distinguishes *Estrellas de Ayer* from other fan films that tend to begin and end with photographs of the adored star in synchronous arrangement with the chosen music. By integrating within the film the absence of the image, *Estrellas de Ayer* incorporates within itself something of the feeling of frustration that usually comes after the end of a fan film: how to deal with the end of the film, with the sudden absence of the star images? As Hernández puts it, 'cinema is a mechanism of frustration' (Bouhours 1997: 48). But the feeling of frustration at play in the last section of *Estrellas de Ayer* is not a simple one, the sudden emptiness of the visual track and the song of Dietrich are complex enough to elicit multiple feelings and thoughts. Its unexpectedness and the contrast of the black image with the previous luminous images of the stars generate something like a tremor, an ache, an uncertainty: where are the images? Is there some kind of technical problem? Are the images coming back or is the past, past? And yet the song continues, how does the spectator listen to this song without the images? Does the song become a sorrowful lament for the pastness of the lost images or do we continue to see images within or through, as it were, the singular voice of Marlene Dietrich? *Estrellas de Ayer* allows us to feel with this last section, but also in its delicacy and physicality, nostalgia as an experience concerned with the uncertainty of the past, with its openness and not with a fixed time or image that would be accessible through detailed documentation and reconstruction. *Estrellas de Ayer* attests that nostalgia activates an experience that is all the more generative because it is engaged with both enthusiasm and frustration. The coexistence in the film, and in our experience of it, of both enthusiasm and frustration, makes *Estrellas de Ayer* all the more beautiful. *Estrellas de Ayer* gives form to nostalgia in ways that allow Hernández and anyone who looks at these images and listens to these sounds to feel something of the agitation stirred by the raptures of the most beautiful. In his notebooks, Hernández uses the term 'baroque' to describe the dance between rigor and passion at play in the act of giving form, an act he understands as eminently concerned with 'the quest for paradise lost' (Bouhours 1997: 13).

The intensely nostalgic films of Hernández, and more specifically *Estrellas de Ayer*, are baroque invitations to feel more and otherwise, and also to give form, in the case of this text with words, to the openness of feeling generated by such delightful encounters. As *Estrellas de Ayer* proves, the trouble of the most beautiful is eminently a warm trouble. As such it is a trouble that perhaps, when compared to the suspicion generated by the usual habits of the good critical position, renders our bodies able to engage in transformation in unsuspected ways, for instance the reconfiguration of relations between means and ends, subject and object, spectator and filmmaker, star and non-star. The warmth of a film-experience like *Estrellas de Ayer* is a singular one but certainly not unique in the sense that it is comparable to the raptures agitating countless film encounters, as narrated by filmmakers and spectators alike throughout the history of the medium. All these narratives of change and elation we could say belong, with the French theorist Michel Chion, to a 'fresh' history of the cinema – one concerned with passionate everyday transformations of our ways of being in the world. As Chion writes in *Audio-Vision*: 'first and foremost we need to rediscover a certain freshness in how we actually apprehend films; and we will need to discard time-worn concepts, which served mainly to prevent us from hearing and seeing anyway' (Chion 1994: 186). *Estrellas de Ayer* helps us discard assumptions and expectations by heating up our senses and allowing us to see and hear again not only the stale images of the past but also the vitality of the relation between cinema and nostalgia, the devotional beauty of the fan film and the splendid and uncertain disposition opened up by a cinematic experience. In its own singular way, *Estrellas de Ayer* is yet another film warmly inviting us to allow ourselves to rewrite what counts as cinema, the most beautiful of all these invitations.

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Notes

1. For a portrait of Sanz de Soto and an account of his relation to Hernández see Suárez (2019b).
2. A digital version of *Estrellas de Ayer* is available online on the Light Cone website. See: <https://lightcone.org/en/film-2841-estrellas-de-ayer>.
3. I have translated myself from the original French all the quotations by Teo Hernández in this text.
4. The habitual slow pace and low tone of Marlene Dietrich's public speaking have set the aural golden standard for the diva-remiscing-about-her-past trope in our aural-visual culture. This standard has often been imitated, also in the manner of parody, only confirming its haunting powers.
5. There is a brief section in the words of Dietrich that is inaudible (at least to me).
6. When I speak of (dis)identifications here I am thinking of José Esteban Muñoz's discussion of dis-identificatory desires and practices in his groundbreaking book from 1999 *Disidentifications, Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. In the introduction, Muñoz compares practitioners of disidentification with 'a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works on to hold on to this object and invest it with new life' (1999: 12).
7. Rappaport uses the expression 'youthful recklessness' in his film *Our Stars* (2015), borrowing it from the character played by Barbara Stanwyck in *There's Always Tomorrow* (Sirk 1955). In *Our Stars*, Rappaport passionately defends a cinema of 'youthful recklessness' over a cinema of 'zombie domesticity'.
8. The first time I encountered the term 'orphan film' was in the inspiring book edited by Allyson Nadia Field and Marsha Gordon (2019).