LANDSCAPES, TIME, AND VIOLENCE

UNEARTHING THE PAST IN SARAH VANAGT AND KATRIEN VERMEIRE'S *THE WAVE*

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This article reads the notion of temporality back into the landscape through a close reading of the video work The Wave *(2012) by Sarah Vanagt and Katrien Vermeire. The piece scrutinizes a landscape intrinsically linked to a violent event — an execution during the Spanish Civil War — through the alternation between vertical landscape views and horizontal views of the exhumed grave. Rather than moving across the landscape's surface,* The Wave *cuts through it, privileging aesthetic experimentation over narrative specificity and grappling with historical violence at both micro- and macro-levels. This paper tests the productivity of putting in dialogue Fernand Braudel's* 'longue durée' *and Rob Nixon's 'slow violence' in the examination of past violence bound to a landscape. While Braudel underlines the importance of 'slow' history and its interdependence with landscape, Nixon highlights the invisibility of certain forms of durational violence. Redressing the relative paucity of accounts on landscape and temporality, this analysis introduces an element often absent from traditional landscape aesthetics: time. Braudel and Nixon are relevant to this attempt; their work provides theoretical tools to understand the persistence of the past in the present, thus shedding light on the cross-temporal configuration of the past at work in* The Wave*.*

INTRODUCTION

The word landscape brings to mind panoramic views of prairies and grasslands, images of natural settings: it has a deeply-rooted association with the genre

of landscape painting. This immediate link, which inescapably ties landscape representations to a static instead of fluctuating entity, is derived from modern art history and its theorization of the genre of landscape art. This genre has evolved from the fifteenth century to the present day, and is linked to an idealized visualization of the relationships between culture and nature.[1] Idealized visions of landscapes have shaped our imaginaries and, more often than not, shrouded the multiple socio-political phenomena at play in them. In this sense, the element of temporality, and the accompanying alterations it brings to perceptions of landscape, has been remarkably absent from traditional landscape aesthetics and its larger theorization as a genre.[2]

The extensive literature on landscape cuts across a wide range of fields — cultural geography, history, archaeology, architecture, and art history, among others — and attests to the fact that the tradition of landscape study is animated by the different stakes in these disciplines. Over the past thirty years, the field of cultural geography has been one of the main forces behind a political understanding of landscape,[3] doing away with the idea of a 'primordial' landscape and introducing temporality into its study.[4] Still, the current perception that landscape is a political category undergoing perpetual change has been a long time in the making. Prominent examples are the classical landscape in the seventeenth-century paintings of Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin, and the Dutch tradition (Fig. 1), and the contemporaneous explosion of naturalistic landscape painting throughout the nineteenth century both in Europe and North America, perfectly exemplified in the work of John Constable or the American Hudson River School.[5] Keeping in mind the differences among these artistic movements, it could be argued that what unites these painterly traditions is an overall static idea of landscape, in which it functions, if not as a mere background to human life, at least as a frozen, idealized image of nature.

This article is based on the premise that temporality is an essential component of landscape and that by not accounting for it we run the risk of not

1 John Wylie, *Landscape* (London: Routledge, 2007), 190.

2 Two key references on the relationship between time and landscape come from the field of archaeology and anthropology, both of which engage in a phenomenological approach to landscape as an inherently temporal entity. Two prominent examples are concerned with the passage of time and the construction of archaeological knowledge; see Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape," *World Archaeology* 25.2 (1993), 152–74; and Barbara Bender, "Time and Landscape," *Current Anthropology* 43.4 (2002), S103–12.

3 For a comprehensive study of these schools of thought in cultural geography, see: "Landscape," in *The Cultural Geography Reader,* eds Timothy S. Oakes and Patricia Lynn Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 147–200.

4 Jan Kolen and Johannes Renes, "*Landscape Biographies: Key Issues," in Landscape Biographies: Geographical Historical and Archaeological Perspectives on the Production and Transmission of Landscapes*, eds Rita Hermans, Jan Kolen, and Johannes Renes (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 38–41.

5 Gudrun Danzer and Gunther Holler-Schuster, "Landscape: Transformation of an Idea. Art from 1800 to the Present Day from the Col-

Fig.1:
Italian Landscape with Umbrella Pines by Hendrik Voogd, 1807, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, public domain image

acknowledging the various external forces that shape and reshape our contemporary landscapes. In the context of the proliferating use of landscape in recent art — mainly by deviating from genre expectations — contemporary artistic landscape representations have the potential to emphasize the multi-layered temporalities that encompass them. These practices mark a departure from the idealized imagination of landscapes, a shift this article explores through a suggestive example of this current within contemporary art practices, the video artwork *The Wave* (2012). *The Wave* returns to the dominant tradition of Western landscape art to eventually withdraw from it, and subsequently triggers reflection on the intricate temporality and the complicated task of depicting violence within — and through — the landscape. Analysis is achieved by means of a dialogue between the historian Fernand Braudel's theorization of the '*longue durée*', and the post-colonial scholar Rob Nixon's notion of 'slow violence'. These two concepts, although they come from different intellectual

lection of the Neue Galerie Graw," in *Landscape: Construction of a Reality*, eds Peter Pakesch, Katrin Bucher Trantow, and Katia Huemer (Graz: Kunsthaus Graz, 2015), 8–13.

traditions, are relevant to the endeavour of re-thinking landscape as a temporal entity, since they deal, respectively, with the inscription of historical time on the land (or the sea), and with how this process of inscription is made tangible in the present.

In 2011, Belgian filmmakers Sarah Vanagt and Katrien Vermeire spent twenty-one days accompanying a team of archaeologists in the remote region of Castilla–La Mancha in the Spanish countryside. Vanagt and Vermeire deliberately placed themselves in the midst of an operation of political remediation: the chosen location is the site of past violence, for this was the exact spot where in 1939, towards the end of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), nine people were executed and buried by Franco's followers. The artists went to this area to document the exhumation, and the result is a 20-minute video piece entitled *The Wave.*

Over the past two decades, contemporary art experimentations with landscape have gained considerable traction within the field of cultural geography.[6] In line with these disciplinary developments, the approach to landscape in *The Wave* underscores the passage of historical time, a fact that makes it pertinent to a reflection on the crucial relationship between landscape and time. More precisely, the particularity of *The Wave* lies in the distinct point of view the artists chose to document the exhumation process: they placed the film camera above the dig, thus confronting the viewer with the material residues of the past violence that had laid intact for almost a century in the secluded grave. Although the landscape is at first devoid of any hint of human presence and stands as the perfect image of rurality, this initial depiction is subverted in the course of the video, for the camera slowly reveals traces of Franco's insidious legacy.

It is important to situate *The Wave* within this wider perspective in recent artistic practice, to shift away from the aestheticization, inherited from traditional

6 Harriet Hawkins, "Geography and Art. An Expanding Field. Site, the Body and Practice," *Progress in Human Geography* 37.1 (2012), 52–71.

landscape aesthetics, of aspects of land. This shift in focus, which can be traced after the middle of the twentieth century, marked a departure from traditional depictions of landscape and transformed the critical components of the landscape's social texture. A pivotal moment of this change was reached with the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975),

Fig.2:
A Mass Grave Near Snagovo, Bosnia
by Luc Delahaye, 2006,
© Luc Delahaye & Nathalie Obadia Gallery, Paris/Brussels

Digital C-print Photograph of 16 November 2006. Archaeologists and forensic experts from ICMP (International Commission on Missing Persons) working on the mass grave #SNA04ZVO, near the village of Snagovo in the Zvornik district, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

which contributed to the demythologization of the genre.[7] Differently put, this shift recognized and subsequently placed greater emphasis on the historical, ecological, and political reality of a landscape. Several contemporary artistic practices are shaped by a desire not just to depict, but also to have an impact on reality, bringing into focus the material rather than the primarily visual aspects of landscape, and incorporating the temporal dimension. Conceived within similar circumstances as *The Wave*, visual creations in which landscapes may appear as a medium to represent aggression can be seen in the work of Luc Delahaye (Fig. 2), Nguyen Trinh Thi, Enrique Ramírez, and Sophie Ristelhueber (Fig. 3), among numerous others. Produced in different contexts of conflict and trauma, these practices express the urge of their creators to grapple with places

7 The show took place at the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, Rochester, New York. For an introduction, see: Grec Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, eds, *Reframing the New Topographics* (Chicago: The Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2013).

that have served in the past as sites for violence, whether against the land itself, or its people, or, indeed, both.

Frequently, the impetus for these artists lies in the ghostly character of landscape, which, even if it gives spatial form to various social, political, economic, geological, and climatic operations, also erodes the evidence of its own production. This observation, which lies at the core of *The Wave*, brings into play questions of visibility and invisibility, which are further complicated by a second representational obstacle. On this front, art historian Brianne Cohen notes that much of the recent crossbreeding between documentary and artistic work experiments with photographic and filmic vocabularies in order to delve into conjoined questions about human aggression and the ecological sustainability of the planet.[8] The use of this crossbred artistic form discloses the generational longevity of human involvement in the landscape, stretching into lengthy

8 Brianne Cohen, "Eco-aesthetics, Massacres and the Photofilmic," in *The Photofilmic: Entangled Images in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture*, eds Brianne Cohen and Alexander Streitberger (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2016), 64. Cohen discusses *The Wave*, but although her analysis of that work and of two other recent audiovisual pieces refers to forensics aesthetics, 'slow violence', and globalized environmental degradation, it does not address the relationship between landscape and temporality. Her main concern is instead with "a historical field causality of violence", an expression that she borrows from the research group Forensic Architecture.

Fig.3.
WB, #22 by Sophie Ristelhueber, 2005, colour photograph, silver print mounted on aluminium, 120 x 150 cm, © Sophie Ristelhueber & Jerôme Poggi Gallery, Paris

This photograph shows the different forms and materials used to cut and block the roads and paths of the West Bank, to which the initials of the title refer.

timescales, thus posing an additional problem of representing the intricate temporal nature of violent operations.

In light of these two representational obstacles — erasure and lengthy timescales — this paper analyses how the hidden (or invisible) and durational forms of violence inscribed on the landscape can be apprehended and critically assessed in *The Wave*. Negotiating in the present an execution that took place nearly a century ago and left an invisible trace on this landscape is an intricate endeavour. This article asks: How does *The Wave* present a filmic figuration of a form of violence that stretches across time and is not necessarily sensational?[9] This question is examined through a close reading of the work, investigated through the temporalities denoted by the categories of '*longue durée*', which refers explicitly to all-but-permanent historical structures, and 'slow violence', which Nixon defines as a violence that "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction, that is dispersed across time and space".[10] Typically not perceived as violence at all, 'slow violence' surfaces via the gap in the way spectacular and unspectacular time are perceived and experienced. Exploring questions of invisibility related to unresolved episodes of social violence bound to the remote landscape of Castilla–La Mancha, and scrutinizing the intricate temporal layers present in forms of 'slow violence' bound to the land, my analysis revolves around an articulation of the element of time and its complicated relationship to landscape.

THE PAST RESURFACING THROUGH THE LANDSCAPE: *THE WAVE*

In collaboration with the Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (ARMH),[11] a Spanish political group working to expose and denounce the cruelties of the Civil War by retracing undocumented burial sites, Vanagt and Vermeire emphasize processes that, although invisible in the landscape, nevertheless continue to define it. For twenty-one days, archaeologists and volunteers from the ARMH worked in Castilla–La Mancha to unearth the bones

9 The terms 'sensational' and 'spectacular' stem from Nixon's invitation to engage a different kind of violence that is neither spectacular nor erupts into instant sensational visibility, playing out across a range of temporal scales. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

10 Ibid., 2.

11 Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory.

of these victims. On the first day of the excavation, a digging crane gently loosened the top layer of soil, until the archaeologists present for the dig encountered a skull with a bullet hole.[12] Thenceforward, they continued their work by hand, and gradually the skeletons began to appear, only to disappear again into the earth from which they had been exhumed. The families of the nine victims were present at the scene and, after a belated funeral, the remains of the nine victims were put back into the earth, to disappear into the realm of invisibility once more. The artists remained on site and documented the excavation for the duration of the operation.

The act of filming this specific landscape derives from an impetus to explore and experience places that were once sites of violence. However, Vanagt and Vermeire approached the land as something that they cannot have unmediated access to, because the type of violence that is specifically at work in Castilla–La Mancha stretches across time. The video offers several perspectives of this landscape, although at regular intervals the camera is placed directly into the earth, inside the pit where the archaeologists are digging, as a result of which the filmic surface is entirely covered with soil. Every day, the artists chose a more or less fixed viewpoint (the general view of the grave).

The film opens on a black screen, accompanied by crunching noises, the source of which becomes clear some seconds later when a digging machine rhythmically penetrating the unearthed soil appears on the screen. This opening shot in media res, portraying a pile of loose earth, produces an uncanny impression that induces some hesitation in the viewer: is something being buried or excavated? The voice-over that follows, accompanied by a panoramic, almost pastoral view of the landscape of Castilla–La Mancha, explains the particularity of the location, which today serves as a repository of the atrocities inflicted during the Civil War. A male narrator explains in Spanish that some family members are not sure if they want the excavation to begin; later we understand that he is a member of the ARMH giving a presentation on the exhumation project. After

12 As described on the artists' websites: Sarah Vanagt, "Balthasar," accessed 27 July 2018, http://balthasar.be/work/item/the-wave; and Katrien Vermeire, "The Wave, a Film (20') and a Photo Series, 2012," accessed 27 July 2018, http://www.katrienvermeire.com/the-wave/.

revealing her identity as a granddaughter, a voice from the audience states that this is a harrowing decision for people like her (01:51 min.). "And what if the bodies are not there," she pursues. "You know what happened in the case of Garcia Lorca, I mean, what if the bodies are not there?" (02:10 min.).[13] Younger relatives, who are further removed from the victims in time, harbour some moral reservations, but the viewer does not get to see this hesitation as the speakers never appear on screen. Moreover, the full details of the execution (when, who, where) are not given to the spectators. The only thing they are aware of up to this moment is that there has been an execution on this spot and that somebody is giving a talk to an audience.

Fig.4.
Still from *The Wave* by Sarah Vanagt & Katrien Vermeire, 2012, 01:22 © Katrien Vermeire & Sarah Vanagt/ Balthasar

The absence of human figures is countered by the backdrop against which this powerful narration unfolds: a mountain view (Fig. 4), initially misty and blurry, eventually unveils the rural, hilly surroundings. The setting appears isolated, making it an ideal execution site. French historian Fernand Braudel, a pioneer of geo-history, analysed the societal landscape of the Mediterranean, with its specific geological features, as the ultimate setting where the slow fluctua-

13 After he had been executed at the start of the Civil War, Federico Garcia Lorca's remains were thought to be have been found thanks to research conducted by an international team of experts. However, it was later revealed that they would probably be unable to locate his remains as Lorca's body was thrown into a water well after he was summarily executed on the night of 18 August 1936. James Badcock, "Remains of Federico García Lorca 'hidden at the bottom of a well'," accessed 9 March 2018, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/13/remains-of-federico-garca-lorca-hidden-at-the-bottom-of-a-well/.

tions of history take place. In his first major work, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1995),[14] Braudel elaborated on the theory of timescales as well as the interaction between them (*longue durée, conjonctures,* and *événements*),[15] suggesting that the history of societies and landscapes resides in the '*longue durée*', the long term, emphasizing, however, that the play between these various strata of time produces historical meaning. As his work on the Mediterranean Sea gave rise to a series of relevant publications on the long-term development of landscapes,[16] a closer look at his arguments about landscape and time provides some insight into the notion of temporality and its connection to the environment.[17]

Braudel conceives the landscape as a witness, a merger of the past and the present. His approach must be seen in light of the new historiographical method he was working to establish, which consists of delving into the course of history through changes — slow, at plate-tectonic pace, and invisible to the human eye — in the natural environment.[18] Braudel investigates long-term, definitive forces in history, which he famously called the '*longue durée*'; this temporal movement is produced through slow, almost geological, societal interaction with the geography and environment over a very long term. Ultimately, Braudel's introduction of this longer-scale temporality broke with the vacuous idea of geography as a mere unchanging backdrop, as the scenery for human activity. Close attention to geographical structures in historical analysis allowed Braudel to weave cultural and natural time into one narrative.[19] To quote Braudel himself: "Lucien Febvre used to say 'history is man'. I on the other hand say: 'history is man and everything else.' Everything is history: soil, climate, geological movements."[20] As a consequence, Braudelian historiography paved the way for the integration of geography and environment into the study of history, which had until then remained unexplored by historians through the ages (his method, incidentally, was formulated against nineteenth-century historiography). Braudel argued that history writing, with its focus on the high frequency and rapid shifts in politics, had overlooked other time frames. By

14 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vols 1–3 1949, trans. Siân Reynolds (Berkley: University of California Press, 1995). The first edition of the study dates to 1949 but the doctoral thesis from which it originates was written in the 1930s.

15 The long-term, towards which Braudel showed a clear inclination (and which constitutes his most considerable contribution to historiography), the conjunctural, and the 'event', as the nexus of a linear conception of history.

16 Kolen and Renes, "Landscape Biographies: Key Issues," 39.

17 It is appropriate to note that the legacy of the Annales School has been gaining renewed attention from scholars, in particular thanks to what is perhaps its cornerstone, the insistence on the '*longue durée*', which is especially important to the development of the category of 'deep time', and to considering the temporal imperatives required for narrating the Anthropocene.

18 Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée: L'espace et l'histoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1985), 31.

19 Stephen W. Sawyer, "Time after Time: Narratives of the *Longue Durée* in the *Anthropocene*," *Transatlantica* 1 (2015), 6.

disposing of the micro-temporality of a single event (like an execution), he shifted the tools of historical analysis towards a construction of time that embraces large temporal periods and geographical amplitudes. Accordingly, Braudelian history also led historians to shift their gaze away from what he called '*histoire événementielle*', with its focus on the trajectories of individual agents, subjects, and actors, and to attend instead to the geographical environment as a possible entry to the study of the past. In his view, "events are dust" because events are finite.[21] While there is no doubt that these events occurred, some events were recorded at the time of occurrence, whereas others were not, and never are, recognized as events in the first place, meaning that they are ultimately left undocumented.[22]

In the case of the execution in Castilla–La Mancha in June 1939, the sole preoccupation with the short temporality of the event, or the focus on the individual identities of the victims, might have been insufficient to capture either the durational violence at work, or, more importantly, the aftermaths of that violence, which stretch all the way into the present. The legacy of Franco's regime still looms over Spanish politics, and even though the regime is long gone, its repercussions in the present are active and several of its aspects remain unresolved.[23] As a result, a cinematic depiction of this cross-temporal violence, such as the one *The Wave* explores, must account for forms of engagement that reach beyond immediate spectacles of suffering.

A closer look at the opening scene, the panoramic view of the Spanish countryside, offers a relevant entry to examine the potential of the Braudelian articulation of space and time for the study of the past in *The Wave* (Fig. 5). It may be thought that this initial mountain scene betrays a perspectivist's view of this same landscape, that is to say, it implies a subject gazing at it. However, film scholar Martin Lefebvre wonders in his reading of cultural geographer John Wylie if "a landscape is the world we are living in or a scene we are looking at from afar", in his attempt to leave aside perspectival constructions of

20 "Lucien Febvre disait: 'L'histoire c'est l'homme'. Je dis quant à moi : 'L'histoire c'est l'homme et le reste'. Tout est histoire: le sol, le climat, les mouvements géologiques […]" Fernand Braudel, "Une vie pour l'histoire (Interview with F. Ewald and J. J. Brochier)", *Magazine Littéraire* 212, (1984), 18–24.

21 "Les événements sont poussière". Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'Époque de Philippe II*, vol. 2 (Paris: Armand Colin, 1966), 223.

22 Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 188.

23 A relevant recent example is the decision to exhume Franco's body from its resting place in the Valle de los Caídos. See Raphael Minder, "Plan to Exhume Franco Renews Spain's Wrestle with History," accessed 30 August 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/07/world/europe/spain-franco.html. For an account on the literal and symbolical 'exhuming' of the Francoist legacy in contemporary Spanish culture, see Eloy E. Merino and Hari Rossi, eds, *Traces of Contamination: Unearthing the Francoist Legacy in Contemporary Spanish Discourse* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005).

Fig.5.
Still from *The Wave* by Sarah Vanagt & Katrien Vermeire, 2012, 02:45
© Katrien Vermeire & Sarah Vanagt/ Balthasar

landscape.[24] In his theorization of a spectator's landscape, or an intentional cinematic landscape — meaning a landscape that arises as an object of contemplation — he urges the viewer to never attribute independence to the setting of a film. One must allow for a larger picture of human–land interaction, one that takes into account the fact that a landscape is pregnant with the past, that it carries historical time, and is defined by multiple forces. Vanagt and Vermeire address landscape as a living actor, an active participant not only in the community's quest to make amends for a violent past, but also in the larger search to remediate the injustices of Spain's recent history. The artists give voice to the landscape; through the vertical movement of the camera inside the unearthed land of Castilla–La Mancha, they attempt to reveal its hidden nature.

INSIDE THE LAND

24 Martin Lefebvre, "On Landscape in Narrative Cinema," *Revue canadienne d'études cinématographiques* 20.1 (2011), 62.

After the opening scene, the camera suddenly abandons the horizontal approach to the landscape and shifts its gaze inwards: it literally goes inside the

earth. The screen surface is immersed in the striated soil, almost making the soil come alive in a direct encounter with the earth and the historical layers that encompass it. Technically speaking, what passes before our eyes is the stitching together of about 9,000 high-resolution photographs (not film stills). The viewer may get the feeling that there are absent frames, but that is only the time passing in the series of photographs, in between every single shot.[25] The important element here is the filmic technique that Vanagt and Vermeire use to depict the vibrant materiality of the soil. Through the use of stop-motion, the

25 The artists, email message to author, 12 March 2017.

Fig.6.
Still from *The Wave* by Sarah Vanagt & Katrien Vermeire, 2012, 03:26 © Katrien Vermeire & Sarah Vanagt/ Balthasar

Fig.7.
Still from *The Wave* by Sarah Vanagt & Katrien Vermeire, 2012, 03:35 © Katrien Vermeire & Sarah Vanagt/ Balthasar

viewer sees different shades of light crossing the scene and revealing a moving image that has the capacity to reorganize time. One series of photographs in a single scene, which in filmic time corresponds to something ranging from one to three minutes, could represent up to eight hours of work by the archaeologists.[26] In film theory, stop-motion is defined as the photographing of a scene or a situation for trick effect through a stop-and-start procedure rather than through a continuous run of the camera.[27] Stopping the camera for a period of time gives an elliptical quality to the image of the depicted scene or situation, and the objects in the frame seem to appear and disappear in flashes.

In the case of *The Wave*, the stopping of the camera is replaced by the instantaneous capacity of a single photographic shot, since the artists use a photo camera, blurring the photographic and the filmic medium. Crucial here is the way through which the immobilized camera and the subtleness of movement in each scene allow the photographic dimension of the filmic image to emerge. In the first shots of the soil, the viewer sees no clues of the presence of human remains (Figs 6, 7). Instead, the moving image, through the depiction of the digging of the earth, translates the passage of time into an act that reveals its materiality. Intriguingly, even though the earth is dug, no equipment for this purpose appears over the course of the film: no trowel, no mattock, not even a human hand.[28] The level of the earth descends almost magically, as if a wind had triggered an invisible wave of exhumations to roll over the country,[29] and as if the excavation of one grave would somehow trigger the excavation of another, and so on — all thanks to the activities of the ARMH.

This wind blowing over the surface of the landscape is insistent and enduring enough to delve deeper into the earth, where it eventually starts revealing signs of human presence. After some minutes, *The Wave* brings into view, piece by piece, the first signs of the archaeological expedition (a red flag used to indicate a specific body part, or a small plastic bag), until gradually human remains become visible (Figs 8, 9). One of the first body parts is a foot, easily

26 The artists, email message to author, 12 March 2017.

27 Franck Eugene Beaver, “stop-action cinematography, stop motion,” *Dictionary of Film Terms: The Aesthetic Companion to Film Art* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 224–25.

28 The only exception is the use of a small mattock in one of the brief depictions of the archaeological operation from a horizontal perspective.

29 This link to the title of the work is explicitly claimed by the artists. Sarah Vanagt, email to author, 14 March 2017.

Fig.8.
Still from *The Wave* by Sarah Vanagt & Katrien Vermeire, 2012, 04:22
© Katrien Vermeire & Sarah Vanagt/ Balthasar

identifiable due to the old, decaying shoe, its form is still discernible, clinging to it. Suddenly, though, this deathly depiction, shown from a vertical camera standpoint, is replaced by a horizontal view of the landscape, only this time the horizontal shot takes in a broader view of the rural surroundings and of the archaeological site itself. This particular scene lasts less than a minute, at which point the image returns to verticality; as the video progresses, more and more details of the skeletons appear through vertical camera views. Throughout the

Fig.9.
Still from *The Wave* by Sarah Vanagt & Katrien Vermeire, 2012, 05:05
© Katrien Vermeire & Sarah Vanagt/ Balthasar

film, a back-and-forth movement between brief landscape views and longer inside-the-land scenes is rhythmically performed.

The brevity of the horizontal views of the landscape compared to the lengthiness of the vertical views of the 'pregnant' landscape (the grave) suggests that the traditional — horizontal — landscape view is insufficient for the task of rendering an episode of violence that still haunts the present. Indeed, the geographer Jessica Dubow notes: "Landscape outlives history; it surpasses it. Over time — and almost as a function of its earth, its soil — landscape absorbs the events played out on its surface; it inters the marks of past practices as much as it bears its traces".[30] Following Dubow, history may 'decompose' in the landscape — this is illustrated on a material level through the decaying process of the human bodies — but, significantly, the violence that is connected to the landscape still has an impact on the present moment. As a result, what the vertical views succeed in doing is to invest the land with a temporal dimension, so often lacking from traditional understandings of landscape. Tim Ingold, already aware of this fallacy, explains that landscape, when set against the duration of human memory and experience, may be easily taken to establish a baseline of permanence.[31]

However, as Robert Pogue Harrison has shown, the earth has an erosive capacity: when it receives the dead, it becomes the site of their disappearance, and at first sight, erases every sign of them and therefore of their history. And the surest way to take possession of a place and secure it as one's own is to bury one's dead in it. Burying then is an act of power. Landscape, through the erasure of its own readability, as Pogue Harrison suggests, is an agent of power, perhaps even independent of human actions.[32] Moreover, the entire world of the living, according to Pogue Harrison, is permeated by the dead, from whom the living inherit their obsessions, their burdens, their causes. In connection with this point, Julia Kristeva has noted that what is particular about the violence of men is that if silenced — especially if silenced — the violence spreads

30 Jessica Dubow, "The Art Seminar," *in Landscape Theory,* eds Rachel Ziady DeLue and James Elkins (London: Routledge, 2008), 100.

31 Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape," 166. At this point, it is important to stress that the interaction between the different timescales Braudel argued for remained largely untouched by scholarship on landscape and time, which insist exclusively on the '*longue durée*'. More anthropological approaches to time, such as the ones suggested by Ingold and Bender, eventually put forth issues of human memory as well in their elaboration of landscape. Hence, *The Wave*, with its overlapping of human and earthly durations, demands a theoretical framework that accounts for both timespans.

32 Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 15.

to the next generations.[33] In the case of *The Wave*, this violence was fiercely silenced through the secrecy of the operation, which, moreover, remained masked until the burial site was revealed by the ARMH. Vanagt and Vermeire chose to mediate this silenced violence through the landscape that carries it. What happens when the dead resurface from the earth? Indeed, one could argue that the power relation denoted by the archetypal marking of place, for example with a grave, is reversed[34] and radically so when the unearthing discloses a hidden aspect of the landscape. As a result, a combination of the erosive capacity of the earth and the erasure of the readability of a landscape is precisely what can make the latter appear as a topography that changes only marginally. *The Wave* puts in question this faith in the landscape's permanence by highlighting the historical layers of the land and by gathering the invisible forces created by the very people who inhabit this same land. In other words, *The Wave* emphasizes the dispersed temporal layers that intersect in this particular landscape: past and present.

SLOW VIOLENCE: A PAST THAT IS EVER PRESENT

In fact, what these historical events bring about is a durational violence, a form of brutality that occurred in the brief moment of a gunshot (past), but involves larger periods of time (present: despite the fact that the execution happened almost a century ago, its impact continues to haunt Spanish society, at a macro-level, and family members, at a micro-level). Having addressed the form of the work and the way it revisits traditional landscape aesthetics, it is important to analyse how *The Wave* activates the violent historical residue dormant in a landscape. Nixon introduces the notion of 'slow violence' precisely to enable an account for a type of violence that operates across long periods, but one that erases the possibility of drawing a straightforward line between cause and effect. The implications of that conflict, consequently, need to be traced beyond the causal nature of the event of the execution. A closer look at Nixon's formulation is worthwhile here, since the notion of the '*longue durée*' is

33 "La violence des hommes a ceci de particulier que même si on la tait, surtout si on la tait, elle se propage aux générations suivantes," Julia Kristeva, *Micropolitique* (Paris: Éditions de l'Aube, 2001), 51.

34 Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, 18.

essential to an understanding of 'slow violence'. Although Nixon never explicitly alludes to Braudel's conceptualization of '*longue durée*', the term is used in important sections of his book, notably when he asks:

> […] beyond the optical façade of immediate peril, what demons lurk in the penumbral realms of the *longue durée*? What forces distract or discourage us from maintaining the double gaze across time? And what forces — imaginative, scientific, and activist — can help extend the temporal horizons of our gaze not just retrospectively but prospectively as well? How, in other words, do we subject that shadow kingdom to a temporal optic that might allow us to see — and foresee — the lineaments of slow terror behind the façade of sudden spectacle?[35]

What Nixon is looking for are aesthetic strategies to arch over "slow terror" and the "façade of sudden spectacle". In his view, the semiotic conventions for representing violence in media contribute to a lack of attention to attritional, open-ended forms of violence. If the reception of the direct violence of sudden spectacles takes as its focal point a particular individual or event, what about the "slow terror"? Besides the element of temporality in itself, the productivity of Nixon's discussion also lies in the tension he identifies between space and time, and in the subsequent bridging he eventually conducts when recognizing the necessity to account for the two in their deep entanglement. Drawing from the work of John Berger, who argues that "it is space and not time that hides consequences from us,"[36] Nixon strives to prevent this spatial eminence from failing to expose the temporal dissociations that permeate violent events.[37] Thus, through his reading of the *'longue durée',* he searches for ways to grasp long-term, intergenerational forms of violence that persevere in the present.
Although Nixon eventually identifies the space of literature as the realm where this '*longue durée*' can be grasped, recent scholarship has also suggested the moving image as a potential realm for the representation of 'slow violence'.[38] An example can be seen in the work of film scholar Juan Llamas-Rodriguez,

35 Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 62.

36 Ibid., 45.

37 Ibid., 45. In this passage, Nixon quotes Edwar Soja's *Postmodern Geographies*, who in turn discusses John Berger and his valuable contribution in the field art history on the intersection of time and space. The aforesaid initial quote comes from John Berger, *The Look of Things*, (New York: Viking, 1974), 40.

38 See, for instance, Ewa Hanna Mazierska, "Representation of Slow Violence in the Films about Collapsed East European State Farms," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 22.2 (2016), 327–50. See also the chapter "Slow Violence in Film," in Christine L. Marran, *Ecology without Nature: Aesthetics for a Toxic World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 55–89.

who reads 'slow violence' as an attempt to 'environmentalize' violence; that is, to find ways to attend to dispersed temporalities and spatialities, to account for reverberations and forms of feedback, and to trace implications that exceed the straightforwardness of cause and effect.[39] Any attempt to 'environmentalize' violence, he suggests, requires an 'ecologic' approach, that is, a set of interconnected systems of human and non-human relations.[40] In the context of a film scene, an analytical move to 'environmentalize' violence consists of tracing macro-level configurations within a sequence that still retains a micro-level specificity. Seen from that perspective, the landscape depicted in *The Wave* is merely a single instance in a wider system of entangled relations that have produced a much larger number of still undiscovered collective burial sites in Spain. Along that same line, in their choice to show the remains of the executed, Vanagt and Vermeire make no attempt to personalize them, that is, to sharpen the micro-level; rather, they attempt to articulate the micro-level within the macro-level, and vice-versa, so that the juxtaposition of the materiality of the earth with an apparently generic landscape becomes the space where such an articulation becomes possible, because it conveys the continuity of the 'slow violence' in the present.

39 Juan Llamas-Rodriguez, "Towards a Cinema of Slow Violence," *Film Quarterly* 71.3 (2018), 32. This article examines depictions of narco-trafficking violence in contemporary Mexican cinema.

40 Ibid., 31.

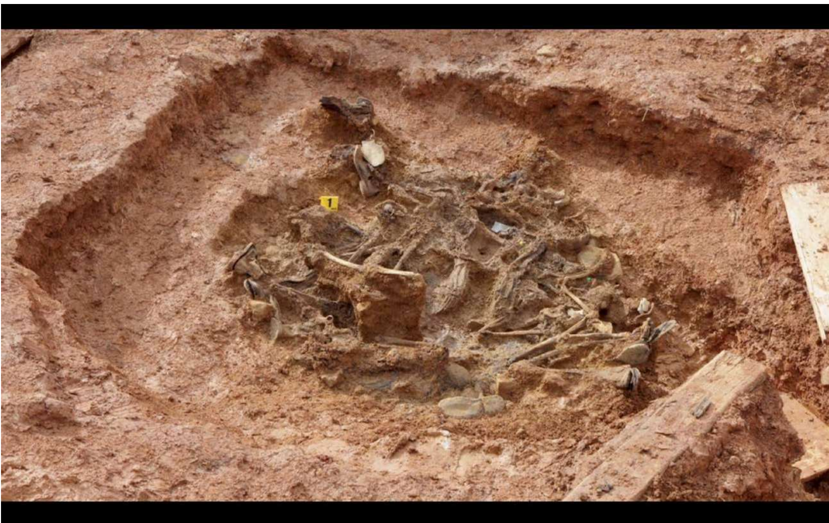

Fig.10.
Still from *The Wave* by Sarah Vanagt & Katrien Vermeire, 2012, 13:05
© Katrien Vermeire & Sarah Vanagt/ Balthasar

Fig.11.
Still from *The Wave* by Sarah Vanagt & Katrien Vermeire, 2012, 13:34
© Katrien Vermeire & Sarah Vanagt/ Balthasar

Concretely, how is this performed in the video? *The Wave* retains the aforementioned micro-level specificity, but achieves it without falling into the trap of individualization, whether of the victims or of the family members present for the funeral. The artists craft an image of the past that is inhabited both by human and non-human relationships: for example, the invisible presence of the archaeologists doing the dig is contrasted with the decaying power of the earth and, in this way, the work succeeds in making the land of Castilla–La Mancha the Braudelian subject of its story. The scenic transition, for instance, makes images fade into one another at varying speeds, perhaps as a way of hinting at the variety of temporalities that are present in the landscape. Occasionally, in slow, more contemplative movements, the images fade into one another. At one point, the static photographic images dissolve into one another in such a subtle and precise overlapping that small yellow flags pop up mysteriously in the frame, one after the other, in sequential order (Figs 10, 11).[41] The number on each flag stands for one executed individual, a reduction of subjectivities to mere figures of scientific classification. Moreover, the gradual and steady appearance of numbers on the screen that reveal the way the bodies in the

41 Cohen also references this scene, though she connects it to Eyal Weizman's work on forensic aesthetics. See Cohen, "Eco-aesthetics, Massacres and the Photofilmic," 77.

grave were stacked, like a joint entity, conveys an image of totality. Indeed, if the bodies can be distinguished from one another it is due to archaeology and forensic science. Be that as it may, the fact that they appear as a collective mass of soil and bones creates a larger, more widespread picture of violence. In its anonymity, this image could outline a broader frame of violence, one perhaps active across different landscapes in the Spanish countryside: a 'slow violence' that can be uncovered thanks to the supposed wave of exhumations rolling across Spain, to return to the image that Vanagt suggested earlier.[42]

Fig.12.
Still from *The Wave* by Sarah Vanagt & Katrien Vermeire, 2012, 11:12
© Katrien Vermeire & Sarah Vanagt/ Balthasar

This particular scene appears towards the end of the video and, in its alluring slowness, it stands in sharp contrast to the rhythmic pace that characterizes the stop-motion used elsewhere in the film. It is important to note that the scene that precedes the identification of the bodies with the yellow flags is that of the families gathering for the funeral, a scene defined by its rhythmic pace. Viewers can barely distinguish the family members as they dissolve in the dark light of the afternoon, and the only element that gives the scene any visibility

42 See footnote 29.

is the frantic on-and-off of photo cameras flashing as they try to grasp the last image of the victims in the waning light (Figs 12, 13). Besides drawing attention away from the human presence, this scene, which uses a horizontal camera view, has a much quicker pace; by alternating swiftly between dark and light, it simultaneously erases and reveals the landscape (Fig. 14). The gradual juxtaposition of different rhythms transforms the '*longue durée*' of 'slow violence' into an instance that becomes ever more elusive to attempts to frame or contain it.

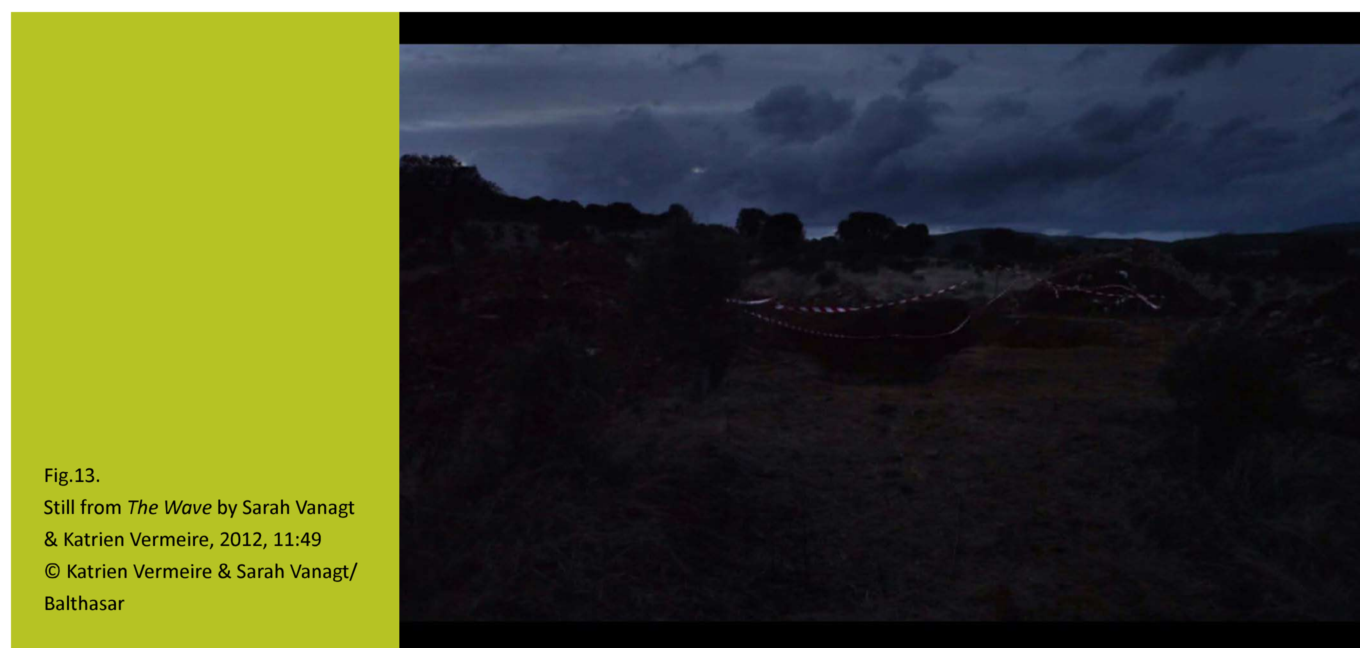

Fig.13.
Still from *The Wave* by Sarah Vanagt & Katrien Vermeire, 2012, 11:49
© Katrien Vermeire & Sarah Vanagt/ Balthasar

Art historian Christine Ross, in her comprehensive study of aesthetic experimentations with time in contemporary art, discusses Braudel's relevance to artists dealing with the past. More specifically, she argues that these artists try to remove this semi-stillness of the '*longue durée*' in order to 'presentify' the historical narrative, productively opening the past to the present by disclosing its irresolution.[43] That is what *The Wave* does when it exposes an aspect of the past that still lacks resolution and extends it — and with it the past — into the

43 See the chapter "The Historical Sublime, or *Longue Durée* Revisited," in Christine Ross, *The Past Is the Present; It's the Future Too: The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 279–305, which examines the work of Stan Douglas and his filmic exploration of an episode of injustice dating back to Canada's colonial past.

present in intricate ways. By bringing the material remains of the past into a temporally limited visibility, the work fuses past and present and provides an articulation of time and landscape that lays bare the historical continuity of 'slow violence', perhaps even disrupting that violence momentarily.

The final sequences play an important part in this possible disruption. It is only at the end of the film that the names of the victims, their dates of birth, and some brief information about the execution itself appear against a black background. In other words, it is only after twenty minutes of landscape views that alternate between vertical and horizontal, fast- and slow-paced scenes, that viewers are given basic information about the event; they must watch the full video before gaining any specific knowledge about the event. The delay is intentional: its aim is not to uncover the specificity of this particular moment in history or a single historical event, but to generate multiple forms of tem-

Fig.14.
Still from *The Wave* by Sarah Vanagt & Katrien Vermeire, 2012, 11:51
© Katrien Vermeire & Sarah Vanagt/ Balthasar

porality and impel the viewer to become attentive to this temporal diversity. Perhaps this decision to provide basic information (names, dates, location) only at the end of the viewing experience serves to displace our attention, to focus it, not so much on a factual, but on a macro-level configuration of violence. The filmic images of the landscape, in their variety of viewpoints and temporalities, enact this displacement. To put it another way, the use of the Braudelian '*longue durée*', which is materially contained in the landscape and infused with violence, succeeds in overcoming the specificity of these events and, in so doing, accounts for larger forms of violence and makes the past matter in the present.

CONCLUSION

This essay examines the notion of '*longue durée*' in connection with the concept of 'slow violence' as it is embedded in less visible landscapes, such as isolated Franco-era execution sites in the Spanish countryside. After a close examination of Fernand Braudel's and Rob Nixon's positions on time, a detailed analysis of sequences of *The Wave* shows the efficiency of Vanagt and Vermeire's artistic, spatio-temporal investigation. Their work renders an articulation of both time (the slow time of history) and landscape as a means to underline the interdependency of the two. *The Wave*'s exploration of a past that lacks resolution performs, even if unwittingly, Braudel's '*longue durée*', and that performance accounts for the binding relationships between landscape, the time of history, and 'slow violence'.

By examining the varying-speed techniques used in *The Wave*, this article shows that Vanagt and Vermeire attend to the dispersed temporalities of 'slow violence', and that they afford the filmic medium new ways to reveal the imperceptible passage of time that hides violence. Through the exploration of a past that lacks resolution, *The Wave* succeeds in extending this irresolution into the present: Vanagt and Vermeire are interested in rendering the past present. The

decisions to leave aside normative depictions of violence, to avoid individualization, and to make the surface of the earth the subject of their story are all governed by the attempt to grasp the ungraspable.

The work succeeds in allowing us to see space as a multiplicity of durations, and the binding spatio-temporal relationship, in its turn, enables a reflection on the invisibility of some forms of violence that extend into the present. In doing so, Vanagt and Vermeire suggest a concept of landscape, not as backdrop or scenery, but as a constitutive and active part of human life and society at large, as a temporal entity that shapes our present and future. In short, *The Wave* treats landscape as an ongoing process shaping the present, in its exposure and subsequent recognition of the traumatic past of the war and of Franco's long dictatorship, that still lays intact in mass graves. This gesture echoes Spain's current political climate, amidst attempts to confront the ghosts of the past, through the design of the first legal document explicitly dealing with them: the Historical Memory Law enacted in 2007, and the more recent decision to establish a truth commission to investigate crimes against humanity committed by the former dictatorial regime.[44]

In light of the above, *The Wave* invites a radical rereading of traditional landscape aesthetics, as suggested at the start of this article. Referencing a landscape afflicted by a not-so-distant past, it comes as a valuable addition to a growing body of scholarship exploring the many ways through which landscapes undergo human intervention, about how they intertwine with politics and become depositories of history. Drawing further into the present the unresolved challenges and pending issues related to the lasting legacy of political violence, contemporary artistic landscape representations are a critical tool in a culture that is all-too-often amnesic. Such a gesture could be seen as a trenchant reflection on the invisible mechanisms that cause a violent past to silently seep into the present moment and, hence, as a move towards a deeper reflection on this same past. Notably, what Vanagt and Vermeire attempt to demon-

44 A law that has, nevertheless, been called into question by different political parties for its inefficiency in retroactively bringing justice. For a critical approach, see: Mónica López Lerma, "The Ghosts of Justice and the Law of Historical Memory," *Conserveries mémorielles* 9 (2011). For an analysis of the more up-to-date truth commission, see Natalia Junquera, "Spanish government to spearhead efforts to find Civil War victims," accessed 10 October 2018, https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/07/12/inenglish/1531388057_522551.html.

strate is that the ways landscapes are looked at, dealt with, and moulded today have a crucial role to play in the process of renegotiating the past.[45]

45 I wish to thank the artists for their willingness to answer my ceaseless questions during the production of this article, Dr. Emiliano Battista for his sharp insights on Fernand Braudel and the editors of this journal for their keen editorial input.

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