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Infrastructure, landscape
& modernism in the short
films of Juanjo Pereira

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PROLOGUE

On a gray day in early Spring 2017, in Paris's République metro station, I shuttled past determined commuters, scattered police, and onto the Place de la République above. I interrupted my usual route home to Belleville, further north, to participate in the annual International Women's Day demonstration. At street level the gray sky erupted with colourful banners, signs, flags, and — most of all — thousands of people, overflowing the plaza and onto the streets.

As the march began, I remember having a sudden recognition: this was, after two months of studying in the city, the first time I interrupted my usual commute between school and home. I tried something new on my own. I marched two kilometres to Bastille with the demonstration and then rambled my way back home twice the distance away.

What did exploring the city that day allow? It let me develop a relationship with the city's people, buildings, parks, and plazas — its urban fabric. I became a regular wanderer in Paris — in part thanks to a generous university grant, gifting me free time outside of class. Through repetitive wandering, I made mental notes of landmarks for my navigation. Slowly, I gained a sense of the city's rhythms, which changed by the hour, the neighbourhood, and the seasons.

My wandering intersected with my study, leading me to learn of The Situationists, an international organization of artists who critiqued capitalism and authoritarianism between the 1950s and 1970s. The Situationists politicized wandering with the *dérive*: a practice of drifting through urban space guided by desire and intuition rather than productive rhythms. The *dérive* was a revolutionary tool, aimed at breaking “the society of the spectacle.”¹ The Situationist's methods have shaped generations of artists who draw on the *dérive* to observe and comment on the world that is. Film, given its capacity to reroute the linear map of time and place, might be the best medium to evidence the gap between *what is* and *what could be*.

INTRODUCTION

Juanjo Pereira watches, listens, and reflects.

This essay explores the filmmaker's work in chronological order: *Small Events in Medium Gray* (Paris, 2019), *Witnesses in Tension* (Asunción, 2020), and *The Impossible Future* (Dubai, 2021).

Born in Paraguay, Pereira is a documentary filmmaker, film programmer, and sound designer. Having trained in Latin America and Europe with organizations such as La Fémis, Locarno Film Festival, and Berlinale Talents, Pereira is now the Artistic Director of the Asunción International Contemporary Film Festival.

Pereira's films struck me by their use of the *dérive* to examine modern infrastructures and everyday built landscapes. Pereira's three works invite viewers to make sense of city space as seen from our situated and human perspectives — from the streets, roofs, trains, cars, doors, and windows. Pereira's films ask us how everyday scenes relate to deeper phenomena.

In what seems a natural evolution of the Situationist *dérive*, the filmmaker's visual language is meditative and disruptive. Taking an observational method punctuated by narration and animation, Pereira's camera points to tension, excess, damage, and longing for something else. He looks at infrastructure and landscape to uncover what lies underneath and outside of our familiar modernity.

In the following sections, I introduce elements of Pereira's three short films through the lens of infrastructure, landscape, and modernism. In each film, I find imaginative ways the filmmaker develops his critique of the modern city — critiques that, through Pereira's insistent observation, take on the quality of appreciation more than indignation.

SMALL EVENTS IN MEDIUM GRAY (PARIS, 2019)

Paris: city of light, love, and luxury. Paris, city of gray. The colour

1 Society of the Spectacle, Guy Debord (Black & Red Press, Detroit: 1970).

permeates the city's atmosphere, blanketing it like the literal clouds that waft over Île de France for what feels like an eternity every winter.

The grayness of the city is more than just its climate. It is also the monochromatic urban design and fashion, where flashes of colour attract attention. Grayness even extends to the decorum of respectable Parisian culture: refined, introverted, and decent.

Pereira's film *Les petits événements dans le gris moyen* (Small events in medium gray) looks at Paris beyond gray. Starting with the idea that medium gray symbolizes perfection, Pereira contends that, as human beings, we need more than perfect. We need more than gray.

The film unfolds by studying two colours as they shape, and take shape, in Paris's urban environment: Red and Blue. These two colours make up many of the thousands of shades and hues that charge our world with feeling. Perhaps a nod to the French tricolour, Pereira investigates the power these complementary colours have on their surroundings and one another.

Red. Loud, fiery, and passionate Red. "A colour that wants to be seen," according to the film's narrator. Red shows up in mosaic tiles, terracotta chimneys, sunset skies, rose petals, and — of course — fire. Red fights, dominates, and burns. And yet, describes the narrator, it is a lonely colour on its own (see Image 1). Red is said to "demand another colour, indispensable for its life." That colour is its complement: Blue.

Blue is, at once, Red's opposite and its equal. Blue is cool while Red is hot; Blue goes deep while Red goes high; Blue waits while Red pursues; Blue is quiet while Red is loud. In the film, Blue shows up in a street mural, an art installation, on oxidizing statues, in clear skies, and — at its most essential — through lapping waters.

Small Events in Medium Gray reveals the power colour has in relation to people and landscapes. By way of its focused shots, gradu-



Noisy, glowing, the red sighs of impatience
and can't stand his loneliness.

fig.23

Small Events in Medium Gray – Juanjo Pereira, 2019.

al transitions, and droning ambient score, Pereira tells the story of two forces that leave their mark on subjective experience. “*Les couleurs sont les forces rayonnantes,*” or *colours are energy-generating forces*, states the narrator as they open the final act.

While the narrator differentiates between “negative” and “positive” forces, it is important not to think of this binary in terms of value judgements one might ascribe in passing (eg. “a positive or negative experience”). The message is deeper, more kinetic, more electric. The interplay between colours in the urban landscape is like a battery conveying energy between positive and negative nodes.

The studied search for balance among the most basic elements is the film’s key premise. By referencing both natural and human-made facets of Paris’s urban fabric, through the story of two complementary colours, Pereira hints toward the unity of urban and natural landscapes. As the flat perfection of medium gray fades away, the balanced messiness in the space between material and metaphor takes its place.

WITNESSES IN TENSION (ASUNCIÓN, 2020)

Pereira takes us on a *dérive* of their hometown, traveling 10,000 kilometres southwest to Asunción, Paraguay. We find ourselves in a very different context than Paris, where Asunción bears witness to the “cracked infrastructures” of a city “facing imminent collapse.”

Witnesses in Tension conceives of Asunción’s urban and natural landscapes as part of one continuum — a single, expansive regional landscape. An often overlooked capital city within South America’s settler-colonial geography, Asunción exists among rivers, wetlands, forests, and savannah. The city is, at once, the heart of Paraguayan resource extraction and the periphery of a globalized economy.

Pereira earnestly presents the city’s upheaved sidewalks, aging brick towers, withering docks, and fallen electric poles — testifying to the unfolding process of a city in slow crisis. Pereira describes



fig.24

Witnesses in Tension – Juanjo Pereira, 2020.

the interplay between urban and natural forms as “tensions that exist between these witnesses of living and dead nature.”

The film depicts this tension via 3-channel video. Pereira provides three different shots on screen at once, usually looking at a particular location from 3 different angles. These 3-channel scenes shift about every 15 seconds, taking us on a tour of the city. Alone, the close-up and medium-length cuts leave much to the imagination. Viewers are asked to triangulate, in real time, a larger story within and between each scene.

The artist’s choice to fill the frame with three channels is intentional. In one scene, Pereira depicts crowded black electric lines crossing over a street, alongside red brick towers looming before a clear blue sky. In another scene, the artist presents close-ups of a lagoon, the waters of which are muddied red, alongside the textures of eroded asphalt.²

However, *Witnesses in Tension* is more than a collection of shots and scenes. The film tells a larger story through the artist’s choice of sequencing. In one sequence, Pereira first portrays a scene of firefighters at work — shots filled with water sprinkling and rainbowing over the street. Then he cuts to shots of a cinema on fire, following salvaged film reels stacked on the pavement. The sparkling wet street contrasts starkly against the dense smoke billowing out of the burning building.

In another sequence, Pereira pairs (from left to right) a medium shot of a fallen concrete electric pole, an extremely long shot of a smoggy river landscape, and a close-up of a dim room lit by a flickering television and a lightbulb (see Image 2). On-screen together, the three shots speak to the regional web of raw material, labour, and energy required to power the city. This scene is immediately followed by a break in the 3-channel video, and the frame is filled with a panorama of Asunción at sunset — its skyline towering

over its neighbouring river, set to a score of passing sirens, voices, vehicles, and winds.

Witnesses in Tension culminates in a speculative turn toward climate crisis and sea level rise, begging the question, *how will the tensions between the city and its landscape be resolved?* In turn, Pereira responds with a CGI animated model of Asunción flooding. The water quickly rises to engulf the gray model buildings, empty streets, and mess of black electrical wire connecting it all. Allusions to mythical epic floods and contemporary climate anxieties conclude, what seems clear by the end, a critique of the modernist city — demonstrating its faulty infrastructure and its failure to exist reciprocally within its landscape.

Asunción bears witness to a malfunctioning modernism structured by colonization. The film reveals modern infrastructure’s failure to fulfill its central promise: to improve quality of life. The city’s electric grid is failing, its sidewalks are unfriendly to pedestrians, and its water and air are polluted. Residents are made to navigate this failure nonetheless.

While the film does not shy away from Asunción’s challenging reality — modernist failure and dying nature — its message is hopeful. The hope, I think, is encapsulated by the panorama of the city, river, and sky at the film’s midpoint. The city’s surroundings provide, what Pereira calls, “a halo that protects it.” From this angle, the city is inseparable from its natural landscape. *Witnesses in Tension* offers a path for human infrastructure to exist in harmony within landscapes, ecosystems, and our planetary climate.

THE IMPOSSIBLE FUTURE (DUBAI, 2021)

Finally, and most recently, Pereira takes us 13,000 kilometres, across the Atlantic and the Sahara, to the city of gold: Dubai. In the space between desert and sea, the city’s glass skyscrapers dominate a landscape also populated by more humble towers, low-rise neighbourhoods, malls, and highways. According to the artist, it is “a place of appearances rather than realities.”

2 Oliver Browning, “Paraguay lake turns illuminous pink after pollution from nearby factory.” (The Independent: 2021), <https://www.independent.co.uk/tv/climate/paraguay-lake-pink-water-pollution-v06251a2c>.



fig.25

 The Impossible City – Juanjo Pereira, 2021.

Dubai's common story is that it quickly transformed from a sleepy coastal trading village to a world-class city in a matter of a few decades. Thanks to the petrol economy and a series of fortuitous political circumstances, Dubai has grown a reputation for wealth and luxury. For many, including Pereira, Dubai also conjures up feelings of futurity.

The Impossible City steps into Dubai just as the city stakes its claim on the global stage with *Expo 2020*. The world's fair invited countries to curate special exhibitions around the themes of *opportunity, mobility, and sustainability*.

The film begins looking out the front of a train headed to the Expo. The first-person perspective places the audience on the train, in the filmmaker's shoes, winding over streets and bridges at the foot of an endless procession of glassy towers (see Image 3). From here, the film quickly transitions to animated architectural renderings of the festival grounds, which provides a glimpse into the showmanship that is so much a part of world's fair culture.

In narrative notes to viewers strewn throughout the film, Pereira writes that he never imagined visiting Dubai. When he stumbled across the World Expo, authorities prohibited filming inside. Thus, *The Impossible City* becomes a record of everything going on around Expo 2020 — a family at the beach, a call to prayer, sand shifting onto highways, kids playing soccer, a fountain spectacle, and a boat ride.

As is characteristic of Pereira's measured expository method, he places everyday scenes from his video diary in direct conversation with utopian architectural renderings of Expo 2020. For example, footage of an emirati falconer and his bird transition into hand-drawn sketches of a falcon. The drawings progress naturally into a 3-D rendering of the United Arab Emirates' pavilion at Expo 2020, designed with reference to the UAE's national bird.³

3 "About the UAE Pavilion." (UAEPavilionExpo.com, 2021). <https://uaepavilionexpo.com/about-us/the-pavilion/>

The rendering is clean, complete, and alive with activity in ways that the film's Dubai is not. The city we see through Pereira's camera is under construction, where cars and towers outnumber people, and sand permeates everything. As such, writes the filmmaker, "a journey of observation unfolds a path between renders and reality." In this juxtaposition, Pereira creates a rupture between the real and the rendered ideal.

As in the two previous films, Pereira insists that the city is never removed from its landscape. Sandbanks collect on roadsides, kids play on a sandy field under electric transmission towers, and a sandstorm envelops everything. The relationship is adversarial — as Dubai grows into the desert, the desert fights back.

Pereira approaches the experience of this "impossible future, not as a lament, but as a coexistence." The film looks at Dubai, the pinnacle of modernism which seeks to clearly divide urban and natural landscapes, and discovers that the two are inextricable. The question becomes not *how might we control the impacts of the environment on cities*, but rather *how might environments and their cities co-exist?*

OUTRO: MULTIPLE MODERNISMS

Together, Pereira's three short films, *Small Events in Medium Gray* (Paris, 2019), *Witnesses in Tension* (Asunción, 2020), and *The Impossible Future* (Dubai, 2021), speak to a greater dialectic between forces that make urban life desirable and interesting, and those that make it treacherous and absurd. Traveling the world alongside Pereira, we begin to assemble an intentionally ambiguous, yet palpable, understanding of different modernist urbanisms: the conservation of Paris's perfect landscape punctuated by colour, modernism's malfunction in Asunción's cracking infrastructure, and Dubai's modernism competing with the desert for a spot on the world stage.

Viewing the three works together, we are bound to ask: *Where are we? What kind of modernism surrounds us? How did we get here?*

Through Pereira's use of the Situationist *dérive*, we begin to see our lived experiences within a broader modernist failure. A failure to produce desirable benefits for the majority of humans while alienating us from our natural landscapes. While there is much fraught in this failure, there is still much to observe — including beauty. There is beauty in the excess as in the decay. Perhaps the filmmaker is showing us that excess and decay are but one and the same. Pereira does not shy away from this complexity. Through this lens, viewers gain renewed perspective on our landscapes and ways to live in harmony with our environments.

Juanjo Pereira is a Paraguayan filmmaker, curator, and sound designer. He is currently artistic director of the Asunción International Contemporary Film Festival (ASUFICC).

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