Historia Pluriversal: Ernesto Baca's *Samoa* (2005)

por Byron Davies

Summary: Ernesto Baca's feature-length experimental film *Samoa* (2005) was fundamental in kindling a renewed interest in Super 8 in Argentina at the beginning of this century. Its massive collection of shots are organized around a single but multivalent idea: the mirror as site of the *contraconquista*. The film opens and closes with shots of conquistadores bearing a light-reflecting mirror, a symbol of the "images at war," that is, of the renaissance perspective against which the film will frequently enlist the flatness of the Super 8 format. *Samoa*'s non-linear structure itself takes up the figure of the mirror: a symmetrical, palindrome-like curve. Its conception of space is derived from the gap between those sides of the curve, thus making it the opposite of spatial conceptions dominant in "classical" cinema: a whole region of structure and depthless shots versus thin structure and deep space. The film then becomes a sustained interrogation of the notion of a center: the center as a fold between two mirrored representations, which in turn becomes an occasion for interrogating the relationship between metaphysical centers and geopolitical ones (metropoles). The film thus points towards an *ethics of liberation* not incidental to, but arguably internal to, Super 8 experimental cinema.

Keywords: Ernesto Baca, *Samoa*, Argentine experimental film, Super 8, decolonial thought

Abstract: An analysis of Ernesto Baca's feature-length Super 8 experimental film *Samoa* (Argentina, 2005) from the perspective of decolonial thought.

Toward the end of Caspar Strake's 2015 documentary *Time Out of Joint*, the celebrated German-Argentine experimental filmmaker Narcisa Hirsch discusses her fantasy of reversing time's arrow. What if the shrinking of the universe she experienced while growing older could be turned around, and the universe could be felt to expand? What if she did not face death, but rather the self-reduction concomitant with an enlarged universe? This thought takes up the thread of her earlier observations in the documentary about the possibilities of simply projecting a film in reverse. She mentions the shock of her students, especially male students, when she

screened Stan Brakhage's childbirth film *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) backwards: they were not prepared for a graphic exhibition of the fantasy of returning to the womb.

Moving beyond individual biography, what about historical wounds? Could the history of colonialism be reversed? It is characteristic of decolonial thought to reject emphatically any fantasies of returning to a premodern, precolonial past. At the end of his book *1492: El encubrimiento del otro*, translated into English as *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of "the Other" and the Myth of Modernity*, Enrique Dussel insists that his "transmodern" vision aims at "neither a premodern project, nor a folkloric affirmation of the past, nor the anti-modern project of conservatives." It rather aims to transcend modernity's "Eurocentrism on behalf of its negated alterity" (Dussel 1992: 178; Dussel 1995: 139). For Dussel, transmodern liberation rejects fantasizing that colonial modernity's negation of the Other never took place, or that it could be reversed; it rather struggles for a political future in which modernity's negated Other is recognized as history's protagonist.[1] More precisely, according to major decolonial thinkers, we should be speaking of a plurality of protagonists and a plurality of centers: Walter Mignolo says, "the genealogy of decolonial thought is *pluri*versal (not universal)" (Mignolo 2007: 43)[2] referring also to the Zapatistas' slogan "Un mundo en que quepan muchos mundos" ("A world in which many worlds fit") (Mignolo 2007: 42).

And yet many of experimental cinema's most conspicuous claims for itself can also be understood as arguing for that medium's pluriversality: a de-centering of "mainstream" formats and ways of perceiving. These claims of course include a rejection of linear narrative (only occasionally framed by experimental filmmakers as a rejection of European or North American narrative formats). But they also include the thought gestured at it in Hirsch's comments in *Time Out of Joint*, namely a rejection of standards of "error" and "correctness" operating in projection—Who is to say that projecting a film in reverse is in error?—and indeed a blurry line between variabilities in projection and the filmic "work." A further example of the latter would be Brakhage's own practices of deliberately screening films out of focus, thus reducing the film screen's character as window into deep, recessive space (Brakhage 2001: 175).

Strikingly, Brakhage also linked just such a reduction of recessive space—and a corresponding expansion of film's other expressive capacities—to a rejection of specific kinds of European and Western prejudices about vision in film. As he says in the trenchant opening of his 1963 book *Metaphors on Vision:*

> And then we have the camera eye, its lenses grounded to achieve 19th century Western compositional perspective (as best exemplified by the 19th century architectural conglomeration of details of the "classic" ruin) in bending light and limiting the frame of the image just so, its standard camera and projector speed for recording movement geared to the feeling of the ideal slow Viennese

1. Dussel says, "The first protagonists of Latin American history subsequent to the cultural shock of 1492 were *the Indians*, who still remained invisible to modernity" (Dussel 1995: 120). See Dussel 1992: 150.
2. My translation.

> waltz […] and its color film manufactured, to produce that picture post card effect (salon painting) exemplified by those oh so blue skies and peachy skins (Brakhage 2001: 15-16).

A decade later Brakhage would also discuss the constrictions involved in his "training in this society in renaissance perspective—in that form of seeing we would call 'westward-hoing man's,' […] a form of sight which is aggressive & which seeks to make of any landscape a piece of real estate" (Brakhage 2001: 158). Perhaps we could indulge the proposal that Brakhage's comments approach, in a peculiarly North American register, a filmic rejection of the "*Yo conquisto*"/"I conquer": according to Dussel, the constitutive thought of Eurocentric modernity. Brakhage suggests that a similar thought is reflected in the very idea of land (the framing and capturing of a deep, recessive space) internal to classical cinematic representation (Dussel 1992: 47; Dussel 1995: 74).

Other examples abound. Indeed, in his book *Light Moving in Time*, William Wees collects many models in North American experimental cinema of the genre's suspension of those perspective cues regarded as "normal" in mainstream cinema. These include not just films by Brakhage—for example, he refers to Brakhage's "need to escape the tyranny of the vanishing point"—but also the slow, downward zoom of Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), where "an initial image of fairly deep space is slowly drained of its illusionistic depth" (Wees 1992: 52). According to Wees, Snow's zoom eliminates "the cues to perspective and flatten[s] the room's space against the wall and windows" (Wees 1992: 52). Snow begins his film with a radical instance of "renaissance perspective," but with the ultimate aim of radically defeating it. Of course, in all these commentaries, we are still very far from enlisting the defamiliarizing methods of experimental cinema in a "*contraconquista*": there is no indication that the authors understand these methods to have possible connections to "images at war"—to adopt Serge Gruzinski's title for his study of the Spanish Conquest's imposition on Mesoamerica of European models of renaissance perspective and of the ideal spectator (Gruzinski 2001).

Nevertheless, all this history is worth adumbrating because it allows us to understand the significance of some seeming accidents for the relationship between experimental cinema and decolonial thought. For example, a reduced Super 8 screening of *Wavelength* organized by Narcisa Hirsch in Buenos Aires in the late 1990s was precisely the first public screening of that format viewed by the then-budding filmmaker Ernesto Baca (born in Florencio Varela, Buenos Aires, in 1969)—himself avowedly influenced by decolonial writing (Pécora 2023: 244).[3] (The very first time Baca had seen Super 8 film projected in *any* setting was a few years earlier in a class taught by his mentor, Argentine filmmaker Claudio Caldini, of Caldini's own *Ofrenda* [1978], itself employing a defamiliarizing method strongly contrasting with *Wavelength*'s: the overwhelming of perspective cues via the proliferation of rapidly passing static shots of flowers, shot frame-by-frame.)

3. The detail that the film was *Wavelength* comes from correspondence with Baca. Incidentally, *Wavelength* was also the first experimental film that Hirsch ever viewed. See Marín 2022: 192.

Several years after viewing Hirsch's screening of Snow's film, Baca would premiere his hourlong Super 8 feature *Samoa* (2005) as a 35mm blowup in competition at the Buenos Aires Festival Internacional de Cine Independiente (BAFICI). The film would go on to screen at the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA) and even in a now-defunct commercial cinema, the Complejo Tita Merello. Kindling at that time a renewed interest in Super 8 in Argentina, *Samoa* has been regarded as of "historical importance," according to critic Pablo Gamba (Gamba 2024). Argentine Super 8 filmmaker Emiliano Cativa says that *Samoa* was a "before and after" for him (Pécora 2023: 259).[4]

Whatever accounts for the relative success of *Samoa* in Argentina, it certainly helps that its heavily elaborated, massive collection of shots (made from twenty black-and-white Super 8 cartridges and one in color) are organized around a single (but multivalent) idea: the mirror as site of the *contraconquista*. The film opens and closes with shots—derived from projections of Baca's earlier 16mm fiction feature *Cabeza de palo* (2002)—of conquistadores bearing a light-reflecting mirror: a symbol of the "images at war," that is, of the renaissance perspective against which the film will frequently appear to enlist its format, staking its place in the above-adumbrated history of experimental film.[5] (These ambitions for the film include employing the reduced perspective cues of a small-gauge format like Super 8 as declarations of the screen as a real, two-dimensional space.)[6] And yet *Samoa*'s non-linear structure itself takes up the figure of the mirror: a symmetrical, palindrome-like curve (in Baca's words, a "false palindrome") consisting of roughly left-to-right inward movement by a woman (Gadea Quintana), then a suspension of human transit and indeed human figuration in an abstract, color, hand-painted "center," followed by roughly outward right-to-left movement by that woman's apparent doppelgänger (Laura Amor), adopting mirroring gestures.

The conquistadores in the film's mirrored opening and closing moments are patently conquering the Americas, not the Polynesian island of Samoa: which here figures in a deliberately abstract title, a reference to an "elsewhere" in the colonial imagination, about which Baca admittedly knew little in making the film.[7] And yet *Samoa* also appears to encapsulate Dussel's thesis that Amerindia was, before the Conquest, the easternmost manifestation of Pacific culture and its migration. Indeed, a very curious fact is that the island of Samoa also functions somewhat metonymically in Dussel's writing for the Americas' "Asiatic being," which he regards as their "authentic being." (A frequent refrain in Dussel's writing has been to link the Mapuche's practices of the cacique and toque in Chile to similar practices on the island of Samoa.)[8]

4. The renewal in interest in Super 8 in Argentina was facilitated by the founding in 1997-98 by Emanuel Bernardello of the laboratory Arcoíris, where *Samoa*'s footage was developed.
5. Despite the significance of Caldini and of Hirsch's screening of Snow's *Wavelength*, Brakhage was not yet a significant reference to Baca in making *Samoa*, since Baca had not yet seen his films.
6. Compare the arguments of Schonig 2022: 99-119, which include references to other works by Snow, particularly *Standard Time* (1967), *Back and Forth* (1969), and *La région centrale* (1971).
7. For comments by Baca on the topic, as well as a poem he wrote while editing the film, see Baca 2014-15.
8. For example, Dussel 2025: 354. In 2022, while collaborating on Cecilia Fiel's forthcoming documentary *Dussel*, Baca spoke with Dussel about *Samoa*, and the philosopher likewise mentioned possible etymological connections between words in Samoan and Quechua.

Nevertheless, in the film *Samoa* such ideas of the Americas' "Asiatic being" are clearly oriented towards India, informed by Baca's own Hindu devotional and monastic practices, and also anticipating his later documentaries *El Sirviente* (2009), about a Brahmin priest in the suburbs of Buenos Aires, and *Vrindavana* (2010), about the titular city in northern India.[9] These ideas are expressed in *Samoa* by the classical Indian music of Chilean-born, Argentina-based musician Rasikananda Das, and by the film's opening epigraph from the *Sri Isopanisad:* "O my Lord! Sustainer of all that lives,/Your real face is covered by Your dazzling effulgence./Kindly remove that covering and exhibit Yourself to Your pure devotee."

In short, *Samoa* is a sustained interrogation of the notion of a center (a "real face"): the center as a fold between two mirrored representations, which in turn becomes an occasion for interrogating the relationship between metaphysical centers and geopolitical ones (metropoles). Its registers of that idea go beyond proposals about Representation, to even further ones about Transport, Fantasy, and Play.

Representing *Samoa*

What might we see in watching *Samoa*? After the epigraph (in Spanish and English) from the *Sri Isopanisad* about the real face of the Lord, the film opens in color: we see Baca's former theater teacher Ricardo Holcer in portrait, facing us (Image 1). A Bell & Howell Super 8 projector is then ignited (Image 2), followed by black-and-white footage of conquistadores climbing a mound. Their apparent leader, played by Holcer, signals for them to stop, while he waves a reflecting mirror at the camera (Image 3). These moments already mark Holcer as director's surrogate, protagonist, and Lord—and of course conqueror-via-representations. We learn in Baca's later (semi-fictionalized) autobiographical film *Réquiem para un film olvidado* (2017) that the filmmaker first had access to Super 8 thanks to cartridges brought to him by Holcer from a trip he made to New York in the late 90s. (Baca is always frank about the format's scarcity, especially in the Global South.)

Indeed, the footage of conquistadores is the same as a film-within-a-film in Baca's earlier *Cabeza de palo* (2002), in which Holcer plays a porn director: a proxy for the cinema of voyeurism. (The other shots of Holcer in *Samoa* are outtakes from that same feature.)[10] With Holcer's mirror, the classical image of Perseus' reflective shield—famously invoked by Siegfried Kracauer to explain how we depend on the film screen "for the reflection of happenings which would petrify us were we to encounter them in real life" (Kracauer 1960: 305)—serves to make images of the Conquest seem bearable by provoking the illusion of our (voyeuristic) distance from them. The additional clue that mirroring will be the film's guiding figure is when a cut transforms that same white, reflecting light into the white "O" (the most perfectly symmetrical, indeed orientation-less letter) of the title "SAMOA." And yet it is written back-

9. A semi-fictionalized subplot of Baca's autobiographical *Réquiem para un film olvidado* (2017) consists of his mother's constant entreaties that he abandon Hinduism and devotional yoga, and return to Catholicism.
10. Though *Cabeza de palo* was shot in 16mm, Baca shot backups in Super 8, hence making available this footage.

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wards, at first exposing only “OM.” From the beginning, the film conceives of itself as a Hindu mantra.

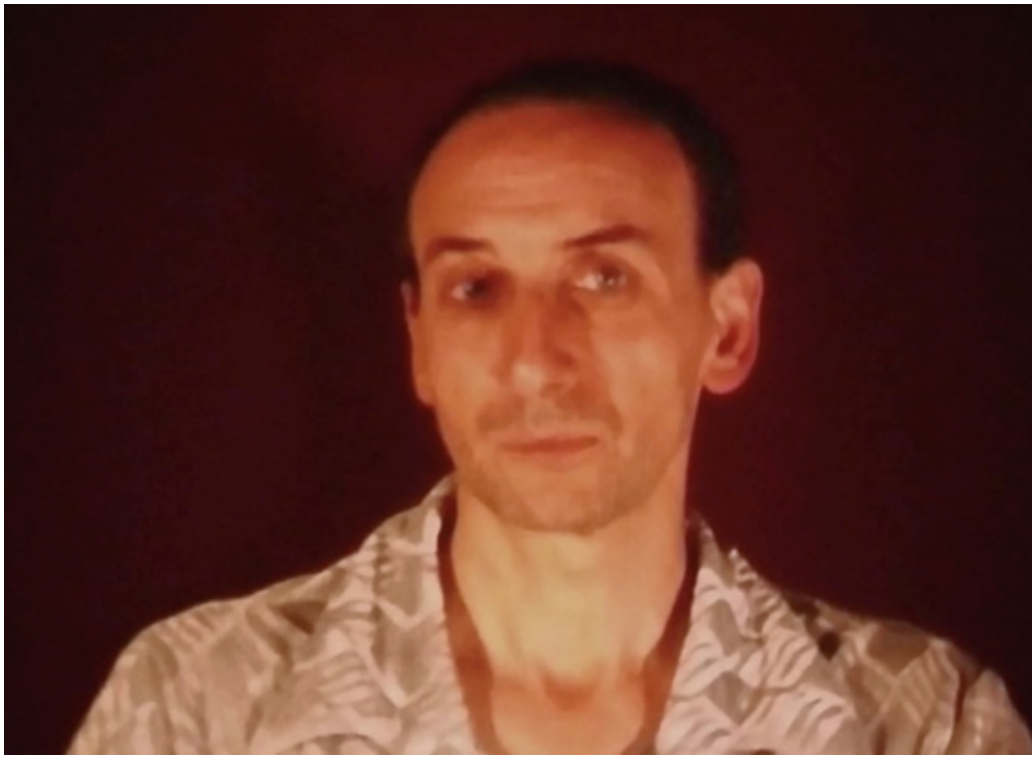

Image 1. Samoa (Ernesto Baca, 2005). Courtesy of the artist

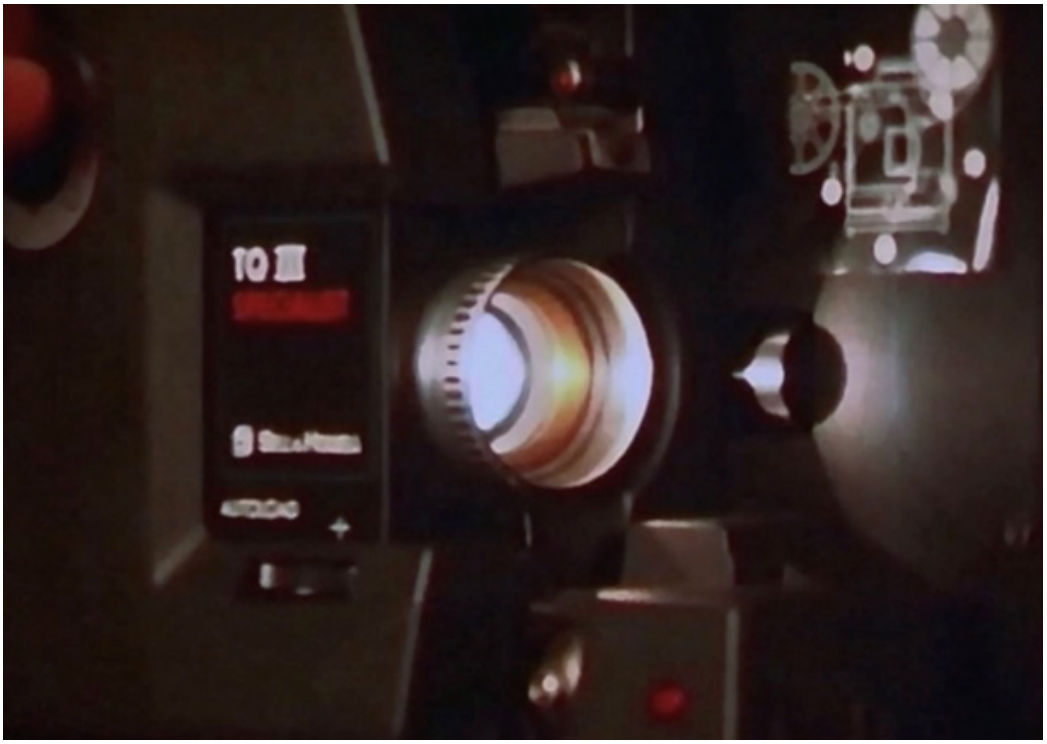

Image 2. Samoa (Ernesto Baca, 2005). Courtesy of the artist.

Image 3. Samoa (Ernesto Baca, 2005). Courtesy of the artist.

That mantra would appear to seek peace in a transformation wrought by reversing time. As manifestations of Baca's "false palindrome," each sequence in the first half finds its rough equivalent in the second half. A close tracking shot facing earth becomes elements that seem like scattered dust. (The film's reversals are occasionally disintegrations: an embrace of the impossibility of perfect temporal symmetry.)[11] The first and last shots of human figures are of women sleeping (Gadea Quintana and Laura Amor, respectively), facing in opposite directions, with respective suggestions of beginning and end of rest, and thus of dreaming in between (Images 4 and 5). This shared, intersubjective "dream" features metaphors of film and film editing (such as a sewing machine), as well as, prominently, movement up and down train tracks: indeed repetitions of the same track footage, maintaining its orientation—Baca's palindrome is always only approximate—but run backwards, and filmed from a screen. Other forms of disintegration are parallel between both "sides" of the film but focus on units of movement: impressively elaborate frame-by-frame pixilation effects of Quintana and Amor traversing a road and the center of Buenos Aires, respectively, but without moving their limbs. (Amor's closed eyes and backwards movement accentuate impressions of her as dreamer.)

As suggested above, this is a film concerned with flatness, with using Super 8 to defeat typical perspective cues—an effect reinforced by seeing both "sides" as folded along a crease. Or rather, its conception of space is mainly derived from the gap between those sides, thus making

11. See the observations of physicist John Cramer about the asymmetry of macroscopic processes, in contrast with the symmetry of microscopic ones, in Strake's *Time Out of Joint* (2015). This issue is more explicitly in addressed in *Samoa*, with its palindrome-like structure, than, say, in Baca's *Ver reversal* (2012), which consists more simply in running footage backwards.

it the exact opposite of spatial conceptions supposedly dominant in “classical” cinema: a whole region of structure and depthless shots versus thin structure (the “line” of linear narrative) and deep space (Brakhage’s “real estate”).

Image 4. Samoa (Ernesto Baca, 2005). Courtesy of the artist.

Image 5. Samoa (Ernesto Baca, 2005). Courtesy of the artist.

Samoa's ideas of flatness are manifest in shots of amoeba taken from an electronic screen (Image 6), silhouettes of animals, road signs, and closeups of water (abstractions evocative of Ralph Steiner's *H2O* [1929] and anticipating the closing shots of water in Baca's otherwise recessive and realist *Vrindavana*). Space is not achieved via the depth internal to the frame, but rather by the "false" superimpositions achieved by rapid frame-by-frame editing and sound effects suggesting fast movement like buzzing and crunching. Tessellations, including some by M.C. Escher, are among the grounds for animating flat spaces—links in a chain of being, from unmoving microscopic elements to moving macroscopic ones—thus rooting *Samoa* in shots of tiles and abstract patterns in earlier Argentine experimental film, particularly by Baca's teacher Claudio Caldini and Jorge Honik (though Baca disavows a direct Honik influence). Those elements also include complete persons, albeit mechanically or accidentally filed away: on one "side" of the film, there are ID photos of men that Baca found in a machine for generating them; on another side, their feminine equivalents. Brief flickers reveal a guru preparing a fire ceremony. And again we see the device of flattening by filming from an electronic screen: in an unidentified movie from India, the deity Bhagawan Sri Krishna exhibits his "universal form"—which itself serves as visual prologue to the film's vigorously hand-painted center (the Lord's unmasking, or the unmasking of figuration, alluded to in the epigraph from the *Sri Isopanisad*) (Image 7).

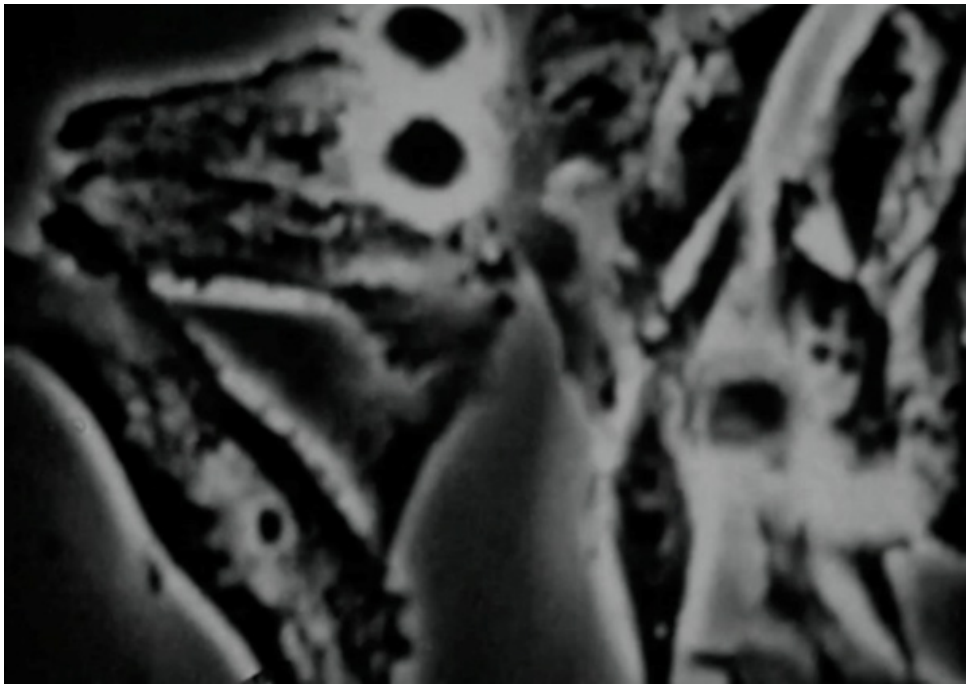

Image 6. Samoa (Ernesto Baca, 2005). Courtesy of the artist.

At the end of *Samoa* the disintegrations resulting from its central reversal are shown to be far from random, but rather guided by a kind of entropy—indeed, a movement toward order—as the previously backwards title "*Samoa*" now appears written forwards (a sign of restoration). Likewise, the film manifests the fantasy of reversing the Conquest, with the exact redeployment

of the conquistador footage, run backwards and filmed from a screen—the invaders are now in retreat. But we must emphasize "fantasy": with the shot of the back of Holcer's head (and the unspooling of the Bell & Howell projector), we see the closing parenthesis constituting the limit of this director's consciousness (Image 8). The "dreamers" (Quintana and Amor) may just be further elements in his own mental theater, thus explaining their doubleness and reversibility. (A doubled dream or shared dream provokes the postulation of yet a further consciousness.) In one respect, regarding its central concepts, the film entertains a blunt idealism or anti-realism: reversibility, like abstraction, may ultimately be just an act of the mind.

Image 7. Samoa (Ernesto Baca, 2005). Courtesy of the artist.

Even so, the film's basic impulse is to turn the figure of the mirror against itself: an anti-mimetic reflection. On the one hand, there is the modern European philosophical tradition of the mind as essentially a vehicle for representations, for a "mirror of nature," as famously criticized by Richard Rorty (whose own Eurocentrism in those criticisms would later be reprimanded by Dussel) (Rorty 1979; Dussel 1996: 103-128; Dussel 2014: 73-103). On the other hand—though *Samoa* anticipates by eleven years Baca's arrival in Mexico in 2016 for several years of production, and though its operative deity is Bhagawan Sri Krishna rather than Tezcatlipoca (god of obsidian, conflict, and "duality" of god Quetzalcōātl)—there is the Mesoamerican tradition of the dark smoking mirror (the very manifestation of Tezcatlipoca) or obsidian mirror. In a discussion of a 1998 installation by Mexican artist Pedro Lasch, *Black Mirror/Espejo Negro*, which paired pre-hispanic statuettes with black mirrors in which reproductions of baroque Spanish were visible, Walter Mignolo says that "the decolonization of imperial aesthetics, based on representation, consists in creating and making that which cannot be co-opted, weakened, and flattened [*achatado*] by the concept of representation" (Mignolo 2017: 31-54, 47).

We might add, in the case of film: flattened by an uncritical rejection of flatness (an uncritical embrace of renaissance perspective).

Image 8. Samoa (Ernesto Baca, 2005). Courtesy of the artist.

Thus, within the proliferation of reflections and anti-reflections in *Samoa*, a main opposition emerges: the gamut of the film as a response to the mirror wielded by Holcer's conquistador, as though the film itself were an obsidian mirror reflecting back the powers of a clear one. This was always an unappreciated consequence of Kracauer's idea of the screen as Perseus' shield. What if the "happenings which would petrify us" include precisely the exposure of our mechanisms of representation? Is shamanic ritual—the further reflection of an obsidian mirror—needed in order to make even that much knowledge (a sideways-on view of representation) bearable?[12]

Transport, Fantasy, and Play

Besides the mirror, the other major figure in *Samoa* is the railroad, which Pablo Gama refers to as a "recurring *motif*" in Baca's work (Gamba 2024) (Image 9). The film indeed sets in place Baca's framework for symbolically equating the train and the film strip, the rail and the sprocket hole, exemplified by his short *Locomoción* (2015).[13] The idea certainly reaches its culmination in his feature *Historia universal* (2022), where the train becomes a figure for movement across the film's titular "universal history" (as

12. The phrase "sideways-on" is most closely associated in Anglophone philosophy with McDowell 1994.
13. For discussion of *Locomoción* locating in within a wider Argentine tradition of direct animation, see Marín 2022: 150-52.

well as its negation in particular histories of Latin America and its cinema: images of children with raised hands superimposed over a passing train evoke the children beseeching train passengers for coins in Fernando Birri's *Tire dié* [1960], itself excerpted by Getino and Solanas in *La hora de los hornos* [1968].)[14]

Image 9. Samoa (Ernesto Baca, 2005). Courtesy of the artist.

But the railroad also presents something of a problem for *Samoa*. The film's shots of movement up and down train tracks are Baca's clearest declarations of the frame's *z*-axis and of movement into a space of renaissance perspective. What is the significance of these exceptions to the film's more typical declaration of flatness?[15] We might find a clue in Lynne Kirby's study of the railroad and silent cinema (itself a notable reference for the absence of synchronized sound in *Samoa*):

> Insofar as the train has always been a physical extension of an imperialist vision, of the hegemonic expansion of an economic and cultural power, a principle of incorporation and arrangement, and of the discipline of heterogenous territories, its function has been that of coherence, order, and regularity. In general, the train is a vehicle that imposes sense on what modern Western culture sees as irrational: nature and tradition. It enforces a kind of readability or understanding according to the authority of its codes and its master—the white male entrepreneur (Kirby 1997: 27).

Sketched as an introductory gesture at the beginning of Kirby's book, these are just some

14. Tellingly, the same scene includes shots of coins and of a bust of Eva Perón: thus making explicit the allusion to Birri's film and locating it in the history of Peronism.
15. On this sort of point and its relationship to train footage, particularly Ken Jacobs's work, such as *The Georgetown Loop* and *Disorient Express* (both 1996), see Schonig 2022: 99-124.

of the cultural resonances of railroad symbolism that we would expect to be meaningful in an decolonial film. Using that sketch as a framework for approaching *Samoa*, it would be significant that movement into the *z*-axis along the train track represents the opposite, colonial pole against which the film's declarations of the shallow Super 8 frame are struggling: that is, the ultimate manifestation of what Brakhage described as making "any landscape a piece of real estate."

Another way of putting this point is that *Samoa* consists precisely in the dialectic described by Deleuze and Guattari between *striated space*—supposedly expressive of settlements and cities, including settler-colonialism—here represented by the train tracks, and *smooth space*—supposedly expressive of nomadic cultures—here represented by Baca's hand-painted, abstract "center" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 474-500). Of course, as befits a dialectic, the distinction is not absolute: "smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 474). Nevertheless, the striated "sides" of *Samoa* characterized by the movement into and out of the film's hand-painted "center" are indeed explorations of extension, including vertical extension (not just movement up and down tracks, into and out of a vanishing point, but also shots of buildings, the Obelisco de Buenos Aires, and the statue atop the Pirámide de Mayo), whereas the hand-painted sections typify Deleuze and Guattari's descriptions of the intensive character of smooth spaces. "Intense *Spatium* instead of *Extensio*" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 479); a "voyage in place" rather a voyage from place to place. Thus, Baca's hand-painted sections also typify the idea of abstraction, marking smooth surface, that Deleuze and Guattari exalt above the "geometrical and rectilinear" (the implicit contrast would be with Baca's employment, in *Samoa* and elsewhere, of the Hindu swastika): "A line of variable direction that describes no contour and delimits no form" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 499).

Correspondingly, the hand-painted sections of *Samoa* constitute not just the film's suspension of any suggestions of physical transport from place to place, but also any suggestions of narrative transport (Image 10). That is, they amount to the suspension of mediation by dialectical or narrative fantasy (the fantasies that make difficulties bearable to view, with their connections to Kracauer on Perseus' shield) in favor of an idea of what it would be like to have an unmediated view of the Real: the "contentless impossible object." For example, in a Lacanian reading of David Lynch (a director who has influenced Baca), Todd McGowan says, "The function of fantasy is to render the impossible object accessible for the subject. In doing so, fantasy provides a way for the subject to enjoy itself that would be unthinkable outside of fantasy" (McGowan 2007: 105).[16] Whenever fantasy collapses, a subject "can no longer disavow the illusory nature of an experience;" they thereby face the "traumatic encounter" with "the pure, contentless impossible object" (McGowan 2007: 105, 213):—exactly the contentless object captured in *Samoa*'s abstract, hand-painted "center."

16. I previously discussed these issues with reference to McGowan's reading of Lynch in Davies 2023: 191-221.

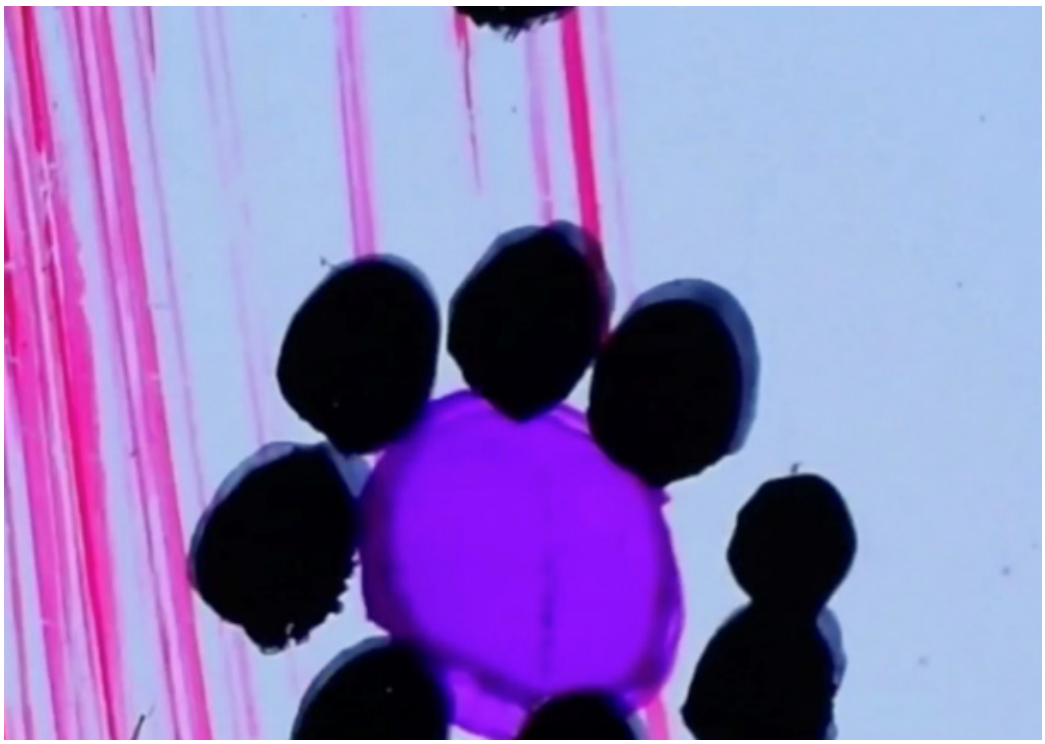

Image 10. Samoa (Ernesto Baca, 2005). Courtesy of the artist.

In Baca's work, train tracks are sometimes conceived of as both the highest manifestations of the fantasies surrounding linear narrative and also the very occasions for those fantasies' collapse. Thus, in *Historia universal* the power to make switches constituting such collapse is arrogated by the Silver Man ("hombre plateado," played by poet Osvaldo Vigna), who travels by Super 8 camera-mounted track trolley, and who is shown switching the direction of the tracks ("Where are we?" he asks his doppelgänger, an unseen Silver Man, who answers: "We're at the zero gap of space-time, where reality stands"). By contrast, in *Samoa*, that collapse is announced explicitly in the opening epigraph from the *Sri Isopanisad* and its enjoinder to the Lord, whose "real face" is covered by "dazzling effulgence," to "Kindly remove that covering and exhibit Yourself to Your pure devotee." The collapse of fantasy is figured here as the ability to see the Lord's face without mediation, where a connection is sustained between that revelation and *Samoa*'s hand-painted sections via the few figurative elements (albeit only faintly visible) in the latter: unused quotations from the *Sri Isopanisad* (the source of this idea of unmasking the Lord) originally planned for the beginning of the film (Image 11).

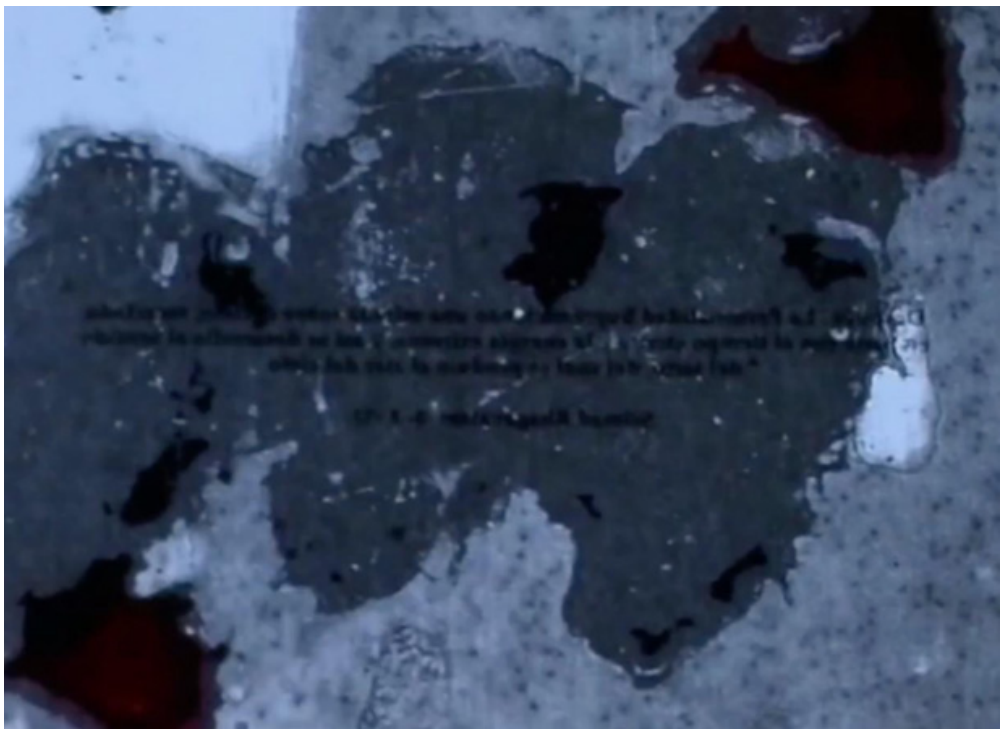

Image 11. Samoa (Ernesto Baca, 2005). Courtesy of the artist.

We can relate these issues to the above concerns about mirroring and representation if we compare "the pure, contentless, impossible object"—the real face of the Lord—to Kant's thing-in-itself. Indeed, McGowan notes that "we might read Lynch's revelation of the fantasmatic dimension of temporality as a gloss on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*":[17] time is a condition of the possibility of experience but cannot knowingly be attributed to the thing-in-itself—that is, in a sense, what lies behind that experience.

With the palindrome-like structure of *Samoa*, marked by its hand-painted "center," Baca is entertaining a proximate thought that extends to Kant's other form of intuition, space. In the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Kant argues that, in comparing appearances of a right-hand glove and a left-hand glove, since "there are no inner differences here that any understanding could merely think," and since they are not representations of things in themselves, they depend on our own sensibility (that is, space, the form of outer intuition). Kant says, "We can therefore make the difference between similar and equal but nonetheless incongruent things (e.g., oppositely spiralled snails) intelligible through no concept alone, but only through the relation to right-hand and left-hand, which refers immediately to intuition" (Kant 2004: 4:286). Taking seriously the palindrome-like structure of *Samoa* (which is admittedly only approximate) involves seeing its two "sides" as "similar and equal but nonetheless incongruent things": a fantasy-mediated sensibility that, in the middle of the film, collapses.

Samoa also invites a more prosaic interpretation of the enjoinder in the *Sri Isopanisad* for the Lord to unmask himself: it is the enjoinder that he stop playing a role, precisely as Baca's

17. McGowan also adds the caveat that, on his Lacanian reading of Lynch, "temporality is not constitutive for the human subject but the result of a fantasmatic retreat from repetition" (McGowan 2007: 252n11).

teacher Ricardo Holcer masks and unmasks, viewing himself dressed as a conquistador on-screen.[18] In Brakhage's *Blue Moses* (1962), actor Robert Benson says, while viewing himself projected on a screen, "Don't be afraid. There's a filmmaker in back of every scene, in back of every word I speak, in back of you too so to speak! No, don't around—it's useless. You see my back, but if I could really turn myself around and see, there would be nothing but empty black space." The idea of turning around and *seeing ourselves seeing* is yet another idea of approaching the impossible, contentless object (imagined by Baca as abstract and in color, and by Brakhage's Benson as empty and black).

Discussing *Blue Moses*, P. Adams Sitney says, "For Brakhage, the implicit countershot of every image would be the image of the filmmaker behind his camera." For Baca, it would seem, the implicit countershot is not necessarily the filmmaker but rather the projector or projectionist: the small Bell & Howell Super 8 projector in *Samoa*, the giant 35mm projector in the cinema in *Vrindavana*. Every recognition that this is a projected film is an outward movement, itself continuous with and broached by the camera's movement up and down train tracks, toward extra-diegetic space. It is the depth that *Samoa*'s typically flat spaces most tolerate.

Baca's career-long engagements with fiction in his films embrace this movement: a straddling of diegetic and extra-diegetic elements, such as in *Música para astronautas* (2008), when a policeman's gunshot becomes an emulsion scratch. Thus, Baca's fictions are manifestly materialist ones. In her materialist analysis of a 1941 Warner Brothers cartoon directed by Chuck Jones, Hannah Frank asks, "Do I really wish to argue […] that *Sniffles Bells the Cat* is about paint, paper, cellulose acetate, and glass?" (Frank 2019: 146). Baca's fiction narratives are meant to encourage just that kind of question: his fictional participation in the creation of the first Argentine Super 8 stock, Argenta, in *Réquiem para un film olvidado*; the Silver Man's naming of "Rodinal" (a black-and-white developing agent) as the "target" of his movements, in *Historia universal*. (References to silver typically accentuate these moments in Baca's cinema.)[19]

Of course, not every expression of time's reversibility will reflexively declare its own material constitution. (Even the welcome concision of Vertov's statement "Kino-Eye Moves Time Backwards," quoted in Strake's documentary, does not quite compensate for its abstraction.) Yet in the minimal narrative constituting the main "sides" of *Samoa* (a woman wakes, is transported, transformed into her double, and then transported back to sleep), among the materialist questions evocative of Frank's would be—facilitated by a symbolic rhyming between the idea of time's reversibility and reversible Super 8 stock—"Is the film really about Baca's twenty black-and-white Kodak Super 8 Tri-X cartridges and Ektachrome 64 cartridge?" Baca's fictions challenge the idea that they are narrated using representations—of something separate or else-

18. Baca added a further form of masking in his *Mujermujer* (2011) when he later returned to the same portrait shot of Holcer, intervening on it and obscuring it with India ink.

19. Pablo Gamba, says, regarding the story of Argenta in that film: in it "converge the name of the constituent element of the silver halides of film and the name of the country. But this is not a return to the industrialist dreams of the past, with the populist leader as mediator between capital and labor, but a self-managed future" (Gamba 2018), my translation.

where—rather than present manifestations. As in the Mesoamerican concept of the *ixiptla*—according to Serge Gruzinski, supposedly opposed to western conceptions of representation—each material constituting his films is an "epiphanic presence," a "being-here" (Gruzinski 2001: 51). This is *Samoa*'s characteristic way of exceeding the limits of the two-dimensional frame while regularly employing Super 8 to defeat recessive spaces within it.

Concluding Remarks

I have mentioned how Ernesto Baca's *Samoa* explores two, almost opposed, fantasies: the fantasy that time is reversible, and the fantasy that temporal events must be conceived in a narrative order. Describing these as "fantasies" is not yet to condemn them, since Baca is rightly interested in both as expressions of real needs and in exploring them up to their limits: in the case of the first, this is the moment when a reversal is shown to be only apparent, or to have come out differently (the film's "false" palindrome); in the case of the second, it is the moment of narrative collapse (the exposure of the "real face" of the Lord, or contentless object).[20]

Nevertheless, it would appear that throughout his career Baca is concerned with any moment in which either of these fantasies becomes ideology. More specifically, he is concerned with any moment in which fantasies of time manifest in forms of standardization or universalism, in the sense of *universal history*—which is in fact a false universalism: the subordination of the world to a center. This would include the identification of the universal or popular with the "interests of the ruling class" (as in the paraphrase of Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* that serves as the epigraph of *Historia universal*, Fisher 2009) or with those of a specific geopolitical power (as in Eurocentrism). Of course, a recognition of the dangers of such "universalism" must be shaped by a recognition of the divisions imposed by those same interests and powers: showing division is "the greatest propaganda of the dominant economic system," as Baca's puts it in *Réquiem para un film olvidado*. Thus, "universal history" and "universalism" surreptitiously make divisions by subordinating real opportunities for solidarity to a false center or standard. In any case, for the filmmaker exploring possibilities beyond "renaissance perspective," from Brakhage to Baca, the exposure of a center or standard as optional opens up the question of a recognition of real (non-imposed, non-arbitrary) need.

Experimental cinema has historically had an uneasy relationship with ethics: there is the concern that an ethics necessarily has a taint of imposition, or that it could not be communicable in film without narrative methods regarded as hegemonic. In contrast, Baca's *Samoa* points towards an *ethics of liberation* not incidental to, but arguably internal to, experimental cinema. Each individual may have but one life to live, but it is always embedded in a history that—both extensively and intensively—contains many worlds.[21]

20. Likewise, McGowan reads Lynch as taking the second kind of fantasy to its limits, up to moments of collapse; see McGowan 2007.

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