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The Logic of Disorientation: Exploring Space in Albert Serra's *Afternoons of Solitude*

By Alexandra Semenova

Introduction

In one of his public talks dedicated to his latest work, the Catalan film director Albert Serra claimed: "In the future, people will go to the cinema to suffer," adding: "Without suffering, one does not feel he is alive." [1] There is no doubt that a film devoted to a subject such as bullfighting inevitably engages with the moving image of suffering – but what kind of suffering is at stake, and how is this cinematographic suffering rendered through space?

In Serra's filmography, space – both literal and metaphorical – occupies a central place, and *Afternoons of Solitude* (*Tardes de soledad* [2024]), his first venture into documentary and winner of the San Sebastián Golden Shell in 2024, continues this exploration. Situated far from traditional narration, the film raises questions rather than offering conclusions; it obscures rather than clarifies, and its treatment of space destabilises the very boundary between the tangible and the imaginary. In the context of documentary cinema, *Afternoons of Solitude* bears a certain resemblance to the work of Gianfranco Rosi – Serra's own acknowledged reference point. What does, for instance, *Sacro GRA* (2013), inspired by Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (*Le città invisibili* [1972]), explain about Rome's outer beltway and its inhabitants? Not much – if anything. Like Serra, Rosi, captivated by the confusing image and an atmosphere of estrangement, portrays without describing, constantly "blurring the line between fiction and non-fiction, or producing a hybrid of them." [2] For these directors, the aim is not to support an initial argument but "to do the opposite: dismantle, link by link, the chain of cause and effect." [3]

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To navigate the repetitive and multilayered structure of Serra's work, I propose a three-tiered framework for identifying filmic space. The first level, concerned with the physical logistics of the set, can be defined as real space — the actual locations in Spain and France. The second level is more ambiguous: imaginary space, which encompasses several conceptual threads such as the mythological and heroic dimensions of the film. The third level, which both absorbs and synthesises the previous two, is pictorial, and draws primarily on Gilles Deleuze's study, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (*Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation* [1981]).

Summary

Structured around the figure of the young Peruvian star *torero* Andrés Roca Rey, *Afternoons of Solitude* adopts the six-part format of a traditional bullfight, translating it into a cinematic architecture that moves – apart from the opening sequence – between three central locations: the bullring, the van, and the hotel room, punctuated by fleeting areas such as corridor and lift. Nothing in these spaces feels stable or personal; they mirror the perpetual motion of the *cuadrilla* (the small team of assistants accompanying the bullfighter), as they drift from one arena to the next. A comparable loop-like effect – without linear progression from point A to point B – appears in Serra's earlier works, especially *Liberté* (2019) and *Pacifiction* (2022), where the viewer, whether in a forest or on an island, is plunged into a disorienting temporal and spatial experience that unfolds without clear advancement. The documentary deliberately excludes the audience's image, transforming the bullring into a near-abstract space whose contours and dimensions resist clear definition. Occasionally, a few faces emerge in the background, or the faint hum of the crowd can be heard, but this presence is never

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emphasized; on the contrary, it is systematically avoided. No explanatory dialogues are offered, nor are there insights into the protagonist's daily life or motivations – the entire filmic composition is built around the *corrida* itself. Even the interaction between the bullfighter and the animal in the emptied arena is rendered mostly through a sequence of close-ups, emphasizing not their confrontation, but their symmetrical isolation.

In Bill Nichols's typology, *Afternoons of Solitude* most likely oscillates between the Poetic and Observational documentary forms. While the former "emphasizes visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization," the latter focuses on "direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera." [4] Through his attention to formal organisation and spatial rhythm – without relying on description – Serra draws on the Poetic, although his film can also be aligned with the Observational approach for its seemingly neutral stance, allowing meaning to emerge through repetition, duration, and frame composition. This is also reflected in Richard Brody's review, as he states: "Once Roca is in the ring, Serra's method turns rigorously and prudently observational." [5]

Literature Review

The primary literary source for this analysis is, naturally, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, which serves as a theoretical framework for the analysis that follows. This approach does not imply a direct influence of Deleuze on Serra but rather draws out resonances between Deleuze's reading of Bacon's paintings and the conceptual logic underlying *Afternoons of Solitude*. Numerous notions and concepts developed across the book's seventeen chapters directly resonate with Serra's strategies, although some will

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receive more focused attention than others. Additional consulted sources include audience and media reviews, along with scholarly works on film atmosphere and sound, such as those by Julian Hanich and Michel Chion. The director's own commentary and earlier texts are also examined.

Methodology

This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach, combining close visual and spatial analysis with a theoretical perspective grounded in the Deleuzian conceptual apparatus. The analysis unfolds through a progression from the most immediate and material aspects of the film to its more abstract dimensions. Key elements under examination include composition, framing, colour, specific sequences, and sound. To support a more rigorous understanding of the film's subtler aesthetic layers, these elements are situated within a broader context encompassing cinematic theory and the visual arts.

Analysis

Real Space

Stemming from a research initiative at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, the documentary was filmed over several years in various arenas across Spain and France. However, the final cut includes footage from only four locations: Madrid, Seville, Bilbao, and Santander. [6] Although it was shot over an extended period – a detail known primarily through external commentary and barely perceptible in the viewing experience – the film generates a perplexing sense of time. Even among critics, viewers, and online commentators, perceptions vary: does it span a week, a day, or a year in the bullfighter's life? The temporal

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frame remains deliberately elusive, sculpted – borrowing a term from Andrei Tarkovsky – in a singular and subjective way.

FIGURE 1—Van shot featuring bullfighter Andrés Roca Rey and his team. Still from *Afternoons of Solitude* (2024). Albert Serra (dir.). Spain, France, Portugal. Copyright Andergraun Films / Lacima Producciones / Idéale Audience / Arte France Cinéma / Rosa Filmes.

All the spaces in the film are both transitory and isolated. The van, for instance, is a recurring setting in which the group of characters is filmed before and after the bullfights – although this sequence is often ambiguous, and the viewer can discern its temporal placement only by observing the protagonists' physical state (Figure 1). The dark, enclosed space of the moving vehicle becomes a kind of frame for a collective portrait, with the surrounding obscurity functioning as a painterly background that evokes the tradition of Dutch Golden Age guild portraits, such as those by Frans Hals or Thomas de Keyser (Figures 2–3). Serra himself confirms this connection, drawing a parallel between the image of the *cuadrilla* in the film and "the choral group paintings […] which comprise relatively homogeneous groups, organised by guilds." [7] The van is never shown from the outside; we only see its interior, and even the fact that it is moving can only be inferred through intuition and generic glimpses

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of the urban environment beyond the dark-tinted glass, with just a few recognisable elements such as a passing bus or a metro station. This may reflect Serra's intention to emphasise the atemporal nature of the film's actions and to shift the viewer's attention away from the questions of *where* and *when*, toward *who*. It is also significant that the figures inside the van seem highly choreographed: in each scene, they appear fixed in the same seats, as if posing repeatedly for a painter or photographer, which reinforces the impression of a protocolised and static (albeit moving) image. The irreplaceable protagonist is always positioned in the foreground, contributing to a visual structure that evokes compositional hierarchies not only from the Baroque, but also from earlier strata of art history – particularly Egyptian and Sumerian visual traditions – where the most important figure is depicted as physically larger than others, in accordance with symbolic rather than naturalistic logic.

FIGURE 2—Thomas de Keyser (Dutch, 1596/97–1667), *The Syndics of the Amsterdam Goldsmiths Guild*, 1627, oil on canvas, 127.2 × 152.4 cm. Toledo Museum of Art (Toledo, Ohio), Museum Purchase, 1960.11. Rights to use granted.

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FIGURE 3—Frans Hals (Dutch, c. 1582–1666), *Banquet of the Officers of the St George Civic Guard*, 1627, oil on canvas, 179 × 257.5 cm. Inv. number: os i-110. Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem. Photo: M. Svensson. Rights to use granted.

The film also includes sequences set in two hotel rooms, treated in a similar manner as sealed capsules: no windows are shown, nor any clear geographical indication, even though the actual locations are known – the Mandarin Oriental Ritz in Madrid and L'Imperator in Nîmes. As in the van, the hotel episodes occur either before or after the bullfight – moments of dressing or undressing – and each presents two figures: the *torero* and his assistant, shown in slow interactions and rarely accompanied by more than a few fragmented lines from the protagonist. One of the most striking visual features of these sequences is the consistent presence of a mirror: much of the action is filmed through it, and at times it becomes difficult – or altogether impossible – to discern whether we are seeing a direct image or its reflection (Figure 4). The mirror not only frames Roca Rey in interaction with his own image but also participates in a more complex compositional dialogue: in particular, the insistent presence of

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the Virgin Mary's image on the bedside table introduces a second, competing portrait. At times, the ornamental mantle on the Virgin's head visually resonates with the bullfighter's costume, creating a remarkable visual parallel in which the sacred and the spectacular, the feminine and the masculine, the still and the moving to slip into one another (Figure 5).

FIGURE 4—Mirroring effect in a hotel room. Stills from *Afternoons of Solitude* (2024). Albert Serra (dir.). Spain, France, Portugal. Copyright Andergraun Films / Lacima Producciones / Idéale Audience / Arte France Cinéma / Rosa Filmes.

FIGURE 5—Image of the Virgin Mary. Still from *Afternoons of Solitude* (2024). Albert Serra (dir.). Spain, France, Portugal. Copyright Andergraun Films / Lacima Producciones / Idéale Audience / Arte France Cinéma / Rosa Filmes.

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There is one singular scene in the middle of the film where the protagonist and his assistant, referred to as the *mozo de espadas* (sword handler), are filmed near and inside the lift – the only sequence that reveals the hotel beyond the confines of the rooms. Filmed from a low angle, this sequence emphasises the monumental presence of the *torero*, who appears graceful and sculptural despite the limited space of the lift. Filled with multiple mirrors and golden surfaces typical of luxury interiors, the space becomes almost blinding, with light bouncing off the ornate costume of the protagonist, who seems to be slowly rehearsing gestures, physiognomy, and posture – turning the lift into a performative area. Like the van, the lift's movement is ambiguous: though the image is static, one can intuitively sense vertical, from up to down motion. Yet, with the repeated reflections multiplying the image horizontally across mirrors, this movement extends beyond a simple vertical descent, suggesting a complex, ambiguous spatiality. The emphasised presence of the mirrors in the film logically evokes a variety of cinematic references – particularly their use in the work of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, whose influence resonates throughout Serra's aesthetic choices. [8] It also speaks to the very structure of filmic perception itself, especially when approached through a Lacanian lens, where the mirror stage becomes foundational in shaping subjectivity and the gaze. [9] For the purposes of this analysis, however, two aspects are of particular interest: the mirror's conceptual and compositional function within the choreography of bullfighting, and further its role in Deleuze's reading of Bacon, especially in relation to the concept of *becoming*, which may offer a point of convergence between these two frameworks.

While the slightly claustrophobic sensation of the van and hotel sequences is palpable – not only due to their enclosed geometry but also to the near-total absence of contextual or

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geographical information – Serra's treatment of the bullring is perhaps even more subversive. The representation of the arena is radically fragmented: it is often unclear whether we are witnessing the same setting or have already shifted to another. Only sparse and peripheral cues – such as a sign at the edge of the frame, a sudden change in weather, or a shift in the colour of the sand – suggest that we may have transitioned from Bilbao to Madrid or elsewhere. Even so, the predominance of close-ups and the absence of clear establishing shots prevent the viewer from constructing a coherent spatial map of these environments.

To illustrate the complex filmic relationship (in terms of spatiality and proportions) between the protagonist figure and the bullring, I will take a small liberty and focus on the film's conclusion – since it is only in the final sequence that the viewer is granted a full sense of the arena's vast scale. The camera follows Roca Rey as, bidding farewell to the (invisible) audience, he crosses the enormous space from right to left, moving, in a sense, against the classical Western narrative direction, which typically unfolds from left to right. This impression of foreboding is constructed not only through the unexpectedly prolonged duration of the shot, which for the first time reveals the arena as truly vast, exposed, and threatening, but also through the acoustic design – specifically, the musical transition in which *The Swan* by Camille Saint-Saëns, accompanying the scene's beginning, gradually dissolves into a much darker, contemporary soundscape. [10] Although this metamorphosis occurs through sound rather than image, it generates a perceptible shift, leading the viewer into the space of the unknown, of uneasiness. As Serra explains, "At the end of the movie I use an ominous music cue when he leaves the coliseum to underline the idea that something can always happen." [11]

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Generally, the film's sound design reinforces the sense of encapsulation: as is typical of Serra's practice, wireless microphones are employed to eliminate ambient noise and capture sounds imperceptible to the human ear. For instance, during the vehicle episodes, we hear neither the city outside the window nor the vehicle itself; and in the hotel, the silence between lines is similarly profound – one might even say *opaque* – an acoustic ascesis that intensifies the sensation of enclosure and isolation. According to the typology proposed by Julian Hanich, this silence could be defined as *foreboding*, the kind associated with non-presence, and "experienced as an ominous void: an absence of reassuring sounds." [12] However, in my reading, the farewell sequence is intimately connected to the film's opening shot, which may be considered one of its central conceptual pivots.

Imagined Space

The documentary opens with a shot of a solitary bull, its figure barely discernible in the darkness – almost ghostlike – immersed in the opacity of the night in a rural or forested landscape. As Guy Lodge from *Variety* puts it, Serra's film "begins not taking the bull by the horns but looking it in the eye." [13] The animal gazes directly into the camera's lens, and we hear its heavy breathing – a breath that will mark the rhythm of the entire film, migrating from bull to *torero* and his group, and back again, as if forming a synchronized respiration, a collective breath shared by all participants, including the audience. Growing heavier, this noise resembles a strange sonic mechanism – gradually filling the filmic space while simultaneously drawing us intimately close to the characters. Michael Chion reminds us that, unlike the image, cinematic sound lacks rigid limits: "there is no auditory container for sounds analogous to the visual container for images that is the frame." [14] Deprived of such boundaries, sound is free to drift and to collapse the distance between film and viewer. Moreover, breath in cinema goes further in exceeding the status of the merely audible and

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moving toward the broader register of filmic atmosphere. It becomes spatial, phenomenological – even reciprocal: as Robert Spadoni observes, "films and their audiences breathe each other." [15] Though neither this taurine figure nor the nocturnal rural setting reappears later, this singular opening image – set apart from the rest – and the hypnotic sound that accompanies it may nonetheless orient the viewer toward a more rarefied mode of perception, one marked by doubt, estrangement and shared filmic respiration.

Seen through a conceptual lens, this shot opens onto a mythological space – meaning a cyclical one, emptied of causality and linear progression – and introduces a realm of solitude already evoked by the film's title. [16] Before the title appears, the introductory sequence unfolds in three portrayals: the nocturnal figure of the bull, looking directly at the viewer; the van, with a frontal view of the *torero*, who also gazes at us; and the room, presenting a series of confusing images multiplied by giant hotel mirrors. This outline can be read on a metaphorical level: the bull, the man, and the mirror – each echoing and reflecting one another, isolated by the camera and montage, yet inseparable within the myth. Although the mythological dimension of *tauromaquia* is not the central focus of this study, this perspective remains important – not only because bullfighting is the film's core motif, but also due to the nature of the filmic space Serra constructs. In *Afternoons of Solitude*, this space is not only encapsulated and slightly claustrophobic – composed of a series of bubble-like enclosures – its temporal dynamics are also cyclical and repetitive, echoing the general logic of myth, and more specifically, that of the heroic myth. This perspective, in my reading, aligns closely with that proposed by Roland Barthes, whose concept of the myth intriguingly resonates with his own vision of the text – both sharing a temporality that is constantly unfolding *here and now*, as Barthes famously states when he writes that "myth transforms history into nature." [17] Serra himself echoes this viewpoint, clarifying that his interest – and the reason behind

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the deliberate erasure of the public and everyday life – was to portray the protagonist "only when he is already a hero, […] embodying his mission, his duty." [18]

Belonging to a broader Mediterranean tradition, *tauromaquia* can be read as one of the binary mythological configurations – such as anthropo-zoomorphic hybrids or specular myths. At its core lies the canonical hero–beast bond, which – even within an ancient Greek context – can be understood as an internal dichotomy: a tension between high and low in the sense explored by Mikhail Bakhtin, spiritual and corporeal, Dionysian and Apollonian, or a conflict between the tangible and the imaginary. The mythological perspective offers two interrelated contributions: the conception of time as perpetual recurrence, and a preoccupation with the ambivalence – and potential danger – of the gaze. In terms of mirroring and binary oppositions, we might recall figures such as Perseus and Medusa, David and Goliath, Narcissus, and inevitably the Minotaur – the contradictory hybrid *par excellence* – who was reimagined and reborn in twentieth century thought, particularly in the writings of Julio Cortázar, André Gide, and the works of Pablo Picasso. [19] In these modern reinterpretations, the Minotaur is not merely converted from antagonist to protagonist; he becomes a stand-in for the avant-garde artist himself. [20] And yet, what remains notably – and perhaps strangely – absent from these formulations, and from Serra's film, is the erotic charge of *tauromaquia* that Georges Bataille associated with the contemplation of death in the bullring – particularly the feminine dimension that forms the conceptual core of *The Story of the Eye* (*Histoire de l'œil* [1928]). [21] In *Afternoons of Solitude*, the only woman appears briefly, in a fleeting scene in which she poses for a photograph with the protagonist, devoid of any detectable sensual implication.

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Amos Vogel famously claimed that avant-garde cinema is defined by its unpredictability, yet *Afternoons of Solitude*, with its circular structure, seems to challenge that assumption. [22] As one displeased viewer writes in a Google review, "In half an hour of documentary, you've seen everything"; while another remarks, "I left the room after more than one hour of the same thing." [23] Although the film bears many traits associated with the avant-garde – such as moments of anticlimax and the absence of storytelling – it confronts the viewer with a persistent sense of repetition. This raises a paradox: how can a work defined by repetition still claim unpredictability? One possible answer to this contradiction lies in the film's disorienting treatment: on the one hand, it follows a rigidly repetitive structure; on the other, it resists predictability by refusing narrative development. The viewer anticipates change – but it never comes. However, the paradox of predictability and unpredictability in *Afternoons of Solitude* can be situated within the broader context of slow cinema – a movement often associated with structural or minimalist approaches to filmmaking. Alongside such directors as Lisandro Alonso, Béla Tarr and Pedro Costa, Serra is frequently identified with this phenomenon, a connection made already with his debut *Honor of the Knights* (*Honor de cavalleria* [2006]), which similarly explores iconic Spanish themes by emphasizing presence over action and pause over deed. As Evgeniy Maizel observes, for Serra, "Quixote's discourse is repetitive, and his general inactivity contrasts sharply with Cervantes' original novel, rich with adventures, suggesting that such deeds now belong to the past." [24] This idea of the past – conceived as presence, opaque and monotonous – is also central to Serra's own aesthetic thinking. Referring to Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, whose method he implicitly aligns with, the director explains that such repetitive filmic signals allow us "to concentrate on them, but not go through them," and compares this artistic condition to "a boxing ball, which gets hit all the time yet remains in place." [25] Thus – and to some extent, this applies to slow cinema as a whole – the opacity and anticlimactic quality of the genre forms its

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unpredictable avant-garde side: the one that engages some viewers through estrangement and discomfort, while logically provoking scepticism in others.

Continuing with the tension between the cyclical and the singular, we return to the opening nocturnal sequence of *Afternoons of Solitude*, which – though brief – establishes a perceptual framework shaped by dream, fantasy, and something akin to a Goyaesque nightmare. The night, a recurring motif in Serra's work, operates here not merely as a setting but as a conceptual threshold. In *Liberté*, for example, night is not the backdrop for action but a principle of fragmentation – a disruption of linear and spatial coherence. Serra often speaks of the dialectic between day and night in his oeuvre, suggesting that while the day implies continuity and accumulation, the night unfolds in a manner that is arbitrary, directionless, and built around the "idea of waste" and a perpetual confusion – "of the film and of the night"– from which he, as an author, can ultimately profit. [26] It is therefore striking that Serra begins a film so preoccupied with diurnal routine with a nocturnal image. This contrast foregrounds a tension between two spatial logics: the perplexing singularity of night and the cyclical regularity of day.

This contrast between the two spaces finds a conceptual echo in the early pages of *The Logic of Sensation*, where Deleuze invokes *El Greco's The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (*El entierro del Conde de Orgaz*, 1586–1588) to explore a pictorial dichotomy: below, the realm of verisimilitude; above, the domain of the spiritual and imaginary – a space of artistic freedom. This upper half becomes a place of "wild liberation, a total emancipation," where "the Figures are lifted up and elongated, refined without measure, outside all constraint." [27] As Deleuze points out, "[w]ith God—but also with Christ, the Virgin, and even Hell—lines,

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colors, and movements are freed from the demands of representation", marking a rupture from narration. [28] In this reading, he radically inverts Fyodor Dostoyevsky's well-known adage, suggesting that in El Greco's case, it is *with* God that everything becomes permitted. The divine space is no longer bound by rational or conscious constraints and does not aim to portray or describe – akin to the realm evoked in Francisco de Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*, 1797–1799), where, freed from reason, the nightmare gives birth to irregularity, and distortion (Figure 6). This juxtaposition, however, is not meant to suggest that any bullfighting arena should be understood as a literal space of freedom; rather, it is Serra's treatment of this space that evokes something closer to El Greco's upper realm or Goya's nightmare-like dimension, untethered from figurative depiction and resonating with the gestural and conceptual freedom found in Bacon's paintings.

FIGURE 6—Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (Spanish, 1746–1828), Plate 43 from *Los Caprichos: The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, 1799, etching and aquatint. Plate: 21.2 × 15.1 cm; Sheet: 29.5 × 21 cm. Object Number: 18.64(43). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rights to use granted.

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Pictorial space

Deleuze argues that no artist ever truly begins with a blank canvas – the surface is already saturated with banalities, with images inherited, repeated, and internalized over centuries. The first task for any author, then, is to confront what he calls the "hydra-headed cliché," a mythical beast that, once wounded, grows back multiple heads—an apt metaphor for the persistence and survivability of the commonplace. [29] Few subjects are as encumbered by such cultural excess as bullfighting: endlessly reproduced in both high and popular culture, and heavily exploited by mass tourism, the image of the *corrida* risks becoming purely ornamental, if not outright kitsch. Not to mention the ideological, ethical, and political tensions that further complicate its representation. Serra's artistic strategy, however, is not to abstract or negate the image, nor to empty it of its figurative charge. Instead, borrowing a Deleuzian term, he *isolates* the figure(s) and in doing so – like Bacon – defeating the hydra of banality, he seeks to break through the plane of representation, transfiguring the overly familiar into something unexpected.

One of the film's most conceptually original isolating gestures is the previously mentioned elimination of the audience – Serra literally breaks the conventional circle, allowing the folkloric layer to fall away. The emptied arena becomes a disorienting space, a Deleuzian *field*, a "vertical sky"; what takes precedence is its texture, its colour, its physical presence. [30] Similarly, in his *Study for Bullfight No. 1* (1971), Bacon displaces the public, suggesting that the spectacle requires an *attendant*, but not necessarily a viewer (Figure 7). As Deleuze notes, "[i]n both Bacon and Beckett, the attendant can be reduced to the circle of the circus

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ring, to a photographic apparatus or camera, to a photo-memory"– there is no need for a pronounced human presence. [31]

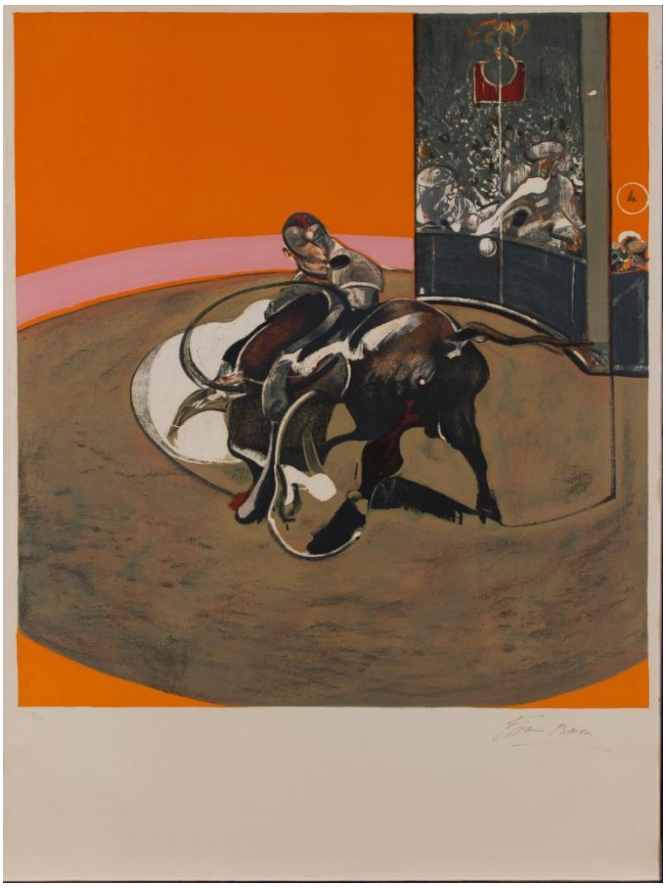

FIGURE 7—Francis Bacon (British, 1909–1992), *Study for Bullfight No. 1*, c. 1971, colour lithograph on paper, 160 × 120.8 cm. 82/2328. Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao. Rights to use granted.

In the introduction to this study, I mentioned Serra's remark that cinema, as he sees it, is a medium destined for suffering—though not in a sentimental sense, but from a formal and conceptual perspective. Similarly, for Bacon, suffering is not equated with narrative violence; as he famously stated, he never wanted to paint horror, but rather the scream. As Deleuze explains, in Bacon "Figures are not depicted as violent – they are violently projected into the field," and he warns that "the violence of a sensation must not be confused with the violence of a represented scene." [32] This distinction is crucial – especially when the very subject matter is as charged as bullfighting, a spectacle premised on the ritualised proximity of death.

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Yet Serra's film stages violence not so much through the subject itself, but through cinematic sensation: in the structure of repetition, the fragmentation, the anticlimax, the prolonged anticipation, the isolated figures, and the abundance of close-ups. This is where the suffering resides – in the form, not merely in the content.

The phenomenon of *isolation* is understood by Deleuze as the pure presence of a pictorial event that has nothing left to narrate. In Bacon, these *matters of fact*, as Deleuze defines them, often take the form of singular or coupled figures constructed from two bodies, without any identifiable plot. The focus here, as Deleuze suggests, is on creating a zone of *indiscernibility* between men or man and animal. He also recalls how Bacon imagined himself crucified in a butcher's shop, doubting why he was not in his proper place. "The man who suffers is a beast; the beast who suffers is a man" – a body in a stage of becoming, enacting the "reality of becoming," as Deleuze formulates it. [33] A similar dynamic emerges in *Afternoons of Solitude*, where radical choices such as close-ups of the *toro* and the *torero* create mirroring, hybrid-like figures that render separation between them impossible. The sound design reinforces this echoing sensation – breaths, murmurs, and repeated exclamations become *matters of fact*, immersing the viewer in a poetic and disorienting experience. [34] In Bacon's paintings, as Deleuze observes, mirrors are opaque and do not reflect identities but function as spaces where heads – never faces – appear. Moreover, the mirror becomes a head itself, with nothing behind, as exemplified in *Portrait of George Dyer in a Mirror* (1968) (Figure 8). This anomalous spatial logic resonates with Serra's film, where mirrors recur as devices that enact the ongoing interplay and echo between human and animal. The insistent mirroring – between the bullfighter and the bull, or between the protagonist and sacred imagery – functions as a visual rhyme, emphasising their ambiguous nature.

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FIGURE 8—Francis Bacon (British, 1909–1992), *Portrait of George Dyer in a Mirror*, 1968, oil on canvas, 198 × 147 cm. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. Inv. no. 458 (1971.3). Rights to use granted.

Although this may verge on analytical speculation, another motif that, in my opinion, invites particular attention is the recurring image of the mouth – both human and animal. In a number of arena scenes, the camera lingers on the bull's tongue or, in case of the vehicle sequences, on Roca Rey's unconscious lip and tongue movements. This *mouth optics* could also be read as a visual rhyme between the two antagonists, reinforcing the uncertainty of identity, the mirroring effect and the perpetual becoming. Deleuze also notes that in Bacon, mouths often appear dislocated, in the wrong places – as holes, openings in heads – while bodies seem to leak or collapse around orifices. Serra's lingering attention to these gestures seems to evoke a similar sense of loss of control, where the body part – whether human or non-human – escapes conventional structure. Particularly striking in the film is not only the

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involuntary gesture itself, but also the colour, especially that of the bull's tongue – a pale, almost sandy hue – that adds a further layer of estrangement to the image.

In Bacon's work, as Deleuze points out, colour does not lie behind or beyond the figure, but exists alongside it – haptic, tactile, as if it had weight, forming, as Deleuze calls it, a "closed and revolving space". [35] A similar dynamic, in my view, is echoed in Serra's film: the *field* surrounding the figures – and the very colour of the arena – becomes visible, almost tangible. Though post-production colour correction in the film is minimal, it subtly enhances the purples, pomegranates, and golden tones, lending them a soft glow, a slight saturation that reinforces their material presence. From one arena sequence to another, we observe how the sand shifts from golden ochre to a pale, almost grey tone. Through the use of digital zoom and prolonged takes, the space becomes tactile – it acquires an existence of its own. In one scene, filmed during heavy rain in the Bilbao arena, the camera lingers on the wet, dark mud, sharply contrasting with the saturated fuchsia tights and fine black leather slippers of the *torero* (Figure 9).

FIGURE 9—Arena cuts and contrasting colour effects. Stills from *Afternoons of Solitude* (2024). Albert Serra (dir.). Spain, France, Portugal. Copyright Andergraun Films / Lacima Producciones / Idéale Audience / Arte France Cinéma / Rosa Filmes.

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In a later moment in the film, shortly after the withdrawal of the bull's body, its mass having just marked the ground, an ephemeral cluster of minuscule scattered white pieces of paper dances in the wind, emphasizing the contrasts in weight and texture between the animal, the human, the sand, and the wind-blown paper. Cinema, as Hanich suggests, frequently exhibits an affinity for the "gently rustling wind," even "anemophilia, a love of the wind." [36] Here, however, these fleeting, aerial fragments stand in stark contrast to the repetitive heaviness of the falls that we face in the film – of the bull, and at times, of the protagonist – creating a tension that echoes Deleuze's observation that "all *tension* is experienced in a fall." [37] This fall – as a visible expression of tension and of weight – brings us closer to one of the director's central concerns: presence. This notion is one of the cornerstones of Serra's work, already foregrounded in his early essay, where – echoing Manny Farber – he advocates for a *dramaturgy of presence* over one of action. Moreover, this concept resonates with the first words the writer Michel Leiris utters before one of Bacon's paintings: "Presence, presence…"

Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed a reading of Albert Serra's *Afternoons of Solitude* through three types of spatial experience that shape its conceptual landscape: the real, the imagined or mythological, and the pictorial space informed by the legacy of visual art. Drawing on Deleuze's study of Bacon, I have argued that the film is neither a commentary on the ideology or controversy of bullfighting, nor an attempt at explanation or psychological portrayal of its protagonist – as Guy Lodge notes, "Serra has little interest in investigating the man's interior or domestic life" – but rather a meditation on the aesthetics of solitude, tension, and presence. [38] It treats violence not as subject matter but as cinematic form,

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through fragmentation, repetition, and distance. The film shares with Bacon a subversive optics: one that breaks figuration to reveal figure, disrupts representation to disclose sensation, privileging texture over significance and presence over coherence. As Deleuze writes of Bacon, "the abjection becomes splendor; the horror of life becomes a very pure and very intense life" – a logic Serra seems to echo when he claims that "in the future, people will go to the cinema to suffer." [39] Perhaps this is how a pure and intense existence can ultimately be achieved: through the uncompromising presence of cinematic suffering.

Notes

[1] Albert Serra, "FFQ&A: Albert Serra," Film Festival Cologne, posted May 10, 2025, YouTube video, 45:53, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5CEOe6R2uw.

[2] Gianfranco Rosi, "Notturno: Treatment for a Documentary Film Shot in the Middle East," *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies* 10, no. 3 (2022): 522.

[3] Ibid., 519.

[4] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 33–34.

[5] Richard Brody, "Glory and Gore in Afternoons of Solitude," *The New Yorker* (2025), accessed August 1, 2025, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/glory-and-gore-in-afternoons-of-solitude.

[6] This selection, as Serra explains, was made for a simple yet notably cinematic reason related to portraiture and proportion: Andrés Roca Rey, the protagonist, is exceptionally tall, and only the largest bulls appear visually balanced beside him, and the largest bulls can be found in the biggest arenas.

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[7] Albert Serra, interview by Alexandra Semenova, "The Art of Bullfighting Is the Art of Stopping Time," *Revista de Occidente*, no. 525 (2025): 216. Translation from Spanish is mine.

[8] Fassbinder's aesthetics can be considered a significant point of reference in Serra's work. Even in *Afternoons of Solitude*, certain visual effects – such as subtle glow, likely introduced in post-production – recall Fassbinder's stylised imagery. This resonance is even more pronounced in Serra's previous feature *Pacifiction*, where the use of colour and atmosphere establishes a more direct affinity with Fassbinder's *Lola* (1981) or *Querelle* (1982). Beyond visual parallels, Fassbinder's presence recurs in Serra's oeuvre: the project *Cuba Libre* (2014) was dedicated to Günter Kaufmann (1947-2012). Fassbinder was also one of the three protagonists in Serra's video installation *The Three Little Pigs* (2012).

[9] From a Lacanian perspective, the mirror functions as a site of specular identification, where the subject recognizes its image but also experiences a fundamental misrecognition, shaping the formation of the self in relation to the Other. Christian Metz extended this insight to cinema, highlighting how mirrors on screen engage spectators in a complex process of identification and alienation within the filmic apparatus.

[10] The lyrical piece used in the film's final sequence is *The Swan* (*Le Cygne*) from *The Carnival of the Animals* (*Le Carnaval des animaux*, 1886) by Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921). In Serra's film, this slow theme underscores a sense of grace, fragility and the solitude of the departing figure of the protagonist. Alongside original music composed for the film, another notable piece is *Sad Waltz* (*Valse triste*, 1903) by Jean Sibelius (1865-1957). While the swan, often associated with death and transcendence, evokes the image of a solitary, vanishing figure, the waltz, by contrast, is traditionally linked to the circular dynamics and shared motion.

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[11] Albert Serra, interview by Ryan Akler-Bishop, "You Cannot Project Your Desire: Albert Serra on Afternoons of Solitude, Bullfighting, and Kristen Stewart," *The Film Stage* (2025), accessed August 1, 2025, https://thefilmstage.com/you-cannot-project-your-desire-albert-serra-on-afternoons-of-solitude-bullfighting-and-kristen-stewart/.

[12] Julian Hanich, "Six Types of Silence: On Quiet Atmospheres in Cinema," *The Oxford Handbook of Moving Image Atmospheres and Felt Environments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 7.

[13] Guy Lodge, "Afternoons of Solitude Review: Albert Serra Observes the Matador Life in All Its Absurd Beauty and Obscene Bloodshed," *Variety* (2024), accessed August 1, 2025, https://variety.com/2024/film/reviews/afternoons-of-solitude-review-1236157814/.

[14] Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 67.

[15] Robert Spadoni, "What Is Film Atmosphere," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 37, no. 1 (2020): 60, https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2019.1606558.

[16] The original Spanish title of the film evokes rich literary resonances, calling to mind Ernest Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) and Federico García Lorca's *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* (*Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*, 1935), where the line "a las cinco de la tarde" (at five in the afternoon) is repeated twenty-nine times.

[17] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991), 128.

[18] Serra, interview, "The Art of Bullfighting," 214.

[19] In the history of art, the depiction of mythic and biblical figures such as David and Goliath, and Perseus and Medusa, often carries layered meanings. Notably, artists have at times inserted their own likenesses into these works as subtle self-portraits, emphasising the dialectic not only between creator and subject, but also between the hero and the beast,

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underscoring how artistic identity intertwines with mythological representation. For example, Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath* (*Davide con la testa di Golia*, c.1610) is famously believed to feature the author's own face in the severed head, while Benvenuto Cellini included his profile in the serpentine hair of Medusa in his *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* (*Perseo con la testa di Medusa,* 1554).

[20] The figure of the Minotaur has been a recurring object of fascination for many twentieth-century artists and writers. Pablo Picasso frequently identified with the Minotaur, portraying himself in its image in numerous drawings and prints from the 1930s. In literature, the myth was radically reinterpreted in works such as André Gide's *Theseus* (*Thésée*, 1946) and Jorge Luis Borges's *The House of Asterion* (*La casa de Asterión*, 1947); a particularly significant reinterpretation appears in Julio Cortázar's *The Kings* (*Los reyes*, 1949), where the Minotaur is depicted not as a beast but as the essence of the artist – sensitive, sacrificial, and ultimately misjudged. In Cortázar's version, the labyrinth becomes a metaphor for artistic interiority, and Theseus emerges not as a hero, but as a banal, ambition-driven figure, devoid of any depth.

[21] Serra himself has commented on this aspect, noting that during the editing process he considered introducing a layer of contemplation – particularly as embodied by female spectators within the audience. However, he ultimately decided this dimension was not substantial enough to constitute a meaningful line in the film. Its inclusion would also have implied the presence of an audience, which he deliberately chose to exclude. For more on this, see the interview in *Revista de Occidente*, no. 525.

[22] Amos Vogel, "Amos Vogel: Why People Object to Avantgarde Cinema?" Komarkive, posted March 27, 2014, YouTube video, 1:35, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEykjF3bL2g

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[23] José Hernández Aparicio and Hernán Cernadas, reviews of *Afternoons of Solitude*, Google Reviews, translation from Spanish is mine, accessed August 1, 2025, https://www.google.com/search?q=tardes+de+soledad.

[24] Evgeniy Maizel, "On Dwarfs Who Started Small," *Syg.ma* (2022), accessed August 1, 2025, https://syg.ma/@sygma/ievghienii-maiziel-o-karlikakh-nachinavshikh-s-malogho.

[25] Albert Serra, *Diari de Kassel* (Barcelona: Núvol, 2018, Kindle edition), 38. Translation from Catalan is mine.

[26] Albert Serra, "Liberté Q&A with Albert Serra," Film at Lincoln Center, streamed live on May 3, 2020, YouTube video, 1:05:58, accessed August 1, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4MxlEAjiOA.

[27] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, (London: Continuum, 2003), 9.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., 88.

[30] Ibid., 31.

[31] Ibid., 71.

[32] Ibid., 83, 40.

[33] Ibid., 25.

[34] One notable aspect of the film – highlighted both by audiences and by Serra himself – is the poetic quality of the dialogues within the *cuadrilla*, captured via wireless microphones. These spontaneous, often repetitive exchanges, rarely heard by the general public, revealed a surprising humour, intimacy and rhythm.

[35] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 6.

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[36] Julian Hanich, "When the Wind Is Gently Rustling: Film and Aesthetics of Natural Beauty," *Film-Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2024), 156.

[37] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 81. Author's emphasis.

[38] Lodge, "Afternoons of Solitude."

[39] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 52.

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Biography

Alexandra Semenova is a multidisciplinary artist and researcher, currently completing a doctoral thesis at the Autonomous University of Madrid. Trained in Fine Arts, she has received several awards and participated in numerous exhibitions and artistic residencies. Alongside her work in illustration, stage design, and education, she has developed a strong interest in the theoretical dimensions of the arts, particularly film philosophy and aesthetics. Her research examines auteur cinema in dialogue with art and literature, drawing on structuralist and post-structuralist approaches while engaging broader questions in contemporary aesthetics. Recent publications include "Through the Lens of Presence: Construction and Deconstruction of the Fourth Wall in the Work of Albert Serra" (*Schermi tra lingue, letterature e culture*, Ledizioni, 2024).

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