

FROM ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE TO COSMOVISIÓN

Bruno Varela's *El Prototipo*

BYRON DAVIES

The following essay is a set of thoughts after viewing various cuts of Oaxaca-based Mexican experimental filmmaker and video artist Bruno Varela's most recent feature-length film El Prototipo (2022), which premiered as part of the ULTRAcinema MX festival in Mexico, followed by its Ecuadorian premiere at the VII Cámara Lúcida festival, and which takes as its point of departure some ideas from Phillip K. Dick's 1981 novel Valis. The essay connects El Prototipo to other significant work by Varela, and thus offers an introduction to one of the most exceptional and inventive—but still relatively under-explored—experimental filmmakers working today. An earlier version of this essay was published in Spanish in Desistfilm on the occasion of the film's screening at Cámara Lúcida.

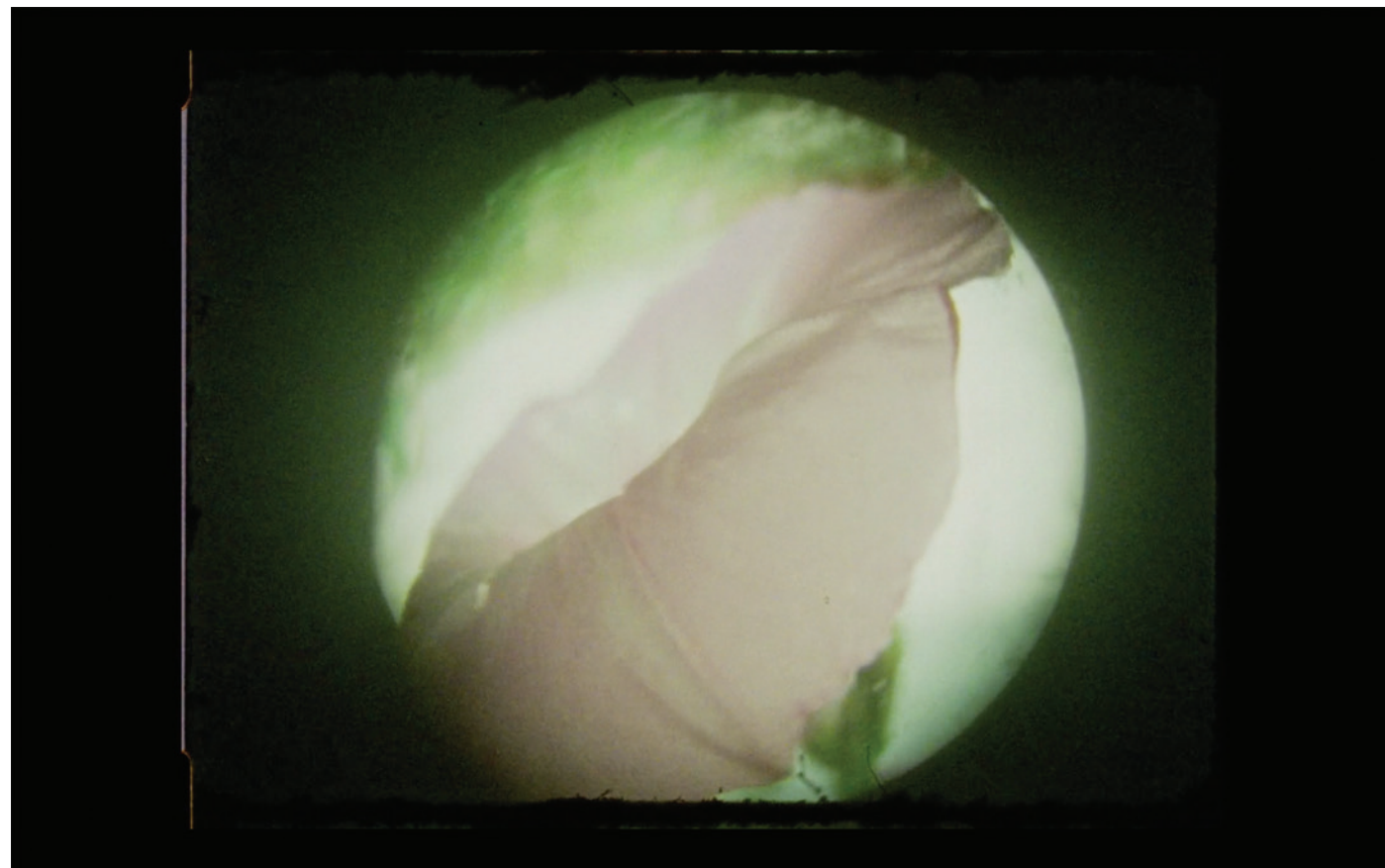
Is Bruno Varela's *El Prototipo* an adaptation of Philip K. Dick's 1981 novel *Valis*? Or is it a *projection* of the novel? In either case, the film raises the question of what special role there is for audiovisual media in communicating a non-linear perspective on time. Varela's great achievement is to offer a vision of the specific character of archival footage—how it might stake a path toward a transcendental film, one that “screens” outside of time, and where cinema becomes our natural way of grasping repetitive needs and gestures. Since fantasy and narrative are likewise our natural ways of rendering bearable our needs, *El Prototipo* shows how archival footage in its counter-voluntary, *found* character can reveal our most naked vulnerabilities. Just like sleep, or *signals from another time*.

What, then, is *El Prototipo*? To what ‘prototype’ does the film's title refer? Does it refer to the film that we are watching, or rather to the primordial film for which its constituent, archival footage offers us a (merely speculative) path? A prototype, after all, is a type from which many different tokens can be produced: like a demiurge, it is in some sense less “in time” than what comes from it.

SOME SUGGESTIONS

1. It is science fiction. *El Prototipo* emerges from the science fiction film *Valis*, described by Philip K. Dick in his novel of the same name as a film both about the powers of transtemporal satellite signals and a product of those same signals orchestrated by a society of Christian Gnostics. *El Prototipo* extends Varela's previous practice of excavating hidden or unproduced science fiction films, such as his applications of Félix Guattari's screenplay *A Love of UIQ* in *Monolito* (2019). This can also be seen in the applications of Chris Marker's *La jetée* (1962) in his collaboration with his daughter Eugenia Varela, *Mano de metate* (2018), where the “strong impression” left on Marker's protagonist figures as a kind of micro-film within the film, likewise traveling across time. But even more than in those works, *El Prototipo* proposes an idea of the science fiction genre itself as a prototype. When we call a work “science fiction” we link its world to our own, as though we could project both of them from the same transcendental template.





Taking up the discoveries about possible connections between archival footage and science fiction by experimental filmmaker Craig Baldwin, Varela goes even further in his awareness of the metaphysical issues at play, asking in effect, “What would happen if we screened the transcendental template itself?”

2. It is an archive. In his description of the film, Varela says, “Everything is archival in *El Prototipo*.” Much of its footage derives from archival material that he has used in other films, including unfinished or abandoned projects. And unless one undertakes to dig into the archive constituted by Varela’s previous films (such as his Vimeo page), one is likely to be overwhelmed by *El Prototipo*’s thoroughgoing ambiguity between the personal and the familial, the produced and the intervened-on, the direct impression onto emulsion and the found. Adopting Lucretius’ term for an unforeseeable or random swerve of atoms, in correspondence Varela describes this uncertainty as a “mutual encounter, a clinamen.”

Yet in *El Prototipo* the exception to this uncertainty is an archival source declared explicitly in the subtitles: “Sleep and Dreaming in Humans,” a 1971 film by the Stanford Sleep Laboratory, discovered by Varela at a *tianguis* in Mexico in 2019. Nevertheless, we witness only brief moments of this film. As such, a natural question to ask is: Why does Varela not simply let the footage play on its own? This would have linked *El Prototipo* to a line of more-or-less “raw” found footage filmmaking that runs from Ken Jacobs’s *Perfect Film* (1986) to recent works in Mexico like Azucena Losana’s *La cuarta plantación* (2020) and Edén Bastida Kullick’s *El Peticionario (Ejercicio #1)* (2021). *El Prototipo* naturally invites this kind of speculative imagining. But the fact that Varela is rather coy with his discovery of “Sleep and Dreaming in Humans” suggests that he is pursuing a somewhat different, more metaphysical line. He wants the film to remain hidden, to include us in the mysteries of discovery. He wants external forms of mediation (physical reels of footage or pragmatic text on documents attached to the Stanford film) to remain between us and what he has found. After all, as Varela suggests, if it were possible to screen a transcendental template or prototype, it would need to have the special qualities of archival footage film. Taking seriously the lessons of Stan Brakhage’s *Metaphors on Vision*, Varela is always attuned to the mysteries of hypnagogic vision, playfully extended in the “flicker” of sound derived from the Stanford film (“rapid eye movement,” its narrator says) over a brief shot of a sleeping male.

But what exactly are those special qualities of archival film? We can begin by noting that they are all those associated with the accidental or involuntary act of finding. Here Varela incidentally links up with Proust’s ideas of the special qualities of involuntary memory, the memory that cannot be forced or called upon, in putting us in contact with the transtemporal. They are also those which go along with the material character of found artifacts—of stumbling upon a container and wondering what

might be inside, as Varela suggests with closing shots of unopened film boxes. In this respect, Varela is also in a kind of argument with yet another one of his influences, the Spanish experimental filmmaker José Val del Omar, insisting on the special possibilities of found footage (a technique that Val del Omar did not employ) in linking material touch (Val del Omar’s “tactile vision”) with the transcendental or “spiritual.” The full spectrum of forms of tactility is declared in another set of closing images: the transition from Varela’s own hand touching light which emits from a projector to an anonymous woman placing her hand against a stone.

I mentioned a “flicker” of archival sound, and indeed there are other, more hieroglyphic sounds that might as well be archival—like *signals from another time*. These are derived from the voice of collaborator Facundo Vargas, and are incorporated into the film’s soundtrack. (In his recent dissertation on re-appropriation in Mexican experimental film, Daniel Valdez Puertos describes Varela’s use of the archive as a “polyphony of verbal and textual discourses.”) The soundtrack of *El Prototipo* was developed between Varela and frequent collaborator Steven Brown (clarinet, saxophone, piano), with pronounced applications of violin (Ángel García), jarana (Julio García), trombone and percussion (Vargas), as well as Varela’s own bass guitar, marímbula, shamisen, keyboard, and percussion. The accompanying soundtrack album is labeled “music for a nonexistent film.” Thus, we have at the level of the film’s music a question parallel to that regarding its title: Does it apply to the film we are watching or to something unreal, transcendental, yet-to-come? As with explorations of its distinct forms of tactility, *El Prototipo* is constantly straddling the material and the spiritual, with archives as our mediator.

3. It is a community. Another way of projecting a template is to imagine a community surrounding it. And as we imagine a community devoted to footage, we can also begin to imagine different ways of including others in the mysteries of discovery. The master stroke in Varela’s conception of *El Prototipo* is to imagine “Sleep and Dreaming in Humans” taking the place of the film *Valis* within Dick’s novel, and thus to imagine the Rhipidon Society (the society formed in Dick’s novel following screenings of *Valis*) as dedicated to this still-mysterious piece of found footage. We might even imagine the Rhipidon Society watching “Sleep and Dreaming in Humans” on loop, in a ritual still further detached from the exigencies of time, just like the secret society devoted to a loop of footage in Raúl Ruiz’s *Le film à venir* (1997). In his book *Poetics of Cinema* Ruiz likewise connected the found, accidental features of film to our capacity to recount humans’ natural history across repeated gestures: the phenomena that he thought grounded both Nietzsche’s “eternal recurrence of the same” and Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Thus Varela and Ruiz’s “invisible dialogues”—to borrow one of the former’s characteristic phrases—constitute a transtemporal community around a shared medium and its accidental epiphanies.

4. It is a body. As long as we are talking about containers with mysterious insides, we will sooner or later come to talking about the (human) body. *El Prototipo* encourages us not to shy away from that thought—of the human body as the container in which “sleep and dreaming” take place. Among its characteristic frames are caverns, orifices, and holes (including sprocket holes), some of which are entered into. Also, one of Varela’s subtitles, accompanying shots of sanguinary skin, says, “Film comes from skin / A very thin layer covering everything.” The late Italian experimental filmmaker Paolo Gioli would sometimes say, “Il film è carne” (“Film is flesh”). Varela’s innovation of Gioli thus suggests that film is the skin that covers everything and that can incorporate all surfaces. With its use of tourist slides befitting a world traveler, presented in its distinguishing right-to-left snaking motion, *El Prototipo* is perhaps Varela’s most geographically encompassing work. And with its use of solid, grainy Super 8 footage of the ruins at Ephesus in the Turkish Mediterranean, we witness a conversation between the correlatively solid surfaces of Ephesus’ heavy marble busts and columns with the film’s other, thinner vegetable textures (quiote, maguey, maize, many different kinds of flowers) captured in direct impressions on film as well as occasionally in the “thinner” format of digital video.

Thus, Varela employs archival footage as a kind of specimen (or prototype) for presenting infinitely repeatable phenomena while also depending on a recognizable connection between biology and repeatable cycles. These are the ambitions that link Varela’s work to Leandro Listorti’s use of archival footage of unfinished Argentine films to construct *The Endless Film* (*La película infinita*, 2018), as well as his use of botanical archives to project repeatable cycles out of individual plant specimens in *Herbarium* (*Herbaria*, 2022). In addition, the narrator of the novel *Valis* notes, “Somewhere Schopenhauer says that the cat which you see playing in the yard is the cat which played three hundred years ago.” After all, their gestures are the same: a natural history can be told of them. Without mentioning Schopenhauer, in *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt locates this kind of thinking within a wider nineteenth century “philosophy of life,” where repeatable biological cycles are the model for all sources of value, and whose “highest principle of all being” is Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence of the same.

Marx is of course the other great philosopher of life relevant here: capitalism reproduces itself, and it does so by reproducing the labor it depends upon, whose locus of self-reproduction (as Engels and more recent feminist social reproduction theorists like Silvia Federici have articulated) is the family. A proposal that we can find in *El Prototipo* is that film, itself a nineteenth-century invention with a material basis in gelatin emulsion, is an extension of these same nineteenth-century philosophies of life. Varela does so by linking ideas of the infinitely repeatable to family archives: Regular 8 footage of his grandmother’s travels through Uxmal, Yucatán in the 1960s, Video8 footage of family travels through the Mapimí Silent Zone in Durango, Mexico, and Guatemala in

the 1990s. Since cinema’s invention, it has become one of our *familiar* means of self-reproduction.

Hence, one of *El Prototipo*’s concluding images is Regular 8 family archival footage of a wedding dance, mirrored in order to accentuate its centrifugal motion. Indeed, throughout *El Prototipo* forms of mirroring and reflection come to serve as figures of repetition across generations. For example, in yet another set of cycling right-to-left frames, derived from the earlier work *Año Luz* (2020), Eugenia Varela holds up a reflecting surface to the camera, as though reversing the common idea of the camera’s relation to mirrors. Here, it is no longer an index of a preexisting pro-filmic event, but a mechanism that depends on future generations for its source of light. Like bodies picking up *signals from another time*.

5. It is a cosmovisión. When in *El Prototipo* we witness a superbly electromagnetic Video8 image of a van in the Mapimí Silent Zone, painted to declare itself a “Philosophical School” (“Escuela Filosófica”) dedicated to “Cosmic Anthropology” (“Antropología Cósmica”), we can naturally understand those labels as a confession of the film’s ambitions for itself. With *El Prototipo* Varela connects the Christian Gnostic thought lying behind *Valis* and its Ur-text, Dick’s philosophical *Exegesis*, to Gnostic notions of transformation, becoming, and repetition. This *cosmovisión* of eternal recurrence that we find in *El Prototipo* has its antecedents in Varela’s *Esporas neón* (2021), where the “helical movement” mentioned in its subtitles is figured by the recurrence of a looping design in the archaeological zone of Mitla, Oaxaca, as well as in Varela’s old footage of a sweater worn by a man in Bolivia’s Ciudad de Piedra (City of Stone). The articulation of a *cosmovisión* likewise situates *El Prototipo* within a line emerging from some of the most important efforts in non-hegemonic cinema in Oaxaca. Notably this includes the *cosmovisión* of the Ikoote indigenous people in *Teat Monteok / El cuento del Dios del Rayo* (*The Tale of the Lightning God*, 1985), filmed in Super 8 by Elvira Palafox Herranz and other Ikoote women in an Indigenous cinema workshop in San Mateo del Mar in 1985. After all, the opening titles of *El Prototipo* recall that in Dick’s novel the film *Valis* announces “the return of some god.” Many humans annually announce rebirth—the return of a god and the cyclical banishment of devils—in the form of Carnivals. In *El Prototipo* we take in the *cosmovisión* of the Carnival in Varela’s assertively cinematic 16mm images of the festival of the “diablos aceitados” (“oiled devils”) in Tilcajete, Oaxaca: images of that town’s Carnival he had previously employed in his film *Heraldos de neón* (2020). Not even Glauber Rocha’s images of Carnival in Rio de Janeiro in *A Idade da Terra* (1980) achieved the same degree of metaphysical assurance.

We are approaching the problem of how a film can articulate a *cosmovisión* and also be political. To be sure, *El Prototipo* is less straightforwardly political than certain previous works by Varela such as *Materia oscura* (*Dark Matter*, 2015), which laid bare

redacted documents related to the 2014 forced disappearance of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Teachers College in Iguala, Guerrero. But in *El Prototipo* we do see separate frames of painted murals of the 43 students. And even *Materia oscura* had its own metaphysical vision (“The images collide to make a wave,” one title in that film says) of how authorities combine images in order to form political propaganda and reify violence as “natural.”

The notion of a politics of *circularity* in experimental film recalls how Brakhage (again, a significant influence on Varela) used *23rd Psalm Branch* (1967) to reveal the reproduction of the tropes of Nazism by the U.S. in Vietnam. Responding to the earliest reactions to that film, P. Adams Sitney was startled that

viewers like Jerome Hill, Robert Lamberton, and Fred Camper read its closing pastoral images of children playing with sparklers as optimistic. According to Sitney, it instead connected the Nazi *Walpurgisnacht* to the culture prosecuting the war on Vietnam, and thus culminated in a “cyclic vision.” (In writing related to *23rd Psalm Branch*, Brakhage also encouraged us to “defeat” the media of propaganda so that President Johnson’s gestures on television emerge as continuous with Hitler’s: yet another circularity embodied in unconscious expression. One of Varela’s other influences, Czech-Brazilian philosopher Vilém Flusser, devoted an entire book to the repeatability of gestures.)





The question, then—whether we are discussing *23rd Psalm Branch*, *Materia oscura*, or *El Prototipo*—is if a given *cosmovisión* can undergird a substantial notion of historical patterns enough to ground a politics. The wider context of Varela's work, beginning with his earliest efforts in indigenous community video alongside Oaxaca's Ojo de Agua Comunicación media project, through to his treatments of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre of student protestors in *Línea 3* (2010-11), show that *cosmovisión* remains a key question motivating his entirely singular *political* cinema.

6. It is a loop. *El Prototipo* is not literally a “looped film,” though the varieties of temporal looping (filmic, historical, cosmological) are central to its conception. (The looping of filmic fragments is also important to the articulation of a “Shamanic Materialism” in the “Thesis on the Audiovisual” by the Tehuacán-based Mexican experimental film collective Los Ingrávidos: a document that we know Varela to have read and absorbed.) Much like Deleuze's rereading of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence as the recurrence of *becoming*, *El Prototipo* invites us to question exactly what constitutes the units of repetition and what agency sustains them. Directly following Dick's descriptions of *Valis* in *El Prototipo*'s subtitles as a film that changes with each screening—and developing his previous mention of a similarly variable VHS tape in *Monolito*—Varela asks, “If a film is shown fifty times, will there be fifty different films?” Describing a film as a loop does not yet settle the question of *what* is being looped.

Additionally, in live presentations, performances, and installations that Varela has developed in conjunction with *El Prototipo* (such as at El Rule Comunidad de Saberes in Mexico City in July 2022, and in a tribute to Val del Omar at Mexico City's Centro Cultural de España in August 2022), he has foregrounded digital loops of the material constituting this film. But again, what is being looped in these presentations? Varela consciously mixes digital and analog media. And here lies a difference: a digital loop can sometimes be a sign that the digital mechanism has timed out, whereas an analog loop can only operate if the analog mechanism is working all too well. Perhaps this is a kind of quasi-Luddite revolt by Varela in his use of digital loops: an effort to slow down or even shut down the mechanism in question *via* repetition, in order to get us to think about what is being repeated.

Walter Benjamin famously wrote: “A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop.” What might it mean that Varela links the slowing down of history to science fiction? It might mean that for futures, both better and worse ones, to be intelligible to us, we must pause to see them as projected from the same template as the present. The same template—straddling uneasily between the material and the transcendental—that *El Prototipo* brings into our view.

References are online at:
www.millenniumfilmjournal.com/mfj-77-supplements/#77-footnotes-davies

