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► **To cite this version:**

Jeff Daniel Silva. Between Time & the Screen: Feeling temporality in "From the Land". Suomen Antropologi, Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society, 2020, 44 (3-4), pp.49-53. 10.30676/jfas.v44i3-4.90722 . hal-04435940

HAL Id: hal-04435940

<https://hal.science/hal-04435940>

Submitted on 2 Feb 2024

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BETWEEN TIME & THE SCREEN: FEELING TEMPORALITY IN FROM THE LAND (FILM BY JEFF SILVA AND RAMONA BADESCU)

How do we understand temporality in documentary cinema and what are some methods that documentary filmmakers can use to express time? How can we ever transmit even a small essence of that profound experience of inhabiting time with our subjects to the spectator? Where do our notions of time, emotion and the senses begin and end? And if our relationship to time is linked to our emotions and senses, what are the epistemological implications of transmitting this feeling of time? And what of the relationship to space? How can we relate present-space/ time to past or future space/time? What can we learn from cinema in these respects and it's facility with working with and reshaping time?

These are questions that have emerged over a long filmmaking and cinema spectating practice and they have risen to surface as a central theme and dilemma in my work. For me, each project demands a unique temporal interrogation, first in the field in the acquisition of raw footage, and later in the edit room, in its sculpting and editing into a finished work.

It's important to note that I normally work in the field shooting and sound recording on my own, or at the most with one other person. I also edit my own work and take a great deal of time to sift through my rushes and slowly develop a narrative flow that resonates with my personal experience. This kind of autonomous practice, I find, enriches one's relationship to subjects, place and time. I see the challenge whilst

shooting and editing to be how to creatively transmit that field experience, filled with all it's complexity to the spectators, How to articulate in a tangible way the profundity of that experience so that film opens up a space for them to grapple with a portion of the questions that I have traversed?

One of my goals in my work is to destabilize preconceptions. To create emotional and intellectual disjunctions that challenge spectators' notions of the subject, of temporality and of place. In this spirit, perhaps we'd do well to embrace Walter Benjamin's idea that 'to write history means to cite history' (Benjamin 1999 [1927–1940]: 476). By extending this idea to documentary we can speculate that perhaps he would agree that films are also in a way made up of citations. Citations of history and of time, strung up one after another leading towards new meanings and new temporal constructions (Dickinson 2014). Time without doubt being amongst the most critical ingredients in a chain of variables making up documentary cinema can be treated in such vastly different ways and at different moments in the filmmaking process to compress, elongate, or combine multiple treatments of time within a scene to influence and challenge our perceptions. More work needs to be done to shed light on how documentary images work on time (and how time can also work on the documentary images) and how this influences our notions of trust in the real.



TIME & SPACE

We cannot separate the relationship of space when we talk about time. As each space or place has its own architectural, compositional and sonic qualities, also has its unique temporalities and histories. A place is always a place in time.

TIME (...) thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, SPACE becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history... This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the Chronotope. (Bakhtin 200 [1975]: 84)

When I am filming I pay close attention to the rhythms of the place I am in. Rather than moving through space to chase down my subject or shot, I try to inhabit place and patiently wait for the temporal notions to reveal themselves. This is sometimes not easy.

ACTIVE SPECTATOR

When I film, I am an active observer and a participant in the ambiguity of the reality that is unfolding. While hours may pass in the real, sometimes something profound or poetic occurs that makes it into the film. Later on the screen, this micro-moment, this shared space between subject and filmmaker becomes a compound visual and sonic experience for the spectator to experience and derive a final significance. The goal is to find the right moments and the right distance for the spectator to be primed to feel, to think, to dream.

Cinema can act as a channel, a passage to emotions, to the mind, to ideas, to the whole grammar of human experiences and sensations. When a person is watching a documentary film unfold on the screen they are involved in a series of cognitive and sensorial activities that includes listening and watching but also embodying, empathizing, anticipating, deducting, temporalizing and using their imagination.

I dream to be able to bring my spectators to what Raul Ruiz had called the ‘hypnotic point’, a point where the spectator is engaged with the entirety of the film, landscape, subjects, sounds, small details where rather than images coming to you they are coming from within you, flying towards the screen. (Ruiz 1995: 119)

This kind of open documentary cinema in the best case scenario activates and empowers the spectator.

The [activated] documentary (...) gives the viewer an ‘empowered eye’ allowing the spectator to indulge in association and memories of their own. We can understand this as a temporal space of possible shared knowledge or private thoughts. It is a privileged space of ambiguity, not the obscurity of psychological motivation, but the abstruseness of movement across space and time. It is the ambiguity of opening possibilities of what could be rather than what might be. It is a world of possibilities

in which the act of spectatorship becomes activated. (Craig 2004)

My goal is to create a cinema space for the spectator ‘to take them somewhere he or she has never been before, and which discourages the return journey’. (Silverman 1996: 102)

A documentary that sticks. Films that demand further attention, emotion, and inquiry long after the credits have rolled. Rather than explain, the goal is to provoke emotion, thought, personal connections, confusion, anger, social engagement.

TEMPORAL INCONGRUITIES

Evoking absence, the past, interiority, and the ephemeral poses significant problems for the documentary filmmaker. How do we render an image of a place or person that no longer exists? How do we get at that tough stuff that Edgar Morin refers to as *cinemas terra incognita* (Heusch & Morin 1962)? We as researchers and





artists must search for poetic strategies that can evoke these absences and compel the spectator to construct an image in their imagination. A virtue of cinema is that it allows us to layer and juxtapose time across the strata of sounds, visuals and texts to create temporal incongruities. These overlappings and disjunctions force the spectator to make choices, problem solve, and to visualize beyond the frame, evoking a sensorial and intellectual space for imagination and introspection.

In *Là où la terre* (2018), a short film I just completed with Ramona Badescu, we were challenged to evoke an image of a Marseille neighborhood that has completely transformed from a dense forest in the 60's to a concrete jungle today. Today there remains hardly a trace of the hills, trees, plants, animals and flowing water, with the construction of a wide expanse of housing projects, a Carrefour supermarket and the underground highway. We were very lucky to have access to the memories of a group of inhabitants who witnessed the transformation of their neighborhood as children. After more than

fifty years, they can still recall the flowers, the animals, the smells, and other small details of life 'before'. These audio testimonies of the past, juxtaposed by the visual and sonic images of the present creates a temporal conflict where the spectator is forced to use their imagination to reconstruct the past in the face of the enormous transformations of the landscape that they witness unfolding. This visual, spatio-temporal incongruity forces the spectator into a memory game, a sort of rewinding, relinking, and reimagining of meaning across the horizontal temporality of the passing images of the film and the contradictory testimony of the voices.

Whether our film succeeds or not in transmitting even a sliver of the emotional and sensorial fabric of experience that we experienced while making it cannot easily be determined. We hope it touches many audience members emotionally, sensorially and intellectually but we recognize the inherent subjectivity of spectatorship along with the conditions of viewing. An ideal spectator will succeed in activating the film within their

imagination and find their own space within the voices, sounds and images to create profound resonances that deepen their experience to the work and to larger personal, and societal questions. Not an easy task, but that said, it is one that I believe documentary cinema capable of and strive towards.

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