

Cinema and landscape: Reflections from a film programme

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Introduction

In this piece we will offer some reflections that emerged from the experience of curating and presenting the Film Programme of the Finnish Anthropological Society Conference in Helsinki from the 21st – 22nd October 2015. The theme of the conference, *Landscapes, Sociality, & Materiality*, encouraged a discussion that thought of landscapes as «contextual social and cultural process defined by time, place and space rather than as an image and an object of the visual gaze». The Film Programme aimed to investigate different ways in which objects, landscapes, material properties, infrastructures, and environments enable and restrict certain forms of creativity. In a nutshell, we sought submissions that considered – through their cinematic form or content – different perceptions, mediations, and constructions of landscape.

The programme was designed as an investigation of the idea of landscape through the medium of an ethnographic film programme: How does the idea of landscape appear like when approached through cinematic tools? What is there to learn from narrativising a film programme around the idea of landscape? What can the film programme format contribute to understanding the experience of landscape?



Neither of us consider ourselves experts in the field of landscape studies and were approaching the programme from the perspective of visual anthropology and ethnographic film-making in particular. Our initial references were ethnographic cinema classics such as the works of Robert Flaherty, Jean Rouch, John Marshall, David MacDougall as well as narrative cinematic works such as Hollywood, Soviet, and European Cinema, amongst others.

Our initial conversations on the relationship between cinema and landscape presumed a relationship whereby film-makers relied on landscape as a tool through which to tell their story. In hindsight, the way we discussed this approach presumed a relationship where landscape is subordinate to the narrative. Examples that came to mind were works like *The Hunters* where the Kalahari Desert can be seen as a backdrop, a scenography, in front of which the action unfolds. We also thought of *Nanook of the North*, where the Canadian tundra can be seen as a metaphoric character, perhaps the antagonist, of the film's narrative. An early scene of *To Live with Herds* features a long uninterrupted take of Logoth, the main character, pointing out the imaginary geographical features of the territory his community lives in – offering the spectator a map in which the film will take place.

This film viewing approach sees landscapes as a 'space', a natural given, onto which human agency is mapped onto. The film-maker would 'use' the landscape as a means of emplacement for the viewers to understand the terms of their relationship to the characters. Another modality of this approach views a tension between proximity and distance, sensuous immersion, and detached observation (see Wylie 2007). Are cinematic landscapes the world in which the characters live in? Are landscapes autonomous entities that structure the scenes? Do anthropologists have a role in constructing these entities? Or are the cinematic landscapes entities to be gazed at from a distance?

As mentioned above, the abstract of the conference considered the context dependent nature of landscape, rather than an object of the visual gaze. From the perspective of anthropological cinema, we felt that the conference's abstract did not really sort out the tension for us. The craft of cinema, we felt, necessarily renders the landscape as a visual gaze. The craft of anthropological cinema, we also felt, prioritises a methodology of observance and humility towards the context filmed (the result of the combination of observant participation and cultural relativism), rather than the result of an ego-centric imposition of the film-maker. As such, landscapes can be seen as static, naturally given environments into which characters relate with each other. The organiser's choice of keynote speakers, Philippe Descola and Anna Tsing, suggested to us a thematic commitment to the Anthropocene and to opening a discussion on the transfigurative properties of landscape. However, we were concerned about how ideas associated to the Anthropocene could inform the practise of film-making, other than informing the plot.

As the submissions came in and we began the process of viewing the films and considering the order of the programme, we developed a sensitivity to a different understanding of the relationship between landscape and cinema. An approach that could,

possibly, take into account the Anthropocene, the ever crescent process of landscapes, and de-centre the “scopophilic” suggestions of landscape as methodological inspirations for understanding ethnographic film practise and film viewing.

In what follows, we will share with the readers three ideas that emerged in the process of curating and producing this film programme. Our examples are tied to the films and we acknowledge that there is a gap at stake if the readers are not familiar with these films. Even though we will be unable to offer a full synopsis and explanation of the films that were part of the programme, we hope that the ideas can offer a contribution to the ways in which film programmes can inform the discursive contours of an anthropological conference and encourage readers to look up the films.

For us, the experience of cinema questions three assumptions and methodologies associated to “land” and “scape”. Three instances:

1. In cinema, the landscape is not exclusively connected to vision (scape) but it is as much a sonic experience as it is visual. This experience recalls ideas that the world is not perceived through discrete sensory regimes, but that all perception entails a synaesthetic experience (Chion 2009).

2. Cinematic practises requires the film-maker to be actively (corporeally) engaged with the subject that is being filmed. This is necessary in order to create a convincing and engaging narrative (Rouch 1975). The corporeal engagement of film-makers has two effects:

- the landscape is not surveyed from outside of it, but expanded upon from within. All the films screened at the conference had an explicit participatory effect, where the film-makers actively directed their scenes. Some relied on re-enactments, other directors provoked subjects to engage with specific features of the landscape others designed sets for their informants, amongst other strategies.

- the film-maker is part of the landscape that is being depicted. This means that the film-makers is a constitutive element of the landscape. The film-maker perceives and constitutes the landscape simultaneously.

3. A third effect of cinema is that it recalls the mobility of the landscape. This comes from the fact that cinema is a time-based and mobile methodology (Tarkovsky 1986). It directs our attention to the continuous unfolding process of the landscape. As a time-based methodology, cinema requires film-makers and audiences to think of landscape (or the world “out there”) as an event, an action-based activity that is constituted not just by the “land” but by objects, people, stories, the light, lenses, microphones, wind, all relating together through a mobile constellation of circumstances that, when filmed, manifest themselves in a unique configuration that frames and is framed by the film-maker’s and the audience’s imagination, skill, and experience. This opens up the possibilities of non-material landscapes.

The Audiovisual Contract «[...] a kind of symbolic contract that the audio-viewer enters into, agreeing to think of sound and image as forming a single entity» (Chion 1994: 216).

An immediate effect that cinema has on the understanding of landscape is to de-centre the scopophilia that is suggested in classical approaches to landscape. While cinema is technically composed of a simultaneity of the visual and the sonic, the process of curating and producing this programme led us to consider that sound “works” on a different level than the visual.

Images, in the montage context, acquire meaning against each other, in a “clash of relations” (see Eisenstein 1949) – a chain of segregated differences, images aligned within the tunnelled vision of the lens. Images have a tactility, a materiality, a pigment, which communicate a sense of space and shape when placed in relation and opposition to each other. Sound, however, references events outside of the range of the field of vision. It is not organized according to visual codes of materiality but it is its own reference.

Sound in cinema does not work through dialectical clashes, but are experienced cumulatively, as a flow rather than through forms. The listener does not interpret through semiotic differences and similarities, but through continuous flow of time – a *non-pulsed or durational time* (the time of sound matter). Sound does not exist by way of time, in time, or about time, but as time, unfolding temporality.

What follows, in our view, is that the sonic experience of a cinematic landscape is not registered at the same level of consciousness as images. Even though any particular soundscape is made up of independent parts, the average spectator cannot easily separate the sonic elements within a film. A good sound design is able to weave together diegetic sound, non-diegetic sound, foley, and music into a sonic narrative whole. Sound designs are the result of deliberate choices which are not limited to choice of microphones, their placement, the recording equipment used, the mixing, added sounds, speakers used during the screening, and acoustics of the screening room. This constellation of circumstances are resources for film-makers to produce a sonic experience that would develop an emotional connection with the audience.

To acknowledge the soundscape of a film as constitutive of its narrative is to acknowledge that cinema goes beyond the events depicted in the screen and beyond itself. The ephemeral experience of sound adds and takes away depth from the visual image, its workings are mysterious for we are not supposed to know fully the origins of each sound, we accept them as they are even though they do not correspond with what we are seeing (Gunning 2010).

The Truth of CineScapes

For me, then, the only way to film is to walk about with the camera, taking it to wherever it is the most effective, and improvising a ballet in which the camera itself becomes just as much alive as the people it is filming. (Rouch 1975: 89)

A consistent theme through all the post-screening Q&As with the directors concerned themselves with the technical and conceptual choices that the film-makers made

when constructing their narratives. While content was discussed, often times, form would take a significant amount of time during the discussion. The film *Hearsay* featured interviews with blind people who were encouraged to talk about their visual fantasies. The film-maker, Eibe Maleen Krebs, then designed a studio space, offered costumes to the informants, and filmed the way in which they re-enacted their imagined selves. In *Dead when I got Here*, Mark Aitken arranges for the main character to travel from Mexico to the United States to meet his estranged daughter. Katri Lassila's *Chalk Circles* is an atmospheric poetic reflection on the effects of global warming in the Pacific. We can go on outlining the approach that the directors chose in their works. The fact is that every film, regardless of the genre, cannot help but to have a position in relation to the world. As such, these films are an opportunity to author and construct the landscape.

In their review of landscape art and its relationship to nature and the nature of beauty, Kemal and Gaskell, reflect how landscape art theory places emphasis on the artists' creative genius, rather than on an attempt to document natural beauty. Landscape art highlights the ways in which human creation and nature are inextricably linked in our understandings. As such, they make impossible the production of clear conceptual distinctions between object and subject, human and nature, art and documentation. A more productive approach, they argue, would «deal with natural beauty by showing the cluster of concepts that make up the parameters of our present understanding, without worrying about the metaphysical certainties that a determinate foundationalist schema promises» (Kemal, Gaskell 1995: 3).

From a cinema theory perspective, this approach recalls Dziga Vertov's case for cinema's capacity to produce a peculiar kind of truth, a cine-truth. He characterized his work as a search for «creating a truly international language of cinema based on its absolute separation from the language of theatre and literature» (Vertov 1929). For Vertov, the "language" of cinema was predicated on the technological possibilities of the medium – the unique effect of recording scenes that mimicked real-time movement, which could then be re-arranged, sped up, slowed down, and double exposed represented a novel examination of the visual world. A "truth" that is mediated through the camera, editing equipment, and projector, which enabled a fresh perspective on reality. In his films and writings, Vertov argues against non-fiction and dramatic conventions in cinema because these conventions reproduce well known codes from literature and drama, hindering the revolutionary potential of cinema. Instead, Vertov's films are credited with having the intention of «capturing life unawares». Contemporary readings of this approach may see this as a precursor to surveillance filming, of the possibility of denying the presence of the camera and objectifying the people filmed. Another reading, based on a different interpretation of the Russian term, would interpret his intentions as «capturing life off-guard» as if by surprise and perhaps provoked by the presence of the camera (Hicks 2007).

In this interpretation, the effect that the camera has on people and on the context filmed is constitutive of cine-truth. Observing social life as it unfolds in real-time, off-

guard, does not suggest the denial of the camera's presence because it is just not possible to hide the equipment, its position is apparent "on set". Documentaries, and ethnographies in general, are necessarily the result of an intrusion into the situation under study (Bruzzi 2000). The authenticity that Vertov is after is not a profilmic authenticity but a cine-based ontological authenticity founded on the suggestion that cine-knowledge is produced with and through the film-making process.

Time-Based Ethnography

La Frequenza Fantasma, a film by Chiara Ambrosio, opens with a 6-minute static shot that tracks the sunrise in the village of Verbicaro in South Italy. While the camera is static, the shot captures the sonic and visual transformation of the town from night to day. Through the course of the narrative we learn that Verbicaro has been abandoned for decades and yet, the town produces in and of itself powerful sonic and visual references to be framed by Chiara's camera. There are a series of complex simultaneities at play here. For example, between the audiovisual resonance of the village and the manipulation of the images by the film-maker; between Verbicaro's bustling past, its empty present, and uncertain future. The film does not resolve this complexity. Through the organisation of rhythm, respect to light, and attention to resonances, the film-maker does not record the passing of time in Verbicaro, but rather a temporal experience is conceived by the film-maker. This approach recalls Walter Benjamin's take on the «dialectical image».

It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. – Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language. (Benjamin 1999: 462)

A similar idea can be found in Deleuze's ideas on time image where the temporal structure of time-image goes beyond the simple and purely empirical succession of time – past, present and future. It is rather a coexistence of distinct durations or of levels of duration, a single event can belong to several levels, where the sheets of past coexist in a non-chronological order (Deleuze 2013).

In our view, the promise of audiovisual ethnography lies in its capacity to bring these kind of tensions to the fore and can push the anthropological project in new directions. To maybe, consider the time-based dimension of the anthropological project, that it is not a thing that you can draw a circle around. Where landscape can be seen as a gathering that is in the process of becoming, rather through a set of hierarchical concepts. Analogously, and from the perspective of anthropological cinema, the practise of curating the programme also suggests that we cannot demarcate an anthropological film

from broader cinematic practise. Where the programme of an anthropological film festival is not the site where “anthropological films” are hierarchically placed in opposition to broader cinema practise.

A film programme acknowledges the creative and generative effect of cinema and its conventions references practises, scenes, methodologies, and conventions that come together in a stimulating programme.

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- Ambrosio, Chiara, 2014, *La frequenza Fantasma*, Italy.
- Flaherty, Robert, 1922, *Nanook of the North*, USA.
- Lassila, Katri, 2015, *Chalk Circles*, Finland.
- MacDougall, David, 1972, *To Live with Herds*, USA.
- Maleen Krebs, Eibe, 2014, *Hearsay*, Germany.
- Marshall, John, 1957, *The Hunters*, USA.
- Vertov, Dziga, 1929. *Man With a Movie Camera*, USSR.

FILM PROGRAMME

SESSION I: MATERIALITIES 1

Wednesday, Oct 21, 13:30-18:00

13:30 – *Mondo Banana*. <http://bananamovie.com/>

SESSION II: MATERIALITIES 2

15:15 – *Cast in India*. <http://castinindia.com/>15:55 – *Obsolescence*. <http://www.obsolescencia.com.mx/>

SESSION III: SPECIAL SCREENING: “SONIC LANDSCAPE”

16:50 – *On the Carrera*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9RRICLhnh4>

SESSION IV: LANDSCAPES OF TIME

Thursday, Oct 22, 09:00-12:00

09:00 – *Por la Verea*. <http://porlaverea.blogspot.com.ee/>10:00 – *Chalk Circles*. <http://www.reelport.com/index.php?id=300&L=en>10:35 – *La Frecuencia Fantasma*. http://www.acuriousroom.com/LA_FF.html

SESSION V: INTERIORS

Thursday, Oct 22, 13:30-16:45

13:30 – *Hearsay*. <http://vom-hoeren-sagen.de/>14:55 – *Birthdates*.