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The politics of spatiality in experimental nonfiction cinema: Jonathan Perel's 'Toponimia'

Patrick Brian Smith

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A whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers – from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat. – Michel Foucault [1]

We are just as much spatial as temporal beings … our existential spatiality and temporality are essentially or ontologically coequal, equivalent in explanatory power and behavioral significance, interwoven in a mutually formative relation. – Edward Soja [2]

I had forgotten that landscape photography is often motivated by utopian or ideological imperatives, both as a critique of the world, and to demonstrate the possibility of creating a better one. – Patrick Keiller [3]

Introduction

From the fûkeiron landscape theory of the 1960s Japanese political avant-garde, through to the Lefebvrian-inflected critiques of social space in the films of contemporary British filmmaker Patrick Keiller, a pervasive though under-analysed phenomenon within the history of experimental nonfiction cinema is the structuring role of space, place, and landscape in works that variously aim to critique the destructive forces of authoritarian state governance, global capitalism, and neoliberalist political hegemony. Within such works urban/rural landscapes and spaces (typically presented through

protracted, deep-focus shots) become the central and structuring foci through which to deploy critiques of oppressive socio-political power relations and the machinations of transnational global capital. For example, as Yuriko Furuhata suggests, a focus on landscape and space in the cinema of the 1960s Japanese political avant-garde offered an 'analytic mode of investigating the immanent relations of power that are found within a historically specific social formation', enabling filmmakers like Oshima Nagisa and Masao Adachi to provide 'a visual "diagram" of social and economic relations, especially those of domination, at work', precisely within a social milieu that was witnessing a rising interdependence between 'the increasing control over territorial space and the consolidation of postwar democratic state capitalism'.[4] Similarly, Patrick Keiller has suggested that his spatially-informed filmic practice aims to 'promote political and economic change by developing the transformative potential of images of landscape', in the face of rampant Thatcherite to Blairite neoliberalism and financial sector dependency in the UK.[5]

These two examples stand at opposite ends of a temporal spectrum of what could be termed a 'spatio-political' trend within experimental nonfiction practice from the 1960s onwards, including other practitioners such as: James Benning (*Landscape Suicide* [1987], *Deseret*[1995]), Thomas Kneubühler (*Forward Looking Statements* [2014]), Rosa Barba (*Somnium* [2011]), Chantal Akerman (*D'Est* [1995]), Yvonne Rainer (*Journeys From Berlin/1971* [1980]), Jenni Olson (*The Road Royal* [2015]), Chris Petit (*London Orbital* [2002]), Eric Baudelaire (*The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi and 27 Years without Images* [2011], *Prelude to AKA Jihadi* [2016]), Diane Bonder (*If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home By Now* [2001]), Ursula Biemann (*Black Sea Files* [2005]), Brett Story (*The Prison in Twelve Landscapes* [2016]), Jem Cohen (*Le Bled [Buildings in a Field]* [2009]), John Gianvito (*Profit Motive and the Whispering Wind* [2007]), Neil Gray (*Palimpsest* [2010]), Travis Wilkerson (*An Injury to One* [2002]), Stephen Connolly (*Machine Vision* [2016]), and Deborah Stratman (*The Illinois Parables* [2016]).

Alongside such a tendency within experimental nonfiction film practice, we have also witnessed the now well-canonised 'spatial turn' in social and cultural theory – in development from the 1970s onwards. As Edward Soja has suggested, this spatial thinking has aimed to understand 'how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology'.[6] Similarly, Doreen Massey has suggested 'not just that the spatial is

political ... but rather that thinking the spatial in a particular way can ... contribute to political arguments already under way, and – most deeply – can be an essential element in the imaginative structure which enables in the first place an opening up to the very sphere of the political'.[7] In a manner akin to these discursive models the aim of this article is to think through these two turns – one theoretical and one filmic – together, unpacking their markedly similar focus on spatiality as a methodological tool for understanding and critiquing uneven shifts in global socio-political power relations.

To help draw these two spatial turns together, this article will focus on Jonathan Perel's film *Toponimia* (2015), an Argentinian experimental nonfiction work that shares productive connections to the spatio-political trend delineated above. *Toponimia* focuses on four villages built in Argentina's Tucuman province by the military dictatorship of the 1970s. The villages – closely monitored by the military – were created to rehouse and, concomitantly, control political dissidents within the Tucuman area. This article will argue that Perel's film contains a rigorous spatio-political formal structure, which assists in deploying a critique of this period of state terror. Simultaneously, however, such an aesthetic also highlights contemporary social transformations post-dictatorship. More specifically, it will be argued that while the inhabitants of the villages post-dictatorship have been able to reclaim and appropriate such authoritarian social spaces, uneven geographical developments between urban centres and rural periferies in Argentina have created the economic and infrastructural void for such strategies of (re)appropriation.

The spatio-political trend that this article wishes to delineate also structures a larger thesis project titled 'The Politics of Spatiality in Experimental Non-Fiction Cinema', focusing on the work of Perel alongside other practitioners such as James Benning, Thomas Kneubühler, and Patrick Keiller. The project aims to place such spatially-informed theoretical methodologies in dialogue with the aforementioned group of spatio-political experimental nonfiction works. Through an examination of this geographically and historically disparate group of filmic practices, the thesis aims to understand how a similar spatio-political aesthetic informs them all; aimed at visualising and critiquing a heterogeneous and localised set of socio-political injustices that are often, to quote Soja once again, 'inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life'.[8] While suggesting there has been a transnational manifestation of a similar spatio-political tendency,

it is also imperative that this article avoids slipping into ahistorical and ageographical aesthetic analysis. Consequently, remaining attentive to the *geopolitical specifities* of each of the case studies – and, more specifically for this article, *Toponimia* – will be crucial, allowing us to understand how a similar aesthetic engages with *heterogeneous and specific* socio-political localisms. Thus, taking account of geopolitical specificities will aid our understanding of how the transnational manifestation of a similar spatio-political aesthetic is variously concerned with critiquing authoritarian state governance in Argentina (in the case of Perel's *Toponimia*), Thatcherite to Blarite neoliberalism, multinational private land ownership in the UK (Keiller), and urbanism and resource extraction in North America (Benning and Kneubühler).

Before moving on to analyse the spatio-political critique deployed by *Toponimia*, it is necessary to outline the theoretical frameworks that have shaped both the spatial turn in social and cultural theory and the typical discursive approaches to spatiality and landscape in film and media studies scholarship. Mapping out these theoretical trajectories will allow us to better situate the spatio-political dimensions of Perel's film, while concomitantly allowing it to operate as a representative case study for the broader set of experimental nonfiction works listed above.

Spatial turn

Mark Sheil has suggested that the spatial turn in social and cultural theory has involved 'a growing recognition of the usefulness of space as an organising category, and of the concept of "spatialisation" as a term for the analysis and description of modern, and (even more so) of postmodern, society and culture'.[9] Soja, in his book *Seeking Spatial Justice*, argues that this turn to spatiality aimed to react against the historical dominance of strictly temporal understandings of the social and political. As he suggests, within social and cultural theory, 'primary attention is [typically] given to social processes and social consciousness as they develop over *time* in comparison to what might be called spatial processes, spatial consciousness, and spatial development'.[10] He continues on to suggest that for at least the last past century, 'thinking about the interrelated historical and social aspects of our lives has tended to be much more important ... than emphasising a pertinent critical spatial perspective'.[11]

Interrogating this enduring emphasis on temporality in social and cultural theory, Doreen Massey argues that Bergsonian preoccupations with duration are a chief causal factor. For Bergson, she suggests, 'the burning concern was with temporality, with duration; with a commitment to the experience of time and to resisting the evisceration of its internal continuity, flow and movement'.[12] For her, Bergson's unrelenting emphasis on temporality and duration was folded into a wider critique of 'psychophysics and the science of his day', where 'intellectualisation was taking the life out of experience' and scientific representation contained an 'over-insistent focus on the discrete at the expense of the continua'.[13]Ultimately, Bergson's emphasis on the temporal had 'devastating consequences for the way he conceptualised space'.[14] Here, Massey echoes Michel Foucault's markedly similar critique of historicism and his interrelated emphasis on the importance of spatial thinking. He offers the question

> did it start with Bergson or before? Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic.[15]

Within Bergson's model, spatialisation is equated with representation and, consequently, with a negative 'fixation of meaning'.[16]

Soja, while not engaging with Bergsonian conceptions of duration directly, largely echoes the general sentiment of Massey's argument, suggesting

> an essentially historical epistemology continues to pervade the critical consciousness of modern social theory… This enduring epistemological presence has preserved a privileged place for the 'historical imagination' in defining the very nature of critical insight and interpretation.[17]

For Soja, it thus becomes important to understand such enduring historicism as an 'overdeveloped historical contextualisation of social life and social theory that actively submerges and peripheralises the geographical or spatial imagination'.[18] Consequently, with the dominance of such historicism and the interrelated uptake of Bergsonian duration, there has been, for Massey, an

> association between the spatial and the fixation of meaning. Representation – indeed conceptualisation – has been conceived of as spatialisation … tam[img] the spatial into the textual and the conceptual.[19]

Thus, Foucault, Massey, and Soja all emphasise the manner in which spatiality and spatial thinking has been 'peripheralised', 'fixed', and equated with the representational, precisely through the dominance of theories of historicism and duration.

What is the theoretical locus behind this rethinking of the spatial and temporal? Both Massey and Soja are heavily indebted to the thinking of Henri Lefebvre when defining their approaches to such theoretical frameworks. For example, Soja suggests

> only a few particularly vigorous voices resonated through the still hegemonic historicism of the past twenty years to pioneer the development of postmodern geography. The most persistent, insistent, and consistent of these spatializing voices belonged to the French Marxist philosopher, Henri Lefebvre ... [and] his critical theorization of the social production of space.[20]

Lefebvre, in his essay 'Space: Social Product and Use Value', defines his conceptualisation of space as a social product, suggesting that the spatial 'is social: it involves assigning more or less appropriated places to social relations ... social space has thus always been a social product'.[21] As Marion Roberts suggests,

> the basis of Lefebvre's ideas was that space is socially produced: that it is not a given but produced socially. Every social formation, that is every principal type of society produces a spatiality.[22]

For Harvey, it was Lefebvre's concept of the 'right to the city' that influenced his early work on the spatio-political. As Harvey suggests, this is a

> right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanisation.[23]

Thus, for him, there is an undeniably social and collective agency behind any potential transformation of contested spatialities. Consequently, we can see the impact of Lefebvre's model of socially-produced space on a number of key spatial thinkers. Lefebvre's model will be turned to in more detail during the analysis of *Toponimia*, as it can productively be mapped onto Perel's spatio-political formal construction.

It is important to note that while these scholars aim to assert the need to embrace a critical spatial perspective, they do not wish to simply reject the historical or temporal. As Soja suggests, 'foregrounding a spatial perspective

does not represent a rejection of historical and sociological reasoning'.[24] Indeed, Soja – particularly in the introduction to *Postmodern Geographies* – warns against 'creating the unproductive aura of an anti-history', calling instead for 'a more flexible and balanced critical theory that re-entwines the making of history with the social production of space, with the construction and configuration of human geographies'.[25] Similarly, Massey suggests that 'time and space must be thought together ... the imagination of one will have repercussions for the imagination of the other and ... space and time are implicated in each other'.[26] Consequently, within the spatial models offered by both, there is not simply a rejection of the historical or temporal; rather they become interwoven into their theorisations. For example, Massey, dissatisfied with this enduring equation of the spatial with the discrete and representative, aims to insert conceptions of duration and temporality into the very fabric of her spatial thinking. She argues for a conception of

> space as the dimension of multiple trajectories, a simultaneity of stories-so-far. Space as the dimension of a multiplicity of durations. The problem has been that the old chain of meaning – space – representation – stasis – continues to wield its power.[27]

Consequently, for Massey, once we move away from a mode of thought that sees the spatial as simply a mirror of the representational, we can begin to apprehend the socio-political potentiality of spatial thinking. To further explore the emphasis placed on an interrelation between the temporal and spatial, let us return to Soja. Reflecting on the spatial turn in social and cultural theory, Soja suggests that this movement 'represents a growing shift away from an era when spatial thinking was subordinated to historical thinking, toward one in which the historical and spatial dimensions of whatever subject you are looking at take on equal and interactive significance'.[28] For Soja, the socio-spatial is predicated upon an interactivity between the temporal and the spatial. Through the triadic formulation of 'spatial processes, spatial consciousness, and spatial development', Soja offers the notion of 'spatial justice', where thinking spatially allows for the creation of 'strategic pathways for reclaiming and maintaining an active and successful democratic politics, the foundation for achieving justice and reducing oppression and exploitation of all kinds'.[29]

Harvey, in his book *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*, has also been keen to push the importance of an interactive relationship between the spatial and temporal. As he suggests,

our sense of who we are, where we belong and what our obligations encompass – in short, our identity – is profoundly affected by our sense of location in space and time. In other words, we broadly locate our identity in terms of space … and time… Crises of identity arise out of strong phases of time-space compression.[30]

Thus, for Harvey, the politics of identity are tied up in both the spatial and the temporal. More specifically, it is moments of 'time-space compression' that significantly alter political identity formation. Ultimately, for Massey, Soja, and Harvey alike, spatial thinking has to enter into an interactive relationship with temporal and historical modes of thought.

Before examining *Toponimia* in more detail, exploring its productive connections to both the spatial turn in social and cultural theory and the wider spatio-political trend in experimental nonfiction cinema, it is necessary to sketch out the way in which film and media scholarship has typically engaged with theoretical conceptualisations of space, place, and landscape at a more general discursive level.

Space, place, and landscape in film and media studies

One of the most pervasive trends of film and media studies scholarship is to assess the function of spatiality and landscape in relation to narrative cinema. For example, as Martin Lefebvre suggests, landscape in narrative cinema has the ability to 'interrupt the forward drive and flow of narrative with "distracting" imagery … thus replacing narrativised setting with visual attractions and unwanted moments of pictorial contemplation'.[31] In addition, Elena Gorfinkel and John David Rhodes – in their co-edited volume *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image* – cite Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film*, in which 'Kracauer wonders if the "small units" of contingent, material existence captured on and by film have a power over and above their service and enchainment to a film's plot-driven, narrative project'.[32] Consequently, while both of these authors point towards the transcendent and transformative potential of landscape, place and the spatial in relation to the moving image, it is narrative cinema that is their primary area of interest and investigation. As a result, the roles of place and landscape exist in a subservient position to the film's narrative, able at times to exceed its 'flow' and 'enchainment', but only in 'small units' or as 'unwanted moments'.[33]

This subservient positioning of spatiality in relation to the cinematic is particularly curious when we consider Mark Shiel's two-part proposition

that 'the increasing prominence given to space and spatialisation in the recent study of culture and society has been a profoundly important development and … cinema is the ideal cultural form through which to examine spatialisation precisely because of [its] status as a peculiarly spatial form of culture'.[34] As Sheil continues on to suggest, cinema is 'more a spatial system than a textual system: that spatiality is what makes it different and, in this context, gives it a special potential to illuminate the lived spaces of the city and urban societies, allowing for a full synthetic understanding of cinematic theme, form, and industry in the context of global capitalism'.[35] Here, Sheil points towards how we can productively think through the cinematic in a spatial manner, moving beyond those analyses that see space and place as only an occasional and interruptive force within the context of narrative practices. The aim of this article, through its analysis of Perel's film and its spatio-political logic, is to shift the discursive focus on place and landscape away from its 'interruptive' function within narrative cinema to a focus on its *structuring potential* within such experimental nonfiction work.

Another recurring trend within film and media studies scholarship is a focus on the relationship between the cinematic and the city space. For example, Mark Sheil is concerned with the relationship 'between the most important cultural form – cinema – and the most important form of social organization – the city – in the twentieth century … as this relationship operates and is experienced in society as a lived social reality'.[36] Examining the simultaneous (and certainly interrelated) rise of modern urban experience and the cinematic institution has been a common thread in discourse examining film's engagement with the spatial. For example, and in a similar fashion to Sheil, Lawrence Webb has suggested that 'the shifting landscapes and cultural formations of the city became a direct inspiration for filmmakers, who sought novel ways of constructing and presenting cinematic space, revised and remade genres, and developed new modes of narrative'.[37] These two examples are thus representative of a larger trend in film and media studies, where a comparative analysis of the socio-spatial and the cinematic is typically undertaken through purely urbanist and city-bound lenses. However, as Soja suggests, 'the impressive impact of urbanisation is not confined to the formal administrative boundaries of the city … the urban condition has extended its influence to all areas: rural, suburban, metropolitan, exurban, even wilderness, parkland, desert, tundra, and rain forest'.[38] Thus, we must take account of the far-reaching influence of urbanism beyond the limits of the metropolis.

The aim of this article is to examine how the spatio-political trend in experimental nonfiction practice is concerned with exposing the impacts of urbanism on specifically non-urban and rural spaces. For example, once we take into account issues such as the relocation and carceral organisation of proletarian rural communities (Perel's *Toponimia*), natural resource extraction and its concomitant displacement of First Nations communities (Kneubühler), and rural-urban economic instabilities resulting from unfettered free market neoliberalism (Keiller), we come to understand how the urban condition – and the centres of metropolitan governmentality tied up in such spaces – impacts (and occasionally structurally eclipses) all those areas beyond the 'formal administrative boundaries of the city'.

Toponimia and the politics of space

Let us now turn to Perel's film, a work through which we can root a number of the spatio-political tendencies mapped out above. As Neil Young suggests, Tucuman 'was the location of an armed rebellion of mountain-dwelling peasants [led primarily by the Guevarist guerrilla group the People's Revolutionary Army (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo)] in the early 1970's, crushed in brutal fashion by the country's military during what was officially known as "Operation Independence" (Operativo Independencia)'.[39] This was the first large-scale military operation to take place during the Dirty War (Guerra Sucia), a period of state terror in Argentina from approximately 1974 to 1983. Known officially as the Process of National Reorganisation (Proceso de Reorganización Nacional), the conflict was one of the first instances where the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance (Alianza Anticomunista Argentina) – formed in 1973 during the rule of Isabel Perón and which united a number of military units and rightist death squads under a single title – actively sought to eradicate left-wing guerillas and leftist political organisations such as the People's Revolutionary Army. By 1983 the conflict's death toll was estimated to stand at between 10,000 and 30,000. As Young continues on to suggest, 'to prevent the repetition of such an uprising, the surviving indigenous population was relocated to the four new settlements where they could be more easily kept under surveillance and thus controlled'.[40] Part of the larger military-sanctioned 'Rural Relocation Plan' (Plan de Reubicación Rural), each town was named after a prominent member of the state military who had died during Operativo Independen-

cia: Capitán Cáceres, Soldado Maldonado, Sargento Moya, and Teniente Berdina.

Fig. 1: An aerial photograph of one of the villages.

Toponimia is divided into four chapters, each focusing on one of the four villages. Perel employs a rigorous formal structure, with each chapter consisting of 'sixty-eight shots lasting fifteen seconds apiece'.[41] The ten initial shots in each chapter present 'excerpts from official documents relating to the settlement's founding', while the remaining 58 visually map out each of the villages as they exist today.[42] With the construction of each village being near identical, the film cycles through the same setups for each of the live action shots across the four locations. For example, we find identical setups that depict markedly similar gateways, roads, and monuments across the four locations. In addition to these four meticulously-organised chapters, a 22-shot prologue offers further archival evidence of the villages' construction. The following images and text are taken from the urban planning documents presented within this prologue.
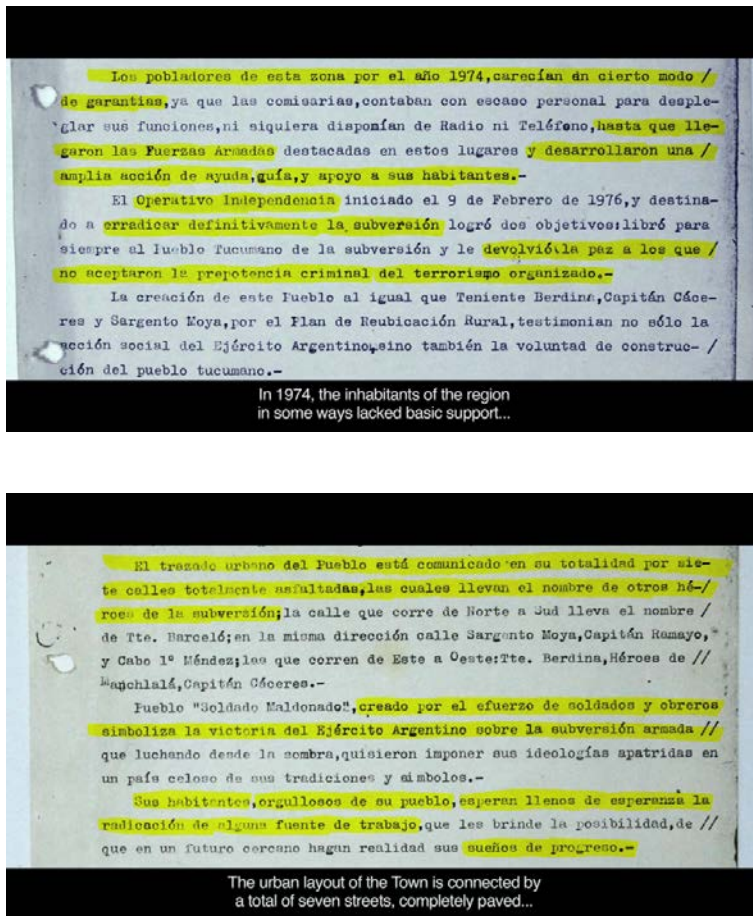
Fig. 2, 3: Highlighted planning documents from the prologue.

In 1974, the inhabitants of the region lacked basic support until the armed forces arrived and developed a broad action plan of assistance, guidance, and support for residents. 'Operation Independence' completely eradicated the subversion, returning peace to those who did not accept the criminal arrogance of organised terrorism. The 'Rural Relocation Plan' had a primary objective to centralise the scattered population and to stop the subversive action that was developed with the support of the dissemination by inhabitants of the Tucuman hills. The constructions are modern and urbanised. The homes are distributed among four rectangular blocks, seventy-eight homes … The urban layout of the town is connected by a total of seven streets, completely paved each named for a hero of the subversion. Created by the efforts of soldiers and workers, it symbolises the victory of the Ar-

gentine Army over the armed subversion. Its inhabitants, proud of their town, wait, full of hope, for the establishment of some source of work … dreams of progress.

While attempting to espouse a rhetoric of community cohesion and collective struggle – think, for example, of phrases such as 'the inhabitants, proud of their towns, wait, full of hope, for the establishment of some source of work … [and] dream of progress' – the planning documents presented by the film are in fact ideologically shot through with the military dictatorship's desires for social suppression and containment, aiming to 'centralise the scattered population' and 'return peace to those who do not accept the criminal arrogance of organised terrorism'. Additionally, various visual documents of the villages are presented in this prologue – blue prints, architectural plans, maps – indicating how these social spaces were to be organised in such a way as to maximise surveillance and control. For example, two archival images from this opening section underscore the panoptic and carceral organisation of the four villages, which are structured in a grid-like manner around a central watchtower.

Fig. 4: Another aerial photograph of one of the villages, with the watchtower at the centre.

Fig. 5: A map indicating the regimented subdivision of land within Soldado Maldonado.

Consequently, within this opening sequence a clear disjuncture develops between the socially-progressive and liberatory rhetoric espoused by the military dictatorship and the panoptic and carceral social spaces they fabricate. Furthermore, the rigorous formal style employed by Perel aims in particular ways to echo not only the rigidity of these fabricated social spaces but, concomitantly, the military dictatorship's ideological and spatial desires for control and surveillance. As critic Michael Pattison suggests, *Toponimia* 'imposes (as might a fascist dictatorship) mathematical precision onto pre-existing landscapes that are at once geographically disparate and ideologically linked, fragmenting each space into images that are echoed from one numbered chapter to the next'.[43] As such, it is arguable that the mathematical – and arguably dictatorial – formal structure employed by Perel functions as somewhat of an ideological corollary to the panoptic and carceral construction of these post-revolutionary social spaces in Tucuman province. Fundamentally, there is a conceptual mirroring between the formal structure of the film and the panoptic and carceral organisation of the four villages.

Here, it is worth pausing briefly to more concretely delineate the boundaries of Perel's formal-spatial construction, and examine how it mirrors the ideological desire for control and suppression by the military dictatorship. To draw together such formal and ideological elements, it is productive to turn once more to Lefebvre's theoretical framework of space as a social product. Returning to such a concept is also useful as it structures and

undergirds the theoretical frameworks of an array of the spatial thinkers examined above. For Lefebvre, there is a tripartite division of social space: conceived space, lived space, and perceived space. Conceived space can be understood as the conceptualisations and representations of space within dominant social groups and spheres, such as urban planners.[44] Lived space is constituted by spatial representations 'which ordinary people make in living their lives, the mental constructs with which they approach the physical world'.[45] Perceived space is 'the practical basis of the perception of the outside world' and is also intimately related to Lefebvre's notion of 'spatial practice', which is constituted by activities in a person's day-to-day life that are determined by particular social, political, and economic conditions and contingencies.[46] As Doreen Massey has noted, there are marked connections between the models of lived and perceived space, both of which arise from the daily inhabitation of – and material engagement with – a particular socio-spatial formation.[47] Consequently, the central division to be found within this tripartite framework is between conceived space – the somewhat abstracted strategy of (re)organising a particular socio-spatial formation, typically influenced by particular institutional forms of governmentality – and the more intimately wedded (and potentially liberatory) notions of lived and perceived space.

Such a socio-spatial framework can be productively mapped onto the spatio-political formalism of Perel's film. Providing a further delineation of the notion of conceived space, Stephen Connolly has suggested that it is constituted primarily by 'techniques of measuring, enumeration and apportioning space by the spatial disciplines'.[48] It is arguable that both the presentation of planning materials (drawings, maps, letters, etc.) and the rigorous formal construction employed by Perel across the later live action sequences expose the 'conceived' aspects of this social space and, concomitantly, the *governmental* imperatives of the military dictatorship in conceiving and fashioning such carceral and panoptic enclosures. The notion of governmentality is defined by Foucault as 'the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population'.[49] Productive connections can thus be made between the conceived and governmental dimensions of such spatial constructions. Therefore, we can return to Pattison's earlier contentions about the mathematical and dictatorial structure of the film through a more specifically spatial lens, bringing it into dialogue with Lefebvre's notion of an

ideologically-constructed 'conceived' space. Ultimately, Perel's formal structure aims to expose such conceived spaces and their embedded forms of governmentality, thus highlighting the panoptic and carceral enclosure of the rural proletariat within Tucuman province.

However, it is crucial to note that by utilising this mathematical (or arguably dictatorial) formal structure to examine the *contemporary* social milieu of the four villages, a powerful juxtaposition is set up between the historical desire for control/surveillance and contemporary attempts to reclaim such social spaces. With vandalised government monuments and community appropriation of state buildings in evidence throughout these documentary sequences, there is a growing apperception of the liberatory transformations of these suppressive spaces post-dictatorship. Young highlights this juxtaposition, suggesting that 'while the government may have succeeded in quelling the troublesome populace, the condition of the villages forty years on displays the triumph of human individualism over externally imposed uniformity'.[50] Thus, while Perel's structuring logic arguably aims to reflect the military dictatorship's desire for rigid control over these fabricated social spaces in Tucuman province, the shots of the villages today undermine such a sense of oppression, indicating the ways in which the community has reshaped and reappropriated its social milieu.

The manner in which *Toponimia* juxtaposes conflicting approaches to these social spaces – the historical desire for control/surveillance and contemporary attempts at reclamation and reappropriation – arguably lends the film an almost *heterotopic* dimension. Foucault, defining the heterotopia, suggests

> we live inside a set of relations that delineate sites that are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another... The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.[51]

Thus, the heterotopia is a non-hegemonic and heterogeneous space that contains connections to other places and embedded temporalities that are not immediately readable within material social space. One of Foucault's 'principles' for heterotopic space – which is particularly applicable to *Toponimia* and its manifestation of different constructions of social space – is the suggestion that 'a society ... can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to

the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or an-
other'.[52] Consequently, the ability of a society to significantly transform
the function of a particular socio-spatial location is a concept that can pro-
ductively be mapped onto the four villages in Tucuman; here we find
communities that have fundamentally undermined the previously milita-
ristic and carceral function of their social spaces.

Foucault's notion of the heterotopia is very much interrelated with both
Massey and Soja's discourse on spatiality. For example, earlier in the same
piece Foucault suggests,

> the great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history… The pre-
> sent epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of
> simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of
> the side-by-side, of the dispersed.[53]

Clear connections can be made here between Foucault's 'epoch of space'
and Massey's 'space as the dimension of a multiplicity of durations'. Else-
where, Massey has suggested the relationship between the spatial and the
durational is key to understanding how such a filmic spatio-politcal aesthet-
ic functions. Discussing the extended examinations of space that structure
such works, Massey suggests,

> these long takes give us, in the midst of the rush and flow of globalisation, a certain
> stillness. But they are not stills. They are about duration. They tell us of 'becoming',
> in place.[54]

Fundamentally, for both, when thinking spatially we must remain attentive
to the myriad of historical and durational temporalities that have informed
and continue to inform the organisation of social space. It is the contention
of this article that Perel's filmic practice aims to juxtapose different histori-
cal and ideological constructions of space, bumping them up against one
another to highlight their shifting socio-political configurations of such
spatialities – from military-conceived to contemporaneously appropriated
and reclaimed. Such an approach echoes both Massey's and Foucault's theo-
ries in productive ways. For example, we are presented with a variety of
artefacts throughout the film – busts, religious statues etc., leftover from the
time of the dictatorship – which are either significantly damaged or com-
pletely destroyed. While the busts of Capitán Cáceres, Soldado Maldonado,
and Teniente Berdina are still relatively intact, only the plinth upon which
the bust of Sargento Moya should sit remains. Graffiti also becomes a recur-

ring motif throughout the film, once again further evincing the manner in which the community has placed its indelible mark on such social spaces post-dictatorship. Such images of reclamation and appropriation can be mapped onto the 'lived' and 'perceived' dimensions of Lefebvre's tripartite formulation of social space, where a sense of everyday co-habitation and community building works in opposition to the militaristic and panoptic ideology that originally underpinned the villages 'conceived' spatial structuring.

Fig. 6: Sargento Moya's empty plinth.

Fig. 7: Graffiti as a recurring motif.

However, it is also necessary to examine and imbricate the uneven econom-
ic and political machinations – both historically and contemporaneously in
Argentina – that have helped to facilitate the virtually unhindered commu-
nity restructuring of these social spaces. Tucuman province has consistently
been one of Argentina's most impoverished provinces, lacking both ade-
quate government investment and infrastructural support. Writing in 1968,
María Teresa Gramuglio and Nicolás Rosa suggest Tucuman had

> been subjected to a long tradition of underdevelopment and economic oppression.
> The current Argentine government, insistent upon a disastrous colonial policy,
> closed most of the Tucuman sugar refineries, a vital force in the province's econ-
> omy. The result has been widespread hunger and unemployment, with all its at-
> tendant social consequences.[55]

Such socio-economic conditions continue into the present day, with much
of the provincial economy precariously relying on minimal state subsidies
to maintain this 'unprofitable but labour intensive' sugar industry.[56]
Therefore, it is easy to see how the community appropriation of these au-
thoritarian spaces post-dictatorship was facilitated by the fact that the gov-
ernment – historically and contemporaneously – has paid little social or
economic attention to the area. Thus, another layer of heterotopic spatio-
politics is imbricated into *Toponimia*, with the neoliberal metropolitan cen-
tres of governmentality socio-economically neglecting the region and thus
facilitating the rural proletariat's virtually unhindered (re)appropriation of
their social space. Here we can once again imbricate Soja's claims about the
impact of urban neoliberal centres on non-urban space; uneven develop-
ment and strategic neglect are indicative of how the 'urban condition has
extended its influence to all areas'.

Conclusion

This article has argued that through the spatio-political aesthetic deployed
by *Toponimia*, a juxtaposition is set up between the historical desire for au-
thoritarian control of social space and contemporary attempts for spatial
liberation. However, it has also gestured towards the uneven geographical
development between urban centres and rural periferies that created the
economic and infrastructural void for such strategies of (re)appropriation.
Thus, *Toponimia* imbricates a number of contrasting socio-spatial for-

mations, allowing us to perceive both the forms of governmentality and the broader uneven economic power relations that have structured the (re)creation of such heterotopic spaces.

More broadly, this article has also outlined how a range of socio-spatial theories can productively be read alongside a heterogeneous body of experimental nonfiction works, all of which adopt a similar spatio-political aesthetic that variously aims to critique the destructive forces of authoritarian state governance, global capitalism, and neoliberal political hegemony. Through such a theoretical lens, we can begin to delineate a set of works which attempt to tackle Foucault's claim that 'a whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers – from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat'.[57] Indeed, many more works of cinema and their imbricated socio-spatial formations remain to be explored.

Author

Patrick Brian Smith is a Film and Moving Image Studies PhD student in the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema at Concordia University, Montreal. His research interests include experimental nonfiction cinema, the politics of space, Marxist geography, precarious labour, and the essay film. He is currently working on a thesis project titled 'The Politics of Spatiality in Experimental Non-Fiction Cinema' which maps out the presence of a spatio-political tendency within a diverse corpus of contemporary experimental nonfiction films.

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Notes

[1]   Foucault 1980, p. 149.

[2]   Soja 2010, p. 16.

[3]   Keiller 2009, p. 413.

[4]   Furuhata 2007, p. 348.

[5]   Keiller 2014, p. 10.

[6]   Soja 2011, p. 6.

[7]   Massey 2005, p. 9.

[8]   Soja 2011, p. 6.

[9]   Sheil 2001, p. 5.

[10]   Soja 2011, p. 2.

[11]   Ibid., p. 3.

[12]   Massey 2005, p. 20.

[13]   Ibid., p. 20.

[14]   Ibid., p. 21.

[15]   Foucault 1980, p. 70.

[16]   Massey 2005, p. 20.

[17]   Soja 2011, p. 10.

[18]   Ibid., p. 15.

[19]   Massey 2005, p. 20.

[20]   Soja 2011, p. 16.

[21]   Lefebvre 2009, pp. 186-187.

[22]   Roberts, 'Lefebvre and the History of Space'.

[23]   Harvey 2008, p. 23.

[24]   Ibid., p. 17.

[25]   Ibid., p. 12.

[26]   Massey 2005, p. 18.

[27]   Ibid., p. 24.

[28]   Soja 2010, p. 15.

[29]   Ibid., p. 7.

[30]   Harvey 2001, p. 124.

[31]   Lefebvre 2011, p. 64.

[32]   Rhodes & Gorfinkel 2011, p. vii.

[33]   Ibid.

[34]   Shiel 2001, p. 5.

[35]   Ibid., pp. 5-6.

[36]   Ibid., p. 6.

[37]   Webb 2015, p. 11.

[38]   Soja 2010, p. 6.

[39]   Young 2016.

[40]   Ibid.

[41]   Ibid.

[42]   Ibid.

[43] Pattison 2016.

[44] Roberts, 'Lefebvre and the History of Space'.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Lefebvre 1991, p. 40.

[47] Roberts, 'Lefebvre and the History of Space'.

[48] Connolly 2016.

[49] Foucault 2007, p. 88.

[50] Young, 2016.

[51] Foucault 1984, p. 3.

[52] Ibid., p. 5.

[53] Ibid., p. 1.

[54] Massey, 'Landscape/space/politics: an essay'.

[55] Gramuglio & Rosa 2004, p. 321.

[56] Vener, 'Rural Poverty and Labor Markets in Argentina'.

[57] Foucault 1984, p. 3.