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2018

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3451>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Smith, Patrick: Evidentiary aesthetics: Landscapes of violence at RIDM 2017. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 7 (2018), Nr. 2, S. 273–279. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3451>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://necsus-ejms.org/evidentiary-aesthetics-landscapes-of-violence-at-ridm-2017/>

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Evidentiary aesthetics: Landscapes of violence at RIDM 2017

NECSUS 7 (2), Autumn 2018: 273–279

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Keywords: festival, film, landscapes, RIDM, violence

‘Space ... is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out.’ – Doreen Massey [1]

Founded in 1998 by a group of Québécois documentary filmmakers, the Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montréal (RIDM) has become one of Canada’s most established documentary film festivals. Since its inception, the festival programming team – currently led by Bruno Dequen – has consistently sought to expand conceptual boundaries of the non-fiction form, promoting aesthetically and politically radical forms of moving image practice that force us to reconsider precisely what constitutes contemporary documentary. In addition, recent iterations of the festival have also provided audiences with an ever-expanding number of supplementary events – workshops, master classes, debates, roundtables, forums – that allow a collective dialogue to emerge around the aesthetic and political directions of the non-fiction image. This trend has continued over recent editions of the festival, with RIDM offering an increasing space for works (short, mid-length, and feature-length) that might not readily find exhibition within more commercially-oriented non-fiction film festivals.

Under the political hegemony of neoliberalism, cultural forums are increasingly instrumentalised to alternatively reinforce the structural dominance of late capitalism or prop up the hegemonic ideologies of contemporary liberalisms (or oftentimes both). During its nineteen-year history, RIDM has frequently attempted to resist such processes of instrumentalisation and commercial reorientation. Emblematic of this resistance is the festival’s recurring ‘RIDM in Prison’ outreach program. Starting in 2012, this strand of

the festival has regularly screened a series of works within a number of prisons in the Greater Montreal area. These screenings are typically followed by a forum and discussion with a member of the film's crew and a critical writing workshop, which allows inmates to engage in discussions comparable to those outside the limits of the prison space. While this strand of the festival could easily be dismissed as a form of 'cultural pacification' – providing inmates with a distorted sense of socio-cultural 'accessibility' that is otherwise structurally denied – the participatory and creative dimension of the outreach program potentially creates a site for solidarity and political autonomy. For example, since 2011 the festival has assisted the Joliette Institution for Women (75km northeast of Montreal) in organising a jury for the Women Inmates' Award. Five female jurors judge eight films from the festival, with the winning film receiving the award on the closing night. Consequently, it is arguable that the RIDM team is not only concerned with fashioning a curatorial practice that interrogates the aesthetics and politics of the documentary form, they also aim to rethink the geographic and spatial sites where such work is traditionally presented and judged. Moreover, programs such as the Women Inmates' Award also help to rethink the very politics of curation itself. What structural forms of inequality dictate who functions as society's cultural gatekeepers? More specifically, who curates, and why? Thus, the politics of curation extend beyond the textual – addressing both the role of programming and the spaces of exhibition where such work finds its audience. As a result, perceiving prison spaces as legitimate sites for forum-creation becomes a radical move in and of itself. This rethinking of the spatial and ethical politics of both exhibition and curation is something that more festivals need to confront.

This emphasis on the politics of spatiality also permeated the festival's 2017 program, becoming a prevalent thematic trend across its ten-day duration. Working at the intersection of the forensic and the spatial, several films screened at the festival's 19th edition were concerned with exploring the geographical and evidentiary potentialities of the moving image. For example, 'The State of the World' and 'Sense of Place' were two thematic sections that aimed to bring together works focused primarily on space and place as loci for political and evidentiary interrogation. As Erika Balsom has suggested, a number of non-fiction practitioners have returned to confront the basic facets of what constitutes 'documentary realism' – pushing back against recent trends that have privileged abstraction, pastiche, and self-reflexivity; generated, perhaps primarily, by postmodernism's 'liquidation of referentiality'. [2]

While offering a slightly reductive binary between ‘realism’ and ‘postmodern artificiality’, Balsom’s provocation does point to a resurgent interest in evidentiary and investigative aesthetics within non-fiction moving image practice. As Balsom suggests, ‘these films retreat from any posture of domination to instead provide thick description of the irreducible complexity of the world, its vital excessiveness and ambiguity’.[3] What we could perhaps crudely term as a desire for an ‘aesthetics of the evidentiary’ has also been reflected in other areas of contemporary artistic practice. For example, the 2017 exhibition *Evidentiary Realism* brought together a range of artists concerned with examining the ‘aesthetics of secrecy, complexity, rhetoric, and the control of social, economic, and technological systems’.[4] As suggested by the curator Paolo Cirio,

the contemporary features of the social landscape are unintelligible at first glance. Although we see the shocking results of our social reality, we are nonetheless often unable to see the systems and processes that generate such conditions ... realism today can be conceptualized as an expansion of ways of seeing and portraying contemporary social complexities, while maintaining the concern of presenting subject matter factually within the aesthetics of visual language. [5]

Consequently, this turn towards evidentiary realism is preoccupied with visualising the social and material consequences of particular forms of control and violence, while additionally rendering visible the structures of power that have not only been intentionally occluded from sight, but which also structurally facilitate such forms of brutality.



Fig. 1: A still from Travis Wilkerson's *Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?*, 2017, Grasshopper Film.

Two works presented at RIDM 2017 share a close affinity with this investigatory and evidentiary impulse in contemporary non-fiction cinema: Eric Baudelaire's *Also Known As Jihadi* and Travis Wilkerson's *Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?* Additionally, within both these works the spatial and geographical become primary sites for such evidentiary work to be carried out. *Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?*, Wilkerson's seventh feature, examines the historical and contemporary landscapes of Alabama, attempting to render visible the social and political milieu that led his great-grandfather S.E. Branch to kill Bill Spann – an unarmed black man – in 1946. Wilkerson's film is centrally preoccupied with visualising the contemporary sites and spaces where this historical violence played out. His camera scours the landscape as though it were a political palimpsest; however, these historical layers of meaning are rendered co-present. Extended tracking shots down rural roads, the shooting of abandoned and foreclosed properties; this keen focus on the spatial serves to collapse past and present, suggesting perhaps that such violence is still encoded into the social and political environment of the southern States today. Indeed, Jonathan Rosenbaum, commenting on Wilkerson's photographing of the Alabaman landscape, suggests, 'entanglement is what this film and this state are all about – call it kudzu made flesh – and as many of the images reproduced here make clear, especially those just below, this is the condition of the American tragedy, the ties that bind and suffocate us'. [6]



Fig. 2: A still from Eric Baudelaire's *Also Known as Jihadi*, 2017, LUX Moving Image.

Similarly, Eric Baudelaire's *Also Known as Jihadi* surveys the landscapes of France, Turkey, Algeria, and Spain, attempting to understand the motivations of a young French man who allegedly went to fight for the Islamic State. Juxtaposed against protracted landscape shots of these various locales, Baudelaire presents us with judicial documents and testimony from the court proceedings that followed the young man's arrest. These documents present strong evidence of the racialised nature of state surveillance – suggesting, perhaps, that the fascism of the French state and the Islamic State are not so far apart. As Balsom suggests, *Also Known as Jihadi* 'is an open inquiry into how the media of law and documentary might – the conditional tense is fundamental – produce knowledge and how they might fail'.^[7] Several contemporary theorists – from Frederic Jameson and his notion of 'cognitive mapping' to Alberto Toscano and his formulation of mapping the 'social totality' – have tried to understand how aesthetic practices can be employed to expose the semi-discreet, yet interrelated, inner workings of late-capitalism, authoritarian state governance, neo-colonialism, illegal occupation and internment, natural resource extraction, indigenous displacement and gentrification/urban re-structuring. Moving image practice presents tools for exploring these processes of exploitation and injustice in inventive and radical ways; these tools are resources for bearing witness, and bringing into view, the voices of peoples and communities affected. These media forms offer significant powers of evidentiary and counter-forensic, spatial visualisation. Indeed, the title of Baudelaire's film is taken from Oshima Nagisa and Masao Adachi's 1969 film *AKA: Serial Killer*, a work which – in a similar manner to the theorisation of Jameson and Toscano – sought to reveal the inherent power relations built into the landscape through their formulation of a fūkeiron (landscape) theory. As Yuriko Furuhashi suggests, a focus on landscape and space in the fūkeiron 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 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'.^[8] Recently, in the work of non-fiction filmmakers and collectives such as Thomas Kneubühler, Ursula Biemann, Allan Sekula, James Bridle, Forensic Architecture, , Susan Schuppli, and Jonathan Perel, we have seen the cul-

tivation of investigative practices that attempt to unite the spatial and the evidentiary. Similarly, within both Wilkerson and Baudelaire's work, we see that the political interrogation of seemingly 'neutral' landscapes are a recurring trend in contemporary non-fiction practice – and RIDM is at the forefront of programming these radical forms of critique.

As suggested earlier, the festival's broad engagement with the ways contemporary power relations operate across material space has become a central concern at the level of both curation and exhibition. Programming works like those by Baudelaire and Wilkerson, alongside outreach initiatives such as RIDM in Prison, suggests that the festival's organisational team recognises that the spatial is an increasingly important site of political contestation and resistance – both at the level of curation and exhibition. The festival's spatial concern seems to mirror Edward Soja's famous maxim that 'relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life ... human geographies become filled with politics and ideology'.^[9] Indeed, the quote from Marxist geographer Doreen Massey that opened this review points towards something markedly similar. Space, seen as the product of 'relations-between' that are embedded in 'material practices' mirrors the socio-cultural role that the festival's forum creation is increasingly invested in. Thus, RIDM is a festival that recognises the importance of the spatial and geographical within its role as a cultural forum – programming works that interrogate the politics of spatiality, while also searching out alternate and oftentimes inaccessible spaces for their exhibition and further forum-creation. Of course, this is not to suggest that RIDM manages to completely disentangle itself from the neoliberal logic of contemporary cultural production. The annual Doc Circuit Montréal (DCM), Quebec's documentary forum co-founded with DOC Québec, adopts the now prevalent 'marketplace' festival model, with filmmakers vying for project funding from producers, distributors, and exhibitors. Thus, while we can reflect on the positive steps RIDM has taken to confront the political and ethical challenges of festival curation and exhibition, we must remain attentive to the structural and financial logic that underpins and facilitates such acts of limited, yet fundamentally necessary, resistance.

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Notes

- [1] Massey 2005, p. 9.
- [2] Balsom, 'The Reality-Based Community', *e-flux*.
- [3] Ibid.
- [4] Cirio et al. 2017, p. 7.
- [5] Ibid., p. 3.
- [6] Rosenbaum, 'Recommended Viewing (Alabama Apotheosis): Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?', *jonathanrosenbaum.com* .
- [7] Balsom.
- [8] Furuhata 2013, p. 348.
- [9] Soja 2011, p. 6.