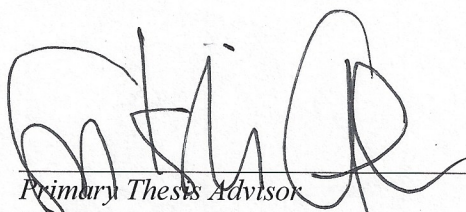


"SLOW" DOCUMENTARIES: THE LONG TAKE IN CONTEMPORARY NONFICTION  
FILMS

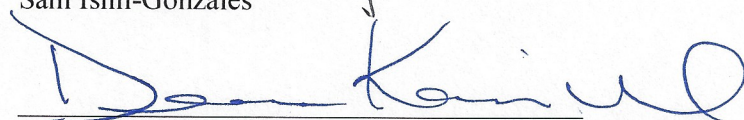
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## Abstract

This hybrid theory-practice project explores how documentary filmmakers create affective, sensorial images by foregrounding experience and duration through the use of the long take and how extended shots can return the audience gaze to inspire reflection, contemplation and meditation. Despite the ongoing fascination with slowness in cinema studies and the recent trend in experimental nonfiction film to foreground duration, few scholars engage in a discussion of temporality as it relates specifically to documentary film. The written portion of this project will address that lack of scholarship with a consideration of the philosophical implications of the use of the long take in documentary film and a structural analysis of the work of a number of contemporary nonfiction filmmakers. The accompanying film is an exercise in creating my own slow, contemplative, nonfiction film. The film, *A Midwest Story*, is a twenty-five-minute short that I shot and edited that attempts to demonstrate the ideas explored in this thesis in a practical form. It was shot in the town of DeKalb, Illinois, where I spent my childhood.

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## Section One: Introduction

As both a documentary film student and maker, I find myself frustrated with the way many of us tend to prioritize narrative content over film structure. When recounting recently seen documentaries, usually the first or second question we ask each other is, “what was it about?” I, too, am guilty of this borderline journalistic obsession with storyline and narrative, but such a narrow focus on subject matter is limiting – it implies that the quality of the film lies solely in the filmmaker’s ability to access a provocative topic and discounts that film is a privileged medium in its ability to evoke multiple layers of duration and experience. Independent filmmaker Jem Cohen summarized the situation in a December 2014 question and answer session at The New School, lamenting the great pressure on documentary filmmakers to choose interesting documentary subjects who possess a compelling “character arc.” Cohen wondered: if the trajectory of a real-life story is so predictable, why make a documentary film? For Cohen, the “home base” of documentary is the “idea that we engage with the world through filmmaking and it is a world that we will see unfold as we make our project.”

What Cohen called “character arc” is comparative to the film’s diegetic world – the running, screened time in which the film’s constructed plot or argument unfolds. Narrative lines are articulated to varying degrees in documentary films, as in fiction films. But, when we go to the cinema, we experience layers of time that go beyond the diegetic time of the film. There is also the time in which the image was recorded and indexed onto film or digital video. And a third layer of time is that of the spectator, who is sitting in the theater experiencing these two other layers of time in the present. Many conventional documentary films prioritize the first two layers of time: the time in which the image was recorded and/or the way those images of the past are reshaped into the time of the film’s constructed narrative or argument. As I will discuss

further in this essay, prioritizing these two types of time leads to fewer questions about the documentary film's authenticity and status as a historical record by foregrounding the time of the image and/or keeps the audience entertained and informed by foregrounding the time of the narrative. But, a nonconventional use of temporality can encourage the spectator to actively consider the present moment and create a powerful and affective exchange between these three layers of time, perhaps provoking a non-reified and more deeply affective response in the viewer than with the use of more conventional techniques.

This essay will explore one way for nonfiction films to create a robust exchange between the three layers of cinematic time: to slow a film down and foreground the passage of time through the use of the long take. By using the long take, slow, contemplative documentary films can allow the present-tense viewer a nuanced, complicated engagement with layers of the past, as the extended time allows the audience a space to consider the materiality of the medium and the act of image creation (Marks *Touch* xi). Slow documentaries that rely on the use of the long take, such as James Benning's *Ruhr* (2009) Chantal Akerman's *Lá-Bas* (2006), and Nikolaus Geyrhalter's *Our Daily Bread* (2005), allow the viewer ample time to experience and explore the situations and events represented onscreen to make a more open, affective (and, subsequently, effective) nonfiction film. By de-emphasizing the time of the narrative, long take cinema allows filmmakers to respect irreducible meanings, as opposed to distilling complex situations into linear stories. This does not mean slow documentary filmmakers have a more objective stance or more authority to represent Truth (with a capital T). But documentary films that emphasize duration via the use of the long take can create a more meditative, contemplative and sensory viewing experience that, I believe, can be particularly valuable for documentary films.

While slowing down is not a groundbreaking or new technique – Akerman, Benning and Peter Hutton have been making nonfiction long take cinema since the 1970s – the structural use of the long take in documentary film has gained momentum and attention in recent years. Over the last four decades, the films of Akerman and Benning and Hutton got play in art house theaters and cinema studies courses but generally remained outside the purview of more mainstream audiences. Today, long take cinema is beginning to reach beyond the art house crowd, as a spate of recent works from a new generation of slow nonfiction filmmakers have been embraced by the larger audience of documentary film consumers. In the 2000s and 2010s, slow nonfiction films such as *Our Daily Bread*, *Manufactured Landscapes* (2007) and *Sweetgrass* (2009) earned accolades at prestigious film festivals and found wider post-theatrical distribution on platforms like Amazon and Netflix. This trend toward slowness follows an interest in temporality in cinema studies in the last few decades, beginning with philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s two-volume exploration of cinematic time: *Cinema I: The Movement-Image* (1983) and *Cinema II: The Time-Image* (1985). Despite the recent interest in slow documentary filmmaking and ongoing scholarly interest in the philosophical implications of cinematic time, the intersection of the two trends is under-explored territory, a lacuna I will address with this work.

The essay is divided into eight parts. In the subsequent section, I provide a working definition of slow documentary films with an overview of recent long take cinema scholarship. Slow cinema is often defined in contrast to the speed of mainstream cinema, and section three of this essay explores how slow nonfiction films work against the norms of conventional documentary film editing. Slow cinema is a blanket label for a certain type of art house film and

does not distinguish between nonfiction or fiction film, but, as I will argue in section three, the use of the long take can produce powerful effects for documentary film in particular.

Section four of this essay will explore the philosophical implications of the use of the long take in the documentary image and the potential of this structural device to merge the diegetic onscreen time of the documentary, the historical time in which the film was recorded and the present time in which the viewer is watching the film. I will discuss why this simple – but radical – act of slowing down could be seen as risky for a nonfiction film. The long take can open up a film in a way that respects the documentary's link to the real-life experience it was created to share, since, as Cohen mentioned, real life is never neatly contained by a narrative or character arc. On the other hand, connecting the past to the present moment through the use of the long take could be seen as a threatening device that would lose the viewer by allowing *temps mort* (dead time) into the diegetic world of the film.

The next three sections of the essay engage in a formal analysis with a focus on how three contemporary slow nonfiction filmmakers experiment with temporality and use the long take in their own work: the aforementioned filmmakers Benning, Akerman and Geyrhalter. Each creates markedly different films in his or her own style, but, they share the common thread of a persistent interest in using sustained shots. Benning and Akerman avoid the more conventional documentary tropes of direct narrative, overt argument and exposition, as does Geyrhalter, particularly in *Our Daily Bread* and *Abendland* (2011).<sup>1</sup> Instead of the narrative connections foregrounded in more conventional nonfiction films, these filmmakers repeatedly choose to venture into more experimental ground with extreme shot duration and allow time for the viewer

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<sup>1</sup> Some of Geyrhalter's documentary films like *Pripyat* (1999) or *7915 KM* (2008) mix observational long takes and expository shots of talking heads. For the purposes of this paper I will focus on *Our Daily Bread* and *Abendland*, his two most experimental documentary films, both of which lack interviews and voiceover.

to develop a more nuanced relationship with the film and its subject matter. Slow documentary films (and slow films in general) have a deceptive simplicity: while the image onscreen may appear modest or mundane, these documentary films – like all documentary films – require the filmmaker to make very complex technical and structural and editorial choices. The final section of the paper is a conclusion and review of my own attempt to create a slow documentary film.

Before I proceed, it is necessary to try the slippery task of defining the documentary film. While it is difficult to contain the entirety of the genre in one description, I want to use documentary film scholar Bill Nichol's 1991 definition as a starting point: a documentary film is making "an argument about the world." This is in contrast to a fiction film, which instead tells a story about the world (*Representing Reality* 24-25).<sup>2</sup> Argument, as I use it here, is meant loosely, and could imply that the filmmaker is trying to persuade the viewer to take a specific action, as in an activist documentary, or asking that the viewer see and consider something, as in an observational documentary. The image in a documentary contains a trace of the historical, physical event, but it is not the event itself (Marks *Touch* x). Subsequently, a documentary cannot be an exact representation of reality. However, it can be a way for the viewer to move towards the experience of a historical time or event – historical as in a moment that has passed, not necessarily a culturally significant moment. While history is not repeatable, the documentary film attempts to bring the viewer into contact with a historical moment through the combination of images recorded by a camera, which, as a machine has a level of objective autonomy, and the framing and combining of those images by the filmmaker, who, as a human, exerts a perspective or point of view in production and post-production. The attempt to bring the viewer into contact with an experience of a historical moment achieves varying degrees of success in different films.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on why it can be problematic to define documentary film, see section four.

But the use of the long take always allows the viewer to consider the exchanges between these different processes and temporalities at work in the act of creating a documentary image.

## **Section Two: The Contemporary Slow Film Movement and the Documentary Image**

The phrase slow film (also sometimes called contemplative cinema or long take cinema) is somewhat unknown outside academia and circles of film enthusiasts and critics, among whom it has inspired a lively debate in recent years.<sup>3</sup> Slow films are experimental or art films, called slow or contemplative because these films have minimal narrative, stress the passage of time by using the long take to present unspectacular events as they unfold in real time, and tend toward stillness in shot composition (Flanagan *Slow Cinema* 63). Of course, long takes are sometimes used in more mainstream films, however, they usually present highly choreographed and action-packed sequences that progress the plot. Consider the three-minute tracking shot following Henry and Karen (Ray Liotta and Lorraine Bracco) as they enter a backdoor, pass through a fully staffed kitchen and into the glamorous Copacabana in Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990). Conversely, the propensity for stillness in slow cinema emphasizes the drama inherent in ordinary events, such as the way the light changes as the sun passes through clouds in one of the ten ten-minute shots in Benning's *TEN SKIES* (2004). In *Goodfellas*, the use of the long take foregrounds the time of the narrative by advancing the plot and the temporal realism of the expertly choreographed sequence draws the viewer deeper into the diegetic world of the film.

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<sup>3</sup> *Sight & Sound* editor Nick James called slow cinema "passive aggressive" in 2010 because, he argues, the mode is a time-wasting indulgence that has generally exhausted its progressive possibilities. This inspired a heated exchange between proponents of slow cinema and critics and bloggers who agree with James. For more on the debate, see Karl Schoonover's article "Wastrels of Time: Slow Cinema's Laboring Body," which summarizes the exchange and suggests there is always radical potential in showing activities that are generally considered wastes of time on the cinema screen.

But, the slowness of the long takes in *TEN SKIES* brings the third layer of cinematic temporality to the fore by emphasizing the time of the spectator. This pushes the viewer past absorption in narrative, history or the act of image creation to a zone of less intellectual certainty.

Slow cinema is not limited to a particular connection to historical events – the subgenre includes fiction and nonfiction films. And it is not limited to a particular culture or country – filmmakers from all over the world create slow films. Frequently cited contemporary slow cinema directors include artists like Akerman (from Belgium), Benning (from the U.S.) and also Pedro Costa (from Portugal), Achipatpong Weerasathakul (from Thailand), Béla Tarr (from Hungary), Abbas Kiarostami (from Iran), Gus Van Sant (also from the U.S.), and the number of directors working in this style continues to grow. The list of filmmakers is international, but slow films exist in contrast to more conventional Americanized/Hollywood films, for which the average shot length has steadily declined since the 1940s and 1950s, when it was 9-11 seconds (Flanagan *Slow Cinema* 10).

Slowness in film is not new; directors like Michelangelo Antonioni (who got his start in motion pictures by making documentaries), Luchino Visconti, Andrei Tarkovsky, Andy Warhol and other modernist directors made films with minimal narratives that used long takes to foreground the passage of time as early as the mid-twentieth century. But slow cinema reached enough of a critical mass in the last few decades that scholars like Jonathan Romney and Matthew Flanagan named the subgenre “slow film.” Romney, writing for *Sight & Sound*, explains that the early 2000s, “saw an increasing demand among cinephiles for films that are slow, poetic, contemplative – cinema that downplays event in favour of mood, evocativeness and an intensified sense of temporality.”

In his 2012 doctoral thesis, which exhaustively surveys slow cinema, Flanagan suggests that the minimalism of the subgenre is a reaction to the increasing speed and decreasing shot lengths of popular cinema, devices that typically leave little room for contemplation (24). Similarly, Romney says the success of slow films among critics and in film festivals may be a reaction to repetitive, codified commercial films and that spectators may seek the meditative experience of long take cinema as a spiritual alternative to the mainstream. Romney finds great value in slow cinema's ability to confront political and social issues by suspending the direct action-reaction responses provoked by more conventional, codified films. Also, I believe, the interest in minimalism could be seen as a way to react to the immediacy of images of current events with our modern, unlimited, access to information allowed by the internet and social media. I sympathize with the fear Laura U. Marks expresses in the introduction to her book *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*: "I worry that the information age is making us very good at symbolization, at the expense of bringing us into contact with that which we do not know and for which we have no categories" (xi).

In *Touch*, Marks describes how specific experimental films and multimedia artworks break down codified representations and cultural assumptions to allow each individual viewer access to a more personal, indeterminate zone (the aforementioned "that which we do not know and for which we have no categories"). Marks wrote this in 2002, before the phrase slow cinema delimited a specific subgenre. Yet her explanation of how some images can "unfold" layers of the past into contact with the present moment "to increase the surface area of experience" and reveal to each individual a different "continuity [she] had not foreseen" also functions as a description of how slow films can create an open-ended viewing experience.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I return to a discussion of Marks and further explore semiotics in section four.

Marks' description of layers of the past and present helps to illuminate Romney's claim that slow cinema has a unique value in its ability to represent complex political and social issues. Since narrative progress is often arrested in a slow film, there is less need to classify and interpret the information onscreen into a linear argument or a cause-and-effect equation. In the *temps mort* that allows the spectator to wander in and out of the shots, and consider the larger themes of the film, the act of image creation or her own presence in the theater, the cinematic layers of temporality come into contact in refreshing, sometimes personal, sometimes collective combinations. Akerman's *Lá-Bas*, for example, includes fragmentary moments of voiceover that build on the sense of loneliness created by the film's images: a series of disconnected long takes of strangers wandering the streets and balconies of Tel Aviv beyond the windows and shades of Akerman's quiet, rented flat. The film is loosely about Tel Aviv and mostly about thoughts and feelings, including Akerman's ambivalence towards Israel, and the dead time onscreen is consummated not with action but by the viewer, who is faced with her own feelings about Israel in the dead moments (Lajer-Burcharth). The weight of Akerman's sense of isolation during her tenure in Tel Aviv is comprehended in the extreme duration of the film's voyeuristic, outsider images.

According to Romney, "Slow cinema's capacity to suspend our impulses and reactions can also help us engage more reflexively with the world in a way that can be critical and indeed political." Yet, despite slow cinema's aptitude for respecting the complexity of difficult, nuanced issues, like the legacy and statehood of Israel, or mental illness (another topic Akerman touches in *Lá-Bas*), Romney, Flanagan and other enthusiasts of slow cinema say little about whether or not a slow film is labeled documentary or fiction. Flanagan does mention that slow cinema tends to blur lines between fiction and nonfiction – minimal narrative or argument makes films

difficult to categorize (24). But, in general, the issue of a filmmaker's intentions to create a documentary or a fiction film seems peripheral to the discussion of slow cinema.

Furthermore, as Malin Wahlberg writes in her book *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology* (2011), questions of aesthetics and temporality are largely overlooked in documentary film theory, a field in which representation and rhetoric are much more popular topics:

If the aesthetic and formal experimentation of documentary film calls for further research, aspects of temporality in these non fictitious genres represent an even more significant lacuna. Not even Gilles Deleuze recognized the complex relation between the time of the image, allegories of time, and time experience in documentary (10).<sup>5</sup>

The oversight is unfortunate as, I believe, the affective, contemplative nature of slow cinema gives the form a particular power for representing real, historical events while respecting the need to leave the past open to the future and potential interpretation. Filmmakers like Geyrhalter and Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash (who are both affiliated with Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab) are working firmly within the tradition of documentary and use slow cinema techniques to make politically powerful (and well-received) films.

### **Section Three: Editing and the Use of the Long Take in Documentary Film**

As mentioned, the generous treatment of time through the use of the long take can be an effective way for films to touch upon historically loaded issues such as land ownership while still respecting the nuances of complex problems. For example, statehood and international borders are recurrent themes in Akerman *Lá-Bas* and *D'Est* (1993), Benning's *UTOPIA* (1998), and Geyrhalter's *Abendland* – films that raise a variety of questions for which we have no absolute

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<sup>5</sup> I return to Wahlberg's point with a discussion of Deleuze and documentary in section four.

answers (see sections five, six and seven for further discussions of each of film). Yet a conventional documentary only makes use of the long take for narrow purposes, such as presenting uncut interviews, or to the advance the film's narrative argument. There is no time for the excess of the long take in the paradigmatic documentary film structure: establish an issue, present the background, examine the extent of the problem and present a solution or way forward (Nichols *Representing Reality* 19). This cause-and-effect sequence is comparable to the three-act structure of a classic Hollywood film. I respect the efficiency of the structure and believe many great documentary films are made in this style – I do not wish to discount a work simply because it is conventional. But, like Cohen, I do believe the pressure on documentary directors to create an arc, with the traditional elements of action, reaction and resolution, often results in a film that moves the viewer further away from the multi-layered experience of real life.

It is in post-production that the paradigmatic documentary distills the past into a closed, linear narrative: “every edit or cut is a step forward in an argument,” according to the film critic and documentary theoretician Bill Nichols (*Representing Reality* 29). In his most recent book, *Introduction to Documentary* (2010), Nichols explains this is “evidentiary editing,” the documentary equivalent of continuity editing. Evidentiary editing serves the conventional documentary's cause-and-effect argument in the same way continuity editing serves a mainstream fiction film's three-act story structure. By shaping the filmed images of the past into a “coherent narrative,” evidentiary editing techniques allow documentary filmmakers to create tighter more controlled meaning through editing instead of with the more contingent (and therefore less controllable) information contained within individual shots. In other words, many documentary films rely on relations between shots and do not often give the viewer time to absorb and create meaning from the information *within* shots.

A documentary that relies on the long take, on the other hand, would include more of the open present – pregnant with possibilities – in which the filmmaker shot the documentary image. In an essay in the 1992-93 issue of *Film Quarterly*, “When Less Is Less: The Long Take in Documentary,” Australian ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall explains that his peers often ignore the long take: “filmmakers continually sacrifice footage which they know would permit a more complex understanding for the subject but which, for reasons of length, the film cannot afford” (42). MacDougall says that many filmmakers recognize a sense of loss in their completed work, and he locates that loss in the rushes (raw footage), which, when uncut, retain a sense of the excitement in the contingency of everyday life: “while finished films suggest a past tense, rushes seem to unfold in the present tense of a camera running” (41).

Neither MacDougall nor I intend to imply that editing is unnecessary. As I mentioned in section one, documentary film is not (and should not attempt to be) an exact replication of the past; raw footage is inscribed with a historical moment but it does not inherently contain unmediated truth. Editing is essential to filmmaking and “introduce[s] its own higher order of truth and understanding” (41). Post-production is a very important, and very challenging step in the process of crafting a long take documentary. Perhaps the lack of codified structure is one reason documentary filmmakers shy away from the use of long takes, which can include unwieldy sequences of events that make it difficult to isolate the image’s “signal from noise” (MacDougall 44). With evidentiary editing, documentary filmmakers tend to use rapid fire, quick cuts to expedite the conveyance of signal – MacDougall clocked the average documentary shot length at around five seconds (37). When shots do meander, directors might patch “noisy” moments with voiceover to provide meaning, as opposed to leaving an image open to multiple interpretations.

Long takes can be seen as risky to documentary filmmakers for reasons beyond the clean, efficient storytelling of the paradigmatic documentary structure. MacDougall argues that the dead moment, in which nothing seems to be happening, is a forbidden topic among his filmmaking peers. He finds the origin of the taboo in a paradox of Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema: the belief that documentary must adhere to and defend “ordinary life” while also portraying it as extra-ordinary. “There was a tacit understanding that you didn’t talk publicly about this. Who cared to admit that documentary actually concealed the lacunae characteristics of ordinary life and chose the best bits, just like fiction filmmakers” (38).<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the act of observing ordinary life on the theater screen can be exciting without dramatic twists, as Benning demonstrates in *TEN SKIES*. After each cut, it usually only takes a few microseconds for the viewer to recognize that he or she is once again looking at clouds, and to subsequently evacuate the shot of its most obvious narrative significance. However, since, each shot remains onscreen for ten minutes, the viewer moves beyond recognition into what MacDougall labeled the “digressive search,” made possible by the long take, which is a more personal hunt for meaning within the shot (40). The long take meanders and allows the objects represented onscreen to shift in the audience member’s perception from autonomous symbols to background noise and then, maybe, to return to the fore. According to MacDougall, while Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité filmmakers shied away from using long takes that did not progress the narrative of the documentary, their contemporaries in fiction filmmaking, such as Antonioni

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<sup>6</sup> MacDougall seems to be generalizing here. He allows for exceptions to the tendencies of Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema to portray the as ordinary extra-ordinary, citing specific examples of how Richard Leacock, Jean Rouch and Frederick Wiseman “use long takes in distinctive and sometimes idiosyncratic ways” (44).

and Roberto Rossellini, recognized the broad potential of the long take for “articulating space and time, relating people to the environment, [and] exploring human personality” (44).<sup>7</sup>

MacDougall’s twenty-year-old plea for filmmakers to use the long take to give documentary films more complex and irreducible meanings is met in contemporary, slow documentaries. These films unapologetically show ordinary life and also respect the need for history to remain open and allow the spectator to connect the time of the image’s creation to the present tense through temporal realism: “a realism of duration rather than a strictly comprehensible documentation of the material world” (45).

Consider two recent documentary films, both about industrial food production, released just a year apart: Morgan Spurlock’s *Supersize Me* (2004) and Geyrhalter’s *Our Daily Bread*. Both nonfiction films were well received by audiences and critics.<sup>8</sup> Both explore food production and consumption in the Western world: *Supersize Me* documents the physical, biological and emotional horrors of Spurlock’s quest to eat all of his meals at McDonald’s for a month and *Our Daily Bread* is a portrait of the generally overlooked spaces of industrial food production in Europe, from mechanized slaughterhouses to salt mines. But the two films work for a similar effect through very different means.

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<sup>7</sup> I will elaborate on the “digressive search” in the next section’s discussion of semiotics; I will also delve into greater detail to explore these properties of the long take while analyzing the work of Benning, Akerman and Geyrhalter in sections five, six, and seven.

<sup>8</sup> *Supersize Me* was nominated for an Oscar and won a directing award for documentary at Sundance, among dozens of other accolades; *Our Daily Bread* won a special Jury Award at 2005 International Documentary Festival Amsterdam also among dozens of other accolades.

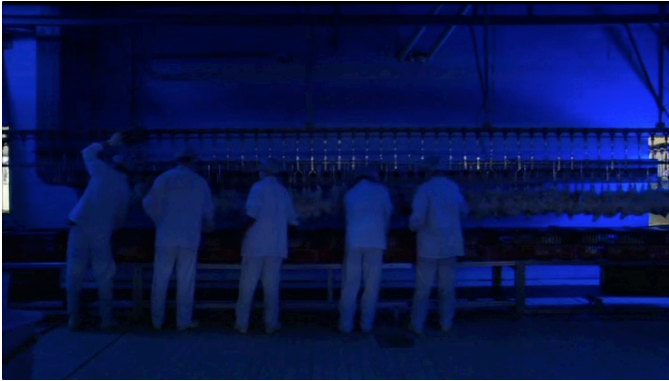


Fig. 1

*Supersize Me* has a conventional structure and channels suspense and narrative through the journey of a hero (Spurlock) who presents a problem and guides the audience to a specific conclusion: if you eat McDonald's food everyday, you will get sick. *Our Daily Bread* uses a more unconventional structure – it is a wordless film in which the main character and subject is the viewer. Geyrhalter allows the audience to consider and experience the time and effort and machinery it takes to dust sunflower crops with a haze of pesticides or process dead chicken bodies in an assembly line without direct exposition of these spaces (Fig. 1). In turn, the audience members may examine their own individual stations as consumers in that process. Geyrhalter did shoot interviews with food workers and manufacturers but he chose to leave them out of his film, for reasons he explains in an interview accompaniment to the documentary's DVD:

During the editing, which [*Our Daily Bread* editor] Wolfgang Widerhofer started while shooting was still going on, it turned out that these interviews tend to disturb, and interrupt, the perception of the film. We then decided on the more radical form as it's more appropriate for the way the footage was shot. The intention is to show actual working situations and provide enough space for thoughts and associations in long sequences. The viewers should just plunge into this world and form their own opinions.

*Our Daily Bread*'s formal reliance on the long take invites a "digressive search" of the image, returning the spectator's gaze to activate his own personal memories and experiences to relate to the industrial processes represented in the film. I do not suggest Geyrhalter's film has no narrative or argument; of course the filmmaker is exerting a point of view. But, instead of making a habitual appeal to reason and guiding the viewer through the paradigmatic documentary structure to diagnose an issue, show its symptoms and offer a solution, Geyrhalter ventures into more experimental ground. His presentation of food-manufacturing spaces – normally off-limits or overlooked – in long takes creates thought-provoking intervals that allow the images onscreen to vacillate between signal and noise, from alien to familiar and back again in the mind of the viewer. The intervals allow space for a nuanced interpretation with the potential for the viewer's relationship to those spaces to change depending on her own circumstances, politics and culture.

#### **Section Four: The Philosophical Implications of the Use of the Long Take in Nonfiction Film**

To help explain why the prismatic openness of an experimental documentary like *Our Daily Bread* may move the audience closer to an experience of reality than the linear closed circuit of the conventional documentary film, I turn now to a discussion of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's studies of cinematic temporality. Deleuze is a sort of godfather for slow cinema scholars and devotees, and, though he had little to say about nonfiction film specifically, his theories on the use of time in modern cinema help illuminate how the long take can be used in documentary film.

In his two-volume study of motion pictures, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, Deleuze proposes two essential categories of cinema, classical and modern, and categorizes a film as one or the other according to its treatment of time. Classical cinema refers to the dominant, commercial mode of filmmaking. The films of classical cinema follow a three-act structure and create a rational presentation of time via continuity editing to show action and reaction, much like evidentiary editing functions in Nichol's paradigmatic documentary. Deleuze explains this reshaping of time into rational chunks of action and reaction as the "movement-image." In the movement-image, montage is central. The film is imprinted with events recorded in real time; an editor cuts and re-assembles that direct record of the passage of time to represent the recorded moments as a common-sense chain of events with actions, reactions and resolutions. Deleuze refers to a number of Hollywood films created before and during World War II as archetypical classical cinema, and, even though the movement-image and three-act-structure peaked in the mid-twentieth century, the style remains the mainstream standard for filmmaking.

The unfathomable and universal trauma of World War II represents a break. The events of the war are so horrific that they confound reaction: "the post-war period has greatly increased the situations in which we no longer know how to react, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe" (xi). According to Deleuze, this break, among other factors, ushers in the modern era of cinema, in which the common sense movement-image of classical cinema becomes inadequate to address the physical, geographical and emotional trauma of the war. Modern cinema sets aside classical storytelling, continuity editing and three-act structure in favor of a new representation of duration, allowing an open and contemplative spectatorial experience in which the passage of time onscreen defies immediate action.

As a counterpart to the movement-image in classical cinema, modern cinema has the “time-image,” in which the movement derives directly from the image (as opposed to directing the image and its temporality). Duration is foregrounded in the time-image and the pressure of time is felt but not necessarily consummated. Instead of a classical, pre-mapped narrative that reshapes time into a series of plot-devices in service of a storyline, modern cinema frees time and allows the audience to experience the forward thrust of duration without having to immediately respond and assign meaning to the shot. While I have focused on the long take as a way to foreground duration, this is just one way to create a time-image. Deleuze describes many paths directors take to generate time-images, finding examples in the films of Yasujiro Ozu, Alain Resnais and Jean-Luc Godard, auteurs who are not typically associated with long take cinema.

The power of modern cinema lies in its treatment of time, which creates thought-provoking ambiguity for both the film’s audience and characters; it is the “cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent” (2). In classical cinema, time is reshaped in the service of the rational representation of a narrative (or historical) event. But in modern cinema, the event is time itself. The action loses its precise location in the film’s diegetic world and is transferred to the experience between the spectator and the film, a new experience rather than the recreation of an old one. Both the film’s audience and the film’s characters are presented with situations onscreen to which they no longer know how to react; both audience and actors are left pursuing vision but not action (3). These pure “optical-sound” situations reveal the fullness of an image and allow the viewer to take that fullness in to create intervals: “instances of pure contemplation” (15).

Deleuze sketches the evolution and expression of the time-image in modern cinema films of European art house directors like Rossellini, Resnais, Godard and others, each of whom foreground duration but in different ways. He also mentions Ozu as the first director to present

“pure optical sound situations.” Ozu’s minimalist films appear as if a return to “primitive cinema” but actually express “an astonishingly temperate modern style” by abandoning classic continuity editing in favor of the “the montage-cut,” which “is a purely optical passage or punctuation between images, working directly, sacrificing all synthetic effects” (13).

“Synthetic effects” are the conventions of classic continuity editing, or, for the documentary, evidentiary editing. Continuity or evidentiary editing makes narrative story lines flow smoothly and favors a tendency of the human mind to reorganize the past into action and reaction. This type of editing is a simulation of memory and the way we might reorder and make sense of events into cause-and-effect storylines, but it is not a simulation of reality. As the contemporary philosopher Bernard Stiegler explains in *Technics and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise* (2011), reality as a cause-and-effect chain of events, as it is presented in continuity editing, is a notion that has become conventional, reified, and was developed to reinforce societal norms.

To bring this back to *Our Daily Bread*, Deleuze might recognize that the film meets his call for modern cinema by showing spaces to which the viewer may not know how to react but must see. In a conventional documentary like *Supersize Me*, the reordering of time in service of a linear cause-and-effect argument – “Eat McDonald’s every day, get sick.” – is a movement-image. Deleuze explains that the time-image, on the other hand, is the co-existence of different “levels of duration.” In a slow documentary like *Our Daily Bread*, these different levels of duration of the time-image could be (but are not limited to) the historical moment in which the film was shot, the real time it takes the food-factory worker to complete production-line tasks, which the filmmaker has chosen to show uncut, and the time in which the viewer is watching the film. These co-existent durations of the image and the spectator enter into an exchange to create

the narrative time of *Our Daily Bread*. This is in opposition to the more conventional documentary use of time in which the narrative time of the film subjugates the use of historical time (as its imprinted on the film) and the audience's time.

In the first chapter of her 2003 book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive*, Mary Ann Doane explains how cinema developed alongside capitalist modernity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the appearance of both, together, participated in, and contributed to, a turn-of-the-century philosophical crisis surrounding notions of time and contingency. In the sciences, Étienne-Jules Marey struggled with how to record and represent time; Henri Bergson theorized on how to understand time and duration. As time became standardized across the Western world, it also became indexically recordable in photographs, and, later, in cinema. Though film could record moments and make them re-watchable in a motion picture (a “technical temporal object,” in the words of Stiegler), fin de siècle thinkers such as Bergson and Ilya Prigogine confirmed the irreversibility of time. Film allows the opportunity to index, or record, and examine the present moment. Yet, according to Doane, there is a menace contained within this possibility – a surplus of unmediated time. To combat this threat, films are edited to re-present time to the viewer. In early narrative cinema “the present – as a mark of contingency in time – is made tolerable, readable, archivable, and, not least, pleasurable” (107).

For the *Cinema* books, Deleuze drew inspiration from Bergson, a French philosopher. Bergson believed in the forward thrust of duration (*la durée*) and he theorized that while time is constantly progressing, it also inherently contains layers of the past. Reality is a constant dance between memory and the present – memory always invades the human experience of the present moment. Actual, immediate reality exists, but, because of the dual nature of duration, often

remains slightly outside the human grasp. Modern cinema acknowledges the many layers of time felt in the present moment with what Deleuze calls the crystal image: “the coalescence of the actual image and the virtual image, the image with two sides, actual and virtual at the same time” (*Cinema 2* 69). An audience may not experience an image only in the present or past tense, as there is no such thing as one without the other. And just as the present moment is constantly invaded by the past, history evolves with the forward thrust of time and the past must be respected as a living, fluid part of the experience of the present. To consider that the past is also a living part of the present could be especially useful for documentary filmmakers, who deal in images of history. This is not to say the past does not exist – it does – but that the past retains the ability combine with the present in new ways.

MacDougall’s call for the long take is a practical parallel to Deleuze’s crystal-image. Both recognize the ability of film to activate memory, bring history into contact with the present and also respect the openness of the immediate moment. Deleuze paid little attention to documentary as a category and he also did not touch on the specific formal technique of the long take as a way to merge the past and present into one “crystal image” (though it seems one clear path to impregnate the present moment with the past). But, in documentary film practice, slowness and the use of the long take can create the space for this powerful image.

In an essay on Deleuze and Lebanese documentaries, Marks applies Deleuze’s concept of the crystal image to certain nonfiction films (made in a war-torn Lebanon she likens to post-WWII Europe) that create an affective, living documentary image, capable of evoking the difficult-to-represent memory of trauma (“Signs of the Time”). For Deleuze, the truth of an image is a product of its ability to fluidly negotiate layers of time (including the actual and the virtual) and create a new experience, both by bringing the viewer toward the experience of a

passed reality by activating memory and also by bringing the past into contact with the present moment. Memory contains the “unseeable” and the “unsayable,” and conventional documentaries ignore this challenge, according to Marks. She likens conventional documentaries to Deleuze’s movement-image and proposes that by introducing an interval – space for contemplation and change – documentaries dealing in the time-image respect history as something that is living and constantly being reinterpreted. One way to create this openness is with duration: “Time puts the truth into crisis. Not in the sense of shifting cultural values, but in that we cannot know today what will come to pass tomorrow and thus must acknowledge the existence of more than a single world...” (207).

Marks turns to Charles Sanders Pierce and semiotics to explain how the time-image is so powerful in documentary film. With semiotics, Pierce classified the world into types of signs and considered the levels of mediation at work in the human interpretation of signs. Firstness is the level of sense we experience before signification sets in, a realm of pure affect, of the preconscious and raw sensations felt in the body. The second level of mediation is the realm of consciousness, the instant when the mind assigns meaning. At the third level of mediation, the social meaning of the image is internalized. A simple example would be the sky, which could be first felt and sensed as blue, next assigned the collectively-understood meaning of “sky” and then recognized in terms of how it relates to the individual, as in a recognition of the weather’s effect on one’s day. At any given moment, we are negotiating these levels of mediation to create meaning. According to Pierce, a healthy, heterogeneous society requires a robust exchange between the levels of mediation so that the sensorial and personal interpretation of objects is in constant dialogue with collectively recognized symbols.

The conventional documentary image deals mostly in secondness and thirdness, according to Marks. The structure of the conventional documentary privileges an ability to envelop the viewer in its argument or narrative (akin to thirdness, the realm in which the viewer would internalize the film's argument) and also foregrounds its indexical link to the historical world by emphasizing the time in which the image was created (akin to secondness, the realm in which the viewer would recognize a collective meaning). For example, a documentary about war might rely on the recognition of dead bodies to link the image depicted onscreen to the historical war that caused the dead bodies. "Secondness is the realm of relations – not of causality, but of brute matter in contact with brute matter – that the documentary must claim to accurately record" (Marks "Signs of the Time" 198). But the conventional documentary tropes used to link the film to the historical world are often limited to more easily-recognizable and predictable signals, restricting the semiotic exchange to what Pierce would recognize as an insufficient exchange between affect, consciousness and society. Drawing on the theories of Bergson and Pierce, Marks explains that modern society is stagnant with mediation – stuck in secondness and reifying collective meaning – while seriously lacking in firstness ("the ability to create our own impressions") and thirdness ("the ability to make our own judgments"). This lack of flow causes society to calcify and tend toward homogeneity, as no one takes a personal stake in the creation of meaning.

Marks suggests that nonfiction films should shake off convention and find power by creating a space or interval between pure affect or sensation and symbolism. As opposed to fiction films, documentaries already often deal in real world images of raw sensation ("Signs of the Time" 197). By depicting historical events as closed, as already interpreted by the consciousness and assigned meaning, documentary films miss the opportunity to be more

affective and powerful stories. This is similar to the difference between creating a movement-image, which deals in the intellectual realm of secondness and the re-presentation of reified images, and a time-image, which sustains a healthy flow between pure affect, symbolic construct and interpretation by attempting to create a new experience with historical events.

Slow, contemplative nonfiction films offer a cinematic way to activate history, not only as a text but also as a sense, as a crystal image. Marks quotes Nichols, who wrote that documentary “shares a common referential bond” with written history. But documentary can also share a formal bond with memory and historical existence, which consists of multiple layers of experience and duration. Deleuze recognized the privileged, temporal power of cinema to activate memory. Marks adds that this activation of memory can be particularly powerful for documentary films to bring history into contact with the present, with pure sensation. “Where documentary should be the model of opening to the outside – for we cannot know what is going to happen in the real world – classical documentary’s ideal of truth is itself a fiction. It confuses truth with what can be said ‘objectively’” (“Signs of the Time” 208).

One could argue with Marks that dealing in secondness, in the world of linkages to historical events, is exactly what defines documentary film. MacDougall said many of his filmmaking peers prefer to avoid wading into the messy territory beyond linear storylines and easily understood events. And following Nichols’ definition of a paradigmatic documentary, films that introduce intervals for pure affect – such as slow documentary films – do problematize conventional structure. While I do not believe Nichols would say a documentary film *must* employ the paradigmatic structure, his work to carve out a theoretical space for documentary throughout the years indicates how the type of open nonfiction film that Marks is advocating for could complicate the genre. Nichols cautions that documentary films must avoid “the asymptotic

convergence with the real” because that negates a documentary’s ability to represent an argument about a historical era (*Representing Reality* 169). He warns that a lack of argument runs the risk of losing the viewer in the real world. But, this convergence need not necessarily be a danger to the genre – I see it as an affective, uniquely filmic strength of documentary film. Epistophilia (the obsession with looking), according to Nichols, can be volatile for its tendency to engage with the world only at a distance. But with the use of the long take to create intervals for thought, the audience is not simply engaging with the film from a distance but moving between closeness and familiarity and distance. Or, in other words, between pure affect and higher level, symbolic interpretation to create a powerful, open circuit with the film.

Nichols has been writing about documentaries for decades, and skimming his work through the years demonstrates the difficulty in defining documentary film. I established in the introduction to this essay that, in 1991, Nichols defined documentary as making “an argument about the world.” In 2010, in his most recent book, he renegotiated that definition, saying that documentary films are “about actual situations and events.” He goes further with his definition of a documentary, which, according to Nichols, is about “real people who convey a plausible proposal or perspective on the lives, situations and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this into a proposal or perspective on the historical world directly,” as opposed to creating a fiction. He elaborated that documentary films contain four basic elements: “indexical elements of reality, poetic affective associations, story-telling qualities and rhetorical persuasiveness” and also possess a strong sense of voice (*Introduction to Documentary* 142-6). The more Nichols shapes a definition of the genre, the more he begins to exclude a film like *Our Daily Bread*, which is arguably not about people but about the observation of capitalist modes of food production.

Economic factors also reinforce the conventional documentary's tendency to shape time in the service of an argument. Marks made an important point that the documentary funding structure works to limit experimentation with narrative and reinforce the conventional exposition of the three-act documentary. She explained that because filmmakers must submit shooting scripts and other pre-production supporting material to ensure a nonfiction film's dramatic success, the film's argument must be determined before production and pitched to funders: "The funding process therefore biases documentary production to prejudge the world, rather than allow the world to flow into the film" ("Signs of the Time" 202).

Cinema is a temporal medium and in a way the question of narrative or argument in documentary is really about time: what type of time is the filmmaker foregrounding? As previously mentioned, it is more difficult to draw a line between documentary and fiction if a film lacks explicit narrative or argument. And, since it does not privilege the time of the narrative over other layers of temporality, a slow documentary film may appear, at least superficially, to have little or no narrative or argument. It is in this lack of overt argument that a slow documentary would appear to problematize the notion of documentary film.

Still there exist many independent nonfiction films that are located firmly within the documentary tradition that do not rely on the conventional documentary film's linear use of time to propel an argument, from founding documentary works like Dziga Vertov's groundbreaking *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) to the more recent *Abendland* or Paravel and Castaing-Taylor's *Leviathan* (2012). These experimental films open the genre up to new forms, an act that, according to Marks, contributes to the maintenance of a healthy semiotic flow of information in society. These independent filmmakers are flaunting conventions through their experimental use of time and duration. Artist and documentarian Peter Hutton's landscape films, for example,

merge the time of the audience with onscreen temporality in shots that run for a few minutes, or more, sometimes with little more action than a change in light. “So much of cinema is about compressing time,” Hutton said, at a 2014 showing of his then-most recent film at the New York Film Festival, but he wants to “stretch it out” to bring forth the joy in looking at things. He acknowledges that this simple act of observation is radical because it is perhaps in opposition to “the whole point of cinema, which is about compressing and distilling and condensing time.”

### **Section Five: James Benning**

Now that I have explored the philosophical implications of slowness in documentary film, I turn to an analysis of the work of three experimental documentary filmmakers, beginning with Benning. Born in 1942 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Benning has been making films since the late 1960s. Over the course of his prolific career, the former mathematician carved out a singular mode of observation that interrogates and complicates the status of the documentary image. Benning has experimented with duration and extreme shot length since his earliest films, and while the topics and materials used in his work have evolved over the last four decades, the filmmaker’s interest in the long take persists. His films tend to eschew direct narrative but accumulate within the viewer to form a loose, meditative collection. Even after a switch to digital in recent years, Benning continues to find unique ways to merge and play with the past and present, with thought and image, with affect and interpretation, to create a resonant, living image.



Fig. 2

Perhaps because of his background in math and/or the concerns of his contemporaries like Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton, Benning's early work is structural and highly formal.<sup>9</sup> His films from the 1970s, like *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977), establish themes he continues to explore throughout his career, including playing with off-screen space through sound and a fascination with place as it is represented in time. His shot-framing techniques in these early works establish his eye for composition and his patient application of the long take invites viewers to wait for an event that may or may not happen. This self-consciousness foregrounds Benning's preoccupation with the act of image creation and builds the foundation for the next four decades of his work, as his films reference each other to play with layers of memory both within and beyond the cinema screen. One need not be steeped in the history of structural film or Benning's filmography to appreciate his work, but he often revisits images from his early films, including the smokestack, which first appears in *11 x 14* (1976), and recurs in a number of films decades later including, *TEN SKIES* and *Ruhr* (Fig. 2). The revisited images are not replicated – these are views that Benning seems to discover and record everywhere he travels, from Wisconsin to California to Germany.

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<sup>9</sup> It is also of interest, though perhaps only incidentally, that Benning studied under film scholar David Bordwell at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the early 1970s and served as Bordwell's teaching assistant while Benning earned an MFA in filmmaking.

Benning's earliest films establish his experimental attitude toward duration. *11 x 14*, his first feature length film, opens with a long take of a ride on Chicago's El train. The shot lasts for more than 10 minutes, half of the frame in a hazy darkness, the other half revealing the changing light and scenery as the train snakes above the mostly-ambiguous city. In the 1980s Benning began experimenting with loose storytelling and personal history. *American Dreams* (1984) mixes pop music, the filmmaker's obsessive collection of baseball cards and the diaries of another Wisconsinite, Arthur Bremer, who spent thirty-five years in prison for his 1972 attempt to murder Alabama Governor George Wallace. *Landscape Suicide* (1986) investigates violence and landscape in America, with actors performing transcripts of two convicted murderers, one a teenage girl, the other Wisconsin serial killer Ed Gein (the inspiration for a number of 1970s and 80s horror films, including *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1974]). Throughout his work in the 1970s and 80s, Benning continued to use the long take to activate an investigation of space and time onscreen and within the viewer.

I am most interested in the work Benning has made since the early 1990s, when he turned toward landscape filmmaking (Pichler "Into the Great Wide Open" 117). His landscape films demonstrate the Deleuzian opening of place that characterizes slow documentary cinema and makes these films particularly apt for representing and investigating what others might write-off as background. Through rigorous observation, duration and a creative use of sound, Benning's landscape work allows complex issues of space to retain nuance as he interrogates perception, history and memory. Though I have not found any indication that Benning has read Deleuze's film theory, the filmmaker's way of locating the viewer *within* a space – as opposed to *looking at* a space – through his insistence on observation over time embodies Gilles Deleuze's concept of the modern time-image.

Benning's early landscape films are shot on 16mm film and play with the audience's expectations for the film's diegetic world through unexpected pairings of off-screen sound and on-screen image, sometimes by juxtaposing image and text as in *Deseret* (1995) or *UTOPIA*. In both films, the timing of the shot is structured by the text, which is either heard in voiceover or read in subtitles (in *UTOPIA*, the voiceover is in English and Spanish and sometimes subtitled).

MacDougall says that voiceover functions as a way for documentary filmmakers to communicate a clear signal through a noisy shot. But in *UTOPIA*, Benning subverts the conventional documentary use of voiceover, building the image and words into a conflict that sometimes clarifies into signal and returns back to noise. The spoken words in the audio track do not narrate the images – the words are not directly related to the pictures – but instead function as a counterpoint. For *UTOPIA*, Benning transcribed the narrative voiceover from Richard Dindo's *Ernesto Che Guevara, The Bolivian Diary* (1994), sectioned it into paragraphs and used one shot for each paragraph of the narration (Pichler *James Benning* 128). Dindo's film is an account of the last 20 days in Guevara's life, preceding his assassination in Bolivia in 1967. The images are a series of landscapes Benning shot in the borderlands of Southern California and Northern Mexico. In typical Benning fashion, no place is identified until the end credits, leaving the viewer to associate freely with the spaces while she watches the film.

Since shot length is determined by audio, as opposed to shot content, the words and images slide into strange combinations and Benning's editorial choices seem both random and associative. The voiceover diary entry accompanying a spectacular shot of the Hoover Dam declares: "nothing much happened on this first day of the month"; a peaceful shot of a suburban subdivision seems initially to clash with another passage: "Miguel, Coco and Julio were killed." In other scenes, words have an obvious connection to pictures, such as a shot of a stream coupled



*Nothing much happened on this first day of the month*



*Miguel, Coco and Julio were killed*



*The rear guard quickly ran for the creek and I followed*

Fig. 3

with the narration: “the rear guard quickly ran for the creek and I followed” (Fig. 3). While the shots remains onscreen for a minute or two, the audience circles between the combinations of image and audio, moving back and forth in a circuit of personal and collective meanings. Further confounding linear interpretation, the images of *UTOPIA* appear in no obvious order. And since the spaces are not identified until the end credits, the audience does not know idea if a shot was filmed in Mexico or the U.S., hinting to the arbitrariness of the concept of a border.

A material structural device, such as the voiceover in *UTOPIA*, or the ten-minute running time of a full cartridge of 16mm film in *13 LAKES* (2004), usually established the timing of shots in Benning’s films through the early 2000s. But, recently, he has played with that expectation. In his newer work, instead of always letting a material concern determine shot content and length, Benning sometimes has shot content determine shot length. With *RR* (2007), his final 16mm film, instead of using a physically measurable or mathematical structure to determine edit points, Benning allows the subject matter – trains – to determine shot duration (Peranson).<sup>10</sup> His choice of trains as the topic of the film means each shot lasts a few minutes, as the machine snakes

<sup>10</sup> Benning repeats this motif in other recent films, including in *Twenty Cigarettes* (2011), for which shot length is determined by the time it takes the smoker to finish the cigarette.



Fig. 4

through the land, from engine to caboose. This temporal realism allows time for the viewer to engage with the image and with Benning's decision to let the train determine duration.

The shots in *RR* begin with trains entering the fixed frame of the camera and end after all the cars cut across the screen. A few shots are in medium close-up, with the train violently bisecting the frame. Many are expertly composed long shots, the depth amplified by the length of the trains, which, as anyone who has waited at a railroad crossing might know, can last for miles. The speed and length of the train can hold a surprising degree of suspense – one particularly slow train seems like it will lurch to a stop before it runs through the shot. Another train, running horizontally across the upper third of the frame, has a few cars dramatically obscured by long grass. And in another shot, the train's empty slots open to reveal the engine zigzagging into the distance. MacDougall claimed the long take can be useful in “articulating space and time” and, as we wait for trains to pass by the camera, the image opens up to the viewer, revealing new contours of the landscape, such as the closeness or distance of objects in relation to the railroad tracks (Fig. 4).

The sound in *RR* is both diegetic – recorded at same time as the images – and evocative of the past with non-diegetic songs or noises that reference specific historical moments, like the

sound of a Huey helicopter from the Vietnam War, or Karen Carpenter, the tragic 1970s folk singer who died of an eating disorder, singing a Coke commercial as trains that could be transporting food slide through the frame. These layers of temporality circulate within the viewer, moving between pure sensation (in the sound of the train, for example), collective recognition (in the writing on the train cars or Karen Carpenter's song, for example), and personal meaning.

*RR* is a quietly political and deceptively simple rumination on the complicated issues of technology and landscape. In his 1994 essay "Landscape and the Fantasy of Moving Pictures: Early Cinema's Phantom Rides" Tom Gunning explains that the picturesque scenery of landscape films might, on the surface, present an escape from technology, but these places are shaped by manmade inventions. Landscape is not only a refuge from the modern world but also a product of it, particularly as its shown via the technological apparatus of the camera. Benning's images of trains – a "cinematic primal scene" in the words of Gunning – are layered with nods to that tension. He shows pristine desert landscapes, where the only sign of human interference is the train itself, and tracks crossing mountains cluttered with windmills and trash (Fig. 4). *RR* is not just a record of trains and landscape but also of Benning – to make this film, he was entirely at the mercy of the trains, sometimes waiting a day and half to get his shot. Benning says: "For me the film is very much about time, and about waiting, but I didn't want waiting to become part of the film. I wanted you to realize that by the absence of waiting you knew that I had to wait" (Peranson).

In *TEN SKIES* and *13 LAKES*, Benning obliterates any sense of character and presents pure visuals that have no determined pasts or set futures, only endless possibilities for combining in the present tense of the audience. *TEN SKIES* presents exactly what its title implies: ten ten-

minute shots of skies; *13 LAKES* has thirteen ten-minute shots with the frame evenly bisected by lake and sky. Both films emphasize the time of the spectator and the time of the image, creating a complex dialectic between the two layers of temporality that allows the pictures to be activated in fresh ways in the present. *TEN SKIES* moves between indefinite images of space shifting in time and moments with distinct traces of human history, like an airplane cutting through a cloud or a smoke stack belching clouds of pollution. Scott MacDonald wrote in 2007:

[Benning's] films have nearly done away with narrative – or at least they have relocated narrative from on-screen into the theater itself, where the spectator's adventure in coming to terms with Benning's sense of space and especially his sense of time tends to become the primary experience generated by his films (*Cine-Fils*).

Because of the extended duration of the shots in Benning's films and the waxing and waning relationships between shots and sounds and off-screen space, the viewer alternates between pure affective impressions of the image and interpretation. Benning creates films that offer the viewer ways to engage with the images on-screen to create an embodied "living image" while avoiding the usual patterns of action-reaction and judgment inspired by more traditional films. His films demonstrate an awareness of the role of cinema, and particularly documentary films, in mediating images to form narratives. Documentaries typically rely on stylistic realism to establish firm historical ties, presenting events as evidence within a closed circuit of history. But Benning works against conventions to create temporal realism.

Film scholar and professor Elizabeth Cowie joins Deleuze's time-image with documentary representations of space in her 2011 essay, "Documentary Space, Place and Landscape." Documentaries may present place as an "other," as the basis for the performance of a scenario that exists as "visual evidence." She explains that this type of representation of space is "documentary 'movement-image' cinema." But documentary films may instead treat

landscape more openly, as part of an endless processes of “becoming” with the people who inhabit these spaces. These documentary “direct-time-images” allow for the past, present and future to coexist in the image and retain a powerful potential both within the documentary and within the spectator. Benning acknowledges the importance of the continual process of becoming in his work, and has said on multiple occasions that he “sees landscape as a function of time.” In 2004, he explained to *Senses of Cinema* interviewer Danni Zuvela: “Once you’ve been watching something for a while, you become aware of it differently.”

Cowie cites the first film in Benning’s California Trilogy, *El Valley Centro* (1999), as an example of a documentary film that creates a direct-time-image. She explains the film manages to present the complex politics of the landscape and open possibilities for the area – and for the film – that remain unresolved. The film demonstrates “that places are not ‘given’ – they are always in open-ended process. They are in that sense ‘events’.” Benning recognizes film’s unique ability to represent landscapes as “events” that change over time; his use of the long take allows the viewer to begin to become familiar enough with a landscape to search the shot for nuance. His films respect the complexities that shape places instead of forcing those gradations into linear narrative or supporting evidence.

Benning brings this desire to interrogate the status of the documentary-image into his work of the late 2000s, a time-period in which he abandons 16mm filmmaking for a digital, high-definition camera and Final Cut Pro. *Ruhr* is Benning’s first digital film. He forgoes using established structural devices to determine shot length but sticks to the use of the long take: the film is two hours long with seven shots, varying from seven to sixty minutes (Flanagan “Act of Seeing”). The last shot of the film, a smokestack exhaling fumes into the dusk, is a study of changing light that evokes comparisons to Andy Warhol’s *Empire* (1964). Mark Peranson calls

the image a “reality-directed document;” the hour-long shot length allows the audience a temporal realism to examine the image to create meaning that exists as much in the present tense as in the time in which the image was created by Benning, subverting the assumptions of historicity placed on conventional documentary films.

Benning’s work demonstrates an awareness of the role of cinema, and particularly of documentary films, in mediating images to construct narrative. Throughout his career, Benning has protested the tired, stylistic realism of conventional documentaries and insisted on the power of observation to activate meaning. His use of the long take creates a healthy exchange between the three layers of cinematic temporality – the time of the image, the time of the narrative, and the time of the spectator – allowing these layers of duration to manifest within the audience, moving the individual toward to a collective experience of the objects onscreen and at the same time provoking an inward turn. A simple statement from the filmmaker, during a Question and Answer session at the Art of the Real Festival, in 2014, sums up the intent behind the structure of his landscape work: “duration makes you really understand the gravity of what’s happening.”

## **Section Six: Chantal Akerman**

Akerman is a singular artist who, like Benning, has experimented with the use of duration in her work since the early 1970s, using hyperbolic long takes in nonfiction films like *News From Home* (1976), *D’Est* (1993) and *Lá-Bas* (2006) and also in fiction films such as her masterwork and best-known film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). She is not, strictly speaking, a documentary filmmaker, but she is an artist who has made a number of slow, contemplative nonfiction films since the early 1970s (and, also, less experimental documentaries, like *From the Other Side* [2002], which mixes expository

interviews with landscape long takes). Her nonfiction films are often place films, using the long take to investigate how people – Akerman included – interact with and are defined by (or in opposition to) a space and to examine borders and the physical manifestation of the concept of the nation-state. By using long takes to foreground the time of the spectator, she encourages the audience on a parallel and connected investigation of place. Her experimental documentaries also complicate notions of objectivity and sometimes verge on voyeurism; because Akerman uses long takes to return the audience gaze, these qualities lead the viewer to question the intentions of the filmmaker and her interaction with the people presented onscreen.

Born in Belgium in 1950 to Holocaust survivors, Akerman made her first short at the age of eighteen, after she dropped out of film school. She and Benning are contemporaries who share a career-long interest in an extreme observational style, fixed camera gaze and formal use of the long take that is rooted in 1960s structuralism. When Akerman moved to New York for the first time, in 1971, the young filmmaker attended screenings of experimental films at Anthology Film Archive, including the pictures of Warhol, Jonas Meekas and Michael Snow. Film scholar Ivone Marguiles notes that Akerman cites structuralist filmmaker Snow's three-hour-long *La Région Centrale* (1971) as particularly influential. The human-less film was shot by a machine-operated camera, pre-programmed and stationed on a mountaintop. The robotic camera roves the landscape to present random disorienting views of land and sky. Even though *La Région Centrale* is the result of a strange collaboration between man and machine, an experimental fusion of subject and object in which only the machine was in control at the time the image was recorded, it roused a corporeal sensation in Akerman. Marguiles quotes Akerman that Snow's film opened her "mind to the relationship between film and your body, time as the most important thing in film," ("A Matter of Time").

Structural films emphasize duration by using material concerns or other predetermined factors to establish shot length. Benning and Akerman have similar roots in this art movement, but no two filmmakers apply the formal use of the long take in the same way. Akerman departed from the objectively measurable constraints of structuralism to let shot content determine the length of her long takes. For her 1972 nonfiction film *Hotel Monterey*, Akerman and Babette Mangolte, her frequent collaborator and cinematographer, would stop and start the camera based on the filmmaker's intuition. According to Criterion.com writer Michael Koresky: "Akerman and Mangolte would put the camera down wherever it felt right and then roll until Akerman's gut told her to stop."

Akerman discovered in structuralism that one "needn't tell a story to generate emotion and suspense," a revelation that defined her career. Koresky continues: "The structural films she was experiencing and learning from were often shot in real time, with minimal setups and long takes, all to elicit a visceral response from viewers." These films lack overt narrative and foreground the act of image creation and the time of the spectator to create a corporeal experience of the filmed world for the audience.

*Hotel Monterey* uses a simple structural concept: portray one night in the shabby, single-room-occupancy hotel on the Upper West Side of New York City. The entire film was shot in less than a day, over the course of fifteen consecutive hours (Koresky). In the completely silent sixty-two minute running time, Akerman guides the viewer from nighttime in the lobby, through the floors of a surprisingly quiet hotel and onto the roof for a 360-degree pan of the skyline and Hudson River, washed in daylight. The audience knows, as implied by the title, that Akerman will explore the hotel, but suspense is created by the shot duration and physical limits of the space of the hotel and the camera frame. A seven-minute long elevator sequence functions much



Fig. 5

like the trains in *RR*: the manmade object creates tension. The audience knows the elevator doors will open and illuminate the frame, but what the doors will reveal is unknown to the audience, as it was to the filmmaker when she made *Hotel Monterey*. Sometimes an empty hallway greets the audience; other times, the elevator opens onto hotel patrons who refuse to enter the elevator (some refuse repeatedly). Other surprise interactions await the audience, such as guests who avoid the camera only to be forced by the constraints of the space to walk through the shot to exit the lobby – the silent, camera-shy actors become more memorable for their initial refusal.

According to Marguiles: “what Akerman learned from *Hotel Monterey* was that the shot duration changes the equation between the concrete and the abstract, between drama and descriptive detail” (“A Matter of Time”). The lingering camera allows the space to shift over time, as movement or light can reveal depth in areas that primarily seemed flat, for example. A two-minute long shot of a hotel guest, centered in a medium shot and looking directly at the camera, is particularly intense, as is another shot of a patron approaching the camera and returning the audience’s gaze, perhaps coincidentally, in the hotel lobby (Fig. 5). Both shots have an initial discomfort and awkwardness that shifts, in time, to other considerations, such as the act of image creation and enigmatic relationship between Akerman and the subjects and/or objects she films.

Marguiles uses the word hyperreality to explain the way an object represented in Akerman's documentary image is onscreen for so long that the viewer is able to examine the material, evacuate it of significance and eventually reassign meaning – in other words, engage in MacDougall's digressive search of the image, switching between pure sensory impressions of firstness and more constructed meanings. Akerman's visual framing techniques work with the long takes to enhance the switching of objects between familiar and strange, or signal and noise. A shot of the Times Square subway station in *News From Home* appears flat until bodies move from behind columns to reveal previously unseen depth. The shift brings out the peculiar details in this scene of a banal, everyday space. In other shots, particularly those from within subway cars, windows and glass add another layer of depth in reflection. The long takes in *News From Home* also allow the audience to consider the actors onscreen. Some stare into the camera as it unflinchingly stares back, clearly provoked by Akerman and her machine. The audience member may awkwardly meet the gaze, self-consciously choose to look away, or maybe both. As in *Hotel Monterey*, the "surplus of reality" in the long takes foregrounds the filmmaker's participation and intention in creating the image, forty years ago, and the role of the audience (Marguiles *Nothing Happens* 36).

Akerman thickens *News From Home* with a highly personal voiceover that is also universal: letters from her mother to the young filmmaker, living in New York. The contrast between the letters and image creates a layered sense of time within the film's diegetic world. The letters, which were written in Europe, relate moments already passed by the time Akerman received the mail from her mother. The combined effect of the letters and images is an indignant, filmic non-response to Akerman's mother, also comprised of moments that have already passed, but represented much differently. The actors and objects visually reveal their bygone era, but the

voice of a nagging mother is timeless. One letter, juxtaposed with images of straphangers on the New York City subway, implores Akerman to connect with the parents of a young doctor: “he says to go see his parents in the Bronx. They know someone in movies...”

The loose narration of the letters further plays with temporality by referencing Akerman’s earlier work. Her sister, mentioned in practically every letter, is named Sylvaine, a name that evokes memories of another Belgian child in Akerman’s body of work: Jeanne Dielman’s son, Sylvain. And, similar to Akerman’s *Je tu il elle*, made the previous year, the audience cannot tell if Akerman is reading these letters from her mother randomly or in chronological order – kind of like the unreliability of international mail delivery. One letter is written in the wake of Sylvaine’s birthday party and the next letter mentions that Sylvaine’s birthday is a few days away.

Instead of using voiceover for exposition, Akerman uses voiceover in her nonfiction films to add complexity to the image, creating the possibility of interesting connections and combinations for the viewer. The audio track of *Lá-Bas* features the filmmaker reciting letters, thoughts and fragments of mysterious origins, muddling the spectator’s relationship to the unknown lives of the people captured on camera and his assumptions about the filmmaker. *Lá-Bas* (which is a French phrase that may be used directionally, meaning “over there”) is a self-referential film, and the framing of the images and Akerman’s loose, fragmented narration combine to create a sense of isolation and alienation, channeling the (Jewish) filmmaker’s ambivalence toward the state of Israel.

She presents Israel without any establishing shots or context, in a series of voyeuristic views from behind the windows of her rented flat in Tel Aviv. Aside from visual nods to the Mediterranean location (veiled Muslim women or black-hatted Jewish men stand on the beach in front of clear blue water) most of the film’s cues of place come from the audio, which include a

series of ruminations on Israel, and Akerman, heard off-screen, taking a phone call in Hebrew. The phone call scene is poignant: the fixed camera looks down an empty, dark hallway toward a distant room with a window. The phone rings. Akerman answers the phone, but the camera doesn't move. This rupture between audio and visual, between off-screen space and what's revealed within the frame, brings the filmmaker's gaze into question and forces the viewer to consider the act of creating the shot. If Akerman simply set up the camera and walked away, as Warhol often did, what does that say about the filmmaker's role in creating the image? Or, perhaps the phone call is not a direct sound recording? The shot runs nearly two minutes, allowing the viewer time to shift between considering those questions, which the film never answers, and more textural, sensorial concerns, like the tone of Akerman's voice or the contents of the room in the background of the shot, mostly obscured in shadow.

Akerman's use of sound and image create a multi-layered temporality, in which the act of image creation and recording of the soundtrack occupy completely different times, further complicated by the addition of ambient noise. The filmmaker remains outside of the diegesis visually, but not sonically, in a way that is similar to her sense of being *in* but not *of* Israel. Ewa Lajer-Burcharth calls the film a "(self) portrait of a place." As an outsider, Akerman cannot make a portrait of Israel, only her non-place within it. This modern conceptualization of place allows landscape to remain open to interpretation and respects the changing nature of a country with volatile shifting borders. It begs the question of whether or not an outsider can represent an alien space.

The long takes of *Lá-Bas* also provoke considerations of agency. Not only is it unclear whether or not Akerman was actually present during all of the shooting, as implied by the phone call scene and (nearly-always) fixed frame of the camera, but no one on camera seems to be



Fig. 6

aware that they are being recorded. A number of scenes feature solitary actors in medium shots – their proximity to the camera and solo presence in a static shot seem to be the focus of the scene. The voyeurism is exaggerated by the way the filmmaker frames the images, with large swathes of the picture sometimes concealed (Fig. 6). But the creeping sense of spying is assuaged when the camera insists on observation, following no one. The camera never pans to trail someone exiting the frame, and, while a few neighbors do reappear in subsequent shots, most actors only grace the screen once. A series of shots on the beach, washed out by the midday sun, lend a home movie quality, adding a layer of familiarity for the audience to consider in relation to the Akerman's detached voiceover. All of these concerns circulate within the viewer and accumulate over time, enticing the audience to contemplate a variety of questions – about the act of creating an objective documentary image, about the state of Israel and its history, about Akerman's outsider status, about loneliness and even about simple gradations of light – that have the potential to combine in surprising ways.

*D'Est*, Akerman's study of Eastern Europe after the fall of the U.S.S.R., is another irreducible portrait of people in relation to a precarious, unstable space. *D'Est*, meaning "From the East," is not a personal film, but an exercise in observing others, in the country and in cities,

and in their homes. There is no voiceover; the audio track is directly recorded, ambient sound. The images are never explained – only linked visually – and build into a story of place. The cars look strikingly Soviet, as do some of the people, such as a man in a red tank top smoking a cigarette and drinking a beer, or women in floral-print headscarves tramping across a snowy expanse with suitcases. But, even when people in the film speak to each other, no translation is offered. Akerman is viewing these places as an outsider and the spectator is to remain on the exterior of these places, as well (Lebow). Both Akerman and her audience must rely on the images, presented in long takes, as the only source of information. The camerawork switches between static shots and steady tracks and pans, evoking, at least initially, a sense of distance and authority.

While the images are presented without context, the information contained within the shots leads the audience to engage in comparisons of past and present, and to explore stereotypes about the East and the Soviet Union. The narrative lives in the details of the shots, as Akerman observes banality and everydayness in this place that, during the 1990s, was the crux of major drama to Westerners who followed the fall of the USSR from abroad. The people look uniquely Eastern, especially the elderly of *D'Est*, such as a couple playing dominoes on the beach, and the dirt roads look decidedly old-world. But cityscapes, in contrast, appear anonymously Western. The urban scenes in *D'Est* could also show an unidentified 1990s American metropolis – that is until an old, Soviet-looking bus cuts across the frame.

Toward the middle of the film, Akerman begins to move inside, presenting more intimate, medium shots of people sitting in their homes, mostly in their kitchens, often making eye contact with the camera. As in some of her other films, the length of the shots and Akerman's editorial choice to include actors who look directly into the camera provoke

questions of mediation and force the audience member to consider herself, as she may choose to meet or avert the actor's gaze.<sup>11</sup> These shots also add to the simultaneously familiar and strange relationship Akerman and her Western audience share with the images onscreen, showing an intimacy that adds nuance to this foreign place. To a western viewer, the homes might look outdated and foreign, but the faces are warm and inviting. Furthermore, because of the filmmaker's career-long interest in showing domestic spaces, some of these interior scenes seem like memories of Akerman's other films – one woman's kitchen is evocative of Jeanne Dielman. She cradles a teacup and nods along to music. These layers of memory and history make it difficult to distill Akerman's representation of the former Soviet Union to familiar stereotypes, instead insisting on the irreducibility of the place and complex struggles of its people.

Akerman's work reinforces the power of nonfiction film to create an insistently present image of the past, irreducible and open to interpretation because of its ability to live with the audience. This duality is achieved in Akerman's unblinking observational form and use of the long take to foreground sensation and the act of image creation. Akerman's nonfiction films emphasize the temporal experience of the spectator, folding the present moment into her images of history. Narrative threads or arguments exist in Akerman's nonfiction films to varying degrees, but, instead of simplifying the complex interactions between people and place, these conceptual themes come into contact with other layers of temporality to add nuance to her portraits.

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<sup>11</sup> Because she so often includes these shots of people looking at the camera, her films form a sort of international index of people's reactions to movie cameras over the last 40 years.

## Section Seven: Nikolaus Geyrhalter

Born in Vienna in 1972, Geyrhalter is one of a younger generation of nonfiction filmmakers reinterpreting the experimental techniques of Benning, Akerman and other older artists for a mainstream documentary film audience. The director shares his predecessors' penchant for place as the connective tissue of a film, and for insisting on observation to allow the audience to suspend immediate judgments. Geyrhalter attempts to activate his audience, without direct exposition, to draw their own associations between the collective capitalist structures shown in his films and their own personal lives, encouraging the audience to take ownership of these revelations.

The director founded his film production company, Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduktion (NFP), in 1994, the year he made his first feature *Washed Ashore*, about people working and living along the Danube. He has directed a dozen documentaries since then, also serving as the chief (or only) cinematographer on all of his films.<sup>12</sup> Geyrhalter says he is “fascinated by zones and areas people normally don’t see.” He uses steady, long takes to reveal these overlooked places in *Our Daily Bread* and *Abendland*, his two most experimental films, which I will focus on in this section. Like *Our Daily Bread*, *Abendland* is a series of portraits, with the general theme of observing activities that happen in Europe and at night, from border patrol to airplane maintenance.

The rhythmic long takes in both documentaries complicate the audience member's role as passive observer. By insisting that the viewer watch the governmental and industrial processes that most Europeans benefit from, in some way or another, without overarching narrative or historical context, Geyrhalter enables the spectator to form his own paths and connections to the

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<sup>12</sup> According to NFP's website, two of those dozen Geyrhalter films are currently in production at the time of writing: *Sometime* and *Over the Years*.

material onscreen. The filmed spaces remain anonymous enough to be universal – the people in each film are not documentary subjects so much as another detail in an industrial complex. But, since most of the information Geyrhalter provides resides in the images or ambient sounds (even conversation is often treated as ambient noise, without translation), the long takes give the audience ample time to connect with the images onscreen and the spectator becomes an implied, ever-present subject of the film.

Geyrhalter's films possess a strong belief in the visual; echoing a mantra that's often invoked to describe Benning, cinema scholar and film festival programmer Barbara Pichler writes in an essay about *Our Daily Bread* that Geyrhalter seeks to "enable a new way of seeing."<sup>13</sup> Pichler asserts that Geyrhalter's portrait of the food industry is not trying to stir empathy within the viewer but instead to create a deeper, more affective image that connects with the viewer on a subconscious level, "to facilitate the experience of places of food production." To create this experience, Geyrhalter artfully negotiates the dramatic and the mundane. For example, a shadowy, lunar landscape reveals itself to be the site of origin for the most common of seasonings: a salt mine. Geyrhalter levies the terror of the alien place by setting up the camera between the heads of two laborers casually chatting as they make the long journey underground to work in the mine.

Geyrhalter rewards the patient observer with the slow build of story. In *Our Daily Bread*, there is no voiceover or narration, and no factories or production processes are identified until the film's end credits (a technique he shares with Benning). Instead, the filmed portraits build into larger concepts that manifest within the audience. The documentary opens, without warning, or even a polite crossfade, to a deep view flanked on either side by a line of animal carcasses.

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<sup>13</sup> Pichler is also co-editor of the only book-length work on Benning: *James Benning* (2007).



Fig. 7

The handheld shot follows a worker hosing down the carcasses, which the viewer eventually recognizes as the disemboweled bodies of pigs. The laborer wields the hose without looking at the carcasses or the camera. After sparse opening credits, another shot of hoses, this time operated by machines and washing produce with strange, human-like motions. The viewer must work to first recognize these strange factory scenes as part of the modern food chain and then, because of Geyrhalter's use of the long take, must stay with the shot to continue MacDougall's digressive search.

Most people are only vaguely aware of how food is actually produced, but still able to recognize the products as familiar. The audience must search each shot to assign the process a place in the food chain, and, in the time allowed for the recognition of collective meaning, will also inevitably turn back inward to consider other factors like the absurdity or cruelty inherent in the mass production of these goods. The scenes connect and build into meta-narratives: for example, the first shot of the pig carcasses is implicit in a shot, an hour later, of piglets being shoved into crates. The elliptical editing mirrors the endlessness of these cycles by returning to earlier subjects, like the pigs, at some other stage in the process from artificial insemination to death. The scenes are specific, all of them shot by Geyrhalter in Europe between 2003 and 2005, but the practices are daily and universal (Dargis). The audience can connect with these images as moments of history but also appreciate that this is ongoing labor – a fact that is underscored by

the long takes, which capture the monotonous repetition of tasks in real time. One can see it takes a man two minutes to pick a half dozen cucumbers and continue with the calculations. Deep shots further emphasize the endlessness of the tasks as spaces open up to reveal vast expanses of crops or goods at various stages of commercial production.

Geyrhalter breaks up the manufacturing scenes with long, intimate takes of the laborers taking a break from work to eat food in front of the camera. Some workers are recognizable from previous scenes. For example, a woman in blue coveralls scatters feed for an infinite sea of chicks down a long corridor. In the next shot, a medium shot, she is shown chewing on a sandwich and drinking coffee, alone, meeting and then averting the audience's gaze (Fig. 7). The scenes of eating function like Akerman's kitchens portraits in *D'Est*, asking the spectator to both consider the factory worker onscreen and to consider oneself. These long takes also allow a few minutes of narrative break, when the viewer does not need to search for visual cues to recognize the activity in the lunch room.

Geyrhalter says he wants the audience to draw their own conclusions from the information in *Our Daily Bread*. He explains his reasoning in the interview accompanying the film:

I also think that things are made too easy for me as a viewer when I'm spoon fed information. That moves me briefly, gets me worked up, but then it can be put into perspective quickly, and it works like all the other sensational news that bombards us day after day because that kind of thing sells newspapers - and it also dulls our perception of the world.

This is not to say that Geyrhalter relinquished all control to the viewer, but that he presented the information to foreground the time of the spectator. Geyrhalter's generous use of time allows the conclusions manifest within the audience members, who then take ownership of the ideas. The

director still makes a highly political argument: that we must see and consider the way our food is produced; we must bear witness to these scenes that also implicate us as consumers.

Reviewing *Our Daily Bread* for the *New York Times*, Manohla Dargis described a scene that she found particularly poignant: “There’s a haunting scene of a woman, seated seemingly alone and cutting the necks of the chickens that survived the initial kill room. Hers is actually an act of mercy.” For me, the emotional center of *Our Daily Bread* is a barbaric two-minute and three-second long shot inside a slaughterhouse. The fixed frame is centered on a cow in medium shot, and the camera unflinchingly records the moment she seems to realize that she will die. She begins to struggle against her fate, until, with a machine obscuring the view of head, we hear the impact of a bolt to her skull and she collapses to the ground, dead. Seconds later, her carcass glides past the camera on a conveyor belt. The mechanics of her death were familiar to me, I could guess what would happen without seeing it, but the look on her face was unlike anything else. This is the magic of the film, the allowance of time and space for the viewer to both assign collective meaning to these scenes and to recognize familiar details, such as an “act of mercy” in these exacting, mechanized processes.

In an essay on Geyrhalter’s similarly-structured documentary *Abendland*, Michael Sicinski explains the director’s “comparative form of montage” that slowly links material into a meta-narrative. Geyrhalter and his long-time editor Widerhofer, who worked on both films, say they do not intend to “spoon feed” information to their audience. The long takes in the films encourage open association, but, the spectator is encouraged to pick up on specific themes. Widerhofer is credited with both editing and “dramatic structure” in *Abendland*: this title stresses, Sicinski says, that Geyrhalter’s films make a highly-constructed argument. The argument builds in the shot lengths and ellipses between parallel scenes. This use of duration



Fig. 8

allows room for the spectator to link these seemingly-disparate elements. I would add that the associations desired by the filmmaker and editor are more obvious in *Abendland*. Perhaps because the film has such a broad topic, the director and editor felt the unities between sequences should be emphasized.

The largest theme of *Abendland* is that it presents portraits of various activities in different countries in Europe, at night. But an underlying theme is surveillance, established in the opening shot of an unmanned camera, squarely facing the audience while roving a border for illegal trespassers. Cameras recur throughout. A later scene shows a sex worker making a web video; another sequence takes the viewer to a police control room, where the officers are engaging in racial profiling, shown repeatedly (in a highly-edited sequence) zooming their street surveillance cameras on people of color while ignoring white people. Geyrhalter says in an interview attached to *Abendland* that he tried to create: “open, broad images where you can lose yourself in nuances, and they’re not limited to depicting what’s happening at the time the image was created, they also offer the observer an opportunity to discover things in the periphery.” While the sequence begins with a number of possibilities in an awesome shot of dozens of CCTVs stretching across a room, the editing soon steers the audience in a specific direction (Fig. 8). From the establishing wide shot of the room, patrolled by four white guys, the camera cuts to

close-up of views of the officials' screens as they zoom their security cameras, leaving little room for conjecture. In spite of the long takes, the surveillance images are flat and there are few other details to glean from the scene. The racism of the state officials casts a shadow over the rest of the film, resonating in subsequent images of surveillance. The cameras exaggerate the director's self-consciousness; upon repeat viewing, these sequences do not hold up as examples of free association but rather an attempt to carve symbolic meaning out of these disparate elements.

Borders and boundaries are another of the more obvious underlying themes in *Abendland*. The film's name translates to "the land of the night" or "the west," designating Europe after dark as a requirement for the film and also implying that the sun is setting on Europe, that the continent and its cultures are facing decline. One sequence shows an African man appealing his deportation to government officials. The editorialization of the image is evident in the framing: the immigration officer's nameplate reads Natalie and the audience can see her face in medium close-up. But the man who is being deported is obscured, faceless and nameless. In contrast to *Our Daily Bread*, many conversations in *Abendland* are translated, including this one. The camera angle is fixed throughout the minutes-long sequence, with black frames to indicate cut points. Even though the image is presented in long takes, this sequence, like the scene of the control room, is edited to convey a specific meaning. Coupled with the translated conversation, the editing sends a clear message that European policy is to keep outsiders on the other side of the E.U. border. The audience may still freely associate with some aspects of the image, possibly since the man's identity is obscured, but in spite of Geyrhalter's stated intentions, these tightly-edited sequences give the viewer less room to draw her own conclusions.

*Abendland* takes the audience behind the scenes, a trope we've come to expect from documentary films, but subverts the idea of privileged access by showing scenes of non-action. These anonymous sequences are more successful in providing an indeterminate zone of openness than the aforementioned scenes of immigrant detention and surveillance. For example, scenes of European excess have subtler overtones but still manage to question the preciousness of the tightly-policed boundaries. First at a sloppy Oktoberfest party and later, at a rave, Geyrhalter's camera roams these parties for a sense of alienation, leaving the audience to wonder why people are trying to so hard to get into these countries. But the shots have incredible depth and plenty of details for the spectator to engage in a digressive search of the images, so there can be more than one takeaway.

As in *Our Daily Bread*, the places in *Abendland* are not identified until the end credits, sending a curious audience member back in time to assign more meaning to the images. *Abendland* deals more in symbolic constructions and direct messages than *Our Daily Bread*, maybe because the film is set up as a series of discreet portraits and the editor then chose to foreground common themes to connect the dissimilar sequences. *Our Daily Bread*, on the other hand, has a more contained topic in factory farming so the sequences are cut together and the audience member has more freedom to find combinations among the scenes. Both films emphasize the time of the spectator with long takes that encourage her to consider to the time in which the image was made and the act of filmmaking, but only *Our Daily Bread* allows the viewer to continually engage in a digressive search for meaning. In *Abendland*, the digressive search is punctuated with clumsy allegory so the viewer feels less ownership over the film's associated themes.

## Section Eight: Conclusion

In *Representing Reality*, Nichols says: “Documentary, on the whole, has not endorsed a modernist perspective. Subjectivity has not been joined to indeterminacy, ambiguity, and relativity but rather to a rational, commonsensical view of the world” (157). Conventions have not changed since he wrote those words in 1991; logical, linear narratives still dominate the world of nonfiction film. I recognize that some could argue it is not possible for a film to embrace a modernist perspective and still be considered a documentary. Using Deleuze’s definition, a modern film does not attempt to mimic the rational understanding of an event but to move the audience toward the experience of a new, cinematic event. One might take issue with a documentary that tries to bring the viewer closer to an understanding of a past event by creating a new, cinematic event, a clear artifice. But that stance would, of course, overlook the artifice inherent in making a paradigmatic documentary film, which uses evidentiary editing to rearrange time into a linear argument.

The possibilities in the use of the long take to emphasize all three layers of cinematic time remain underexplored in documentary film theory and in nonfiction filmmaking. Akerman discovered in structuralism that films can have great suspense without a story; this is especially relevant to documentarians, because the filmmaker cannot approach a living subject, whether person or place, and already understand the film’s narrative arc. Furthermore, the long take can help directors represent complex issues like international borders or the zones of capitalist food production with nuance by constructing a space for temporal realism and contemplation rather than carving out a unidirectional argument. The multi-layered experience of time in a slow nonfiction film allows the viewer intervals to engage in a personal hunt for meaning, reaching the audience in a deeper, more indeterminate zone than the habitual documentary appeal to

reason. The spectator of a long take documentary enters in an exchange with the film that allows for the figures onscreen to drift back and forth between collectively understood symbols and associative details, creating new connections between the events and objects represented onscreen instead of reifying old ones.

While most filmmakers will not engage in the singular experimentation of artists such as Akerman, Benning and Hutton, I am encouraged by the tendency I see in a number of recent documentary films that allow space for *temps mort* with the use of the long take and still reach mainstream audiences. These include works by filmmakers like Geyrhalter, whose films *Our Daily Bread* and *Abendland* achieve varying degrees of slowness, and also Barbash, Castaing-Taylor, Cohen, Paravel, Jennifer Baichwal and Pacho Velez (Benning's former student and the director of *Manakamana* [2013], which has just eleven shots in 117 minutes).

I also believe that the representation of banality and dead time in these contemplative documentaries can serve as a way to engage with the real world in opposition to the constant bombardment with information that is our modern condition. The last 100 years of filmmaking and the development of other media have allowed for easy conversation across formerly-estranged parts of the world. With millions of images and endless cultures and subcultures online, the exotic has become harder to find. This unlimited access is, I believe, another reason that documentary filmmakers like Benning, Hutton, Geyrhalter and Castaing-Taylor use extreme observational techniques to explore commonplace zones of food production, industry and transport. Furthermore, our access to infinite information means we have become experts at providing our own context to images, by searching for meaning online. Filmed images can invite a similar search for meaning, but in a fresh way, as a collective temporal experience. As Romney said, audiences seek a spiritual alternative to the speed of the mainstream.

The filmmakers I have studied for this project create deceptively simple films. Working extended duration into the form of a film is easy; crafting a cohesive work from these large chunks of time that has a successful temporal rhythm and is able to resonate with the audience is difficult. I am exploring these ideas in my own work. The accompanying film *A Midwest Story* is my experiment in the form of the slow, contemplative documentary. As in the films of Akerman, Benning and Geyrhalter, I hope my application of the long take is unique and that the *temps mort* in my film will allow the spectator to find meaning that exists within and between the shots, beyond the initial surface value of the images.

I have been living under the heavy influence of these filmmakers for the past year, while I worked on this project. In making my own landscape film about the midwest, I could not escape Benning's repeated visual motifs of trains and smoke stacks, for example. I knew that I wanted to make a landscape film about my hometown of DeKalb, Illinois (just two hours southwest from Benning's own Milwaukee, Wisconsin) because the flat suburban and countryside scenery provide a welcome contrast to New York City and because I have easy access to Northern Illinois. With family and friends still living in the area, it remains familiar to me. But the midwest is a flyover zone for many Americans, a place that people and goods pass through on the way to somewhere else. I chose to focus on corn, cars, and trains because these are scenes that even Midwesterners tend to overlook – they are simply obstacles that stand in the way of getting from point A to point B. I found myself searching for more depth in this flat landscape of unseen spaces and objects and, in my production, used the long take to allow the spectator to explore these areas. One of Benning's former students wrote in an essay about his "Looking and Listening" course at Cal Arts: "Through dedicated observation, we have the power to remove the murk of the known world and transform it into something boundless, bright,

infinitely worthy” (Yates 164). I hope the patient spectator will be rewarded with the personal experience of discovery that comes from observing a place over time and find something new in the combinations of Midwestern landscapes in my production.

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*11 x 14* (1976)  
*Chicago Loop* (1976)  
*One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977)  
*American Dreams* (1984)  
*Landscape Suicide* (1986)  
*North on Evers* (1991)  
*Deseret* (1995)  
*Four Corners* (1997)  
*UTOPIA* (1998)  
*El Valley Centro* (1999, California Trilogy Pt. 1)  
*Los* (2000, California Trilogy Pt. 2)  
*Sogobi* (2001, California Trilogy Pt. 3)  
*13 LAKES* (2004)  
*TEN SKIES* (2004)  
*27 Years Later* (2004, remake of *One Way Boogie Woogie*)  
*casting a glance* (2007)  
*RR* (2007)  
*Ruhr* (2009)  
*Pig Iron* (2010)  
*Nightfall* (2011)  
*Twenty Cigarettes* (2011)  
*After Warhol (15 most beautiful people)* (2011)  
*Two Cabins* (2011)  
*The War* (2012)  
*Stemple Pass* (2012)  
*Easy Rider* (2012)  
*Postscript* (2012)  
*HF* (2013)  
*Signs* (2013)  
*US 41* (2013)

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*Sud* (1999)  
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*Elsewhere* (2001)  
*Our Daily Bread* (2005)  
*7915 KM* (2008)  
*Abendland* (2011)  
*Danube Hospital* (2012)  
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Additional:

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*Manakamana* (2013), Stephanie Spray and Pachol Velez

*Manufactured Landscapes* (2007), Jennifer Baichwal

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