

---

H-France Review Vol. 18 (December 2018), No. 228

Alison J. Murray Levine, *Vivre Ici: Space, Place, and Experience in Contemporary French Documentary*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018. ix + 303 pp. Notes, references, and index. \$120.00 U.S; £90.00 UK. (hb). ISBN 978-1-78694-041-4.

Review by Albertine Fox, University of Bristol.

This book invites its reader to explore the sensory experiences offered by contemporary French documentaries that share a deep engagement with place and space. The author sets out to examine what she calls the experiential tendency in a diverse selection of French documentaries that encourage viewers “to ‘feel’ space” (p. 3) and that generate an intimate sense of closeness between viewers and filmed subjects. Inspired by the direct cinema filmmaker Richard Leacock’s attempt to convey “the feeling of being there” through film, the author traces the ways in which this special feeling occurs in contrasting spatial contexts, while generously making space for the presence of the reader as she guides them through short but attentive close readings (p. 2). One of the fruitful concepts introduced by Levine is the recurring metaphor of “a documentary ecosystem,” which is intended to not only encompass the spatial relationship between filmmaker, filmed subject and spectator, but also to bring into play a wider “historically specific creative ecosystem of theory, production, and reception” (p. 3). Indeed, one particularly welcome feature of this study is the careful balance of scrutiny given to the multisensory experience generated by the films themselves, and to extra-textual details of box office figures, critical appraisals, and types of unprompted audience response. This helps to contextualize the films and the discussions that form around them within the current and very active landscape of French documentary production, while encouraging readers (and spectators) to make extra-filmic connections to other “creative documentaries” in line with those analysed by Levine, and to wider public debates concerning the subject matters evoked (p. 22).

In the introduction, Levine sets out the main theoretical threads that support her analysis, primarily phenomenology and sensory theory, film theory, eco-criticism, and models of critical spectatorship. This aspect draws substantially on the work of Jean-Louis Comolli and Jacques Rancière, and on Sarah Cooper’s engagement with Levinasian ethics and the documentary spectator. The reader is also introduced to Vivian Sobchack’s emphasis on film as an experiential medium, to Laura U. Marks’s theory of “haptic visuality,” to Jane Gaines’s notion of “political mimesis” and documentary’s ability to move spectators to bring about social change, and finally to Belinda Smail’s attention to emotion in documentary film. This rich theoretical framework is complemented by a lucid outline of the book’s organisation, interspersed with more personal reflections that make the text itself feel “habitable” and accessible to readers (“I was drawn to films that made me, personally, feel a sensation, an emotion, an intensity”) (p. 16). Levine singles out two crucial qualities that the films of her study have in common, namely, the ability to produce active spectators who feel “*displaced* or unsettled in the process of perceiving others” (p. 3, original emphasis), and who feel “a co-presence in the film space” (p. 3), sharing space with the filmmaker and filmed subject *and* with the historical viewers in the world beyond the frame.

Levine’s emphasis on multisensory perception and on the non-verbal, sensual and emotional qualities of

film space, inadvertently establishes a fertile dialogue with a recent special issue of *Discourse* published in 2017, titled “Documentary Audibilities.” This issue proposes new approaches to the study of voice, sound, and listening in documentary film, bringing into audition the experiential dimension of voice as opposed to its functioning as a vehicle of explanatory commentary, thus offering an intriguing “vocal” extension of Levine’s study.<sup>[1]</sup> Furthermore, standing apart from other recent studies of documentary film, including Bill Nichols’s *Speaking Truths With Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary* (2016) and Agnieszka Piotrowska’s *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film* (2013),<sup>[2]</sup> Levine offers a unique contribution to the field through the sustained critical focus she brings to the multisensory spaces opened up by documentaries in a French-speaking context, inspiring future studies of documentary from under-theorized sensory perspectives.

Six chapters follow the introduction, the first of which, “Renaissance?,” provides a detailed historical backdrop to the rest of the study. Here Levine sets out the arguments and counter-arguments to the claim that the 1990s saw a “golden age” in documentary production in France (p. 22), which was followed in the post-2000s by a steady decline in innovative documentary practices. Levine charts the changes to French television production prior to and during this period, concentrating on the creation of Arte and the firm commitment of its director, Thierry Garrel, to the production of “high-quality” creative documentaries (p. 23). She also underlines the solidarity among French filmmakers and producers who are dedicated to “an experiential understanding of creative documentary” (p. 35), which her study proceeds to investigate in chapters two to six. Whilst chapter one seems a little too far removed from the remaining chapters owing to its extended historical emphasis, it allows the reader to *place* the divergent films explored later on through better understanding their shared interest in “feeling” as opposed to “knowing,” and their sensitivity to embodied experience that is common to creative documentary form.

Analysing potent aesthetic moments in each film that affect or unsettle the spectator, such as conveying the experience of “what it feels like to learn” (p. 112) or what it feels like to experience the world through a non-human viewpoint, enables the author to successfully highlight each work’s originality by pinpointing the filmmaker’s distinct creation of a multisensory spatial experience that carries the work beyond its subject, indicating its political force and potential longevity. Across chapters two to six, based thematically around the five sites of Planet, Road, School, Farm, and Edge, Levine introduces inventive concepts and categories as she moves from site to site. For example, in chapter three she suggests that a “nomadic documentary subjectivity” is constructed, based on the human body’s motion through film space and on the parallel “journey of displacement” that disturbs the spectator (pp. 75-76). In chapter two, Levine defines the four high-budget films as “new French eco-docs,” distinguishing them from predictable nature documentaries by illuminating their heightened experiential approach and expression of a non-human viewpoint, fostering “an environmental sensibility in the viewer” (p. 41). In her fascinating analysis of Claude Nuridsany and Marie Pérennou’s *Microcosmos* (1996), a discussion of familiar sights rendered startlingly unfamiliar through an “experiential form of looking” (p. 46) is vividly brought to life in a commentary on haptic close-up sequences, intensified through a trio of memorable stills of embracing “amorous snails” that forge a “tactile connection” with spectators and readers alike (p. 49). These instances of intimacy and spectacle demonstrate the various ways in which the spectator is placed in an experience of “co-presence” with the filmed animals, as the author inventively asks her readers to consider the spectatorial posture of openness and curiosity, common in scenes of human interaction in documentary film, within a non-human context.

The close analysis carried out prompts some important questions that are left for the reader to contemplate. For example, to what extent is the effectiveness of the experiential tendency in French documentary films inflected or challenged by a multicultural global audience? From an ethical and aesthetic perspective, how do the changes in perception and “ways of seeing” stimulated by the film experience differ from or resonate with more overtly activist documentary films? Another stylistic question that arises across the chapters concerns the difference between the sense of intimacy generated through the specificity of location and through a “precision of space” (p. 143), as in Raymond Depardon’s

*Profils paysans: le quotidien* (2005), and the intimacy kindled through a deliberately ambiguous and “unfinished” sense of place, as in *Être et avoir* (2002) and *Les Plages d’Agnès* (2008). Moreover, how do these forms of intimacy differ from the uncomfortable intimacy and emotional power of Alice Diop’s “crowded frame” (p. 180) in *La Permanence* (2016)? One of the impressive strengths of Levine’s study is the further comparative aesthetic and ethical questioning the analysis triggers. Her attention to the extra-textual context surrounding each film, with a focus on audience response, combined with her meticulous attention to the multisensory experience of film space, brilliantly underlines the impossibility of separating the social and political role (and responsibility) of documentary film, from its equally important status as an art form that affects and *moves* the spectator in more ways than one. Levine’s close readings effectively demonstrate how the political value of each film relies on the experiential dimension surpassing both the dominance of the subject matter and any overriding didactic purpose. Scholars and students of French history, cinema and cultural studies, and of documentary film studies more generally, will find the book an inspiring and informative pedagogical resource to draw on.

#### NOTES

[1] Pooja Rangan and Genevieve Yue, eds., “Documentary Audibilities,” *Discourse* 39, no.3, Special Issue (Fall 2017).

[2] See Bill Nichols, *Speaking Truths with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016) and Agnieszka Piotrowska, *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

Albertine Fox  
University of Bristol UK  
albertine.fox@bristol.ac.uk

Copyright © 2018 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172