
FILM AND VIDEO REVIEWS

Barstow, California. Directed by **Rainer Komers**. 2018. 76 minutes. Colour.

There are no happy endings or serendipitous moments in *Barstow, California*. *Barstow* is portrayed as a city whose narrative escapes the viewer, an assemblage of a myriad individual stories in a Route 66 stop that reference a struggling middle class. A work of nostalgia, around its 30th minute the documentary focuses on a woman, in a tiki bar heavily taxed by roads diverting away from its location, testifying to the disappearing ‘history of Americana[.] You forget places like this, you forget an art form and that is a tragedy’. The documentary is the third of director Rainer Komers’ *The American West Trilogy*, following *Nome Road System* (2004) and *Milltown, Montana* (2009).

While the director’s camera assumes the semblances of a wanderlust projection, moving between the vast landscapes of the Mojave Desert and the documentary’s namesake town, Stanley ‘Spoon’ Jackson recites from his memoir, *By Heart* (New York University Press, completed in collaboration with Judith Tannenbaum). In addition, the superimposition of the words of an imprisoned man and the memories of his family and friends against the high desert landscapes brilliantly reference Baudrillard’s conceptualization of space in *California* in his *America*. According to the author space, and landscape more specifically in this case, constitute ‘the very form of thought (Baudrillard 2010: 16)’. Of particular interest for urban studies scholars, but also truly scholars from any

discipline that engage with the urban form, are the portrayal of the views that the place offers and the town’s characterization as a transportation hub. Here again, *Barstow, California* extends a poignant angle, which Baudrillard has only foretold:

‘Driving is a spectacular form of amnesia. Everything is to be discovered, everything to be obliterated. Admittedly, there is the primal shock of the deserts and the *dazzle* of California, but when this is gone, the secondary brilliance of the journey begins, that of the excessive, pitiless distance, the infinity of anonymous faces and distances, or of certain miraculous geological formations, which ultimately testify to no human will, while keeping intact an image of upheaval.’ (2010: 10).

Similarly, the documentary’s commitment to watching and listening to the landscape, completely avoiding sound effects, extends to people watching and listening. Thus, an interview to a tourism operator, a series of tourists to nearby mines, and tourists to the Marine Corps Logistics Base *Barstow*, where a re-enactment of a grotesque instance of war supposedly situated in Central and South Asia occurs, provide an idiosyncratic perspective to the failings of poorly replicated cultural practices in peripheral spaces. Along these lines and to summarize considerations apropos the film’s stylistic fidelity, it can be said that another loop of examination that the documentary lays out for scholars could be that of Lefebvre’s rhythm analysis.

Lastly, Komers’ uses of landscape and landscaping work to situate the

documentary as an urban historical composition.

Reference

Baudrillard, J. 2010. *America*. London: Verso Books.

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Atieno. Directed by **June Ndinya, Effie Awino, Ruth Njoki, Lavine Atieno, Dorcas Akin**. 2018. 64 minutes. Colour.

Atieno is a fictional film that tells the story of a young girl from a fishing village named Atieno who goes to work for her aunt in Nairobi. Harassed by customers in the bar where she works, she runs away and does odd jobs to earn a living. She ends up running a small street food business. In parallel, we are told of the life of one of her friends — a young boy who stayed in the village. The film ends with a phone call; we don't know who is calling or why.

The aim of the film is clear: On the one hand, it shows the journey of a poor young girl (her father is sick and she must leave for the capital to be able to support him and her little brothers) who discovers the harshness and violence of urban life in a poor area of the capital. On the other hand, it tells the journey of a young boy who, not having won a scholarship, will use his bike to earn a living and slowly gain his independence. This subject of rural exodus and of the opposition between rural and urban life is not new in African filmography. Here the editing, which alternates short sequences in the countryside with short sequences in the city, does not allow for the complexity of

the situations and characters. It is almost caricatural.

The city of Nairobi is only present through the poor neighbourhood of Mathare, where we see tin houses overhanging the street. The parallel editing strikingly shows the contrast between life in the fishing village and the bustling life of the densely populated neighbourhood of Mathare, where men are all presented as 'dredgers', thieves and brawlers. The relationship between Atieno and her aunt — who tells her when they arrive in Nairobi that she is no longer her aunt, but her mother — could have been explored in greater depth. Generally speaking, the social relations among the different characters are not sufficiently developed.

It should be added that this film was written, acted and produced in collaboration by DreamGirls, a group of teenage girls and young women from Nairobi and Kisumu, and is used by the Community Media Trust as an educational outreach tool to facilitate discussions on HIV, transactional sex and entrepreneurship. Using an animated guide, the audience is invited to discuss the film's open ending. The international funding of the film may explain the high quality of the images and sound (although the musical soundtrack is not always appropriate in some scenes). The target audience is not documentary filmmakers or specialists of African studies, as the story is (unfortunately) banal in its narration and interpretation. The transmission of HIV-AIDS comes late and not in the urban sequences, but with the male character in the countryside. Note that the Ivorian director Kitia Touré made four short films

in 1993 *Les gestes ou la vie: au nom de l'amour*. The film *Atieno* would certainly have benefited from being either shorter or divided into several short films. We would have liked to follow the implementation of the film with the actors (non-professionals?), especially the young people, to gain a better understanding of the different issues in what is commonly called a participatory film.

Let's hope that the screenings of the film in front of different audiences (in Kenya and other African countries) have been recorded or even filmed; they represent precious documents on the reception and the different uses of such a film.

Additional information:

- the DREAMS (Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored and Safe) partnership is a public-private partnership aimed at reducing rates of HIV among adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in the highest HIV burden countries.
- 1993 – *Les gestes ou la vie*, Kitia Touré, a series of four short films to inform and sensitize Africa for the fight against AIDS; Promaco Prize for the fight against AIDS and Telcipro Prize for technical quality at FESPACO 1993; Special Jury Prize at the Scientific Film Festival of Paris-Tour Eiffel, 1993.

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Suspension. Directed by **Simón Uribe**.
2020. 75 minutes. Colour.

Suspension presents a cinematographic approach to the construction of roads in

Colombia, with a special attention given to the technical work of measuring and clearing areas in the jungle, hammering rocks and setting the iron and concrete to build. The film tells the story of two roads in the state of Putumayo that play a central role in connecting the capital, Mocoa, to the national railroad system. Mocoa is located in the middle of the Amazon jungle. It is surrounded by huge mountains and has a considerable annual volume of rainfall.

The first road was built in the forties and is called 'Trampolín de la Muerte' (Springboard of Death) due to the risks it poses for those who need or dare to drive along it. Known as one of the most dangerous routes in the world, it connects Mocoa to the city of Pasto through a very winding, narrow path that, in some places, only one vehicle can pass at a time; Otherwise, the risk of falling off the edge of the cliff is high. Despite the unfulfilled national state promises of looking after the road after a series of accidents over the decades caused by the precarious infrastructure combined with natural disasters (landslides and floods), it still used by trucks and cars. The second road is a glimpse of hope for better days for the population of Mocoa and those living in its surrounding areas. Construction seems to have started around 2014 and was interrupted a few years later due the alleged lack of money just after finishing a huge bridge going around a mountain and suddenly ending somewhere in the middle of the jungle. Abandoned, it became a kind of local tourist attraction, although the builders had put a closed gate and a sign authorizing only their own personnel. The

film shows people going there for a walk with the family on the weekend, taking pictures of the stunning view of the jungle; youngsters riding motorcycles, taking advantage of the great quality of the road. As it has been said in the anthropological literature that it is not rare for users to distort the planned use of a particular piece of infrastructure.

One of the characters in the film is an old man who worked on the construction of the unfinished road. Living with his family in a place that seems to be close to the construction site, he talks about his low expectations in seeing the road completed in his lifetime. This is one of the ways in which the film offers a historical perspective of the dramas experienced by the inhabitants of the area. Generation after generation wait for a solution to mobility problems that never comes. In this sense, *Suspension* is a fitting title for a context in which the dream for better integration is always on hold.

Guillermo is another central character in Uribe's film. A railroad construction engineer and resident of Mocoa, he takes the spectator through the 'Trampolín de la Muerte' as he talks about how his concern with mobility in that part of Colombia as a young man led him to pursue involvement in politics as well as seek historical and technical knowledge about the road. Guillermo seems also to be an important informant in Uribe's ethnographic research on infrastructure and roads in Colombia, as the relation of this character with the camera and person behind it displays subtle informality. The use of Guillermo's video archives of the situation of the road in the

mid-1990s (after the huge disaster in 1991), the presence of a dog along for the ride in what seems to be Guillermo's car, images of his house and the announcement of his death in the 2017 flood at the end of the film are some elements that seem to display aspects of the ethnographer-filmmaker/informant relationship.

Three elements of the film narrative are important to highlight. First, it follows a historical process of road construction. It starts showing pictures of the workers building the 'Trampolín de la Muerte', followed by some sequences of the disasters in 1991, Guillermo's videos mentioned above and continues with Uribe's own images from 2014 and 2017, capturing interviews and the construction site of the long-awaited bypass to reach Mocoa.

The second element is a sensorial perspective in which sound plays an interesting role in creating an ambiance. Some sequences show the mountains surrounded by clouds, the constant rain and details in the forest. It also exhibits a sensorial vision of the building process and the abandoned construction site with its materials being taken over by nature. In this sense and as the third element, Nature seems to be the main character in the movie due to its resilience, mystery and unruly power.

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