ARTICLE

COMPARE AND CONTRAST THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VOICE, SPACE, AND FORMS OF INTIMACY IN TWO OR MORE OF THE FILMS STUDIED ON THIS UNIT

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In both *Sud* and *E-muet*, voice and space inform the ethical as well as the aesthetic. Voice in documentary may be taken literally to mean the voices of social actors, or that of the author. However, as Bill Nichols suggests, it may also be used as a catch-all term for the director’s ‘voice’, often expressed through non-verbal means (1983). This essay will refer to the latter definition, but in view of criticisms of its expansiveness (see for example Leimbacher, 2017), focuses on instances where voice is undermined, negated or nuanced by other kinds of expression. Space has a similarly complex definition, since all conceptions of cinematic space form within each viewer’s imagination, tending to perceive documentary space as contiguous with the ‘real world’. Both Akerman and Shawi disturb this notion, challenging the truth claims of the documentary mode in order to place their spectator critically, an ethical strength that complicates the balance between distance and closeness.

Analysing each film in turn, I will first illustrate the structure of *Sud* to introduce theories surrounding voice and space, and how they inflect interpretations of intimacy relating to the trauma of the murder, before investigating the contrasting model of *E-muet* and its potential parallels. This, I hope, will reveal how both film-makers use film to shape the ethics of their approaches to depicting socially marginalized subjects (in *Sud*, the black community of the American South; in *E-muet*, women in middle-eastern patriarchal society), enabling evaluation of the films’ socio-political implications as well as showcasing the creative aesthetic possibilities of the documentary form.

*Sud* is the second in a series of four documentaries by Akerman, following *D’Est* (1996), a film which exemplifies what Marianne Hirsch refers to as the transmitted trauma of ‘post-memory’ (2008) by filming the lives of residents of the former Eastern-bloc, creating imagery that recalls that of the Holocaust. Akerman’s interest in post-memory arguably attunes her to the sensitivity required of representations of the suffering of others, and *Sud* strongly refers to this sense of a necessary, though painful, reconnection with history. Claire Atherton, Akerman’s editor, has described *Sud* as aiming ‘to film the landscape and to feel how history is encrypted in it’ (Margulies, 2019), highlighting the importance of its conception of space. Structured by long, contemplative shots of the town and countryside juxtaposed with interview scenes that contextualize the murder, *Sud* alternately prioritizes the fragmented spoken accounts of the interviewees, and the quiet space of the exterior world. The obscurity this generates aligns *Sud* with Janet Walker’s ‘trauma cinema’, which locates ‘a sense that what is being represented is extraordinarily memorable at the same time that it is partly unfathomable’ (2005: 190). *Sud* emphasizes the schism that prevents an intimate grasp of the trauma,
whilst nonetheless striving to engage emotionally with the events as far as cinematically possible.

The function of space in *Sud* is indissociable from that of time, since it is through the pairing of extended duration and meticulously composed framing that Akerman exhausts the visuals, building tension and distancing the spectator. As Noël Burch has noted, the longer the duration of ‘empty’ static shots, the greater the tension between on- and off-screen space—a technique that encourages acknowledgement of the directorial decisions determining what is excluded from the frame (1973: 25). *Sud*’s exterior scenes are almost all medium shots for which the camera is positioned from the roadside, at passenger-seat level, and all are either completely static, or are mechanical, car-mounted tracking shots. Despite the formal clarity of this repetitive style, the lack of explanation for the duration, for the contents of these shots, or for the order in which they appear means that neither interior nor exterior space in the film coheres with a clear vision of the town’s geography. The link between the footage and its real-world referent is therefore weakened, and the film’s space seems disorientating, unmappable.

In addition, the general banality of *Sud*’s imagery recalls Ivone Margulies’s description of ‘hyperrealism’ in Akerman’s work, a feature which creates ‘a hesitation between the literal and the symbolic registers’ (1996). The very act of framing implies the presence of withheld symbolic meanings, yet the duration also draws attention to the frame’s compositional elements, the geometrical architectural patterns or the saturation of colours. This ‘divest[s] the quotidian of its familiarity’ (Schmid, 2010: 112), making the mise-en-scène strange, and preventing the spectator from feeling immersed in the film. Images waver between the literal and the poetic, freeing them to be interpreted by each viewer on individualized terms.

An apparent diversion from this use of space occurs in the scene of the church service commemorating James Byrd’s life. Here, Akerman’s camera is positioned as an audience member, a choice which risks intruding upon the community’s space and misrepresenting the voices of social agents. However, the highly noticeable ellipses in the editing of this sequence self-critically underscore the limits of the footage, its manipulated and thus unreliable nature, rendering the scene incomplete. The omission of indications of the time elapsed between the church service and the interviews (or the murder itself) further blocks the viewer’s judgement, preventing fixed interpretations and making the camera’s intrusion effectively inert, since although the viewer is aware of the community’s expression of emotion, it is impossible to fully contextualize this sequence.

In the interview scenes, this sense of incompleteness is magnified by the inherent distance of speakers from the events, tempering the potentially intimate, emotive quality of subjective testimonies. Akerman’s interviewees are either anonymous or occupy official positions: none reveal personal ties to the victim. Details of the crime are gleaned from a journalist and from a partial eyewitness, while other interviews describe the situation of the black community, retelling second-hand the experiences of older generations concerning the area’s history of violent discrimination. Voices remain austere: factual in tone, leaving the viewer attentive both to the reasonable validity of their accounts and to their anecdotal quality. More broadly, although the voice of the interviewer/director is erased from the film, directorial expression is made conspicuous by the abruptness of cuts between interviews and exteriors. Without expositional information, the viewer becomes aware of the mediation of information, presented at several removes from events and channelled through various voices and the gaze of the film-maker, meaning
that, as Vivian Sobchack notes, the viewer looks ‘both at and through the screen, dependent upon it for knowledge, but also aware of an excess of existence not yet contained by it’ (1999: 246). Such reflexive distancing techniques therefore prevent *Sud* from becoming a reductionist or didactic representation of the topic, since Akerman continually places the viewer in critical relation to her subject.

But this dimension is countered by the figurative aspects of the film, which could be read as attempts to prevent these distancing techniques from dehumanizing the murder case. Using imagery to evoke the viewer’s embodied, sensory experience, Akerman attempts to generate an individualized, empathetic response from the viewer towards the traumatic event. Here I refer to the final tracking shot of the film, which I propose invokes Laura U. Marks’s theory of haptic visuality, expanded upon by Guiliana Bruno who describes the ‘kinaesthetic’ hapticity of movement through cinematic space (2002: 180–89). The final tracking shot of the film is the view from the back of a vehicle as it drives the route along which, we are told, the victim was dragged after being beaten and chained to a truck by his murderers. The unrelenting mechanized pace of the movement therefore becomes deeply disturbing in light of this revelation. The viewer’s sense of touch and of movement triggers an ‘involuntary mimicry of emotion or sensation of the body on screen’ elicited by the visible texture of the asphalt and by the sound of the engine and tyres (Gaines 1999: 90). Although ‘the body on screen’ remains absent, the camera position, fixed on the empty space where the victim had been, recalls the viewer to their own absence from the on-screen space, as well as to their own bodily presence before the screen, as if to project the viewer towards sensing the unimaginable. This negative image hapticity risks, as Marie Lienard has pointed out, ‘de transformer l’horreur en objet esthétique’ (2006). However, since the viewer is made self-aware not only in an intellectual sense but also in an embodied one, the film solicits an appreciation of the precise experience of suffering, itself unrepresentable, in relation to the viewer’s personal, individual sensory memory and the universality of the fear of unknown pain, restoring the humanity of the event by underscoring the paradoxically simultaneous sense of difference (experience) and similarity (embodied existence) between viewer and subject.

Where Akerman’s approach is strongly lateral in its implementation, evoking intimacy through this balance of distance and uncannily visceral images of absence, Shawi’s film adopts an unabashedly personal tone, foregrounding the vocal and corporeal presences of her subjects in order to investigate their relation to space and to self-expression, and the impact these concepts have upon personal relationships.

Intimacy in Shawi’s film must be understood in relation to her hybrid mode of filmmaking, which, following Nichols’s descriptions, has both participatory and poetic elements. Reading the film as exclusively poetic could render its use of the images of women exploitative, since poetic documentaries tend to fragment and blend footage, depersonalizing subjects and using them as abstract ‘raw material’, as Nichols notes (2017: 162). However, Shawi’s participation reinstates the personal nature of the film by placing emphasis on the idea of the instantaneous encounter, rather than on an abstract, poetic temporality. Ilona Hongisto notes that by seeing documentary as ‘creating events in which the real actualizes’, films avoid becoming abstract distortions of reality, instead validating the representational value of specific encounters and drawing attention to the conditions in which ‘particular actions and sentiments take form’ (2018: 197). Similarly, *E-muet*’s essayistic qualities could be considered to augment the film’s balance of the personal and the abstract. Although the film lacks the first-person narration typical of this mode, Laura Rascaroli explains that a director of an essay film ‘questions not only
her subject matter, but also her authorship and her subjectivity’ and further ‘urges [the spectator] to engage individually with the film’ by leaving meaning unfixed, features which are undeniably present in *E-muet* (2014: 33).

Filmed principally with a handheld camera, from Shawi’s ‘roving’ perspective, *E-muet* deliberately disobeys conventional spatio-temporal unity. As in Akerman’s work, ellipses and spatial disorientation deny the spectator grounding and make them critically alert to other means of generating meaning. Yet Shawi’s style is more erratic, not only rendering geographical space fluid, but also symbolically destabilizing notions of belonging, privacy and home. Her subjects appear inside and outside, in private and in public, locations rarely reappearing, making it impossible to definitively assign any of the women to one place. The camera favours extreme close-ups of the women’s faces, a framing style which dislocates subjects from the off-screen space beyond. The interviews themselves also complement the sense that the women inhabit a state of perpetual transit. In various scenes, Nanou repeatedly evades capture by the frame, making sudden gestures or moving around the room. One of Nanou’s key interviews is prefaced by an insert of Nanou’s photograph, as if Shawi is attempting to keep her still. Yet Nanou’s changeable behaviour contradicts rather than complements this fixed image. Moreover, in one interview discussing Nanou’s domestic situation and lack of ‘inner peace’, the dialogue is ironically underscored by the fact that she is driving, and by the sound of fireworks which interrupt and frighten her. Elsewhere, Rajwa mentions keeping her possessions in a bag behind the door in case she needs to quickly relocate, a residual habit from the former ‘situation’ of the country (inferred to mean Beirut’s civil conflicts). Her experience of displacement appears to have psychological repercussions which prevent Rajwa from forming attachments to people or places, or from feeling settled. Shawi’s poetic imagery reinforces this sense of uncertainty. She employs static shots of arrows, airports, roads, boats and water that contrast with those of her walking unsteadily along a railing. These contrasting images reveal the resonant instability of her own identity. Scenes such as these reveal how the precariousness of the women’s experiences and relationships is exacerbated by their disjointed movement and insecure relations to their local spaces.

The uncertain sense of place shared by the women is mirrored by the frustrated expression of much of their dialogue. Shawi deliberately juxtaposes her three subjects’ different degrees of loquaciousness and styles of body language in order to show how verbal expression is a flawed means of facilitating intimate exchanges. Across the film, Nanou describes her struggles with unexplainable, fluctuating moods, while Rajwa’s speech is characterized by hesitations and flickering eye-contact, and Rajwa even mentions explicitly that she feels nervous. Recourse to other modes of expressing emotion also reveals the insufficiency of verbal expression, as best exemplified by Johanne. The first of the central women to appear in the film, Johanne remains silent throughout, and therefore appears most in control of her own representation, choosing to communicate through body language alone. What’s more, Shawi’s editing choices and the surrounding soundtrack further emphasize these ‘vocal’ comparisons, contrasting conversational scenes with moments of silence, or ambient atmospheric shots. The film contains scenes of each woman that are accompanied by music, as when Rajwa idly sings along to an operatic aria, when Johanne sways and mimes to a track by Barbara, or when Nanou sings along to the radio, and later plays a folksong on guitar. Musicality and singing are therefore presented as powerful alternative vocal registers for communicating and sharing the intimate.

This non-verbal expression is complemented by moments where Shawi’s directorial ‘voice’ is evoked visually. Unlike the possible connotations of claims to objectivity that

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could be assigned to Akerman’s camerawork, Shawi’s subjective involvement is apparent from the pre-title scene, in which an additional woman (Nora) addresses Shawi’s camera directly, reaching towards her and apologising. Nora’s image reappears sporadically, at two moments later in the film, but purely as an affectionate, smiling image, like a memory interrupting Shawi’s stream of consciousness. Such poetic bursts punctuate the film with a sense of Shawi’s interiority, so that her overarching creative control is constantly obvious. Voice in *E-muet* therefore engages with different levels of expression which simultaneously inflect presentations of each of the participants, finally revealing that intimacy is not simply a matter of speech, that it necessitates openness to expression beyond words, and that voice in isolation, as we have seen in *Sud*, is a flawed conveyer of meaning.

*E-muet*’s depiction of the intimate arguably renders the presentation of personal experiences politically subversive. Lina Khatib notes that the confessionalist divisions of Lebanese society mean that ‘the boundaries of bodies have to be policed, as they signify social boundaries’ especially in relation to women (2008: 143). The intense proximity of Shawi’s camerawork to the corporeality of the women, as well as the intimate topics of conversation, could therefore be construed as subversive within the Lebanese context. Yet the complexification and destabilization of identities and of space, and the plural means of self-expression prevent *E-muet* from making sweeping political assertions. Instead, the film invites the viewer to empathize with the subjects as individuals.

Within the limits of this essay I have attempted to trace the complexities of each film’s aesthetic approach and to evaluate, with close reference to both the films and surrounding documentary theory, how these different styles contribute to the evocation of precise kinds of intimacy. Shawi and Akerman share an alertness to the limits of the form’s ability to make contact with others, but rather than attempt to invisibilize this, both, through divergent means, instead choose to embrace this apparent ‘distancing’ obstacle and use it to move towards empathetic connections with their subjects. Indeed, this connection is arguably only possible once the viewer is able to appreciate their own distance and difference from the subjects of the documentary, as it is the acute, layered form of documentary consciousness which triggers a more ethically sound and individuated kind of intimate relation to those they see. Such an engagement would be impossible within the framework of conventional documentary and the disguised authorial position it adopts.

This essay has sought to assert that, in both films, political subversion arises principally from formal experimentation, and has only briefly analysed the broader politics of the topics concerned. But since, in both cases, it is the lives of marginalized communities and individuals that have given rise to these formally innovative techniques, the films should be seen as demonstrating how documentary is able to transmit and to generate a nuanced sense of different kinds of intimacy, something which may usefully incite further critical debate on questions of representing and listening to subaltern voices without becoming reductive or exploitative, and increase awareness of the challenges of documentary ethics, as well as of the real experiences of participants. In this way, these films may provide inspiration for further attempts at establishing intercultural, empathetic connections through the cinematic medium.¹

¹ Since the time of writing, Corine Shawi has followed up *E-muet* with a new feature documentary, *Perhaps what I fear does not exist*, which documents her father’s sudden illness and the subsequent experience of everyday life for her family at the hospital. It was the recipient for the Fondation Boghassian’s Prix ‘résidence’ in 2020 and is expected to screen at festivals later in 2021/2022.
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Audiovisual Works

De l’Autre Côté. [feature film] dir. by Chantal Akerman (Arte/RTBF, France/Belgium, 2002) 103 mins.

D’Est. [feature film] dir. by Chantal Akerman (Icarus Films, France/Belgium, 1993) 107 mins.

E-muet. [feature film] dir. by Corine Shawi (Spectre Productions, Lebanon, 2013) 52 mins.

Sud. [feature film] dir. by Chantal Akerman (La Sept-Arte/RTBF, France/Belgium, 1999) 71 mins.

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DISCOVERY OF ZOBEL’S LOST WARTIME SHORT STORY: ‘BO-BO-BO-O’ OR ‘UP YOURS, HITLER!’

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In the course of my research into Joseph Zobel, I have frequently found myself tracking down, examining and comparing different editions of the author’s work. As I argue in my most recent monograph, Joseph Zobel: Négritude and the Novel, Zobel’s extensive project of revisions and rewriting reveals much about the shifts in his relationship with, and attitudes towards, Négritude, and about the evolution of his thinking on race and identity more generally. The publication history of Zobel’s short stories is no less complex and intriguing, and in the present article I wish to draw attention to my recent discovery of a remarkable ‘lost’ short story by Zobel. I begin by focusing on publication history, before moving to provide an outline of the lost short story and highlighting its significance for wider scholarship on francophone literary culture and history; in the final phase, I consider the factors which may have led to the text becoming lost.

The existence of the story has long been forgotten due to its complete exclusion during one of Zobel’s forays into rewriting, and the lost text only came to light when I examined the original edition of Zobel’s first short story collection, Laghia de la mort, a compelling series of tableaux of everyday Martinican life. Laghia de la mort first appeared in 1946 with a private Martinican press, and three decades later, in 1978, was republished under the same title by Présence Africaine, with extensive revisions. Moreover, the 1946 collection itself has a significant pre-history, as many of the stories were adapted and revised by Zobel from the prose fiction stories he published regularly in the Martinican newspaper Le Sportif, so began the pattern of rewriting which was to become such a prominent feature of Zobel’s career.

The 1978 Présence Africaine version is still widely available and studied, while the documented remaining examples of the 1946 edition are held in archives in Martinique and Paris. An online search of the SUDOC library catalogue revealed that one of the extant 1946 copies was held in Paris at the Médiathèque of the Musée du quai Branly.

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