Landscape
FRAMES of REPRESENTATION (FoR) embraces the cinema of the real and
the creative tension between fiction and non-fiction. In its combination of ethics
and aesthetics, we believe this form is extraordinarily suited to depicting
individual lives and engaging with contemporary socio-political struggles.

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MUBI
FRAMES of REPRESENTATION (FoR) embraces the possibilities offered by the cinema of the real, showcasing films that approach complex material contexts through innovative forms of storytelling. Returning for its third edition, this year’s festival explores the multifaceted concept of ‘Landscape’, following ‘Working’ in 2017 and ‘New Periphery’ in 2016. Calling for a new way of understanding the world and our place in it, ‘Landscape’ discusses paths to ecologically sustainable and socially equitable communities.

Through a series of screenings and related discussion forums FoR 2018 aims to facilitate conversation around how filmmakers, thinkers and activists are currently addressing the interconnected frames of art, society and the environment. As in past years, the festival engages with the creative tension between fiction and non-fiction, reality and imagination, aiming to create a space where cinema and art become dynamic forces for change.

The films navigate places marked by political borders, trace rapidly changing environments and imagine new geographies of sound, affect and aesthetics. Investigating landscape from different angles, they imagine it as a matrix where various social issues, constructs and positionalities are illustrated, made tangible and experienced in – and through – the physical environment. Landscape emerges as a complex space that connects each individual to the other, where geographical borders can function as an entry point to a rich sense of inclusiveness, rather than structures of demarcation and exclusion.

FoR 2018 continues a strong Latin and Caribbean strand that has been present since the festival’s inception. Many of this year’s films are concerned with centering – and redefining – black narratives, opening space for multiple forms of knowing, practicing and living.

Moving between Jamaica’s streets and rural landscapes, Khalik Allah’s Black Mother (special preview) captures immersive portraits of everyday life. Allah also offers a workshop in which he discusses his focus on black communities, urban environments and the ethics of depicting marginalisation on screen, in conversation with Dennis Lim.
Cocote (UK premiere, Locarno Film Festival Signs of Life Award Winner), by director Nelson Carlo De Los Santos Arias, moves between the rural and the mystical, negotiating ethical expectations and family feuds in the multilayered context of the Dominican Republic. Djon Africa (UK premiere), directed by João Miller Guerra and Filipa Reis and produced by independent collective TERRATREME, dramatises an adventurous non-fictional narrative to explore notions of family, home, and intangible inheritances. In a special seminar led by independent producer and activist Brenda Coughlin (Dirty Wars, CITIZENFOUR, Risk) TERRATREME shares how, as a collective of artist-filmmakers, they leverage their pooled resources to produce films outside creatively inhibitive production structures in Portugal.

Multiple films explore the importance of personal narratives and family archives. Argentinian Toia Bonino’s first feature Orione (UK premiere, BAFICI Best Director Award), is a complex story of criminality and personal tragedy, blending dramatisation of real events with archival footage of Buenos Aires’s outskirts.

Stories of singular societies nevertheless offer relatable narratives. In Dragonfly Eyes (UK premiere), Xu Bing asks viewers to adopt the surveillance camera’s voyeuristic gaze, challenging us to confront our changing notions of privacy and morality. Rosa Hannah Ziegler’s Family Life (European premiere) also presents an intensely intimate picture of difficult interpersonal dynamics among relatives living a stifling agricultural existence. The Son (UK premiere) examines the psychology of young men grappling with futures embroiled in the political landscape of the Russian military apparatus. Meanwhile, Salomé Lamas’ Extinction (UK premiere) meditates on the troubled borders of Eastern Europe with a melancholy lyricism. Gürcan Keltek’s Meteors (UK premiere) documents what happens when physical phenomena intrude into life like state repression into truth.

FoR 2018 also turns its eye once again to films set in Eastern Europe and Russia. With its unremitting observational approach, Oleksandr Techynskyi’s narrative Delta (UK premiere) illuminates the interconnectedness of relationships and resources in an extreme rural setting. Similarly Clément Cogitore’s Braguino (UK premiere) presents a context in which the environment sustains human life.
as an alternative to capitalist paradigms. Audiences can follow the threads connecting these stories to the world beyond the screen in *Eastern European Politics, Borders and Landscape* – a workshop with Cogitore and Techynskyi. Offering a light-hearted change in tone, *In Praise of Nothing* is an ironic visual stroll, narrated by Iggy Pop. It provokes a rich range of questions, from our anthropocentric view of the environment to our understandings of the act of viewing itself. Audiences are invited to a lecture on *How to Film Nothing* by director Boris Mitić.

For the first time, this year’s festival introduces a section for short films showcasing new territories of storytelling. After the screenings, the filmmakers join us for a discussion of their work. The striking lush textures and warm light of *Empty Shore* (IDFA 2017 Best Short Film) belie the emptiness and neglect experienced by its characters in this portrayal of state-driven economic deprivation. Films such as *Ascension* and *Amundsen’s Dogs* heighten the ambiguity between documentary and reality in strange, nonlinear montages driven by revelatory approaches to philosophy and mortality. *Untitled 1925* poetically links the weight of her family history to national narratives. Amid echoes of the political and pop cultural landscape of 1980s Madrid, *Aliens* positions the self as cultural producer in a mode that counters conventional documentary techniques and renegotiates the relationship between subject and representation. In *Horta*, geographical and emotional landscapes intersect as the protagonist experiences the intertwinement of her family’s past with the history of her ancestral home. Our exploration of new aesthetic landscapes also continues through visualized radio platform Radio Atlas, which returns to FoR to present a programme of radio documentaries.

For our closing symposium *Imaginaries of the Desert*, we welcome back Academy Award-winner Walter Murch (*The Conversation, Apocalypse Now*). This forum aims to challenge preconceptions of the future as an empty landscape, open to the insertion of life and technological experimentation, as well as exploitation.

As a body, the films selected for the third edition of FRAMES of REPRESENTATION reflect upon the role of contemporary society as a force which not only impacts on ‘Landscape’ but also collectively creates it.
We are very excited to begin this edition of FoR, and look forward to the new conversations, perspectives and landscapes that we hope it will generate. As photographer Susan Meiselas engagingly remarks in a different context, ‘a return always offers a new possibility.’
Films:
Black Mother

Dir. Khalik Allah, Jamaica/USA, 2018, 75 mins

Special preview + Q&A with director Khalik Allah

Lyrical and haunting, *Black Mother* is a film-poem to Jamaica, conjuring up the island through a polyphony of textures and tales. Moving between the voices of different characters, from the prayers of priests to the stories of sex workers, the film captures the plurality and complexity of its overlapping worlds.

With a photographer’s eye for detail, Allah interweaves varied stories into a complex tapestry of encounters, which border on the sublime. Probing the line between imagination and history, the film depicts the island landscape as a creative force, a space not only shaped by its past but also continuously evolving through new webs of relation.
The debut scripted feature by documentary directors João Miller Guerra and Filipa Reis, *Djon Africa* is a warm-hearted picaresque, exploring the transformations and translations that occur in every act of return. The subject of the directors’ previous documentary, Miguel Moreira plays himself here, travelling to Cape Verde in search of his father. As he journeys across the unfamiliar country, he befriends a varied cast of characters, offering a meandering portrait of a complex landscape, its layers and idiosyncrasies. Loosely episodic in structure, the film navigates pressing questions of nationhood and belonging with upbeat, gentle humour.
Deep in the Siberian taiga, two feuding families live on opposite banks of a river. Part of an ancient sect of the Russian Orthodox Church, the villagers reject the authority of the state and live by their own rules and principles. There are no roads leading here; the village can be reached only by helicopter. Stretching as far as the eye can see, the immense forest is both a resource and a threat: wild animals come close to villagers' homes; every year, climate change intensifies the risk of fire. Against this backdrop, this evocative film traces the tensions and possibilities of building a community in a remote and rapidly changing environment.
Dir. Oleksandr Techynskyi, 2017, 81 mins, Ukraine/Germany, Ukrainian with English subtitles

UK premiere + Q&A with director Oleksandr Techynskyi

In the isolated, rural world of the Danube Delta, daily life is centred on a harsh and unforgiving landscape. Men cut through tall reeds and ice to bring in the harvest by boat; orthodox church-goers go to the riverbank to fill vessels with holy water. Here, the river is the central protagonist; the villagers find themselves at the margins, physically and symbolically pushed to the edges of the frame. With its unremitting observational focus, Delta explores the significance of the human, evoking the interconnectedness of relationships and resources in an extreme environment.
In Praise of Nothing

Dir. Boris Mitić, 2017, 78 mins, Serbia/Croatia/France

UK premiere + panel discussion with director Boris Mitić

An offbeat, satirical and beautifully-shot film about Nothing, in which Nothing, tired of being misunderstood, runs away from home and begins to reveal his thoughts on pretty much everything, from life and death to love and politics. Shot over eight years by 62 cinematographers in 70 countries, this essay-film is narrated in verse by Iggy Pop and scored by cabaret grandmasters Pascal Comelade and the Tiger Lillies. Humorous and self-reflexive, it interweaves moments of playful superficiality with insightful commentary and formal lyricism, challenging us to reconsider the significance of life, the universe and film today.
Ascension (Ascensao)
Dir. Pedro Peralta, 2016, 18 mins, Portugal, Portuguese with English subtitles

At dawn a group of peasants tries to rescue the body of a young man from the inside of a well. At the centre of it all, a mother anxiously awaits her son’s salvation, until finally his body emerges from the earth. Part of influential Portuguese film collective TERRATREME, director Pedro Peralta plays with the language of the spiritual, only to complicate this frame. Ultimately, there is no transcendence here. Only the natural landscape endures: unpredictable, generative, ongoing.

Amundsen’s Dogs (Los Perros de Amundsen)
Dir. Rafael Ramírez, 2017, 25 mins, Cuba, Spanish with English subtitles

Drawing on the story of Arctic explorer Ronald Amundsen, this film investigates a landscape which seems to defy human comprehension and classification. Interweaving footage of frozen wilderesses, the stories of those who did not survive their expeditions and the words of writers inspired by the Arctic, it meditates on the creative force of this vast landscape’s enduring strangeness, reflecting on our fascination with those worlds we cannot know.

Empty Shore (Zhalanash)
Dir. Marcin Sauter, Poland, 2017, 40 mins, Russian/Kazakh with English subtitles

Once one of the world’s biggest lakes, today the Aral Sea has all but vanished. This haunting, beautifully-shot short focuses on what remains in an area that was once flourishing. Fishing boats erode in the dusty desert, a lonely camel wanders an empty street, and an old woman quietly stares at her birthday cake. Empty and dry, the land stretches out as far as the eye can see.

+ Q&A with directors Pedro Peralta, Rafael Ramírez and producer Michał Białożej
Family Life
(Familienleben)

Dir. Rosa Hannah Ziegler, 2018, 94 mins, Germany, German with English subtitles

European premiere + Q&A with director Rosa Hannah Ziegler

On an isolated farm in Eastern Germany, Biggi lives with her two teenage daughters, her violent ex-husband and an assortment of dogs, cats and other animals. With an empathic, intimate perspective, the film follows her as she balances the demands of agricultural work with the desire to build a home for her daughters. Immersing us in the complexities of the family’s relationships and their attempts to communicate with each other, this sensitive observational piece offers a portrait of the difficulties and dreams of individuals living together in a remote, rural environment. Through its careful attention to the rhythms and details of the everyday, the film offers a nuanced reflection on love, violence and social inequality, without easy generalisation or judgement.
Dir. Xu Bing, China, 2017, 81 mins, Mandarin Chinese with English subtitles

UK premiere + Q&A with director Xu Bing

All across China, surveillance cameras are tracking citizens as they go about their lives. Compiling diverse fragments of actual CCTV footage, Chinese artist Xu Bing constructs an unsettling fictional narrative: a young woman leaves a Buddhist monastery to begin a new life, working in various jobs until she ultimately finds fame online. With a voiceover that threads together disparate fragments, the film confronts us with an insightful yet troubling image of contemporary life and the technologies which regulate it. Instead of focusing on any single character, its concern is the texture of the present: how the spaces in which we live and come to know ourselves are framed, increasingly, by the gaze of others.
Hypnotic and multilayered, *Extinction* meditates on the troubled borders of Eastern Europe with a melancholy lyricism. Shot in black-and-white, Salomé Lamas’ film follows Kolja, a young man who is loyal to Transnistria – a communist state that broke away from the former Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, yet is today unrecognized by the international community. Mediating between dreamlike echoes of the Soviet past and Kolja’s politically-charged encounters in the present, the film slowly builds up an associative, non-linear story of a landscape in which the borders between past and present remain unsettled.
In Siberia, a group of young recruits compete in harsh conditions to join the elite Spetsnaz special forces. At home, a family grieves for a lost son, killed in 2013 at the age of 21. Interweaving these narratives, The Son immerses us in the intense world of the Russian military training apparatus, observing the changes that take place in young soldiers as they prepare for violent conflict, their lives intertwined with the fate of the group. With a tone that is simultaneously empathic and detached, the film negotiates complex ethical questions about the representation of violence and the state, while also offering a sensitive portrait of family grief.
At night, in a Kurdish town in Eastern Turkey, meteors start to fall. Stepping out of their homes to look, the city's inhabitants encounter fragments of the past and remember those who have been lost. In this environment, the tracing of absences becomes both an imaginative and a political act; the impact of the violence which has scarred the area has been erased from official records, leaving memories and stories to fill the gaps. Focusing on the troubled history of this conflict-stricken region, *Meteors* deftly interweaves its cosmological framework with astute political commentary, exploring the ethics of how we remember the stories, places and voices which have disappeared.
Radio Atlas

Camp Sisterhood (Soeurs de Camp)
Dir. Charlotte Rouault and Benoit Bories, 2013, 28 mins

Colette’s Podcasts (La Reine du Podcast)
Dir. Charlotte Bienaimé, 2014, 17 mins

+ panel discussion

The most interesting things just fell out of the sky...

If we didn’t look after ourselves, we were done for.

Radio Atlas presents two subtitled audio works in which women travel in their imaginations – returning to landscapes from their past or escaping into audio adventures. The short feature Colette’s Podcasts (ARTE Radio) accompanies Camp Sisterhood (ARTE Radio) in which three women share memories of their time in a French concentration camp.
Dir. Toia Bonino, 2017, 67 mins, Argentina, Spanish with English subtitles

UK premiere + Q&A with director Toia Bonino

Nuanced and unsettling, *Orione* reflects on the complex imbrication of the personal and political in a Buenos Aires’ neighbourhood. Alejandro was a gang member, betrayed by a friend and killed by police. Through a series of engaging and sometimes uneasily juxtaposed fragments, *Orione* evokes different aspects of his life; at one moment, the camera dwells on the warmth of his mother’s memories, at another, we are confronted with archival footage which captures the violence of his crimes. Splintering across the film, these varied visual and sonic strands resist easy assimilation into any single narrative, building a complex picture of a man – and a society – full of contradictions.
FoR Shorts #2

**Aliens**  
Dir. Luis López Carrasco, 2017, 23 mins, Spain, Spanish with English subtitles

Tesa Arranz, a key figure in the 1980s Madrid art scene and the lead singer of Los Zombies, painted over 500 portraits of outer-space creatures. Combining the singer’s paintings with the memories of her youth, her poems and diaries, *Aliens* depicts an emotional landscape in Spanish history where happiness, nightmarish experimentations and alienation walked hand in hand.

**Horta**  
Dir. Pilar Palomero, 2017, 15 mins, Spain, Spanish with English subtitles

*Horta* is a collage of the filmmaker’s hometown and an engaging portrait of family grief. Here, geographical and emotional landscapes intersect as the protagonist experiences the inextricability of her personal history and the multilayered landscape of her ancestral home.

**Untitled 1925**  
Dir. Madi Piller, 2018, 26 mins, Canada

Travelling through the highlands of Peru, an artist follows the path her grandfather took in 1925, from Lima to Cusco. The vast, silent territory of the Andes is the backdrop for her moving and compelling reflections on identity and belonging.

+ Q&A with directors Luis López Carrasco, Pilar Palomero and Madi Piller
Cocote

Dir. Nelson Carlo de Los Santos Arias, 2017, 106 mins, Dominican Republic / Argentina / Germany / Qatar, Spanish with English subtitles

UK premiere + Q&A with director Nelson Carlo De Los Santos Arias

A sensory portrait of the syncretic, multilayered landscape of the Dominican Republic, Cocote negotiates ethical expectations and family feuds. The film follows evangelical Christian Alberto as he returns home to attend the funeral of his murdered father and finds that he is expected to take part in rituals that conflict with his beliefs.

As he draws out the possibilities and complexities of a world in which multiple histories intertwine, director Los Santos Arias opens space for what he terms 'mulatto' filmmaking. Playing on the border between fiction and non-fiction, the film resists one-dimensional identifications, juxtaposing ethnographic recordings with fictional scenes in which both professional and non-professional actors appear. Shifting between tones and textures, it offers an immersive and visceral engagement with violence of different kinds: the violence of loss, of family dispute, and ultimately, of history.
Programme:
FRIDAY 20 APRIL

6pm  Urban Landscape Workshop with Khalik Allah
8.30pm Special preview: Black Mother + Q&A with director Khalik Allah

SATURDAY 21 APRIL

4pm  A Case Study: TERRATREME
Seminar with independent producer Brenda Coughlin and TERRATREME’s Pedro Peralta with directors João Miller Guerra and Filipa Reis
6pm  UK premiere: Djon Africa + Q&A with directors João Miller Guerra and Filipa Reis

SUNDAY 22 APRIL

2.15pm  Politics, Borders and Landscape in Eastern Europe
Workshop with Clément Cogitore and Oleksandr Techynskyi
4pm  UK premiere: Braguino + Q&A with director Clément Cogitore
5.45pm  UK premiere: Delta + Q&A with director Oleksandr Techynskyi
8pm  UK premiere: In Praise of Nothing + panel discussion with director Boris Mitić
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<td>MONDAY 23 APRIL</td>
<td>6.15pm</td>
<td><em>How to Film Nothing</em>  Lecture by Boris Mitić</td>
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<td>8.15pm</td>
<td>FoR Shorts #1: <em>Ascension</em>, 18 mins / <em>Amundsen's Dogs</em>, 25 mins / <em>Empty Shore</em>, 40 mins + Q&amp;A with directors Pedro Peralta, Rafael Ramírez and producer Michał Białozej</td>
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<td><strong>TUESDAY 24 APRIL</strong></td>
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<td>European premiere: <em>Family Life</em> + Q&amp;A with director Rosa Hannah Ziegler</td>
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<td>UK premiere: <em>Dragonfly Eyes</em> + Q&amp;A with director Xu Bing</td>
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<td><em>In Conversation with Xu Bing</em> Talk on Surveillance, Data Collection and Storytelling</td>
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<td>UK premiere: <em>Extinction</em> + Q&amp;A with director Salomé Lamas</td>
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<td><em>Our Soul Isn't a Border</em> Masterclass with Salomé Lamas</td>
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<td>UK premiere: <em>The Son</em> + Q&amp;A with director Alexander Abaturov</td>
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<td>UK premiere: <em>Meteors</em> + Q&amp;A with director Gürcan Keltek</td>
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**FRIDAY 27 APRIL**

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<td><strong>Colony, Riots and Unheard Fragments of Time</strong> Workshop with Gürcan Keltek</td>
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<td><strong>A Night with Radio Atlas</strong> Radio Documentary Programme</td>
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<td>UK premiere: <em>Orione</em> + Q&amp;A with director Toia Bonino</td>
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**SATURDAY 28 APRIL**

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<td>11am–5pm</td>
<td><strong>Imaginaries of the Desert</strong> Symposium with Walter Murch  + guests</td>
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<td>FoR Shorts #2: <em>Aliens</em>, 23 mins</td>
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<td>8.15pm</td>
<td>UK premiere: <em>Cocote</em> + Q&amp;A with director Nelson Carlo De Los Santos Arias</td>
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Masterclasses, Talks and Workshops:
Urban Landscape
Workshop with Khalik Allah
Friday 20 April, 6pm

Director and artist Khalik Allah’s debut feature *Field Niggas* was FRAMES of REPRESENTATION’s inaugural screening in 2015. This year, Allah returns to lead a workshop. In conversation with Dennis Lim, he discusses his focus on black communities, urban environments and the ethics of depicting marginalisation on screen. The conversation investigates the ways in which Allah’s distinctive methodology seeks to resist the stereotypes that still often frame discussions of race and marginalisation, instead engendering an empathic and nuanced approach.

A Case Study: TERRATREME
Saturday 21 April, 4pm

In this seminar, led by independent producer and activist Brenda Coughlin (*Dirty Wars*; *Citizenfour*; *Risk*), we are joined by three filmmakers from Portugal’s influential TERRATREME collective: Pedro Peralta (*Ascension*), Filipa Reis (*Djon Africa*) and João Miller Guerra (*Djon Africa*). They discuss their vision for independent film production, as well as the new possibilities and challenges facing filmmakers today. Founded in 2008 by a group of young filmmakers, TERRATREME is a collective which pools the resources of a diverse group of artists. Over the past decade, they have produced a variety of engaging and innovative films, which have gained recognition across the globe.

Politics, Borders and Landscape in Eastern Europe
Workshop with Clément Cogitore and Oleksandr Techynskyi
Sunday 22 April, 2.15pm

In this workshop, the directors of *Braguino* and *Delta* discuss their filmmaking process, the politics of landscape, and their engagement with the changing relationship between humans and the environment. Drawing out the complex imbrications of formal choices and ethics, the workshop reflects on contemporary film’s responsibilities in a rapidly changing present.

How to Film Nothing
Lecture by Boris Mitic
Monday 23 April, 6.15pm

The director of satirical documentary *In Praise of Nothing* joins us for special, tongue-in-cheek lecture about Nothing. He presents a quirky overview of the creative and production challenges of making his whistleblowing documentary parody, in which he explores his chosen topic and the process of creating a narrative from thousands of hours of footage shot by filmmakers across the globe. The project started in bankrupt Serbia as a provocation and took eight years to make, shuffling its way through 20,000 pages of eclectic bibliography, a crew of 62 cinematographers brainstorming on a unique anonymous online platform, and shooting locations across 70 countries.
In Conversation with Xu Bing
Talk on Surveillance, Data Collection and Storytelling
Wednesday 25 April, 6pm

What tools does cinema offer for exploring the complex relationships between data collection, surveillance and storytelling? In this talk, artist and director Xu Bing returns to the ICA following his 1997 Installation by Xu Bing show, to lead a discussion on framing of different kinds, exploring our contemporary landscapes of surveillance and his approach to negotiating the dynamics between filmmaker, film and audience; between creation and consumption.

Our Soul Isn’t A Border
Masterclass with Salomé Lamas on Landscapes and Film
Thursday 26 April, 4pm

I’m not quite sure if I even distinguish landscape from people. I know it sounds terrible, but I guess the approach [should be] equally respectful and ethically responsible.
– Salomé Lamas

Filmmaker, artist and researcher Salomé Lamas returns to the festival for a second year to screen Extinction and lead a masterclass on landscapes, the sublime and non-anthropocentric forms of filmmaking. In the conversation, she explores topics such as the intertwine- ment of methodology and ethics, the significance of landscape today and the filmmaker’s responsibility towards it.

On 23 and 25 April, two CHASE seminars for students and academics also take place in the ICA Studio, with invited filmmakers.

Colony, Riots and Unheard Fragments of Time
Workshop with Gürcan Keltek
Friday 27 April, 5pm

Through his engagement with the physical and affective traces of the past, Gürcan Keltek attempts to capture a fragmented, disappearing reality. Patterned with echoes, his film creates a visual experience which allows riots, conflicts and shifting political conditions to surface, articulating characters’ inner time in dialogue with the sociopolitical sphere. In this workshop, hosted by filmmaker and lecturer Ludovica Fales, he discusses the process of making a film about memory, and how urgent contemporary concerns emerge through a focus on unheard fragments of the past.
**Imaginaries of the Desert**
Symposium with special guest Walter Murch
Saturday 28 April, 11am

The Desert comprises discourses, tactics, and figures that restabilize the distinction between Life and Nonlife. It stands for all things perceived and conceived as denuded of life – and, by implication, all things that could, with the correct deployment of technological expertise or proper stewardship, be (re)made hospitable to life. [...] The Desert is the affect that motivates the search for other instances of life in the universe and technologies for seeding planets with life; it colors the contemporary imaginary of North African oil fields; and it drives the fear that all places will soon be nothing more than the setting within a *Mad Max* movie.
– Elizabeth Povinelli

This symposium invites critical responses to the expanded notion of the desert.

Taking as a starting point anthropologist Elizabeth A. Povinelli’s discussion of the Desert as a category of thought, this convening explores how the figure of the desert becomes a receptacle for imaginaries about our relationship to the earth, life and non-life. The aim is to interrogate preconceptions of both Global South and future landscapes as ‘empty’ and stripped of life, while at the same time being open to technological experimentation and insertion of life, as well as exploitation as a resource.

The desert not a literal space that is inhospitable to life due to a lack of water, but rather a lens for any place that is figured as silent; waiting to be made visible; lacking memory; available as a resource for more valuable forms of life; requiring de-toxification; needing the establishment of boundaries of maps. This vision serves a particular form of life linked to capital and anthropocentric destruction. The artists, filmmakers, researchers and writers contributing to this symposium will explore how particular landscapes and their inhabitants can resist this perspective through different (artistic) imaginaries.
Dennis Lim on *Black Mother*

There is hardly a greater leap than to move from a chronicle of a single street corner to that of an entire country, but that is precisely what Khalik Allah attempts in his new documentary tone poem *Black Mother*. Allah’s previous feature, *Field Niggas*, was shot entirely in the vicinity of a busy Harlem intersection (Lexington Avenue and 125th Street). *Black Mother* finds the filmmaker-photographer absorbing – in all its dizzying vibrance and complexity – the people and places of Jamaica, his mother’s homeland, where he still has family.

Allah’s work amounts to a deep inquiry into the possibilities of portraiture: what can you tell from an image of a person, from a fleeting interaction with them? Can the essence of that encounter be captured in a still or moving image, a handful of words? The most striking formal aspect of Allah’s films is the asynchronous soundtrack – he interviews his subjects off camera, and their voices come together in a polyphonic aural montage that fits, while seldom actually matching, the syncopated visual flow. The separation of image and sound creates a simultaneous impression of proximity and distance, and invites the viewer into a richly associative space. But where *Field Niggas*, illuminated by the flaring lights of a New York City night and given to passages of drifting slow motion, had the effect of a reverie, *Black Mother* thrives on sensory multiplicity: this flood of faces and bodies and landscapes is shot on a patchwork of formats including digital and analog video, 16mm, and Super 8, and accompanied by an unceasing patois-inflected stream of testimony, confession, harangue, prayer, and song.
Belying the initial impression of overload and sprawl, *Black Mother* is organized into three loose sections, more or less corresponding with the trimesters of a pregnancy. The first part offers a crash course in Jamaican history and culture, the second concerns the place of women in Jamaican society, and the third – including a funeral and a birth – settles into a more meditative rhythm and opens up into a consideration of the cosmic cycle of life and death. With its telescoping perspectives – political, social, personal, metaphysical – *Black Mother* covers considerable ground: the island nation’s colonial past, its entwined histories of slavery and religion, the life-giving abundance of the land, the deadly realities of poverty, crime and sex work, and woven through it all, Allah’s own investigation into family and spirituality through his relationship with his grandfather. From all manner of fragments, *Black Mother* pieces together an affirmation of the eternal: it’s a film held together by its maker’s boundless curiosity and empathy, by a gaze attuned equally to beauty and pain.

Dennis Lim is a curator and writer
Greg de Cuir Jr on *Djon Africa*

*Djon Africa* can be read as a picaresque tale. But this feature-length work of cinema is not entirely literary. Not least because the main character might not even be Miguel, the roguish wanderer who goes by the nickname Djon Africa. The true protagonist might in fact be Cape Verde, the archipelago nation off the northwest coast of Africa, which Miguel claims as his heritage, and where he travels from Portugal in search of his lost father.

Cape Verde is the star, with its colourful rocky cliffs, its secluded beaches, its hedonistic locals, its irresistible spirits. This fact perhaps accounts for the work moving into the realm of non-fiction. All of the people who make appearances are non-professional actors, and Miguel plays himself. In fact, ironically enough, given the prior argument, Miguel could be read as something of a literary device. He is both author and subject of the narrative.

When I think of Cape Verde I also think of another cinéaste: Cape Verdean-American artist Anthony D. Ramos. In 1975 he shot the video documentary *Some Aspects of Cape Verdean Culture*, which exists as the only documentation of that jubilant moment of independence from Portuguese colonial rule. Maybe it is no coincidence that Ramos is the family name that Miguel searches for. Portugal is yet another patriarchal force that hovers over *Djon Africa*. It is a burden that Miguel cannot relieve himself of. Everywhere he goes in Cape Verde he is heckled and teased as a foreigner, a tourist. The implication is that he is just another exploiter, regardless of the colour of his skin or the tone of his Creole. In one early scene on an aeroplane Miguel has to convince a young woman of his Verdean roots by prompting her to touch his
skin. It is as though tactile evidence is required for identification – for recognition – here. Indeed, in his attempt to assert his island identity, Miguel even associates himself with its ecosystem and wildlife. He compares his skin to that of a shark or dolphin, the woman caresses his arm, and she eventually relents and believes him.

Through the course of his journey Miguel learns about some aspects of Cape Verdean culture, but nothing of his father. Just prior to returning he discovers that his girlfriend is pregnant. Will history repeat itself? The final shot and the last time we see him is on a crowded street back in Portugal. Miguel disappears into the mass of life, just another ‘Djon Africa’ among many. But, as he floats off screen, someone notices him as he passes; a face in the crowd that turns to stare but does not pursue. Could this be his unborn son, reversing his path? Could it be his father, constantly evading him and just out of sight? Or is it a random passerby, inquisitive about the presence of the cinematic apparatus in his neighbourhood? All fiction tends toward documentary and all documentary tends toward fiction. Like many other contemporary works of cinema that concern themselves with the creative treatment of actuality, this is a continuum that Djon Africa navigates and lays bare.

Greg de Cuir Jr is a curator and writer
Brenda Coughlin on *Braguino*

How do we live now? Today this question confronts us with increasing urgency.

The conditions for life on this planet require defence. Social inequality and forced migration spread and grow. Land and commons – and the rights to them of flora and fauna, human or otherwise – are restricted to private gain, industrial agriculture, military bases, mining and construction.

The desire to conserve life, to manage our common affairs, to assemble in public, to build communities – all are at the root of this era’s social and political struggles.

Enacting their answer to how we live now, situated movements worldwide are making and claiming territory, occupying and blockading. The resisters of ‘la Zad’ – Zone à Défendre – in western France defend farmland from a decades-old plan to build an airport. The Standing Rock Sioux protect their nation and Turtle Island from the Dakota Access Pipeline. For ten years, the homeless of São Paulo have continued the Mauá Occupation in once derelict buildings. In the squares of Syntagma, Tahrir, Puerto del Sol, and Taksim, city dwellers assembled and camped.

Sacha, the father in Clément Cogitore’s *Braguino*, answered the question of how to live now for himself and his family by moving deep into the Siberian taiga. Alone, as if an autonomous collective, the Braguine family built shelter, community and a life in peace in the taiga’s forests, the planet’s second-largest biome after the oceans.

Cogitore pays close attention to social currents in remote lands, as in *Neither Heaven Nor Earth*, his 2015 film about an army platoon
in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border zone. *Braguino* too is closely observed, with stunning visual- and sound-scapes that intensify both the solitude of the Braguines and their absorption into and by the taiga.

Though set in vastness, *Braguino* comes to us on an intimate scale: of towheaded children playing on the river’s sandy banks; of Sacha and his son gutting a bear they’ve hunted, gently handling its entrails; of the large family in candlelit darkness sharing meals, complaining about the neighbours. The neighbours, only just across the river, are the Kilines.

Two warring houses: Kilines and Braguines. Hatfields and McCoys. Montagues, Capulets. We know this old tale of family feud. But Sacha is no gunfighter. He sings a song to the soul of the hunted bear. He quietly plies the river, emitting bird calls. He interprets his dreams of extinction, of being forced to leave the taiga.

When the helicopter comes to his village, bringing with it men, guns, menace, and ownership papers, Sacha laments, ‘a war is coming’. He adds, ‘they come and occupy the taiga, whereas we live here.’

How do we live now? Occupy and defend? Go alone into remote areas? Survive through mutual aid or in isolated fortresses? Autonomy or community? *Braguino* contends with these high stakes.

*Brenda Coughlin is an independent producer and activist*
Aga Baranowska on *Delta*

People living in remote communities under harsh conditions are sometimes portrayed as fighting against their surroundings, as being at the mercy of the environment to the point where they are surviving, rather than thriving. In *Delta*, director Oleksandr Techynskyyi acknowledges the harshness of life for his protagonists, inhabitants of a Danube Delta village in Ukraine. Yet they live in harmony with these less-than-friendly surroundings. Isolation and extreme weather are part of their existence, but they learn the secrets of the surrounding landscape and find ways to peacefully co-exist there without mistreating it. They become an inseparable part of the austere environment.

The beauty of the nature presented in the film is undeniable. The farmers work in fields shrouded in fog which descends almost magically, as if part of a mysterious crime story. Falling snowflakes shimmer in the sun revealing the brightness of the snow. The sunsets over the Delta are some of the most gorgeous one could ever see. Techynskyyi presents the landscape as if it is a fairytale, an idyllic place to live in.

Against this beautiful backdrop, the protagonists’ hardships are visible. The presence of alcohol throughout the film illustrates a common coping mechanism. Most of the inhabitants are older with few young people seen in the village, suggesting that there are no future prospects there. Yet, Techynskyyi doesn’t seem to emphasise loneliness, despair or desperation in their lives. The strength of their community, rather than the individual, appears to help them overcome external adversities. There are virtually no scenes in the film showing people on their own against the landscape; they are always part of a bigger group.
It is this constant push and pull between the beauty of the scenery and the toughness of life that Techynskyi is particularly interested in exploring here. This is conveyed through the fluidity with which the camera moves between the protagonists and the landscape. Techynskyi doesn’t observe people fighting against the environment or brutally exploiting it for their own benefits, but rather working alongside it in a peaceful symbiosis, captured by the smooth transitions of the camera focus.

In *Delta*, people’s lives are deeply connected to the surrounding water. It is their lifeline: without roads, waterways provide the only transportation option for people and goods. It is their obstacle, as they learn how to tame it, figuring out simple tasks like how to get from one end of the river to the other when it is frozen. It is their companion, as they get to know it their whole lives. If they had to leave the Danube Delta, we come to understand, the protagonists of Techynskyi’s film would be out of their element.

Aga Baranowska is a film programmer
Paul Harris on *In Praise of Nothing*

Boris Mitić’s *In Praise of Nothing* comes off as a brazen tour-de-force born of calling a bluff: imagine having the audacity to propose making a metaphysical political planetary provocation in which Nothing speaks for itself, for the first and last time. Imagine giving yourself eight years to research 20,000 pages of eclectic bibliography, and enlisting dozens of cinematographers around the world to film documentary footage of Nothing according to increasingly precise instructions. Imagine, finally, writing the entire script in rhyme, hiring your childhood rock ’n’ roll hero to narrate it and provoking absolute audience feedback such as: ‘Can I screen this film at my funeral, twice?’

Tagged as ‘a whistleblowing documentary parody’, *In Praise of Nothing* is an epicaresque grand-rogue runaway road movie wherein Nothing, tired of being misunderstood, runs away from home and ‘descends down a blank page’ to share a few thoughts with us. The film unfolds in episodes intercut by silent-era intertitles, as a sequence of vignettes, riffs, conceits and salvos; each one singular, each executed with crystalline clarity. Nothing’s confessional soliloquy is matched to footage from 70 countries; the relation between text and image changes constantly, by turns ironic, mimetic, enigmatic, evocative, provocative, or just fucking hilarious. The marvellously mood-shifting score by cabaret masters Pascal Comelade and the Tiger Lillies provides tonal consistency, as well as a sonic backdrop ideal for bringing out the nuanced layers of Nothing’s voice: a kind of cowboy visionary, a teen-aged old man, acerbic and immature, wise beyond its years. Yes, if you’re going to pull off Nothing speaking for itself, you would definitely want to get Iggy Pop to do the voice.
Mitić’s movie is methodical and meticulous, improvisational and impetuous. It shows that even in the odd case of nothing, less is more and more is less: it distils Nothing’s linguistic paradoxes, philosophical quagmires, existential rabbit-holes and cosmic black holes in a rhetoric of aphoristic erudition, euphemism and wordplay, deflation and overstatement. Its allusive range runs the gamut from Heidegger to E.T., Cyrano to Bruce Lee. Visually, Nothing’s opening gambit that it is ‘actually there in every shot’ probes the limits of cinema, like a literal onscreen realization of Wallace Stevens’s lines ‘nothing itself, beholds/Nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is.’ But for all the diverse sources and our rational resistance, the visuals turn out to be surprisingly unified, if not universal, effectively suspending the audience’s disbelief and perpetuating the big gamble.

Politically, Nothing epitomises humanity’s potential and its penchant for grand failure; Nothing is a perversely immaterial real thing, the ultimate folly, a beautiful concept that comes to naught, a poignant aspiration that ends in emptiness. Like Erasmus’s Renaissance encomium, Mitić’s In Praise of Nothing provides a searing satiric commentary on the vanities and corruption of the time. But as an open provocation it also extends an open invitation: ‘Actually, there’s no real conclusion to what I had to say; It’s more about what went through your mind along the way.’ Like its subject, the film is at once accessible and opaque; it stands up to sustained scrutiny, remaining an inexhaustibly stimulating, maddening, open-ended source of consolation and reward.

Paul Harris is a writer and scholar
Carmen Gray on *Ascension, Amundsen’s Dogs* and *Empty Shore*

Landscapes as conceived of by humans, spoken about through generations and revisited in dreams, are always so much more than the contours of ground and sea to be inhabited or crossed. They exist in a teeming multitude of contested signs and symbols, named and described anew as founding mythologies of place evolve or are overtaken. Their meanings and fading traces are now also mapped through cinema, as reproductions are made in their image, and stories about them propagated or revised. These three shorts deconstruct the ways in which the landscape has been co-opted in service of alluring myths of religion, human exceptionalism and colonialist progress, showing that through its sheer uncontainable force nature constantly overcomes any static narrative.

In a painterly world of blue-tinged halflight faces hold our gaze, as if we might read the universe’s mysteries there. Labourers retrieve a man from a well, and his mother cradles the body. Birds sing, oblivious; water trickles. His eyes open. A miracle? *Ascension* could be another depiction of the Deposition of Christ and Lamentation – were it not for the fact that the scene has been stripped of deification, suggesting instead an interconnected natural world in which a flow of death and regeneration is the eternal domain of all beings. Director Pedro Peralta is of a generation of Portuguese filmmakers characterised by transgressive energy, who create realms marked by the nation’s Catholic roots only to revel in subverting them with maverick gestures that rewrite the bounds of form and decorum. We might even see the film as a redress to the more cynical lens of compatriot auteur Manoel de Oliveira’s famed
short *The Hunt* made half a century before, which – in its mystical vision of a boy sinking into a swamp – lamented the limits of human solidarity and nature’s primal cruelty.

‘At last, we were entering the white, aeon-dead world of the South.’ Cuban director Rafael Ramírez’s *Amundsen’s Dogs* begins with this crossing into the unknown; the Arctic explorer’s vaunted world of the liminal. Norwegian expedition leader Ronald Amundsen beat other men to the South Pole by using half of his pack of 60 dogs to feed the rest. Poet José Luis Serrano and horror maestro HP Lovecraft were both fascinated by the vast blank this unexplored region represented, and their dark visions of Arctic extremity are quoted amid a raging torrent of forms and codes, from archival found footage to strange re-enactments. In their irreducibility to any single rational interpretation, these reinforce a sense that there is something mystically arcane about the wilds – planes no explorers can fully conquer, despite the hubris of science. We revisit husks, skeletons and replicas of the fallen, their fates quantified by measurements, but their persistence as ideas taking us no further toward understanding their essence – or transcending our own mortality.

Polish director Marcin Sauter’s *Empty Shore* brings us back full circle to water and its powers over life and death. According to a Kazakhstani village’s founding legend, a khan was standing on the edge of sea and desert when he named the place Zhalanash – ‘empty shore’. But in Soviet times the Aral Sea dried up, drained by canals ordered by Stalin as part of a plan for cotton production. In showing all that’s left, the documentary ponders the power of summoning into being intrinsic to the act of naming; a belonging in language as much as place that can be desecrated by a colonial oppression that renders the old words barren of meaning. There is a haunting, surrealistic beauty to this vision of objects and beings out of place and time – its boats stranded in the desert; the languid camels that now underpin the local economy; its elderly inhabitants sitting around a birthday cake. A rising wind reminds us that even in such apparent world-weary stasis, the universe is in constant movement and transmutation, between decline and regeneration.

*Carmen Gray is a film critic*
Wendy Ide on *Family Life*

This intimate portrait of a de facto family struggling to keep a life together on a run down farm starts with an explosion of emotion. A wide shot captures three figures, indistinct in the cautious first light of dawn. The man, cowboy hat clamped down on his head, gestures with both fists for emphasis as he rages, demanding to be left alone. The woman and her daughter circle him, alternately pleading for calm and goading the hornet’s nest of his fury. And the erratic dogs join in, their barks ricocheting around the gutted buildings of the farmyard. Even with the vast sprawl of frost-blanchéd fields that surrounds them, the walls are closing in.

The man is Alfred, the woman Biggi. Both survivors of the kind of childhood that leaves livid scars, they were, for a time, in a relationship. Now they are separated but live in adjacent buildings on this barely functioning homestead in Saxony-Anhalt. They are united by the landscape of a common dream, of an American-style ranch, rich with livestock, romance and promise. They have the livestock – four pensive horses and a scattershot rabble of dogs and cats. But the romance and promise is lacking, starved out by debt and hardship. Biggi has two daughters who, after spells in the care system, have returned home. Denise is battling with depression and a self-harm habit; Saskia is restless and rebellious.

The first feature-length documentary from Rosa Hannah Ziegler was shot over the course of a year but the overriding sense is of winter; the sun hangs low in the sky, the branches of the bare trees are as ominous as gibbets. It’s a remarkably sensitive piece of filmmaking. Ziegler absents herself from the picture, but the trust she has clearly
built up with the family means that each member comes to regard camera as a confidante. Alfred, head buried in his hands, shows a vulnerability to the filmmaker which he jealously guards from the women with whom he lives. And Biggi reveals the shattering sadness which has marked her life and relationships.

The film is produced by, and in the tradition of, the socially engaged and respectful work of the Wendland Film Cooperative. But there is a clear parallel also with the work of the British documentarian Michael Grigsby, who, with films such as *Living on the Edge* (1987), combined an evocative, poetic appreciation for landscape with an empathetic understanding of lives on the margins.

Wendy Ide is a film critic
Tony Rayns on *Dragonfly Eyes*

Xu Bing has a global reputation as a leading visual-conceptual artist, and his first-ever film extends his range brilliantly. The images in *Dragonfly Eyes* are drawn from material found online: most of it from public surveillance cameras, some of it from those websites on which brash-but-fragile individuals bid for fame as micro-celebrities. Every frame of the film is documentary. All of this actually happened. But the storyline, the dialogue and the sound design are fictional, created expressly for the film. There is a symbiotic relationship between the image-track and the soundtrack. Images have been edited to illustrate an aural drama, but found footage also been allowed to shape and change that drama. Xu Bing is not the first person to work this way, but nobody has ever attempted this kind of filmmaking on this scale – or with such social, cultural, sexual and, yes, philosophical resonances.

The story: a young woman with the unusual name Qingting (‘Dragonfly’) grows impatient with the growing materialism of the Buddhist temple where she has been preparing for ordination. She opts out and leaves to explore the secular world. Her first job is in a highly mechanised dairy farm, where she worries about the ‘happiness’ of the cows. The engineer Ke Fan develops a crush on Qingting (not really reciprocated) and frees one of the cows in the hope of pleasing her. Both of them are fired. Qingting moves to a city and starts working in a dry-cleaning shop. Ke Fan stalks her and tries to intervene when a nouveau-riche customer victimises her. He tries to introduce his theory about ‘geo-magnetic recordings’ to Qingting, but his reprisals against the abusive customer land him in jail. When he’s released three years
later, he can find no trace of Qingting – until he stumbles upon evidence that she may have had plastic surgery and become a website host under a new name.

For obvious reasons, many young women and men caught in surveillance footage from roads, shops, restaurants and workplaces appear in the film as Qingting and Ke Fan. Less obviously, Xu Bing uses the characters’ fluid identities to pose larger questions about gender identity, spiritual identity and the very concept of visual evidence. He sets the story in a chaotic world of natural and man-made catastrophes, and uses a phenomenal score by Hanno Yoshihiro to underline the pervasive sense of foreboding. And he introduces a cyber-entity which calls itself ‘Dragonfly’ and tries – but fails – to rationalise events by classifying their visual components.

It’s usual these days to look for political meanings in Chinese independent art and there is no doubt an implied political dimension in Dragonfly Eyes. But Xu Bing never limits himself to any one frame of representation. His film provides vivid clues to the way China looks and feels now – not so different from the way London looks and feels, as it happens – but it also goes much further. As the Surrealists said: Power to the Imagination!

Tony Rayns is a critic, curator and screenwriter
Matt Turner on *Extinction*

Salomé Lamas’ *Extinction* opens with a face looking directly at the screen. Shot in grainy black and white, the close-up composition immediately recalls her 2012 film *No Man’s Land*, in which a man faces the camera and describes the atrocities of his life. Though it also features interviews (alongside essayistic monologues, recorded conversations, archive audio, and other verbal digressions), *Extinction* immediately veers away from this simple setup, sprawling omnidirectionally to become larger and more complex. More than just one man’s testimony, it is an exploration – an excavation even – of nationhood and identity.

‘What’s so good about Europe anyway? I don’t need Europe and Europe doesn’t need me,’ insists Kolja Kravchenko, the young man we meet in the first scene. A resident of Transnistria – an unrecognised state situated on the border of Moldova and Ukraine that ‘emerged by itself’ in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union – both he and his home are ostensibly the film’s subject, though Lamas’ scope proves wider. A site of ‘frozen conflict’ (an area where active combat has ceased but no formal resolution has been achieved), Transnistria is one of many unresolved border conflicts in the region, a geographic quagmire described in the film as ‘Stalin’s chessboard’. As the film’s quasi-narrator – an unnamed woman quoting from Ryszard Kapuściński’s 1993 text *Imperium* – tells it, *Extinction*’s basis is in the ‘collisions, rebellions and wars’ of the ‘distant peripheries of the former USSR’. Yet, its interest is their aftermath and the sense of dislocation produced. What does it mean to live in a place that, according to the UN, doesn’t exist?
In the film – at once solemn political essay, resplendent landscape film and treacherous checkpoint road-movie – Lamas and Kravchenko move between Transnistria and the surrounding areas, filming the grand, forlorn architecture, meeting locals, and passing through crossing points, if rarely with ease. Lamas’ imagery is entrancing, using stark high-contrast black and white cinematography to showcase an enigmatic array of grizzled faces and ghostly figures, winding roads and crumbling ruins, city lights and fireworks, forests and night skies. Yet it is the film’s sound that is its most remarkable element. The soundtrack, created in collaboration with composer Andreia Pinto Correia, elevates proceedings into an operatic, ethereal realm, with sharp strings and crashing screams that break in at pivotal moments, or mix in sonorously with the cacophony of found and recorded sounds.

The film’s centrepieces are less maximal. Stealthily recorded KGB border-point interrogations are laid over plain backgrounds of deep blue; and as the increasing convoluted, agitated conversations play out, the utter chaos of nationhood is made apparent. In this region, where space is constantly contested and territories are divided along fluid, politically pernicious lines, ‘borders are bureaucratic fault-lines’. Lamas frames these divisions as hostile; the territory’s delineations as inhumane. ‘Borders? What do I care about borders? Our soul is not a border’, a man cries. The film’s postscript describes a ‘world of shifting borders, visionary leaders and forgotten peoples’ with a dedication addressed to ‘all the unrecognised and unnoticed territories that lie on the margins of legitimacy.’ Focusing again on marginalised communities, Extinction continues Lamas’ commitment to bringing those who have been disregarded and discarded to the forefront – whoever they may be, wherever they may reside.

Matt Turner is a writer and film programmer
On the 23rd May 2013, my cousin died. When I learnt the news, I was far away, I couldn’t be close to my family, nor attend the funeral. On the phone it was his parents who comforted me, and not the other way around. His mother told me, “Now you need to make a film.” I think she told me this to get me thinking about something else, to get me busy. Yet, I clung onto this. In the end it was the only thing I could do.
– Alexander Abaturov

In 2013, Dima Llukhin, a soldier in the Russian army, died on duty in the Republic of Dagestan in the North Caucasus. Dima was just 21 years old. This incident marks the starting point for director Alexander Abaturov’s poignant and probing reflection on the military.

Without modifying reality The Son strives to describe the daily life of a young soldier, capturing the training of new recruits in Siberia as they bid farewell to their mothers and girlfriends to learn the mechanics of warfare. These sequences are juxtaposed with images of Dima’s parents, mourning their son in silence and reflection, attempting to carry on against the stark contrast of the noisy and brutal regime of army existence. We also follow the plight of Dima’s former fellow recruits, many of whom have first-hand experience of the losses caused by war, as they prepare to return to battle. Some of these recruits dream of their dead friend. Meanwhile, newer privates hoping to prove their mettle in order to gain entry to the Spetsnaz – the Russian military’s special forces – are put through their paces.

The director’s first feature-length documentary, The Son required Abaturov to channel his emotions and sense of shock into a work that
subtly reveals the tremendous personal price that combat extracts. An astonishingly intimate work that undercuts heroics and machismo whilst operating from a position of mutual respect and understanding, the film contains an incredible sequence in which Spetsnaz recruits are swallowed up by the huge belly of the aircraft that will transport them to the front and we bear witness to the fear and apprehension that flashes across their young faces.

Made over a four-year period with the makers given unprecedented access to the military by senior officers out of respect for the family, *The Son* eschews an investigative approach into the death of Dima for something far more meditative and observational. ‘For me, it wasn’t an investigation but rather a quest. I found the answers. All of them are not shown in the film. Some I’ve kept for myself’, comments Abaturov, who impressively deploys a vast range of cinematographic techniques and an immersive, rhythmic approach to editing influenced by the music of Miles Davis. Revealing that each and every collective unit is in fact populated by individuals, the director also reminds us that we all occupy a universe, for better or for worse, in which life and death unhappily coexist.

*Jason Wood is a writer, curator and filmmaker*
Isabel Stevens on *Meteors*

The Turkish government’s violent repression of entire Kurdish towns and villages, with the aim of silencing the independence movement, has had little media attention in Turkey or beyond. Enter director Gürcan Keltek’s startling debut feature which delves into the ongoing conflict in the forgotten mountainous hinterlands of the southeastern edges of his country.

Keltek’s film is a scattershot collage, blending essayistic fragments with immediate reportage. One moment it feels like a diary, with actress and writer Ebru Ojen, who lived in the region for nine years, offering her thoughts on life when you are surrounded by devastation and the constant spectre of death. Next, we are catapulted into the midst of the conflict – witnessing protests as people teem through the streets with fire torches and later violence as the Turkish military arrive. At other times, *Meteors* wanders away from politics and combat to muse on memory, the history of the region, its traditions and even celestial encounters, like the meteor shower of the film’s title.

The genesis of *Meteors* was somewhat unorthodox: due to the conflict, Keltek couldn’t initially access the area and so started to collect footage online. The film mixes snippets from a huge array of sources: Russian news channels, independent reporters, filmmakers and activists, CCTV as well as footage Keltek shot himself when the region was no longer under martial law.

*Meteors* is markedly different from your average documentary about conflict. In Keltek’s words: ‘There are no limits in documentary filmmaking; when you try to describe them, it just expands’. His film is
not just distinctive in its style, mixing the immersive and contemplative as it does. Most portraits of war revolve around men. Here Keltek foregrounds the experiences of those most often overlooked: women and children. He interviews them in close-up, listening to their perspectives on the conflict, watching while they flick through images of bullet-ridden walls on their phones. Meanwhile, the Kurdish fighters on the street and those hiding out in the mountains are far more anonymous.

Balancing these more traditional humanistic interludes is Keltek’s rapture with landscape. Meteors is a consistently enigmatic spectacle; Keltek’s decision to turn all of his disparate footage monochrome results in a unique visual experience. Glitchy dissolving images of street battles from web-streamed videos feel mysterious and ghostly compared to the normal shoot-and-run footage of conflicts we’re used to. Images echo throughout the film: the beautiful haze of a misty mountain range at sunrise blends uneasily with a similarly ethereal vista of a village burning at night. Keltek consistently gazes upwards, not least in the unexpected magical climax of the film where flashes of meteors light up the sky. At first they have eerie connotations but gradually wonder takes over. The sky, as one interviewee memorably puts it, provides some hope of escape.

Isabel Stevens is a writer and editor
Eleanor McDowall on Colette’s Podcasts and Camp Sisterhood

I have a vivid memory of sitting in a classroom listening to an old recording from 1937. The radio reporter, Herbert Morrison, is looking on in horror as he witnesses the crash of the Hindenburg, a present tense commentary unspooling from his mouth. ‘Oh, the humanity!’, he cries – a familiar line that long ago slipped the moorings of this tape to embed itself in popular culture, in disaster movies, in cliché.

But in that moment of listening, amidst the anonymous decor of the seminar room, I felt myself lost to the immediacy of that voice in pain – past and present unfurling around me.

Detached from the context of the image – the period costumes and settings that force you to recognise the distance between you – a recording of the human voice can invite the possibility of time travel.

The radio feature has a fascinating relationship with time. It stretches and bends, places the voices of the dead in the landscapes of the living. And it allows for the layers of sediment within a single life – youth and the reflection of old age – to be held simultaneously in one sonic moment.

I remember hearing the radio-maker Rikke Houd speak captivatingly on the simultaneity of time in Charlotte Rouault and Benoit Bories’ Soeurs de Camp. A documentary framed around a fixed point in the youth of a group of now-elderly women. Rikke described the image of a window – covered in a layer of dirt, accrued over years of use, faded lace curtains draped in front of it filtering out the sunlight.
The documentary, she said, had the feeling of looking at the experiences of these women as if through that stained piece of glass – the flecks of dirt, the marks and cobweb-fine cracks left by a life lived. These women were, in the same moment, young and old, present and past tense – inviting the listener to move fluidly between points in time as they must flow between them within their imaginations.

Landscape in audio feels marked by this relationship to time travel. Rarely is the listening space simply a literal rendering of the environment – it is at once here and there, now and then, our shifting, fragmented selves resonating in the fourth dimension.

**Eleanor McDowall is a radio producer and curator**
The title of Toia Bonino’s Orione refers to both a location and a person: the housing-estate of Don Orione, in the city of Claypole, in the subdivision of Almirante Brown, in the province of Buenos Aires, 17 miles south of the sprawling Argentine capital’s centre. Places, faces... Luis Orione (1872–1940): an Italian saint, whose heart is preserved in a church in the area; Pedro Claypole (1869–1927): a local landowner of presumably Lancastrian descent; Hugh Brown (1777–1857): an Irish-born admiral, the ‘father of the Argentine navy.’

As often in Latin America, nomenclature and eponymy inscribe the official, cosmopolitan history of the land – via military, religious and capitalist eminences – onto the geography traversed by its people. Few such memorials exist for ordinary citizens, especially small-time criminals such as Alejandro Robles, a young man killed by a police sniper more than a decade ago.

He lives on only in the memory of his friends and relatives, and via his son Agustín, who was born after his father’s demise. And now also through Bonino’s 67-minute debut – a dense ethnographic text for which she won Best Director at the prestigious Buenos Aires Independent Film Festival’s Argentinian competition last year.

With a professional and educational background that straddles both visual arts and psychology, Bonino – herself a B.A. native – approaches her complex subject-matter(s) from an audacious and stimulatingly oblique angle. The life and death of Alejandro (‘Ale’) Robles is handled with respect and objectivity – there’s no attempt to make a saint out of a sinner – as a fractured prism with which to
view and present of Don Orione, a low-income zone of which the majority of porteños have probably never even heard, let alone visited.

Perhaps they recall mentions of Claypole on the television news, in sensationalised bulletins like the one Bonino excerpts here – reporting the incident that cut short Robles’ life. This footage is just one strand in the film’s audio-visual tapestry, a skilfully-assembled polyvalent collage of video encompassing home-movies, journalism and atmospheric, poetic, elliptical glimpses of the Orione environs shot by Bonino.

She works as her own cinematographer and co-edits with Alejo Moguillansky, himself a director of considerable renown. Their film has moments of pathos, drama and tension, accentuated by Hernán Hayet’s sparingly-deployed score, and punctuated by extended, calming sequences showing Robles’ mother Ana making an elaborate football-pitch cake. We intimately observe every stage from the breaking and whisking of eggs to the application of icing and the addition of soccer-player homunculi. Ana Robles’ voice dominates the soundtrack across each of the film’s seven chapters, recounting her offspring’s troubled teenage years and the circumstances of his death. Her tone is mournful but businesslike, the pain of grief perhaps softened by the passage of time: ‘whatever your son does, he is always your son.’

The word which crops up again and again when Orione is written about or discussed is ‘puzzle’; the tagline on its own poster proclaims ‘una historia sin solucion’ (‘a story without a solution’.) This is a film that interweaves facts and impressions, opinions and memories. Like the finest non-fiction cinema it is a work of implied questions rather than answers. A bracing immersion in hard-knock urban reality and social inequality, its implications extend far beyond the metropolis of ‘fair winds’ whose hidden corners Bonino so sensitively illuminates.

Neil Young is a film critic
We need a new definition of landscape, and this new definition engages a new understanding of human presence in the landscape. More precisely, the landscape not as what is in front of the human being, as an object to look at or to transform, but on the contrary as a very dimension of the human being.

– Jean-Marc Besse

Can portraits of invented, imagined, hallucinated aliens constitute the internal landscape of a character? Can they perhaps be considered a singular attempt to create the topography of an invisible space, a memory, an era, a yesterday, or a self in perpetual change? Can the walls of a house, the distant shots of mountains, or a collection of old photos and some 16mm sketches taken on a trip, also constitute a sort of emotional biography? If we assume Jean-Marc Besse’s (re)definition of landscape with which this piece opens, we can better understand how contemporary cinema engages and integrates it: landscape is not considered as something external – a pre-existing, eternal and immutable reality – but rather as one dimension of identity, an extension of the self, a space that determines our way of being. It is no longer the place where national myths are constructed, but rather a space where the most intimate, and the political are redefined, the inscription of the person in the world.

Aliens (2017) by Luis López Carrasco extends the notion of the landscape beyond nature subjected to human – and generally white, masculine – vision. It instead embraces the artistic creations with
which protagonist Tesa Arranz, the singer of 1980s Spanish underground band Los Zombies, decides to surround herself. These portraits of aliens are the imagined, yet very real, landscape that she builds around her, the only one in which she recognizes herself and the only one that represents her. *Aliens* shows that landscape is not that which is captured in the distant view of nature from a watchtower, but is something closer, something physical and palpable, that touches and affects us, and that we can also reconstruct and manipulate.

In Pilar Palomero’s *Horta* (2017), the director returns to the physical and emotional landscape of her childhood to explore how we leave traces and construct the landscapes that in turn make and mark us. Taking a never-completed short film as her starting point, Palomero returns to the village to film the same images years later, revealing the traces of time, in addition to the experience of loss; the ghosts that inhabit and animate the recesses of the landscape.

*Untitled 1925* (2018) also engages with a journey of return, yet turns it into something more abstract: here we only have notes, fragments, snippets of memories, old photos of an ancestor who travelled from Romania to Peru. Together, these form the multilayered, migrant identity of the director, Madi Piller. This suite in three parts follows the journey that her ancestor made, not to look for the literal tracks of his presence, but to engage with absence, movement, and a landscape that – thanks to cinematic manipulations (time-lapse, solarizations, freeze-frame) – departs from the realistic to the imaginary, the fragmentary and the intangible.

Like *Aliens*, like *Horta*, *Untitled 1925* also proposes an emotional and political geography, more lived than thought, that is linked to experience and the physical, far away from abstract contemplation. It is the self (individual, but also collective) in the landscape: a way to (try) to be in the world. To live it, think it, feel it, and transform it.

Gonzalo de Pedro is a curator and writer
Kieron Corless on *Cocote*

*Cocote* opens with a static shot on an expansive, well-tended garden with swimming pool, belonging to a wealthy family in Santo Domingo, the capital city of the Dominican Republic. Two off-screen voices establish a set of social relations based on power and servitude. Our protagonist Alberto is granted permission to return to his village for a few days for his father’s funeral, whom it later transpires was murdered by a powerful local man, a corrupt police officer.

In a film where landscape is so omnipresent and visceral, we should probably note in passing that Alberto is a gardener. He’s also an evangelical Protestant pastor, fervent and steadfast in his beliefs, the Bible always at hand. He seems more than a little buttoned-up in his crisp white shirt, with deliberate gait and quiet watchfulness (Vicente Santos as Alberto is one of the more riveting presences in recent cinema).

Back in his village, the sustained, two-fold pressures Alberto will face from his family and particularly his firebrand sister are anathema to his beliefs – to participate in the extended mourning rituals of Los Misterios, a syncretic mash-up of Catholicism and West African mysticism that merged during the colonisation of the Caribbean; and as the eldest son, to exact vengeance on his father’s murderer.

So Alberto is portrayed as a riven, fissured character; amongst his family and in the village he is now a misfit. The threat of still more terrible violence hangs palpably in the air (his father was beheaded for failing to pay off debts). In the village, interior and exterior blur into each other, the landscape is a potent presence through every shack’s open windows and door frames, working on Alberto just as his family is doing, as if it too is reclaiming him, exhorting him to perform an act of natural justice.
The mourning commences, filmed mostly with non-professionals; animals are slaughtered, primal rhythms assert themselves through music and dance, the landscape becomes another participant in the rituals – invoked, extolled, traversed for several of the them. At such moments nature becomes a source of comfort and healing, offers spiritual succour for intense grief. This sense of profound attachment and attunement to the landscape isn’t necessarily harmonious, but it is complexly layered. We’re a long way from polite garden parties for a white social elite.

The title Cocote is a word in Dominican Spanish designating the neck of an animal that’s about to be broken. It’s the second film by Dominican director Nelson Carlo de los Santos Arias, whose first was a mesmerising, elliptical reading of Roberto Bolano’s colossal novel 2666 that twinned ethnography with murder investigation. A similarly dynamic binding of ethnography and genre is at play in Cocote, whose multi-format hybridity nails the fractured, violent reality Santos Arias is attempting to reveal, and gives credence to his pursuit of what he terms a ‘mulatto cinema’.

Or, to put it another way – a political cinema; produced in Cocote by way of a dialectical struggle in which the various antagonisms – social, religious, racial, class-based, psychic – are deeply inscribed in the landscape, a locus for projected fears, superstitions, beliefs, desires, as well as being a repository of memory. As such landscape here is open to multiple interpretations; it isn’t easily pinned down. It disrupts and complicates the film’s structuring binaries. It is both actor and acted upon.

Santos Arias has spoken of a constant search for images providing new points of view or ‘rupture’. That sense of rupture is thrillingly conveyed by Nahuel Palenque’s sound design; uncanny, cacophonous music and noise seems to merge with, or emerge from, the landscape. It captures what the director has referred to as the Romantic principle – ‘the immensity of nature and our insignificance as human beings’. The landscape here can indeed dwarf people, but also seems able to magnify. Does it ultimately induce a kind of clarity in Alberto, or the viewer? Cocote poses any number of difficult questions, but let’s be grateful that it refuses to provide straightforward answers.

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