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Documenting the air

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Abstract

The air sustains, connects and conditions our lives and has been of growing relevance to social scientists adopting an atmospheric approach to social life. Nonetheless, in screen studies, air's critical uptake has so far been limited to narrative cinema, leaving it undertheorized in non-fiction filmmaking. In this paper, I introduce theories of the air that flow from the broader rise of atmospheric socio-aesthetic theories and suggest that it is possible to understand the air as an agent in the relationship between a filmmaker and their practice, and the film and its viewers. To make this argument, I first present a theoretical orientation to air as it is implicated in the non-fiction filmmaking process, before considering how the air has been understood in film scholarship, and how it has been taken as a subject of filmmakers working in experimental traditions. I then consider two bodies of non-fiction filmmaking through this ethereal lens. The first is Margaret Tait and her concept of 'breathing' with the camera, and the second is Arwa Aburawa and Turab Shah's *And Still, It Remains* (2023). In these analyses, I argue that thinking aethereally allows us to consider the co-construction of documentarian, document and viewer.



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Air is a necessary condition for life itself, and a medium that connects us to one and other and the world at large. Nonetheless, it is strangely absent from most understandings of social life. Over recent years the air has begun to seep into the social sciences largely as a result of theories of atmospheres, understood as socio-spatial phenomena which lend shared emotional and affective colour to our social encounters. The air has figured in this new atmospheric thinking, chiefly as weather with all its symbolic baggage (Ingold 2010), but also in the shape of balloons (McCormack 2014) and pollution (van Aitken and Brake 2021). These atmospheric theories, broadly construed, have made itself felt in film theory (Spadoni 2020), and tangentially in documentary studies (Carroll 2016). However, the critical study of the narrower topic of the air has so far been limited to narrative cinema, especially when understood through the lens of atmosphere theory. In this paper, I will draw on these theories, and use the air to explore the situatedness and relatedness of documentary practices. As such, my focus is not on documentary strategies for

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dealing with the air as a filmic subject – such as in *All That Breathes* (Sen 2022), an Oscar-nominated documentary that addresses air pollution in Delhi, or Laura McGann’s *The Deepest Breath* about the thrills and perils of freediving (McGann 2023) – but rather on the air as an agent of the filmed world in the making, in which filmmakers, their subjects, and their audiences live, work, and breathe.

In the first section of the paper I draw on the work of philosopher Gernot Böhme to formulate the air as an atmospheric thing, and engage with anthropologist Tim Ingold’s call to ‘[bring] the air back into presence’ (Ingold 2012, 76). I conceptualise the air as an agent of atmosphere, which qualifies material and affective experience in time and place, and of connection, in which it bears the imprint of spatially distributed social inequalities. I then consider how the air has been studied by film scholars – as filmic sign and subject; as an agent in film production; and as an element of spectatorship – and how it has been approached by artists and experimental filmmakers working in a documentary vein. I consider how these literatures and films correspond or depart from the foregoing conceptualisation of the air as a medium that connects and conditions socio-spatial relations.

In the final section I apply this aerially-inflected thinking to two different films, both of which engage with the air in different ways. In the first, a discussion of twentieth century Scottish filmmaker and poet Margaret Tait’s work *Place of Work* (1976), I focus on the air as something that conditions a filmmaker’s engagement with their world in ways that indexically and atmospherically imprint on, but always exceed, the screen. I focus on the notion of ‘breathing’ with the camera that is commonly attributed to Tait as part of the growing posthumous popularity of her work (Krikorian 1983; Neely 2008, 2009, 2017). In the second, I consider the aerial community at a broader scale. Here, I take the 2023 film *And Still, It Remains* by the artist filmmakers Arwa Aburawa and Turab Shah as my example. In this film, which confronts toxic colonial legacies in Algeria, the air figures as a contaminated thing, a carrier of radioactive fallout, and an agent of history. I use this to discuss aerial social and political relations, including those between film and audience. With these two discussions, my intention is to model two ways that the air can be something with which we think about documentary films, rather than something to be documented.

I refer to the films I discuss as ‘documentary-like’ and use this term throughout the paper as a broad, non-prescriptive descriptor of varied films that cut across disciplinary boundaries in their attempts to screen air (Frankham 2022). Broadly, these films are positioned between documentary and art worlds. I did not select this term to denote a genre with display conventions, shared aesthetic forms, and established audience relationships, but rather to embrace Bettina Frankham’s use of the term as a way to speak about the ‘territories of overlap and intermingling between fiction, art practice and documentary’ (Frankham 2022, 4). While not wishing to enforce ‘hard borders,’ Frankham articulates the documentary-like film as one which:

encompasses installation practices more usually associated with gallery exhibition ... [And] includes materials that convey the real but the material is combined and presented to the viewer in ways that problematise, disrupt and trouble the sense of direct representation. (Frankham 2022, 4–5)

Such films, Frankham continues, capitalise on the ‘malleability of form’ at this disciplinary intersection to craft films that are responsive less to genre and more to the specific ‘materials, ideas, audiences, [and] exhibition circumstance’ with which they are in

conversation (5). In this paper I deal with films which, in profoundly different ways, refuse to take air as a given, which are responsive to air as both material and idea, and which tend to have found a home in the gallery space (Balsom 2013). Other descriptors might have served me well (such as ‘experimental documentary’ (Jewesbury 2016) or ‘avant-doc’ (MacDonald 2015)), although my discussion skews towards artists’ film at the extreme end of the experimental and social theory at the intersection with aesthetics. The dexterity of Frankham’s phrasing allows me to speak to any film which experiments to meet the challenge of conveying the undisciplined reality of the air and captures the diverse self-positionings of the filmmakers who done so. Its openness also suits the air as a restless thing, flowing across boundaries – even generic ones.

Theorising the air

My route into my theme, the air, came by way of the atmospheric theories that are on the rise across the social sciences and humanities. This body of work is rare for having its roots in aesthetic theory while gaining popular application by social scientists looking to theorise the spatialisation of affective experience. I will shortly turn to how these theories have been applied to films of various kinds, but first it is worth offering an overview of the theories, their generation, and their methodological challenges, while recognising that I am adding this to an already long list of similar overviews (Brown et al. 2019; Griffero and Moretti 2019; Sumartojo and Pink 2019). In this, I benefit from the relatively recent spate of English translations of the German texts of aesthetician and eco-critic Gernot Böhme.

Böhme’s philosophical project was to propose ‘atmosphere’ as the founding principle of a ‘new’ aesthetics (Böhme 2017). Böhme’s motivation came from his dissatisfaction with the ‘intellectualism of classic aesthetics’ and the hermeneutic approach to works of art that he encountered in late 20th European art worlds, which by his analysis robbed art criticism of arts’ affective capacities (Böhme 2017). Inspired in part by Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura, the affect of distance and respect that elevates experiences of original artworks, Böhme argued that the cornerstone of aesthetic experience is the generation of ‘spatially extended qualities of feeling,’ which he captured in his use of the word ‘atmosphere’ (Böhme 2017, 15). However, motivated by his interest in the environment at large, Böhme pushed this further to argue that it is not the preserve of art alone to engender such atmospheric encounters, but rather that perception itself is socio-spatially attuned – in a word, it is atmospheric. Böhme’s examples of the atmospheric tinting of space and time skew towards the ecological, such as the experience of a ‘serene spring morning’ (Böhme 2017, 11), but his work has been taken up by social scientists to study the atmospheres of a football match (Edensor 2015), café culture (Kuruoğlu and Woodward 2021), the surveillance state (Soilen 2020), hospital wards (Kanyer-edzi et al. 2019) and other settings that are socially scaffolded by spatially extended qualities of feeling.

Where social scientists have taken atmosphere, as theorised by Böhme, as their object of study, they have encountered a methodological challenge: do atmospheres exist in the world, or in the perceiver? For most of those who apply Böhme’s theories to empirical work, atmospheres are understood as a relationship between the world and the perceiver, as a perceptive and connective medium rather than a property of one or the other. It is

this that makes the air and its weather an obvious archetype of atmospheric thinking. As weather, air qualifies material and affective experience in time and place; at the same time, it is the arch connective medium, holding things together in an aerial community. As weather, air therefore offers a useful proxy for atmospheric thinking in general, illustrating the more-than-metaphorical way that atmospheres are a function of co-presence.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold stresses the weather as something aerial. He argues that it is only by dematerialising the air in the imagination, by seeing it as a void rather than an active and vital presence, that we can understand the weather and its affects as something outside of us to be studied objectively. The air we breathe entangles us with the ‘weather-world,’ our immersion in which conditions life, experience and our knowledge of such (Ingold 2010). As such, he entreats us to ‘[bring] the air back into presence’ in our thinking, as it is in our bodies, and to appreciate the air, and the weather and the affects it carries, as something that ‘mingles with our bodily tissues, filling the lungs and oxygenating the blood’ (Ingold 2012, 76–77). The air stitches us and the world together – we are aerial things, caught in atmospheres, weather and all.

The air also, it follows, stitches us to one another. In her analysis of Liza Johnson’s film *In the Air*, Lauren Berlant speaks of ‘the common air’ which binds the protagonists to one another in time and place (2016). This aerial community, in which we are held in varying degrees of proximity in a human and non-human assembly, bears the imprint of spatially distributed social inequalities. This has been a topic of geopolitical analysis, which has illuminated the ‘air as an agential feature of political control’ and a site of power more broadly construed (Feigenbaum and Kanngieser 2015, 81; also see Adey 2015). The air is ‘never ‘the same’’ (Feigenbaum and Kanngieser 2015, 83); it is differentiated by pollution and toxicity, it is commoditized and made scarce, and it can be taken away with violence, both targeted and diffuse. As such, to rematerialise the air is, in the same breath, to politicise it and understand its profound mutual consequence.

Air in film criticism

Ingold’s call to ‘[bring] the air back into presence’ animates this paper (Ingold 2012, 76), and also provides a link between the atmospheric theorisation of the air and filmmaking. Air has been brought into presence in both films and film theory largely through discussions of representation, narrative, and spectatorship in fiction film. Across this literature there exists a tendency to treat the air (and its associative partner, the breath) as a cinematic sign or as a material element in the technical filmmaking process. In this paper, I argue for an expanded conception of the air as an agent in the filmmaking process, and one which troubles binaries between knowledge and the known, meaning and material, filmmaker and subject, audience and film.

In a paper on the ambiguity of air in cinema Kevin L. Ferguson studies the iconography of the air and respiration in cinema, presenting breath as a ‘legible cinematic sign’ (Ferguson 2011). The materiality of air is made apparent, for Ferguson, by its kinetic effects (the movements of a breeze, for example), and thus he focuses on the ‘allusive techniques’ needed to bring air into filmic existence – such as wind rippling hair, cigarette smoke, or sandstorms – and labour of doing so (Ferguson 2011). Kristi McKim’s *Cinema as Weather: Stylistic Screens and Atmospheric Change*, meanwhile, focuses on the narrative effect of climatic and elemental forces, such as the wind, and how cinematic

weather implicates both story and spectator (McKim 2013). A more niche but no less aerial approach is taken by Damien Pollard in his study of the cinematic life of the most fragile of airs' manifestations: the bubble (Pollard 2023). All these studies foreground the narrative or culturally scripted implications of air on screen.

Related to these studies of the iconographic or symbolic role of air in film is scholarly literature on the breathing body as a cinematic subject. Davina Quinlivan's *The Place of Breath in Cinema* (2012) takes on this subject, treating breath as the cusp of cinematic perceptibility, the tissue between visibility and invisibility. Drawing (to an extent) on Luce Irigaray's metaphysics of air (Irigaray 1999), whose work also informs Tim Ingold, Quinlivan conducts case studies to argue that on-screen breath produces an interplay between subjectivities of viewing self and screen. In other words, Quinlivan goes beyond a symbolic and towards an relational reading of cinematic breath, in which the air is a sensible connective field holding screen and spectator together.

In parallel to these are studies that focus on the materiality of air and its impact on the filmmaking process and industry, including the technological skills it demands (Greene 2016). Such work includes Richard Farmers' work on how the phenomenon of London Fog that spanned the late 19th and early twentieth century shaped the development of the British film industry. In a similar vein (although related to still photography) Michelle Henning has written about the regulation of light and air in the material practice of analogue photography, and how this 'shapes modes of experiencing and comprehending different geographic places' (Henning 2020). Like Farmers' study of London Fog, Henning's analysis is intimately tied to place and its luminous and climatic aspects, critical as these are for the process of photography in all its forms. With this, Henning forges a way between cultural, material and spatial analysis of image making as a process, laying down a path for me to follow.

A final component of the critical discussion of air and film concerns the viewing experience itself, some of studies of which place a literal focus on the aerial encounter of the cinema space. Jie Li, for example, draws attention to the multisensory experience of cinema-going with a focus on open-air cinemas in China. Jie's focus is on the relationship between cinema-going, propaganda, and macro social forces of political economy, but her account is vivid in its description of the 'sensorium of open-air cinema': the weather at screening events, the presence of non-human life, consumption of various kinds, noises, conviviality (Li 2022). With this, she makes clear that air's filmic agency is not always routed through the screen as a representational device, but rather that it also conditions the atmospheric architecture in which both screen and spectator are located. I will take this in a more political direction in what follows.

With varying intensities, these literatures all speak to air as medium of connection between the documentary filmmaker and the world they are documenting; in film in the process of becoming; in filmmaking and viewing as an embodied, situated practice. My intention is to develop on these elements to move beyond a discussion of air as a cinematic subject and towards an aurally-inflected approach to the situatedness and relatedness of documentary practices themselves.

Screened air beyond cinema

The air, and its close relations in the wind, the sky, clouds, and breath, have long attracted filmmakers working in artistic traditions and sharing the documentarian's interest in 'the

real'. Artists Elsa Stansfield and Madelon Hooykaas' 1984 film *The Force Behind Its Movement*, for example, opens with the text 'We only see the fluttering of the flag. The force behind its movement remains invisible' before going on to show various effects of the wind, from fluttering curtains and flags to the famously wind-blown Marilyn Monroe (Stansfield and Hooykaas 1984). The same impulse is found in experimental filmmaker and musician Karin Fisslthaler's recent film, *I Can Feel it Coming* (2022) in which the screen splits into a grid, across which plays a mosaic of slightly unsynchronised clips from 11 movies showing curtains fluttering and storms raging. Both *I Can Feel it Coming* and *The Force Behind Its Movement*, however engaging they are to watch, reduce the air and its filmic possibility to the visual recording of its climatic effects, and both films explicitly claim that outside these effects the air is invisible. Of course, following Ingold, the air's materiality is far more diffuse than these films suppose. It is seen in our respiring bodies, and all those that surround us.

Similarly, experimental filmmaker Chris Welsby's *Wind Vane* (1972) is a study of the effect of the wind, although this time it is the camera itself that is caught up in its currents. Welsby strapped a Super8 camera to a wind vane on Hamstead Heath and let the film record the movements this created. Reflecting on this work, Christine Elwes writes that Welsby 'harness[ed] the contrivances of his imagination to the rhythms and contrapuntal forces of nature, and collaborate[d] in the creation of a work' (Elwes 2022). Where *The Force Behind Its Movement* and *I Can Feel it Coming* relegate the air to something made manifest only through its effects as wind, *Wind Vane* returns its agency, rendering it as something that can contribute to its own representation.

More epic in scale is James Benning's *Ten Skies* (2004). *Ten Skies* is composed of ten ten-minute long still shots of the airy medium writ large: the sky. The only protagonists are the clouds, which move and morph across the screen (and there is a parallel history of artists' cloud films). In her text on the film, Erika Balsom comments on the films' 'apparent emptiness, its flatness and refusal of representational hierarchies' (Balsom 2021). With this, Balsom captures the knee-jerk cultural erasure, or dematerialisation, of the air itself. Balsom finds in this a freedom to explore and interrogate the film through an effective type of critical drift, in which her intellectual project shares the rhythm of the film. Nonetheless, *Ten Skies* (unlike *Wind Vane*, for example) adopts an almost scientific viewpoint, in which the camera in its fixity almost absents itself from the film and the aerial currents of its making. Likewise, the body of the filmmaker is not implicated – quite the opposite, the viewpoint is ascended, the realm of the body left behind. In *Ten Skies*, and its moodiness, we find an emblematic filmic example of the affective, atmospheric quality of the air, but one that does so at a remove from the body, and from air as a life-giving medium which 'mingles with our bodily tissues' (Ingold 2015, 70).

The air is present in other documentary-like films which deal explicitly with the breath. These works are perhaps the closest to my interests in this paper, as their focus on the breath both structures the image and sound of the film whilst also establishing an affective atmosphere. Paradigmatic of this is artist filmmaker William Raban's 1974 *Breath*. In the film, shot on the open moorlands of Dartmoor, three people walk for 8 min in separate directions away from a centrally positioned tape recorder, each with a camera loaded with 100 feet of film, before turning to reconvene in the centre. The walkers shot film for the duration of a breath, quantified by the use of a whistle

recorded by the tape machine. The film is therefore articulated around the temporality and rhythms of breathing; unlike *Ten Skies*, the airy referent here is the breathing body behind the lens.

More recently, writer, artist and scholar Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński similarly used the breath as a structuring principle of her film *Respire (Liverpool)* (Kazeem-Kamiński 2023), in which Black residents of Liverpool inhale and exhale into a red balloon. At times the sound focuses on the individual, at others it is layered up into a breathing collective. Her focus on breath here ‘refers to the precariousness of Black breath as an act of existence, liberation and community building’ (Phileas 2024). In other words, Kazeem-Kamiński makes the rematerialization of air a political act in ways that will echo in the latter section of this paper.

All these films speak with different intensities to the theoretical framing of this article. I have attempted to read them through the lens of air as a medium that connects and conditions socio-spatial relations, and that implicates the body (of filmed subject, filmmaker and viewer) in the becoming of the world. Weather and breath are key ways in which the air has found its way onto screen, and both appear in the analysis that follows. However, my focus is less on the filmed image and more on the air as an element in which films are made and seen. Unlike many of the above films, my analytical intention in the following discussion of Margaret Tait and Arwa Aburawa and Turab Shah’s films is not to look to the screen to find a shadow or representation of the rematerialized air, but rather to consider the aesthetic and aethereal co-constitution of the filmmakers’ encounter with their world and how this is extended to the screen and beyond.

Margaret tait: ‘Breathing’ with the camera

Margaret Tait (1918–1999) was a Scottish filmmaker and poet, making 33 films in her lifetime in a wide variety of styles and employing a range of different techniques: hand painted film, short portraits of places (Edinburgh, Orkney) and people (including the poet Hugh MacDiarmid), and one feature-length narrative film, *Blue Black Permanent* (1992). The majority of her work was made in, and of, her native Orkney. Tait is often described as being outside of her contemporary art and film world – she turned down the opportunity to work for John Grierson, for example, and received vanishing small funding – although to over-stress this is to erase Tait’s interactions with the London Filmmakers Co-Operative and her training at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia. Regardless, Tait’s reputation and posthumous scholarly appraisal (facilitated in part by the acquisition of her film cans by Scottish Screen Archive in Glasgow from her husband), has cemented her as a ‘genuinely independent, experimental mind’ (Malcolm le Grice quoted in (Neely 2009, 318)). This independence reflects not only her financial and geographic distance from filmmaking centres but also her style. Her films evidence ‘unconventional filming and editing styles, without reference to conventional film-language’ (Curtis 2021, 15). Tait herself described her style as one of ‘stalking the image’, a phrase she took from Lorca, by which she meant that she trained her eye on the subtle, indirect aspects of the vision afforded by her viewfinder, and allowed these to lead the rhythm of her shooting process and edit, rather than any narrative or other filmic conventions (like continuity, for example) (Curtis 2021, 15; Krikorian 1983; Neely 2008).

Tait's filmmaking approach has come to be popularly understood as one of 'breathing' with the camera (Krikorian 1983). The phrase 'breathing with the camera' accompanies almost all presentations and articulations of Tait's works, and is typically accredited to Tait herself, but I have been unable to substantiate this. It appears to be a quote from artist and curator Tamara Krikorian who interviewed Tait for the documentary *Margaret Tait: Film Makar* and reported in *Undercut*, the magazine of the London Filmmaker's Co-op, Tait's description of "breathing' with the camera' (directly quoting Tait only on the word 'breathing') (1983). In the filmed interview, neither woman says the phrase 'breathing with the camera', and preparatory notes for interview (held by the Orkney Library and Archive) simply contain a note to discuss 'breathing'.¹ 'Breathing with the camera' is, therefore, Krikorian's way of capturing Tait's ideas and approach to filmmaking, but 'breath', we can be sure, was critical to how Tait conceived of her work. Is it this personal and popular affinity between 'breathing' and Tait's filmmaking practice that makes it of relevance to the current discussion of air.

What does it mean to suggest that the camera is something Tait breathes with? My suggestion is that to breathe with the camera, in Tait's fashion, is to use it as a device to take in, transform, and traject the world – just as, Ingold reminds us, we do with the air. This entangling of the creative and respiratory process is also etymological: 'inspire' comes from the Latin 'breathe into' ('inspirare', from to breathe 'spirare'). However, to appreciate how Tait engages the air as both inspiration and material, we need to engage with her films directly.

As I have argued above, the air is inherently spatial. It is what allows us to be in, feel, and be affected by the place where we are. Many, if not all, of Tait's films 'impart a deep sense of place,' and one that flows from Tait's own engagement with the places she films, which are also the places in which she made her life (Neely 2017, 213). I take as my example here *A Place of Work* (1976), a 30-minute film that documents the house in Orkney that Tait lived in on-and-off throughout her life and from which, at the time of shooting (June 1975 to November 1975), Tait was in the process of moving out. (Arguably I should have focused on *Aerial* (1974) which is explicitly concerned with the elemental, but *A Place of Work* has more personal, site-responsive quality).

The film opens with that most cinematic of airy effects: a windy storm raging outside of the window of Tait's place of work, her studio. The winds' howl, however, continues as Tait focuses in on her interior, her desks full of the accoutrements of filming. With this opening sequence, the aerial elements begin their bleed into her craft. Preferring detail to completeness, Tait takes her viewers outside the studio to the surrounding garden, the soil and seedlings of the borders, pans with a butterfly as it catches a breeze, jump-cuts between plant-life in the full flush of summer, and focuses on the flickering of dappled shade. We must understand this green life, which is everywhere in Tait's films, as part of the airy assembly of socio-spatial life, dependent as we are on its respiration. The film crescendos into a choppy shot and edited sequence of high winds catching in late autumnal trees. A pile of leaves on a pavement is threatened and agitated by the wind, Tait's camera spiralling with the fly-aways. Across this densely aethereal sequence, a bagpipe (itself a very airy instrument) blows across the footage as if just heard, caught on the wind, from afar, and accompanied by birdsong. With this, Tait knits together her portrait of place: of her Scotland, made of the elements, of non-human life, of culture. The film ends, however, back in her workspace, her empty seat

centre stage, reminding us that the body behind the lens – who lives and breathes this place, whose camera and bodies moves and is moved by the currents of its the air – must next sit down with the raw film, work on it with hand and eye, be inspired by it, transform it into the film that we see.

When we see the air in Tait's films it is not as it is in Chris Welsby's *Wind Vane* (1972) which marries air's kineticism with the mechanics of filmmaking but skips the human touch. Nor is it as it is in narrative films, where the air is made legible, whether as breath or as weather, as a symbolic signpost. Instead, the visible effects of the air are reminders of the essential connectedness of the documentarian, the documented and the document. It is a reminder, in this case, that Tait's filmmaking body exists in and through an aerial context whose effects we can see on the film as wind, as breeze, and as sustenance for the plants, and that the atmosphere of Tait's films is coproduced by the climatic and the cultural. By making the filmmaking process explicit – as a tangible, material, laborious thing – Tait emphasises that filmmaking is an embodied practice through which one can metabolise a socio-cultural environment of flux and movement.

This is what I suggest can be understood by 'breathing' with the camera. It signals a way of thinking about the filmed world in the making, in which filmmaker and film are more-than-metaphorically entangled. Specifically, it sensitises us to the aerial co-production of filmmaker, filmed world, and film, in ways that indexically and atmospherically imprint on, but always exceed, the screen. It is the personal nature of Tait's work that makes it fruitful for this granular aerial attention. To discuss the wider social and political relations carried by the air, I turn now to a different film.

Politics of air: *And Still, It Remains*

My final point of discussion is the film *And Still, It Remains* (2023), by artists Arwa Aburawa and Turab Shah. With this, I intend to highlight another mode in which the air entreats itself to filmmakers: the political. *And Still, It Remains* takes as its subject a village in the Hoggar Mountains of Algeria which lives with the toxic legacy of 17 French nuclear tests which took place between 1960 and 1966, many occurring after the eight-year struggle for independence had resulted in the official end of 132 years of French colonialism in Algeria. The Évian Accords of 1962, the treaty which formalised Algerian independence, had given France a lease on these test sites. Some of these tests, like that codenamed Gerboise Bleue, were four times the strength of that dropped by the USA on Hiroshima, and four of the explosions, detonated in tunnels bored through the Hoggar mountains, were not fully contained (Henni 2017, 2022). In areas around the test sites, sand turned to black shards (BBC 2024). Nuclear fallout from the testing regime exposed local populations to highly threatening levels of radioactivity, and indeed heightened atmospheric radioactivity was detected as far afield as Khartoum and the Mediterranean (Henni 2017; Global Zero 2023). For local people, the effects were profound, deadly, and generational – respiratory disease, eye infections, cancer – and took place in a vacuum of information and, still, of justice. Abed Alfitory, an author and researcher whose father was blinded before dying from the radiation exposure, describes the explosions as 'the day the desert wind cried' (Elsaidi 2023).

Writer and curator Samia Henni calls the ongoing effects of these tests the 'toxic imprints' of colonialism, an all too literal 'toxic atmosphere' (Henni 2017). In 2021

and 2022, unusual meteorological events led to red Saharan sand blowing into European countries, including France, Spain, and Britain. Skies turned reddish orange, and landscapes were coated with fine Saharan dust. The French Association for the Control of Radioactivity in the West analysed sand that fell in the Jura Mountains and found it to contain cesium-137, a signature, they said, of ‘contamination of the Sahara and for which France is responsible’ (2022). Other similar events have been analysed to reveal radionuclides in atmospheric dust intrusions, a toxic imprint of other nuclear events like the Chernobyl disaster (Liger et al. 2024). The press reported on the irony of this chain of events (Cereceda 2021), not least of the health anxiety it brought to the metropole despite the deposits being below dangerous levels. The episode highlights the capacity of the air to collapse time and distance, and to archive injustices; it reminds us that the air is something shared, and something that carries; and that decolonisation, in Algeria and elsewhere, is a far from finished project still meting out violences (Jarvis 2021).

This is the subject of Aburawa and Shah’s film, which amounts to a study of lives lived in this toxified atmosphere. It is a slow, meditative watch, showing farmers working, men resting, children playing, and communities praying amid the rocks and rock art, sand, mountains and water of the Sahara. Voiceovers (which one assumes were recorded as interviews) detail partial personal histories of the nuclear tests and their legacies, and of how nuclear fallout was drunk as water or inhaled as air. Taking air-borne toxicity as a film’s subject matter poses a representational challenge. For Aburawa and Shah this challenge was not to make air a legible cinematic narrative sign, but to make colonial legacies legible by documenting the air as such, rematerializing and repoliticizing it as air.

The film serves its documentary function not by providing totalising information to define the scientific or political reality of the situation. Instead, it lets its subject be as nebulous as a cloud. In its explanatory restraint, it affectively documents the threat of the unknown. The air feeds into this in two ways: as hue, and as sound. Firstly, the air’s agency in this context is combined with the radioactive dust and sand which it carries. It was by being visible in the metropole that the air-borne dust made colonial legacies a tangible presence in contexts where colonialism is culturally and politically relegated to the past. The filmmakers lent into this. The film’s colour palette is sandy, and, at times, the visual field is all but obscured by the dusty air. Secondly, in lieu of a ‘voice of god’ voiceover, *And Still, It Remains* has a consistently windy soundtrack. The wind is granted the authoritative position of the truth-teller. Both choices make the air legible in the film in relatively standard ways. The difference, however, is that this is not a narrative trope but a political conditioning of how the film is experienced. The air is what holds the film together, collapsing the timescale of the film – from the ancient rock art it opens with, through the colonial era, to the contemporary, ongoing toxicity – into one aerial continuum.

Air is, as various authors have shown, also a part of the screening environment. If we watch *And Still, It Remains* from afar, such as in the UK festival contexts for which the film was commissioned, we are (or imagine ourselves to be) at a safe remove from the toxicity of the Hoggar Mountains precisely because the screen is not a gauze that connects us in any material way to what it shows, and even when the winds blow the toxic sand afar it does so in a relatively detoxified way. Viewers from afar can watch, then, with a degree of bodily autonomy. This material disconnect nonetheless inserts

viewers into a political relationship with the subject of the film – we are all citizens of the air, all of us beneficiaries or otherwise of enduring process of power and politics written into the very air we breathe.

Where in Tait's films the visible effects of the air are reminders of the essential connectedness of the documentarian, the documented and the document, *And Still, It Remains* reminds us of the missing partner, the viewer, who should be factored into this airy assembly. The effect of *And Still, It Remains* is to rematerialise and repoliticise the air, not only as a screened thing but something breathed as we watch. The legibility of the on-screen air serves as not (only) a narrative device but as a referent against which a viewer measures their own aerial privilege, and the histories and geopolitics that support it. This is reminiscent of Quinlivan's work on the function of cinematic breath to inter-mix the subjectivities of self and screen, expanded beyond the breathing body to the air itself.

Conclusion

The different aerial resonances of *A Place of Work* and *And Still, It Remains* can be read back into the films in ways that exceed the 'allusive techniques' by which they render air visible (Ferguson 2011). The granularity and intimacy of *A Place of Work's* focus stems from the filmmaking process being, for Tait, an exploration of place as a modality of the self (thus 'breathing'), mediated by the camera. Tait considered her films to be poems, and in this case, they can be said to deal in the poetics of air. *A Place of Work* is a trace of Tait's atmospheric attunement, unencumbered by narrative, and held together by her unique aesthetic, associative, aerial, and poetic instincts. In contrast, *And Still, It Remains* is folded into a wider political project and thus takes a wider view, both literally and figuratively. Aesthetically, the film is steeped in the Hoggar Mountains, but in winds and words, it is stitched together with the faraway land of the coloniser. Unlike *A Place of Work*, its edit is restrained, its shots steady, and its pace slow. This gives the viewer the space in which to find themselves implicated, the time to breathe and, in so doing, throws the viewers' own air into relief. The film, in other words, refuses to let the air of the viewing encounter be a void. Where Tait metabolised her socio-cultural environment into films that bear both the indexical and atmospheric imprint of the air, *And Still, It Remains* take the longer view, of the air as an agent of history, and a space of reckoning.

Beyond the screen, the air situates the documentary maker in the world that they are documenting. Likewise, it situates the viewer in the context in which they watch, and manifests social relationships between the here and there of the documentary encounter. The air is not only something to be documented; it is also a category of the real, resistant to discipline, and always exceeding its representation. In these ways, the air amounts to more than just a representative challenge for filmmakers engaged with the real. As an outgrowth of Böhme's environmental aesthetic theory, atmosphere theory has provided a way of understanding the air in this expanded fashion. The particular filmic challenge of the air makes it inviting to take this theoretical approach to screen-based practices, but indeed many other creative, communicative, or documentary practices would similarly repay an aerial attention. What's more, the films I have addressed in this paper are all closely related to the air as a subject. To fully rematerialize the air, however, is to

recognise that it is there is every documentary encounter, rendered as a void, but stitching everything together.

Note

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