

# CINEMATIC DUNES: THE CONFIGURATION OF THE DESERT IN EXPERIMENTAL FILM AND VIDEO ART\*

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## INTRODUCTION

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In the desert it isn't necessary to move, given that it is the desert itself that moves beneath the feet of those who dare to visit it. What sense does it make to travel if the landscape itself is doing so? So far as I know, the desert is the only place in the world where something like this happens.

D'ORS, 2019: 98

The main objective of this article is to investigate the role acquired by the desert in a number of audiovisual productions that represent it. The film and video production practices studied here are formalist, conceptual creations of the past 60 years. By identifying how the desert has served as a source of inspiration for various filmmakers and video artists on the international scene, this study aims to contribute to research on experimental film from the perspective of the landscape. Based on a specific visual motif (a type of geographical

setting characterised by a lack of rain and the aridness of its terrain), the article explores how the desert is depicted in these artistic practices as a territory that invites us to mediate on the conditions of life and to reflect on the viability of audiovisual technology to document them. Portraying the desert in sound and moving images facilitates the articulation of abstract aesthetics, fictionalised metaphorical constructions and wordless philosophical mediations.

Leaving aside fiction films (which use the desert as a backdrop for the resolution of dramatic conflicts) and expository documentaries (which generally describe it with explanatory voice-overs), the focus here is on a group of productions free of narrative impositions and informational parameters. They are works belonging to the tradition of experimental film and video art, shot on film stock (16 mm or 35 mm) or recorded on analogue or digital video, exhibited exclusively in artistic contexts or at specialised festivals. The piec-

es chosen for this study are predominantly from Europe and North America, as audiovisual experimentation has been a practice limited mainly to Western countries. Some Japanese, Australian and African titles were also considered but could not be included in the final study because it was not possible to gain viewing access to them. Ideally, a precise analysis of the connection between cinema and the desert should consider a full range of African and Asian films. However, in view of the difficulties associated with obtaining certain relatively unknown films by creators such as India's Mani Kaul, Iran's Atoosa Pour Hosseini and Senegal's Ousmane Sembène, it was decided to leave these peripheral film industries out of the analysis. Nevertheless, on the question of African cinema, it is worth recalling Alberto Elena's observation that "the cinematographic desert that Sadoul spoke of thirty years ago is a desert no longer: with some major works to its credit, and, above all, an inexhaustible vitality, the emergent cinema of Africa has become not only 'the night school of my people' as Sembène once described it, but an important part of the contemporary film scene" (1999: 187).

The works discussed here offer a cinematic overview divided into three blocks. Three specific visual motifs—sand, the human figure, and the horizon—serve as starting points for three sections each analysing three different films. The first section explores stylistic perspectives that describe the surface of desert landscapes in poetic terms. From these perspectives, the notion of abstraction makes its presence felt in images of sandy, arid and rocky terrain that serve autobiographical intentions. The second block considers narrative questions expressed through human performers. The human figure is the focal point in three titles that erase the boundary between fiction and documentary. With minimalist *mises-en-scène* or clever essayistic montages, these films experiment with idiosyncratic ways of adding bodies to the desert landscape. Finally, the third section

offers an analysis of the horizon as an element of the landscape that fosters philosophical meditation, allowing for an exploration of the concepts of emptiness and endlessness.

Based on the subjective perspectives of the artists, the works studied here offer a glimpse of the fascination that a setting characterised by extreme conditions can arouse. These filmmakers and video artists tell intimate stories in films that highlight the desolate nature of the landscapes, which are revealed to be epistemological foundations. Technology and the imagination are used to counteract the lifelessness associated with the desert. In this way, they take an exploratory approach located between philosophical reflection and cinematic investigation. Why does the desert attract so many audiovisual artists to carry out their projects there? What is the source of this fascination? How do they express the experience of being in the desert? Why does taking a poetic perspective and playing with metaphor prove so insightful? What ideas does the desert inspire and how are audiovisual techniques used to express them? These and other questions are examined below through the analysis of a range of works, many of which use the word "desert" in their titles.

## **DESERTS IMAGINED, DESERTS SIGNALLED**

The desert landscape suggests countless semantic considerations that stretch beyond its physical boundaries. According to Milani, "[t]he landscape is not limited to the territory, that is, to an expanse of land that remains identical through the mutations of its environment. The territory is a geographical, political and social expression, while the landscape contains symbolic and affective meanings" (2006: 76). Desert or semi-desert regions cover a third of the land surface of the Earth; their presence all over the planet is impossible to ignore. In climatological terms, deserts are regions with only sporadic precipitation, spaces with no permanent bodies of water on their surface. At

the biogeographical level, although deserts are abiotic (devoid of life), they do in fact provide a home to sparse animal and plant populations that exist thanks to their adapted forms. The paucity of flora and fauna in these regions is obvious, as is their endemic nature and their physical similarities. The Sahara is far and away the largest desert on the planet, its 9 million square kilometres stretching across 12 North African countries.

The vast sands of the Rub' al Khali in Saudi Arabia, the basins of East Asia, the rocky terrain of the Saharan woodlands, the arid wastes of the Southwestern United States, Australia's desolate interior, the littoral of Peru and Chile, and the coastal dunes of the Namib are all places that have exerted a powerful attraction on numerous audiovisual artists. As Michael Martin (2004) suggests, deserts are sanctuaries for the imagination because they allow us to enter another dimension, a place where solitude, silence and the connection with Earth and the cosmos transcend time. The desert draws us into the most profound mystery of life, as time there acquires a different density. In these magnificent landscapes, past and future unfold with all their force.

Atmospheric pressure and wind patterns determine the meteorological processes that create the arid zones where deserts are created. The dunes of Taklamakan, the Gobi and the Atacama, the mountains of the Sierra Nevada and the volcanic vastness of the Danakil are a few of the emblematic motifs of deserts classified as tropical, subtropical, interior, temperate, cold, coastal, high-altitude or rain shadow. These are sandy, stony or rocky deserts whose topographic forms have been the subject of geological research, but which have also served as material for visual documentation using the technologies of photography and cinematography. The results of both may be expressive, poetic or informational.

Fiction films and contemporary conceptual art can both reveal the desert's ability to express aesthetic interests and narrative objectives. Many

of the regions mentioned above have been used as locations for dramatic situations in cinematic narratives. Emblematic titles in film history have demonstrated that deserts can serve as important settings for dramatic conflicts, or vast spaces for the staging of psychological horrors. Motion pictures as diverse as *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962), *Woman of the Dunes* (Hiroshi Teshigahara, 1964), *Simon of the Desert* (Simón del desierto, Luis Buñuel, 1965), *Zabriskie Point* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1970), *Punishment Park* (Peter Watkins, 1971), *Walkabout* (Nicolas Roeg, 1971), *The Inner Scar* (La cicatrice intérieure, Philippe Garrel, 1972), *Xala* (Ousame Sembène, 1975), *The Sheltering Sky* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1990) and *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996) all feature sequences filmed in deserts. In most of these, actors are at the centre of the attention.

Scholars have offered a wide range detailed analyses of the desert in films like these. Examples include Brad Sykes' book *Terror in the Desert: Dark Cinema of the American Southwest* (2018) and Chris Byford's article "The Garden of Light: Images of the Desert in Film" (1999). Byford's study explores the mythology of the desert in *Lawrence of Arabia* and *The English Patient*. In both films, the desert *mise-en-scène* is limited to sand, light and heat, turning this geographic space into "the ideal place for the process of myth-making" (Byford, 1999: 38). The inherently epic nature of these two canonical works in film history reflects the fact that "in the secular West, the desert has become the purest signifier of the mystic emptiness of the soul" (Byford, 1999: 37). The comparative analysis of the insignificance of the human being and the immensity of the desert is one of the key points in a study focusing on how light and shadow are used in different scenes.

As a favourable location for the development of artistic projects, the desert has become a notable feature of the practices of a number of artists working in the fields of land art and Earthworks (Lippard, 1973; Krauss, 1979), the former being as-

sociated with the US context, while the latter is used mainly with reference to British artists. The dramatic alteration of the landscape in land art contrasts with the subtlety and respect for nature that characterises Earthworks. Both are expressions that emerged during the rise of conceptual movements associated with the dematerialisation of art in the 1960s and 1970s. Various American artists intervene in desert zones with aesthetic objectives involving the transformation of their physical appearance. According to the theorist Simón Marchán Fiz:

[...] works of land art as well publicised as Heizer's *Double Negative*, Robert Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* and *Spiral Jetty*, Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*, Christo's *Running Fence*, James Turrell's *Roden Crater* (an ongoing work in progress since 1974), scattered across deserts in Arizona, California, New Mexico and Utah, are landmarks where the surrounding nature not only serves as their setting, their specific site, but is also integrated into each one as part of the piece. (2006: 43)

Another emblematic work worth adding to this list is an artistic intervention titled *Sun Tunnels* (1973-1976) by the American artist Nancy Holt, which includes a documentary of the same name completed in 1978. The 26 minutes of this film documents the process of constructing four concrete cylinders with a diameter of two metres, which were transported by truck to their final location: a remote valley of the Great Basin Desert near Wendhover in northern Utah. The film is a descriptive testimony to the creation process for a project involving dozens of workers interacting with construction tools in the open air. Another artist worthy of mention here is the English sculptor Sir Richard Long, whose desert walks and interventions, consisting of marking routes, drawing circles or collecting found objects, are recorded in the documentary *Stones and Flies: Richard Long in the Sahara* (Philip Haas, 1988).

The abstract nature of certain fiction sequences set in deserts and the artistic sensibili-

ty apparent in land art interventions can also be identified in the films and videos analysed below. The poetics of their images and the conceptual background to their formal approaches provide evidence of the exchange of influences between filmmaking and contemporary art. Situated between these two cultural dimensions is a kind of experimental film and video art that uses the desert as a vehicle for expressing personal concerns. These audiovisual expressions eschew both the drama and the exoticism that the desert acquires in mainstream cinema, while also shying away from the monumental quality implicit in land art sculptures. Instead, they articulate unique aesthetic approaches and unexpected developments involving filmmaking techniques that invite the viewer to ponder the desert.

### **DESERT POETICS: FROM HYPER-REALIST SAND TO ABSTRACT ARIDITY**

While in the first avant-garde film movements the play of luminous reflections on water became a recurring motif for filmmakers such as Ralph Steiner (*H2O*, 1929) and Joris Ivens (*Rain*, 1929), from the 1960s to the 1980s the sandy surface of the desert attracted various filmmakers who examined its appearance with a focus on the transformation of its dunes. Pondering the movement of the sand through the flow of images is an analytical exercise that reveals not only the iconic nature of film images but the self-reflexive undercurrent implicit in any filmmaking exercise in the desert. The sand's constant motion has an analogous relationship with the variations of the photochemical process of the celluloid and its subsequent projection. The continuous formation of these landscapes is a source of fascination for filmmakers who allow themselves to be seduced by its immensity, discovering the resilience of the individual subject in an inhospitable setting.

If there is any one film that best exemplifies this fluctuating quality of the desert expanse, it is

*Alaya* (1987) by the American filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky. Over the course of 30 minutes of footage, Dorsky meticulously documents the changes occurring to the dunes of different deserts around the world. Demonstrating a profound knowledge of the 16mm film camera, the director assembles a montage of static shots, close-ups and overhead views of different sandy regions. Framed with an “all over” approach (in keeping with the principles of abstract Expressionist painting), the compositions become an abstraction of vibrating particles resulting from the precise use of macroscopic optics during filming (Image 1). Added to this unusual view of grains of sand are the changes of position caused by the wind, as well as changes to the lighting. Filmed indiscriminately at daytime and night-time hours, the shots demonstrate not only the contemplative tone of the enterprise but also the highly individual approach adopted by the filmmaker to achieve his purpose. With nothing added to the soundtrack, Dorsky creates a hypnotic, hyper-realist film in which sand is in perpetual motion. These grains, illuminated by the sunlight and displaced by the force of the wind, interact with the photochemical grain of the emulsion. When they shine against a dark background, the cosmos is inevitably brought to mind.

*Migra* (1994) by the Catalan filmmaker Toni Serra focuses on the surface of the desert, offering a personal journey in which the landscape and texts recited aloud signal a rite of passage. The dry, often cracked terrain is filmed in video images with fleeting frontal and lateral move-

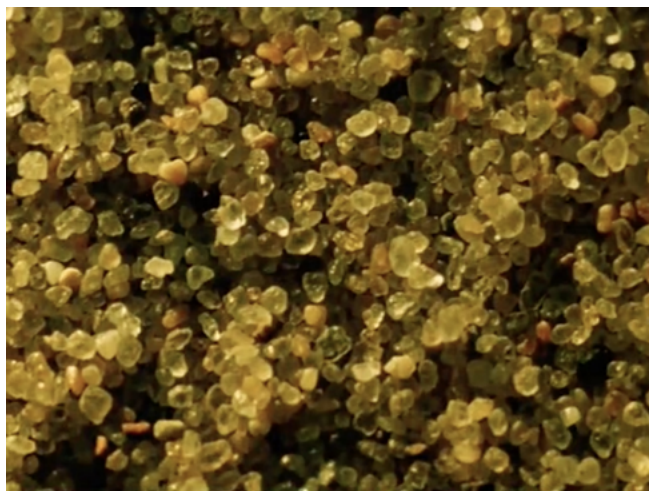


Image 1. *Alaya* (Nathaniel Dorsky, 1976–1987). Source: <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/es/ressources/oeuvre/cMjp6x>

ments, taken in an overhead view (Image 2). All these images reveal a poetic cadence that is progressively increased by the written word. The synopsis, written by the creator himself, reads: “Landscapes like texts to be read. The desert is our friend, migrations of the mind.” Juxtaposing landscapes of desert and plant life with images of printed pages, Serra reflects on the locations visited, the role of vision and the transmission of knowledge. According to Serra, “to decolonise the vision would be to give it back, to integrate it into the body and the other senses, to integrate it into the place, into its forces and voids... To rescue it from the tyranny of the merely optical in order to open it up to the other eyes of the body and spirit, to make it whole” (2018: 90). This is a way of signalling how thought flows when it is allowed to submit to ocularcentrism. The music in *Migra*, composed by Barbara Held, is a sound piece titled “Desert Wrap” that combines frequencies of wind instruments with sounds recorded on location. It is an unsettling sonic accompaniment that is well suited to the continuous series of rocky images.

Jon Behrens turns up the hyperactive tone of the film described above with a nine-minute piece titled *Desert Abstractions* (1997). Multiple exposures captured in the Arizona desert (taken with

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Image 2. *Migra* (Toni Serra, 1994). Source: <http://www.al-barzaj.org/2011/06/migra.html>

Steve Creson's help over the course of a week) are the material used to create a piece that functions as a mosaic of chromatic impressions. Here, hundreds of brief moving images fuse with others, juxtaposed with continuous zooms and tracking shots moving to both sides. Different filters of warm colours define shots that convey a kind of visual confusion, despite the specific geological shapes they show. Rubato's music, with its New Age cadence, creates a soporific tone to the beat of endless dissolutions. Beginning with figurative representations (desert landscapes captured from all kinds of distances), Behrens moves with determination towards a quest for abstraction. Like the two films discussed above, *Desert Abstractions* eschews the peacefulness associated with specific visual motifs (sand, rocks) to take us into another dimension, one that offers glimpses of the possibility of entering the past and future of these same locations.

As Pablo d'Ors puts it, "the fascination with sand is none other than the fascination with our origins and, also, what all of us are compelled toward" (2019: 78). The sand of the desert symbolises the presence of an absence. It can also be read as the encapsulation of every desert landscape on Earth. The filmmakers and video artists dis-

cussed here appreciate the morphology of sand, which reflects their technical skills when they work with cameras and editing processes. In their pieces, the human figure is located off screen; the human presence is limited to the body behind the camera. The next section explores ways in which human beings are inscribed into the frame in experimental film and video art, in the middle of a desert setting.

### **DESERT MYTHOS: FROM MINIMALIST FICTION TO ESSAYISTIC DOCUMENTATION**

In fiction films, the storyline is generally articulated through quite explicit mises-en-scène and performances of dialogues or the omnipresence of voice-overs. All of this overrides any possibility of the desert playing the central role: the human figure always predominates over the landscape. These are films that use the desert to shape the emotions and dramatic circumstances of their main characters. In documentaries, the educational nature of the information related to the conditions of the desert landscape precludes the possibility of comprehending it without words. For David Jasper, the desert is a "place of wandering, a place to enter into," and also "a place of meeting" (2004: xviii). Although the desert offers the potential for contact with alterity, this meeting is mainly with oneself. In the following paragraphs, I consider how human figures interact with these environments and other beings in three films in which the direction of the actors is reduced to a minimum.

Walter de Maria's *Hard Core* (1969) was filmed in the Black Rock Desert in northwest Nevada in July 1969. This 28-minute film presents the landscape with a series of slow 360-degree pan shots from left to right, filmed using a tripod and a wide-angle lens. The breadth and immensity of this arid territory evokes the Westerns of Hollywood's classical era. In the film, two men dressed as cowboys (the cinematographer Blair Stapp and



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fellow artist Michael Heizer) eventually appear in some fleeting detail shots. At the same time, the whole film is accompanied by an intense musical soundtrack, composed by de Maria himself, including two pieces titled Cricket Music (1964) and Ocean Music (1968) produced using recordings of waves on the sea, incessant percussion and instrumentation *in crescendo*. After numerous pans sweeping across the horizon, the two human figures are presented in a frenetic finale: an armed duel condensed into a long series of brief shots of one man firing a revolver and the other a shotgun. It is the epitome of the violence intrinsic to classic Westerns and their mythology associated with the conquest of the American hinterland. Here, the desert plays the main role. In this location beyond the reach of civilisation, impunity is a visible feature. The Italian scholar Francesco Careri points out this filmmaker's interest in the desert when he notes that "[i]n 1968 Walter de Maria made his *One Mile Long Drawing*, two parallel one-mile lines drawn on the Mojave Desert, where in 1969 he shot, for the television gallery of Gerry Schum, the video *Two Lines, Three Circles on the Desert*" (2018: 139).

*One Woman Waiting* (1984), by the Canadian filmmaker Josephine Massarella, is constructed entirely out of a single static shot lasting nine minutes. It is a work of minimalist fiction in which the creator underscores the recognition of the other. Appearing in a desert landscape of brightly sunlit dunes lit is a young woman who, after tracing a circle in the sand with her bare feet, sits down on the right-hand side of the frame to contemplate

the landscape (Image 3). A short time later, a human figure becomes discernible on the horizon in the background: it is another woman, who moves patiently towards the first, greets her and embraces her. With no dialogue, and with ambient music of bells and sonic textures that evoke the wind, the film presents us with a scene marked by dichotomies: distance/proximity, strangeness/familiarity, staging/documenting. All of this is encapsulated in one precise moment: an embrace with metaphysical resonances. In this gesture, the two women exemplify the importance of companionship and respect in a setting as desolate as the one they find themselves in. The need for refuge is made forcefully clear, hinting at the vulnerability of the human body without exaggerating the action. In the waiting, the silence redefines and foregrounds the territory. While the two men in Walter de Maria's film confront each other violently, the two women in Massarella's film offer one another soothing care and mutual understanding. The footprints on the sand allude to the protagonist's indecision and disorientation, in a connection with the short story "The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths" (1939) by the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, when he establishes a parallel between the labyrinth and the desert,

**Image 3. *One Woman Waiting* (Josephine Massarella, 1984).**  
Source: <https://lux.org.uk/work/one-woman-waiting>



“which has no stairways to climb, nor doors to force, nor unending galleries to wear one down, nor walls to block one’s way” (1978: 90).

*Zoom* (2005), by the Spanish director Elías León Siminiani, constructs a remarkable montage of the process of reviewing a single shot filmed in the Erg Chebbi Desert in Morocco. An expedition of human figures and camels is shown travelling across this region of semi-arid pre-Saharan steppes (Image 4). With a static point-of-view shot and a slight forward zoom, the camera operator focuses on his partner, a young woman from Madrid. At one point, she makes a revealing gesture. With the aid of Luis Callejo’s voice, this gesture hints that the couple are at the culminating moment of their romantic relationship. “50 apparent seconds of silence, calm and emptiness... But only apparent” is the synopsis of a video about a zoom-in that gave rise to another more elaborate video: *Límites: Primera Persona* (2009). Completed for an exhibition project titled *Miradas al límite* [Gazes on the Limit], organised by the Artium Museum in the Basque Country and produced by the Pantalla Partida production company, this second project takes a more ambitious approach to the investigation initiated in *Zoom*. The spoken word takes centre stage in an 8-minute video montage focusing on the distant figure of a girl wandering through a desert in Morocco. In a voice-over, Luis Callejo and Siminiani himself reflect on the amateur quality of the images filmed on video and the biased perspective created by the montage. The series of arguments put forward are aimed at restoring the romantic relationship between the



Image 4. *Zoom* (Elías León Siminiani, 2005). Source: <http://plat.tv/filmes/zoom>

video’s protagonist, Ainhoa Ramírez, and its creator, Siminiani. As we hear in the voice-over: “if she is searching for him, he is searching for her all the more ‘because’ all the images he brings back from the desert have her as their motif.” The spoken words reveal the degree of self-consciousness applied to this digitally manipulated material, geared towards a particular semantic construction. A few gentle piano notes from a Claude Debussy composition give colour to an audiovisual essay created as a test of love between two Spanish youths. The physical distance between the two bodies—one visible, the other off screen—is the correlative of a video that celebrates the power of the surrounding space. The Saharan dunes are setting for a heterosexual relationship made up of symbolic shots on video, playful montages and gazes to camera.

The two fiction pieces studied here eschew the kind of narrative logic associated with commercial and arthouse cinema. The individuals participating in these projects are delving into their own thoughts; seeing themselves surrounded by immense landscapes shapes their personal perceptions, turning them towards the sublime. According to Tynan, in modern culture, the desert is often used “to evoke experiences of placelessness or dislocation, or of what Deleuze and Guattari

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call, in their unique theoretical vocabulary, *deteritorialisation*" (2020: 11). In Siminiani's documentaries, this placelessness leaves room for a reflection that ranges from the rational to the ironic. In all three pieces, the desert bears witness to important moments in a relationship between two people. Death, companionship and love are meticulously cultivated in three different settings that in a certain way set their visitors off on a quest for the essential. Ethical disengagement and a loss of one's sense of direction are simply consequences of this powerful longing.

### **DESERT METAPHYSICS: FROM SPECULATIVE HORIZON TO ETHEREAL MEDIATION**

The endlessness of the desert horizon, the vastness of its spaces and the beauty suggested by its desolation confront us with the idea of the void. This nothingness encourages us to conceive of the desert from a philosophical and spiritual perspective. We can thus speak of both a physical or external desert and a mental or internal one; both suggest absolute concepts that inevitably elicit metaphysical considerations. The desert is a metaphor for infinity because, as Pablo d'Ors argues, "it is the place of absolute possibility: the place where the horizon has the breadth that a person deserves and needs" (2019: 63). The titles studied in this section reveal how essential filming the horizon becomes to convey the experience of witnessing deserts for cinematic purposes.

In *Hand Held Day* (1975), the American filmmaker Gary Beydler uses a small rectangular mirror, held in one of his own hands, to reduce the passage of a day to a few minutes. While chronological time is condensed in a series of individual still frames showing different moments of the day, the surrounding space (the Arizona desert and mountains) is reduced to a rectangular composition inside another rectangle of smaller proportions. The variations of light and the vibrations resulting from the slight changes of position

of the fingers holding up the mirror are the perceptible changes in a film that captures the path of the sun on two rolls of Kodachrome film. The mountainous horizon reflected in this detail shot contrasts with the spatial expanse of the desert. The mirror concentrates the beauty of the clouds in the sky and the sunset over the mountains while projecting the filmmaker's desire to frame and contain the surrounding landscape. This exercise of speculation on the dimensions of the horizon and its temporal condensation gives way to another exercise underpinned by the notion of the mirage.

*Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)* (Bill Viola, 1979) is a video recorded in the Tunisian region of the Sahara Desert. Chott el-Djerid is the name of a large salt lake located in the Tunisian Sahara that often produces mirages when it is dried up. The intensity of the heat caused by the midday sun creates distorted illusions of moving shapes (Image 5). The perpetual movement of ethereal elements perceptible on the horizon and the constant vibration of blurry splotches of colour recorded by the video camera facilitate speculations about the images. The piece documents a vibration that seems to be a constant wave on the arid terrain of sand, sparse vegetation, a few

**Image 5.** *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)* (Bill Viola, 1979). Source: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/coleccion/obra/>



buildings, and some camels and humans crossing the scene. These fluctuating spectres are interspersed with shots taken in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan and central Illinois in the United States. Although their climatic conditions are completely different from those of Chott el-Djerid, these prairies filmed at wintertime display similarities related to their disorienting effects. These physical settings create psychological spaces that can inevitably be interpreted as perceptual delusions. Christopher Eamon argues that in his films in the 1970s “Viola immerses the viewer, taking his investigation to a metaphysical level” (2009: 82). Undermining the static notion associated with any horizon, Viola has constructed a video of temporal and spatial ruptures.

With *Altiplano* (2018), the Chilean filmmaker Malena Szlam has created a 15-minute film that takes us to the Andes mountains, travelling over different regions of northern Chile and western Argentina. Atacameño, Aymara and Calchaquí-Diaguita are the regions filmed in a piece named after the Altiplano region of the Atacama Desert. Shot on 16mm film, this work realises numerous technical possibilities associated with this format. Multiple exposures, colour filters, time lapses and other technical strategies allow Szlam to capture the essence of a place shaped by ancient geological features, volcanic deserts and sloping horizons. Taken by day and by night, the shots comprise a montage marked by a chromatic study of the landscape (Image 6). The visual richness



Image 6. *Altiplano* (Malena Szlam, 2018). Source: <https://light-cone.org/en/film-11452-altiplano>

combines a feverish gaze with a hallucinatory tone. This approach calls to mind an obsession of the video artist Mary Lucier: “[s]ometime around 1970 I became obsessed with the idea that video had been invented to satisfy an ancient longing: to allow the human eye to gaze directly at the sun without damage to the retina” (1990: 457). Szlam’s film reflects this longing, in the same way that one of her earlier pieces, *Lunar Almanac* (2014), obsessively captures the light of the moon with multiple exposures. *Altiplano* is a mysterious piece that evokes South America’s ancient past while suggesting a future filled with enigmas. As the scholar Ara Osterweil observes, “[m]ade too late to serve as a warning, *Altiplano* shows Szlam using the techniques of a dying medium to instead compose an exquisite elegy to what has been lost—and what might remain” (Osterweil, 2018). Szlam multiplies the lines of the horizon, juxtaposing layers of shots of different locations. The mountain peaks and other desert horizons, with their inexhaustible visual mutations, seem to have a life of their own. This continuous self-formation seems to rebel against the extractivism of human utilitarianism carried out in the name of progress.

The films examined in this section reveal the vastness of settings whose horizons render ex-

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plicit the impossible nature of adapting them to a human scale. Reducing the horizon to a mirror image, exposing its constant distortion in mirages and superimposing different shots onto a single frame are ways of exploring its richness. The unique nature of the film and video production techniques used here reveal how audiovisual media can convey meditative states by bringing their documenting potential into play. In their novel *Hermanito*, Ibrahima Balde and Amets Arzallus describe Ibrahima's desert experience: "When I woke up, I sat for a while looking ahead, without knowing where 'ahead' was. I looked ahead in all directions and saw nothing. Only desert. Desert here. Desert there. Desert in all four directions." (2021: 48-49). In the pieces by Beydler, Viola and Szlam, the desert horizon is presented as fluctuating, conveying the uncertainty and the existential nature of spending prolonged periods in such a place. These pieces mediate on the omnipresence of time in locations where past, present and future all seem to happen at once. In a way, all three titles aim to transform the scale, the stillness and the uniqueness of their desert settings. As Graciela Speranza points out, "many artists and writers [...] reconfigure the world in their own way, and without losing their uniqueness, they expand the horizon of the diverse" (2017: 19).

## CONCLUSIONS

The desert inevitably evokes the atemporal. The lack of human intervention in its surface facilitates this impression. According to Aurora Carapinha, "[i]n the landscape, space, matter, time (past present, future and biological time) and process are objectively present. They combine and structure one another in multiple interchangeable ways" (2009: 122). Desert settings are located outside time as they enable us to imagine past and future times never experienced. As most of the films analysed here show, the desert encapsulates the

feeling described by Robert Smithson when he suggests that the present "must go into the places where remote futures meet remote pasts" (1968). However, human activity also has consequences for deserts. In our era, deserts have been growing due to human-caused climate change, one consequence of which is subtropical drought. As the researcher Germán Esteban Maidana points out, "[i]n just 70 years, from 1882 to 1952, the proportion of the Earth's land surface classified as desert increased from 9.4% to 23.3%" (2017: 144). It is reasonable to assume that this percentage has grown considerably since then.

The film installation *Bending to Earth* (2015) by Italian artist Rosa Barba consists of a 15-minute film—shown in a loop on a 35mm projector—that represents the effects of the arrival of utilitarianism in the desert. Barba shows the human footprint left on the Earth's surface in the name of progress with aerial shots of various radioactive waste storage facilities. Filmed from a helicopter, the different sequence shots show technological structures located in desert regions of California, Utah and Colorado. These nuclear waste management plants are described in a voice-over that explains the toxicity of the mixtures treated in them. The film's soundtrack combines electronic sounds and radio signals created by Barba and Jan St. Werner (a member of the German band Mouse on Mars), with the distorted voice of Letitia Sadier from the British group Stereolab. Cristina Cámara Bello suggests that the sound for this film "situate[s] us once more in another time, a moment of suspense between the nuclear disarmament brought about by the end of the Cold War and the radioactive waste generated by nuclear energy" (2016: 77-78). Viewed from the sky, these structures look rather like models created for dystopian science fiction films. The imposing nature of the projection equipment—with its size, noise and the dramatic nature of its loop—could be associated with the profound transformation

that certain deserts have undergone as a result of human intervention.

Rosa Barba offers a tragic view of the world that gives rise to an aesthetics of waste. The devastation and ruin that characterises the Anthropocene are signs foreboding an apocalyptic future. Yet it is also a future that has a positive reading because, as Pablo d'Ors remarks with reference to the desert, "[a]fter much thought, I have come to the conclusion that what attracts me to the void is the ecstasy of possibility" (2019: 100). According to Tynan, the desert can be understood as something "surprisingly fragile, as an idea of geographical extremism or alterity, as a sacred or accursed site, as a metaphor for nullity, as a subjective or existential terrain, or as an object of sheer aesthetic exultation" (2020: 1). This multiplicity of meanings is perfectly reflected in a group of films and videos that embrace aesthetics derived from their audiovisual constructions while hinting at concerns oriented simultaneously towards the whole and towards nothingness. Using film and video production techniques, these relatively inaccessible territories can be grasped as regions filled with life. As Tynan suggests, the desert "becomes a stage on which a new awareness—a new semiosis—of life becomes possible" (2020: 3). As can be seen in the audiovisual works analysed here, despite the alienation, solitude and unease it elicits, the desert is shown paradoxically to be an ideal geographical location for the imagination. Conveying experiences and suggesting atemporal encounters are the common features of these artistic explorations in which the desert reveals its cinematic power. ■

## NOTES

- \* This work has been carried out within the framework of the Consolidated Research Group: IMARTE. Investigación en procesos artísticos y nuevas tecnologías (2021 SGR 01090) of the Facultad de Bellas Artes of the Universidad de Barcelona.

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## CINEMATIC DUNES: THE CONFIGURATION OF THE DESERT IN EXPERIMENTAL FILM AND VIDEO ART

### Abstract

Deserts have influenced a number of experimental filmmakers and video artists who have visited them to make audiovisual pieces offering glimpses of unusual aesthetic connotations and unique epistemological considerations. The works analysed in this article place the desert in the main role, eschewing the informational objectives associated with conventional documentary and rejecting the functional quality assigned to the desert as a dramatic location in fiction feature films. These artists offer a different configuration of the desert, focusing on the sandy abstraction of its dunes, exploring the insignificance of the human figure in the face of its vastness, and imagining possible temporal representations of its horizons. This article considers the poetic, mythical and metaphysical nature of the desert through the analysis of various experimental films and video creations that study the idiosyncrasies of its landscape, reflecting on the existential connotations suggested by desert regions and testing out the multiple options offered by audiovisual techniques. These are pieces that range from lyrical abstraction to autobiographical testimony, from minimalist fiction to self-reflexive essay. The analysis of a film installation with an environmentalist discourse concludes this study of sounds and moving pictures that imagine new readings that can help us understand the importance of the desert.

### Key words

Desert; Experimental Film; Artists' Video; Landscape; Horizon.

### Author

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### Article reference

Alcoz, Albert. (2024). (2022). Cinematic Dunes: The Configuration of the Desert in Experimental Film and Video Art. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 37, 147-160.

## DUNAS CINEMÁTICAS. LA CONFIGURACIÓN DEL DESIERTO EN EL CINE EXPERIMENTAL Y LA VIDEOCREACIÓN

### Resumen

El desierto influye en una serie de cineastas experimentales y video-creadores que se acercan a él para realizar piezas audiovisuales que vislumbran connotaciones estéticas inusuales y consideraciones epistemológicas singulares. Los trabajos analizados en este artículo toman el desierto como protagonista principal; esquivan la voluntad informativa asociada al documental ortodoxo y rechazan el carácter funcional del desierto como localización dramática en largometrajes de cine de ficción. Estos artistas configuran el desierto concentrándose en la abstracción arenosa de sus dunas, deteniéndose en la insignificancia de la figura humana ante su vasta dimensión y elucubrando posibles representaciones temporales de su horizonte. El carácter poético, mítico y metafísico del desierto queda argumentado a través de un conjunto de films experimentales y videoocreaciones que estudian la idiosincrasia del paisaje. Lo hacen pensando las connotaciones existenciales derivadas de los territorios y perfilando la pluralidad de opciones de las herramientas audiovisuales. Son piezas que van de la abstracción lírica al testimonio autobiográfico, de la ficción minimalista al ensayo autorreflexivo. El análisis de una instalación fílmica de discurso ecologista concluye una investigación en la que los sonidos e las imágenes en movimiento imaginan nuevas lecturas con las que comprender el valor del desierto.

### Palabras clave

Desierto; Cine experimental; Videoocreación; Paisajismo; Horizonte.

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### Referencia de este artículo

Alcoz, Albert. (2024). Dunas cinemáticas. La configuración del desierto en el cine experimental y la videoocreación. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 37, 147-160.

recibido/received: 15.09.2022 | aceptado/accepted: 20.06.2023

Edita / Published by



Licencia / License



ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB [www.revistaatalante.com](http://www.revistaatalante.com) MAIL [info@revistaatalante.com](mailto:info@revistaatalante.com)