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## Review Essay

# The Digital Parallax and Entanglements of Filmmaking

**Powerless.** Deepti Kakkar and Fahad Mustafa, dirs. 84 min. Globalistan Films, ITVS International, Fahad Mustafa, Deepti Kakkar, Leopold Koegler, India, 2014.

**Nero’s Guests.** Deepa Bhatia, dir. 57 min. India: The Jan Vrijman Fund Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland in association with ARTE France, Oktober, and YLE, 2009.

**CHAR ... The No Man’s Island.** Sourav Sarangi, dir. 88 min. Produced by: Sourav Sarangi with funding from George Foundation from Switzerland, IDFA fund from Netherlands, Asian Cinema funds, India, 2012.

**Arjun Shankar**

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This past week, I presented two short films I had created with a colleague of mine, Mariam Durrani, at the University of Pennsylvania. The two films together were reflections on a trip we took with a group of professors, graduate students, undergraduates, musicians, and elders from the Jamaican Rastafarian community to London, Johannesburg, and Cape Town to show a film about a violent government crackdown on Rastafarians in Jamaica in the 1960s. After the viewing of the film, we shot footage of the discussions in these community centers—passionate dialogues about the plight of Rastafarians all over the world.

In an archaic anthropological sense, we were “outsiders”: we had very little knowledge about the community we were documenting and were given no suggestions as to what to look for, who to talk to, or what to film. As a result, the films

risked feeling distant to those who were part of the “family” (to use one of our professor’s phrases), our ethnographic filmmakerly gaze affectively and ontologically separate from the contexts that we were filming. We were making a “film about a film,” shot in places halfway around the world from each other, with communities who were connected in a complex web of identity (Rastafarianism), physical movement (our travel to these places), and digitality (an entire infrastructure of projectors, HD cameras, websites, and computers that facilitated this global dialogue), of which we were not a part.

The problem of our positionality was further exacerbated by a series of workshops we gave as we moved through these venues. We used clips we had shot during the trip to facilitate dialogues about representation, technique, and the ethics of our filmmaking engagement. Our presence there as two South Asian Americans was itself a fragmenting of a previously held continuum of identity, and our products

were a “soldering” of these fragments, which, when shared with ever-expanding audiences in ever-expanding formats (in-person, online, in conjugation with or separated from the original film, in dialogue with those who were filmed, etc.), rendered the marking of origins nearly impossible. The other clips I showed during our workshops—minutes of raw footage I’d shot during my own fieldwork in a village outside of Bangalore, India—only exacerbated this feeling. Where was the beginning of this story, and what was happening as these pieces of life were digitized and reconnected in new contexts? It was, as one of the activists in Johannesburg commented, borrowing from Albert Einstein, a kind of “quantum entanglement,” bodies seemingly separate but indescribable without reference to a broader system in which they interact and unfold: meetings that are defined, as Rey Chow (2012) explains, not necessarily by “proximity or affinity.”

During our viewing at Penn, one of the audience members remarked on a few shots—one in which a man shoots footage on his own small handheld camera and another in which a man with a tripod scoots in front of me as I film, obscuring the shot for a brief instance. These shots struck him as especially important, a momentary glance at the technologies that facilitate entanglement or at least make the entanglements that already exist ever more visible. Why, he asked, had we chosen to leave these shots in?

In my mind, the question foregrounded a kind of “digital parallax” experienced by the ethnographic filmmaker, faced not only with his own products but also the products of millions of others who are competing for both physical and virtual space. If Faye Ginsburg’s (1995) “parallax effect” mostly remained tied to the indigenous–outsider dichotomy, predicated on a fear that the Other would question the anthropologist’s filmic representations, the digital parallax was an anxiety based on the sheer proliferation of position in a web-centric world, something akin to “parallax as vertigo” to use John L. Jackson Jr.’s (2005) phrasing. To place these instances of parallax in the frame was to admit that we were wrapped in these digital entanglements, in both how and what we could shoot.

I think the idea of the digital parallax and its concomitant entanglements takes the discussion of filmmaking in a new direction, one in which “virtual connectivity . . . exceeds the readily perceptible, empirical dimension” (Chow 2012:155) and necessarily influences how filmmakers make films—whether, as in our case, filming a Rastafarian group in South Africa or filming “Indians,” as in the cases of the films reviewed below.

It’s the result of a “shadow media” that we encounter as part of a digital public, a set of “user-generated, often mediocre-quality images . . . the tangential, mobile infrastructure of a counter-discourse to conventional national and international broadcasting” (Grace 2007; see also Chow 2012:167). The shadow media’s very ephemerality—the fact that it blends into the YouTube, Flickr, and Instagram world unnoticed and unseen—is its greatest virtue, allowing

for potential visibility in its very mundanity and everydayness: shots of a man sleeping, a woman talking, children playing, and so on and so on until something breaks through the mundane, going viral without any predetermined rationale, filmmakerly or otherwise.

It is only natural that the genre boomerangs around to affect filmmakers with formal training, especially those committed in some explicit way to “reality,” ethnographic or documentary: we might use 4K cameras or mobile phones, but in the end we’ll all be competing for space on YouTube or Vimeo. Indeed, I watched all three films that I’ll be reviewing below on my computer using Vimeo links provided by the Film Platform ([www.filmplatform.net](http://www.filmplatform.net)), a viewing experience all too familiar for those who are online media consumers. It is a reminder that the shadow media’s influence is felt as strongly by those who curate or disseminate films as by the filmmakers themselves. What constitutes a “quality” film, and how do we maintain some sort of guidelines for inclusion while recognizing a larger number of “filmmakers” beyond those with formal training?

For the documentarian, one of the easiest ways to get around the problem of legitimacy is to find marginalized groups who do not have access to digital technologies and to film them. The “everyday life” of the marginal is anything but for those of us who live and work in the digital world, so documenting such lives becomes a novelty in and of itself, distinguishing the documentarian from the rest of the camera-using world. It’s a move that allows a return to the far-simpler binaries of “inside–outside” eschewed by a digital logic (even if the tools for capture are still exclusively digital). It also places the documentarian into the ethical discussions that ethnographic filmmakers, especially those who emerged from a postcolonial tradition (Minh-ha 1989; Rony 1996), have always faced: How should we represent marginalized peoples? How do we self-reflexively engage with positionality? What economic and political inequalities must we unpack for the viewer? How do we film without producing the worst affects of Othering? In other words, for the documentarian, to go “ethnographic”—a situation much maligned by some in the ethnographic filmmaking tradition (Ruby 2005)—is to return to some of the oldest discussions of a politically motivated visual anthropology.

There are other questions that arise when documentarians deploy strategies for filming everydayness borrowed from places in which digital technology is an integral part of life and then redeploy them in contexts in which digital self-production is not the norm. As I have already insinuated, doing so changes how one uses the camera—specifically, how one thinks about its position, framing, movement, and the like. Mobile phone footage clashes with high-quality establishing shots; cameras move along with the action, jostling and shaking in a fashion that makes one feel that they are part of the action, or the cameras are fixated on bicycles and cars as they move down congested roadways; people talk directly to the filmmakers as they go about their daily work,

and the filmmakers become ever more visible as members not only of the crew but also of the cast.

Given the subject matter, these techniques are always politically oriented, revealing inequalities of all sorts in the “everydayness” of a camera’s movement. Yet, the paradox that emerges in this attempt at filming everyday suffering and inequality is that the filmmaker is always entangled in the larger economic infrastructure that makes their films possible and, in many cases, is part of the very same system that creates marginality (lest we forget the very materiality of filmmaking and the capital necessary to sustain the craft). In other words, to “sell” is to make films that look more and more like those found on YouTube, and to open avenues to political change is to make films that look more and more like those found on YouTube.

For those producing filmic work in postcolonial contexts geared toward social change, this realization creates its own kind of anxiety, well-articulated in Chow’s (2012:168) question: “Is redemption or restitution simply a matter of technological recyclability?” It seemed to be the underlying sentiment of our process in South Africa—the question of reparations for state-propagated violence deeply tied to technological capture, then recapture, then dissemination, then recapture across the globe. It also seems to be a question that grounds the struggles faced by the filmmakers in each of the films “about India” reviewed here: *Powerless* (2014), *Nero’s Guests* (2009), and *CHAR . . . The No-Man’s Island* (2012).

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*Powerless* (2014) takes its name from the massive electricity outages that shape the lives of those living in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh. Ebbs and flows of darkness set the stage for a tense battle between KESCO, the state government’s electricity supplier, and *katiyabaaz*, individuals who “steal” electricity and supply it to those who have been left in the dark. For directors Deepti Kakkar and Fahad Mustafa, electricity issues reflect the demise of Kanpur’s economy, once home to a burgeoning textile industry (“The Manchester of the East”) that has slowly lost nearly all of its manufacturing sector in the continued deindustrialization of India’s second-tier cities. The filmmakers get incredible access and always seem to position themselves in the right place at the right time, moving back and forth between formal documentary techniques and handheld journalistic methods. We never see the filmmakers or hear from them, though there are moments where people talk directly to them, in formal interview settings and during moments of frustration. They are positioned so well, in fact, that I wondered whether the whole film might have been staged. To the ethnographer’s eye, there were immediate questions of access, method, truthfulness, objectivity, and time in the field. What was the “real” relationship between the directors and their subjects?

The story’s two main characters are KESCO managing director Ritu Maheswari and local *katiyabaaz* Loha Singh. Maheswari, ambitious and disciplined, is adamant that delinquent payments and the stealing of electricity are

the direct cause of the longer power cuts in Kanpur. She cracks down on those who steal electricity by cutting off power, raiding homes, and laying hefty fines on those who have been caught using electricity supplied through the *katiyabaaz*’s informal economies. Simultaneously, she restructures the entire system of electricity payment by implementing the first electronic bill payment center in Kanpur. “The digital” enters the script, then, not so subtly, facilitating centralization, promoting efficiency, and catering to the middle classes while further marginalizing those who were receiving electricity through informal networks. This is the kind of digital culture the Indian government seeks to cultivate and control in a country overridden by thousands of informal economic networks like the *katiyabaaz*’s, which proliferate in parallel with the formal economy (Benjamin et al. 2007; Sundaram 2009).

Loha Singh, a short, stocky man with a crooked, uneven smile, plays the film’s Robin Hood, laughing as we watch him steal electricity, ridicule the government, and remain resolute in performing an occupation he believes is vital. His stance is simple: the government has never taken the needs of the poor seriously, and so, as always, the poor have found a solution themselves. He shows off his “battle scars” to the camera, pointing to a finger that has been permanently bent out of place during a job gone bad. His work is dangerous and he knows it, but this only heightens the egoistic altruism he flaunts throughout the film.

As Maheswari cracks down on electricity theft, encounters between the government and city dwellers only worsen. A crowd beats up a KESCO employee after being left without power for ten hours; a local politician—using the electricity issues to further his own political aspirations—storms Maheswari’s office and demands that something be done immediately before being escorted out by the police; Loha Singh fights off newcomers who encroach on his territory, eager to tap into this burgeoning black market. It is a cycle that never ends—more power outages mean more theft, which means more power outages—and it is a cycle that disproportionately affects the poorest and most vulnerable populations. Access to electricity is the most obvious of class-based distributions of resources, and an already bad situation is only exacerbated by the bribes taken by bill collectors, who leave behind them angry men and women bemoaning the “rascals” that steal their money. These moments remind the viewer that all money in India is a certain shade of gray and that there is still much debate as to the identity of the real criminals in neoliberal India.

These sentiments are echoed in the words of P. Sainath, the hero of *Nero’s Guests* (2009), as he barks into the camera while driving past one of Mumbai’s sparkling malls, “Most of the electricity of the city is consumed by the malls and the multiplexes. [For] a twenty minute power cut in the main Mumbai, you can give two hours of power to all the troubled districts in Vidharba.” Sainath is a rural journalist, formerly of *The Hindu*, who, over the course of ten years, has documented the growing number of cases of farmers’

suicides all over India. The farmers' suicide epidemic has, in many ways, become synonymous with India's neoliberalization and concomitant agrarian crisis (Munster 2012), with over 200 thousand documented cases in the past 20 years. Directed by Deepa Bhatia, the film follows Sainath as he interviews the families of suicide victims, speaks at conferences around India, and sits at home, sifting through pages of notes, images, and audio recordings he has taken during his fieldwork.

Bhatia makes sure to highlight the painstaking rigor of Sainath's journalism, a vestige of a bygone time before the media met the blogosphere. Inner titles arise on screen as if we are viewing word documents, and close-ups of keyboards, computer screens, and notebooks illustrate the meticulous process of data collection, organization, and translation that goes into every one of Sainath's lectures and writings. The camera is never still, moving awkwardly as it tries to follow Sainath in his travels, jostled by the obstacles that one encounters when intruding on an unfolding reality. Yet the cameraman remains silent, but for one moment when Sainath ridicules him for being from a Europe that no longer grows any crops of its own but instead imports much of its agricultural product from India, creating an incredibly unbalanced market relationship. "But we grow potatoes . . ." begins the cameraman as Sainath shakes his head in frustration.

The film is narrated around Sainath's retelling of Tacitus's *Nero and the Burning of Rome*, in which Emperor Nero holds the greatest party ever seen, attended by "everybody who was anybody in Rome." The problem that Nero faced, like the people of Kanpur today, was that of lighting—a problem he solved by burning prisoners and criminals at the stake to illuminate the gardens in which the party was to take place. Sainath wonders aloud about Nero's guests, who enjoy their party as people shriek in anguish. Who stands by as these atrocities occur? How do those with money and power remain blissfully ignorant of these visceral (and extremely proximal) moments of suffering?

Images flash on Sainath's computer screen: a shot of a donation box set on a counter during one of Mumbai's many parties. Women with high-pitched voices, bright pink lipstick, and luxurious black dresses talk about their attempt at ending poverty by partying. One woman says, without a hint of irony, "We need to see the have-nots as key to our survival. We can't see them as different creatures from a different world. They are the fresh laundry we have everyday. They are the fresh cut flowers in our bowl. You know, they are the fact that I have nicely blow-dried hair once in a while. They are our manicures and pedicures." It's the contemporary instantiation of Nero's guests, those who see the poor as objectified nonhumans, useful only for their labor, but who consider themselves progressive for seeing these "others" at all. Another set of images flash across the screen, this time from the Lakme Fashion Week in Mumbai, an event covered by 512 accredited journalists. Sainath comments, "There is not a single newspaper or channel in this

country [India] that has a correspondent working full time on poverty." This is Sainath's direct critique of the media—a media that is the "fastest growing, politically free media in the world, but completely imprisoned by profit." Fashion sells, poverty does not: hence the current state of Indian media. In this instance, the digital is simply another tool for capital accumulation, a part of the military-industrial-media-entertainment complex that only exacerbates inequality by leaving little room for the circulation of stories that do not have a significant exchange value (Giroux 2002).

These images of Indian opulence are juxtaposed with those from Sainath's travels among farmers in Maharashtra. Each of these moments are heart-wrenching: wives holding (digital) photographs of their dead husbands, and children describing the last time they saw their father alive. We hear the daughter of one such farmer read her father's poems, including the poem he wrote just before his death. This farmer—very much an organic intellectual in the Gramscian sense—had written a series of poems about agricultural suffering, and these poems flash onto the screen to remind us that those who die are not dying because of some weakness or pathology but because the agrarian crisis that they face has left them without hope. The most devastating of these scenes happens by chance. As Sainath goes to talk to doctors about "national rural health," a farmer is rushed into the hospital, having just swallowed pesticides. He cannot stand, and he writhes in pain, clutching his stomach, while lying on a stretcher waiting for his stomach to be pumped. These stories, and the filming techniques that convey these stories, create a sense of absolute despair—a loss of control so great that all one can do is to die in protest, the body worth more in death (especially if captured on film) than it was during life.

It is this same sense of despair that those living on the island of Char fight against everyday in *CHAR . . . The No-Man's Island* (2012), directed by Sourav Sarangi. Rubel, a Bengali Muslim boy of 14 years, rows across the Ganges with bags of rice to smuggle from India to Bangladesh while he talks to Sarangi (in Bengali) about his life. "Char has no future but we have for sure . . . Not just hope. It will happen. Not now maybe, but someday ahead." This is the "horizon of possibility," to borrow Jocelyn Chua's (2014) framing, which (unlike in *Nero's Guests*) balances depictions of intense suffering with aspirations and dreams for the future.

In Char, as in Kanpur and rural India, the psychological affects of living in suffering are always entangled with the infrastructures of governance. The movie starts with text on black screen: "Dams are the new temples of modern India." This is a reference to the Farakka dam, built by the Indian government in 1975, which changed the course of the Ganges River and flooded a large portion of land at the Bangladesh–India border. Years later, the island of Char formed and was populated by the homeless who had been displaced by the earlier flooding. The island itself belongs to neither India nor Bangladesh and is patrolled by Indian border police, who try and stop smugglers from crossing

into Bangladesh to sell rice and, more pressingly, phensidyl, a cough syrup that contains trace amounts of alcohol, which is banned in Bangladesh. Rubel, his brother, and many other men and women who live on Char make the dangerous trek across the border at night, hiding contraband in their shirts, saris, and schoolbags as they row across the river. The film moves back and forth between the present story of Char and flashbacks to 2002, during Sarangi's earlier trip to the region, when river erosion first displaced the men and women of the area.

Sarangi's voice is always present, and he talks openly with the men and women of the community, asking questions, following them on their treks, and capturing their hardships as they unfold. Unlike Kakkar and Mustafa or Bhatta, Sarangi never hides himself (though his face is never seen), and the ethnographer's eye notices a relationship between Sarangi and those within this Char community that was not evident in either *Powerless* or *Nero's Guests*. The impact on Sarangi's camera technique is striking as he whips around with the residents of Char, less concerned about the camera's steadiness or aesthetically pleasing images and more concerned with foraging into the darkest places in the family's lives.

Sarangi's approach is also ethically confusing. He films women shooing him away as they sneak away to smuggle phensidyl (dyl), women shouting at border police after being held for over ten hours, and men lying quietly waiting for border guards who want to beat them. As he gets deeper into these stories, there are immediate questions about whether the camera's presence might actually get them into more trouble. Other times, Sarangi imposes his directorial will on those who are experiencing loss. He films a grandmother who stands and waits for her grandson, Sofi, throughout the night, though he never comes home. He continues to question her from behind, trying to pry into emotions that she does not want to divulge. "I'm just sitting and watching," she says as a concluding remark, clearly her mind concentrated somewhere far away from the camera. It is an uncomfortable scene and one that might be unnecessary: Does the audience need to see this moment to understand the gravity of the situation faced by families living on Char, or is it merely taking advantage of suffering toward another, less altruistic goal?

The heart of Sarangi's film is his relationship with Rubel and his family, who struggle to survive after his father's hernia keeps him from working. Instead, the father sits at home watching television or wandering out to find loans, though there is always an undertone of possible infidelity to these trips away. The family's struggles are only exacerbated when they are forced to marry off their daughter after she was caught talking alone with a boy in the community. The 50,000 rupee dowry demands are excessive, and the family's anxiety only increases each time they try to find a method to pay the dowry. Rubel himself is constantly torn between his hopes for the future, his longing to go to school and learn, and the needs of his family. In some of the most poignant

scenes of the film, Sarangi captures Rubel's arguments with his family when they refuse to give him his school fees, when he refuses to carry rice across the border because his neck aches from the weight of the bags on his head, and when he takes a moment to listen to Bollywood music while playing a game on his mobile phone. The last of these scenes reminds us that no one, not even those stranded on a "no-man's island," are truly outside of the digital world nor is there anyone who is not constructing a digital culture. It is a shot that harkens back to the scene from Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy Part 1: Pather Panchali* (1955) when Apu and his sister Durga stare at the train passing by as they stand in a field, a signifier of globalization's "wave two" in the same way that Ray's shot marks globalization's "wave one" (Kobrin 2008).

Rubel's hopefulness is juxtaposed to his festering feelings of guilt and shame at the work he is forced to do. He knows that smuggling goods can never be seen as "honorable," as it is marked by the constant surveillance of the border police, yet he tries to justify the actions of those in his community. "No work is sinful," Rubel says. "Smuggling dyl is not a sin when you cannot feed your family" and, earlier, "I can't afford a good way. People call me a bad guy." At this point in the film, Sarangi's probing questions prompt Rubel to stop talking entirely. Rubel himself will only smuggle rice because he knows that getting caught with dyl will bring his school "a bad name."

It is the same tension faced by others working in these informal economies and echoed in the words of Loha Singh at the end of *Powerless* (2014). After a night of intense drinking, Loha begins arguing with his uncle about the ethics of his work. His uncle insists that no matter what he says, "his work is shameful," and that no matter his justification, Loha will ultimately always be a thief. The uncle's dialogue, and the anxiety that it produces in Loha, brings into focus the socially structured ideas of worth and value that are hammered into the psyche of those who are forced to function in these informal economies. When one's work no longer fits into the neat confines of market logic and exchange value (and, in most cases, is systematically destroyed by market logics), when it is not protected by the formal apparatus of governance and policing, one's moral value also comes into question. Such is the psychological trauma faced by those like Loha Singh and Rubel as well as by those who take their own lives, rendered criminals in the act of suicide itself. If nothing else, these stories evoke the entanglements resulting from a moment in India when those who are supposedly "outside" of the formal politico-economic-technological apparatus are never really so, consciously negotiating their exclusion, both physically and emotionally, as part of their everyday existence.

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## Film Review

# An Oversimplification of Her Beauty

Terence Nance, dir. 84 min. New York: Media MVMT, 2012.

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Terence Nance’s feature film debut is significant and promising. Concerned with the project of black self-making, Nance recognizes the artistic possibilities involved in projecting blackness from a point other than the mainstream. *An Oversimplification of Her Beauty* is not a strictly narrative film. It is a series of glistening fragments. The film began as Nance’s 2010 student film, *How Would You Feel?*, an “educational film” examining “theories about how humans come to experience a singular emotion.” In *An Oversimplification*, Nance reworks material from this film, remounting scenes that he considered over about six years. Right away, he makes us aware of the process of fabrication, reconstitution, and technological simulation: after the film’s transcendent musical title sequence, Nance abruptly stops the action, pausing the image as if it were from a degraded videotape while the narrator explains the relationship between the previous short and the new feature. Nance repeatedly moves back and forth between the old film and the new creation, “to provide the context necessary to tell a complete story.” The first film is presented as nonfiction, though Nance deliberately blurs the lines between reality and invention with his copious recursions, obvious editing, and embellished, animated sequences.

In terms of plot, *How Would You Feel* focuses on a single incident. A woman for whom Nance has feelings (Namik Minter, essentially playing herself) cancels a date with him at the last minute. The didactic British narrator, who explains Nance’s struggle to make it home for this date, reveals Nance’s disappointment and annoyance and elicits audience sympathy by repeatedly asking viewers the title question. *An Oversimplification* riffs on the same situation but is a deeper analysis of the structure of Nance’s attraction to women and why he is unable to commit romantically.

Rather than giving us a series of situations, Nance puts several pivotal moments under microscopic examination, using editing in the way a biologist might use a scalpel. He prods these moments into second life, imagining them in different, sometimes conflicting ways and often with the use of animation. Through his use of direct address, he makes clear that the cinema (and the process of filmmaking) is a vehicle for obsessive return and itself an obstacle to romance and any humanizing project. Yet cinema still emerges as the flawed glass through which romance can ironically be most beautiful.

This film mixes a number of genres: romantic comedy, art film, autobiographical filmmaking, and documentary. But as a romantic comedy, the film’s gender politics become problematic. Nance is self-conscious that he presents “an oversimplification of her [i.e., Minter’s] beauty.” But does this excuse the fact that he is quite actually oversimplifying

her person? Nance's exquisite ode to Minter already seems suspect because it provides too limited a window into Minter's subjectivity. But when at the film's midpoint he uses the same techniques to describe his love for four other women, the film begins to feel not only like an oversimplification of Minter but also a betrayal. Listening to the educational voice-over, whose second-person narrator repeatedly asks the spectator to imagine his or her own feelings, we eventually come to wonder how Minter and the other women in the film might feel being blurred into beautiful but simple types. Nance's former girlfriend Qurescent, whose new lover is a woman, becomes a comically emasculating figure when, in a cartoon sequence, Nance renders her as an Amazonian nude of epic proportions who holds Nance in the palm of her hand and makes him "shrink." On the DVD are inscribed the words "Black women are God." But the voices of black women are always secondary and tightly filtered through Nance's own dominating vision and voices. If you don't care who these women actually are, then Nance's layered oversimplification may seem like stimulating art—a *Rashomon*-esque (Kurosawa 1950) approach to romance that centers on the artist's failures at love. But if you do care, you may wonder why he allows himself to float in fantasies about the women he loves rather than exploding these gendered myths.

Nance reveals a more genuinely empathetic approach to gender in his other work. His short documentary *No Ward* (2008), which subtly examines post-Katrina evacuees, is in many ways the opposite of *Oversimplification*'s boyish look across gender lines. *No Ward* is conversational, based on real dialogue between Nance and post-Katrina residents of Texas. Nance sutures together fragments of women's sage explanations of their lot and their extemporaneous and beautiful efforts to remake their lives. In spite of some minor audio effects and captivating shots of carnival, Nance's documentary is less dazzling in terms of animation or "art." But what is clear is Nance's ability to channel the worldview of his women interviewees, to listen to and project their voices through his cinema craft.

Seeing *No Ward* makes it seem that Nance was being deliberately provocative in making *An Oversimplification* from such a masculine viewpoint. The structuring of a *Rashomon* effect and its rich embeddedness makes it less driven by a single male voice, revealing instead Nance (both filmmaker and protagonist) as a series of fractured, changing selves. Nance's radical unreliability seems an autocritique of his crippling, indulgent self-consciousness. When read as a film about the construction of self and others—as about dissemblance as much as self-making—its sometimes-precious reveling in surfaces and artifice is productive. Whatever Nance's intent, the film is best read not as an indie hipster romance but, rather, as Nance's struggle for basic human connection amid the dazzling, technophilic artifice and architecture that surround and cramp us, abstracting (and simultaneously crystalizing moments of) our humanity. The film instructs us to listen to a series of verbal engagements. But it is the lapses and lags between Nance and Minter's words and the images—and, more broadly, between the sound and

the source—that hold a more stunning set of explanations than the often self-helpy conclusions Nance puts forward as moments of revelation.

Black independent film has always been a venue for African American politics. But recently, Sundance favorites *Fruitvale Station* (Coogler 2013) and *Middle of Nowhere* (DuVernay 2012) have announced commercial viability for films that illuminate how state policing circumscribes black lives. Those looking for such explicit politics in Nance's *Oversimplification* will be disappointed.

Nevertheless, Nance's project has its own subtle racial politics. The intense urban confinement of subway corridors, NYU dorms, and Brooklyn apartments gives way to animated visions or mellow musical sounds that re-route spectators into a wider ground—the navigable internal space of Nance's own imagination. But these same sequences are political in their disclosure of the perilousness of the black creative class, one that is tenuously holding on but still making its bed (quite literally) out of borrowed wood and from items found in the trash. This class, Nance demonstrates, is separated by little more than the sheen of hipster chic from becoming the very things it dreads: impoverished, other, and alone. This marginality, Nance's film perhaps inadvertently reveals, has a different meaning for African Americans than for white artists. For example, a racially specific insecurity lies in the moment when a random white girl on the bus touches Nance's hair while the film's narrator describes Nance as "busy finishing your education so that you can finish with finding who you are, so that you can finish with those years in life in which you have no clear answer to the question: What do you do?" Further, in Nance's explorations of his own limits—his vulnerability and emotional unavailability—the film draws attention to the tension between intimacy and masquerade, a topic that sorely needs discussion in the black community and in a genre other than melodrama. Nance's visualization of abjection, rejection, and unnerving exposure does challenge the stereotype of black masculinity. Nance's *An Oversimplification* is not a feminist work. Still, in a black mediascape loaded with images of black masculinity that generally treat displays of bravado and invulnerability as axiomatic, Nance's circumspect self-portrait casts quite a different shadow.

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