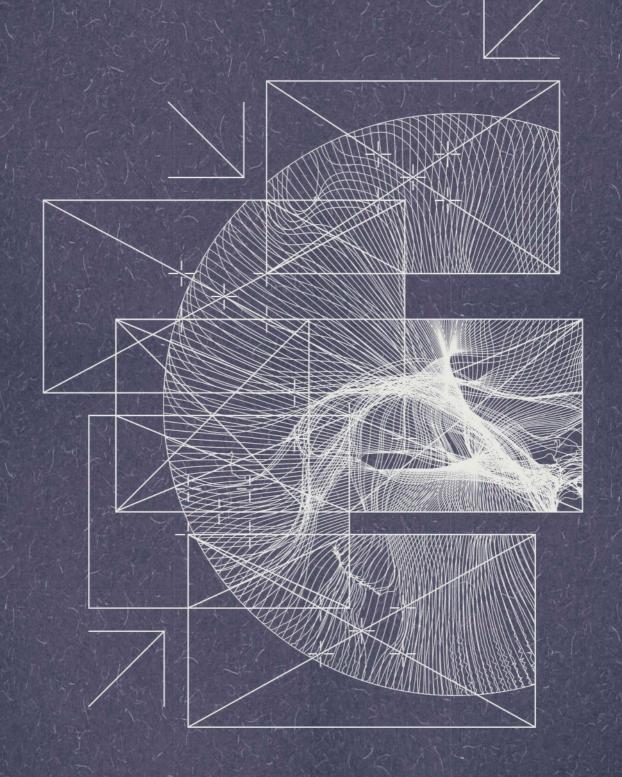
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SPACE ON AND OFF SCREEN:

THE DÉTOURNEMENT
OF DOCUMENTARY FILM INTO
VIDEO INSTALLATION

Patrícia Nogueira

ABSTRACT

This essay proposes the détournement of the documentary film Displacement (Nogueira 2021) into a video installation, as a process to subvert the sequential documentary account of reality, as well as to interrogate space and movement on and off screen. Instead of editing and presenting the images and sounds in a continuous flow, the setup of the installation fragments the narrative and replaces the sequential format by a projected, sculptural, four-channel experience, composed of a prologue and three acts: (1) the family's daily activities; (2) disruption of the quotidian routines; (3) the family's displacement. While the installation projects the prologue onto clear white translucent plastic (like the ones used to cover construction sites) at the entrance to the darkroom, the three acts are projected on the three walls surrounding the audience in the darkroom. The result is an intersection of images and sounds: a juxtaposition and intertextuality of the content to offer an immersive view into family life. It also raises the question of embodiment in video installations, especially the notions of spectatorship, authorship, reality, performance, and, most importantly, what the boundaries of the screen are in the expanded practice of documentary film.

#documentary film, #expanded documentary, #landscape cinema, #installations, #détournement

ONE: DÉTOURNEMENT

It is difficult to define documentary film. From Grierson (1971) to Nichols (2017) or Plantinga (2005), attempts at defining it have foregrounded the underlying difficulty in characterising and conceptualising the field, and commonly define it in terms of its opposition to fiction film. The reason for this is that the term drifts with the creative and fuzzy nature of documentary film. Much like the impermanence of the world we inhabit, documentary film is malleable and encompasses a wide range of aesthetics and approaches to reality that complicates the endeavour to specify the realm. Besides approaching reality through different aesthetics and modes (Nichols 2017), like other moving image formats, documentary film has been shaped by digital technology and has merged with other art forms (for example it now appears in museums and galleries), thereby creating vast scope for practical experimentation in the field and theoretical debate about what it is.

The expanded form of documentary not only raises theoretical questions due to the definition of "expanded," but also opens up space for new forms of documentary practice. Working between its account of reality and the audience's interaction, expanded documentary changes how documentary art is presented to its audience, commonly displaying several projections instead of a single channel, to foster "a recognition of the space outside the monitor" (Rush 2005, 132) and offer an opportunity to explore the notions of time and space. This perspective shifts the concept of documentary from the object to the experience. Following a phenomenological approach, Vivian Sobchack (1999) considers documentary not merely a cinematic object and "less a thing than an experience" (241), fostering in the spectator a specific mode of consciousness and identification with the world represented on screen. Closer to home movies, or film souvenirs, than to fiction films, documentary elicits our position as existential subjects in relation to the screen, as we identify the projected images with the quotidian experiences of the world we inhabit.

Besides the sculptural setup and the performative spectatorial mode, the displacement of documentary footage to an installation setting is a process of transmutability that raises questions and demands

- ¹A trailer of the original documentary is available at https://vimeo.com/720300431
- ² The French word dérive means "drifting," or "wandering" and relates to the practice of aimlessly walking to spontaneously and imaginatively reconstruct a space over a rationalised one. The concept was used by the Situationist group to propose an imagined geography against the urban environment shaped by capitalist needs.

further discussion. Drawing upon the concept of détournement (Debord and Wolman [1956] 2005), I will analyse how the documentary Displacement (Im.per.ma.nên.ci.a; Nogueira 2021), a twenty minute landscape film, becomes a four-channel installation. Displacement portrays a family that lives in the north of Portugal forced to move due to the construction of a dam. The documentary portrays the family going about their daily activities and, as the film unfolds, we realise that people gradually disappear to make room for the empty house, leaving behind only sounds and memories.

As originally conceived, the concept of *détournement* elaborated by the Situationist group implies a reconfiguration of a work, creating an antagonistic or antithetical variation of a previous piece, with a subversive political position questioning the status quo. Although the installation of *Displacement* does not produce a radical decontextualisation of the point-of-view of the documentary, the set-up of the exhibition subverts the original narrative by creating a new material and experiential account of reality with the same documentary footage. In fact, the installation "hijacks" the pre-existing images and sounds of the documentary, re-mixing them in a novel interpretation that highlights the underlying ideology of the original footage while foregrounding the natural and human costs involved in using natural resources to produce energy, such as the river and the wind.

Furthermore, this process of détournement fragments, deconstructs, and subverts the sequential documentary account of reality, challenging conventional narrative forms and inviting the spectator to mimic the subjects' movement on screen, by wandering between projected areas and moving her/his own body across the venue. From a phenomenological perspective (Husserl 2012; Merleau-Ponty 2013), while the documentary film invites contemplation of the portrayed world, the installation demands active audience participation for a full experience: this means walking around, getting closer or moving away and mimicking the bodies on screen, which emphasises the idea of the dérive. The gallery works as a "transitional space" (Ellsworth 2005) that bridges the otherwise separate realms of self and other. Hopefully, this active engagement with the world and the social characters portrayed will also encourage the audience to develop a critical position and a political conscience.

The matching displacement process, on and off screen, offers a sense of "realism" close to a pure cinematic experience, which Raymond Bellour (2013) defines as an experience of "cinema, alone." In a certain sense, the installation *Displacement* walks towards an attempt of the Bazinian myth of total cinema, moving closer to "a total and complete representation of reality [...], a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time" (Bazin [1946] 1967, 20–21). Furthermore, I argue, that it offers the audience a recreation of the lived experience.

TWO: DOCUMENTARY

The fog over the river disperses as the sun begins to break through the tree branches (fig. 1). At a distance, semi-hidden behind the dense mountain clouds, the wind turbines spin. As the first rays of light hit the undergrowth, a house appears placed between the river and the agricultural fields. The imagery encases a rural scene shrouded by fog which slowly lifts to partially clarify the previously concealed elements on screen. Despite the deceptive simplicity of the shots, the compositional elements of the fog line unveil a buried meaning that surpasses the surface of the landscape. Beneath or beyond the bucolic scenery, the landscape evokes a plane of the immanent sensory experience of being immersed in the natural world, surrounded by fields and mountains.

³ While landscape has always been the subject of representation in cinema (Harper and Rayner 2010), during the last decades and particularly since the beginning of the twentyfirst century, some directors and researchers have been focusing on a more contemplative aesthetics, with a minimalist and observational style, built upon long takes, which challenges the temporality of the cinematographic experience, also known as "slow cinema" (De Luca 2015).





FIGURE 1. Stills from the prologue of Displacement. Source: the author.

This prologue introduces the audience to the space and time of *Displacement* (Nogueira 2021), a twenty-minute documentary film, framed by Landscape Cinema aesthetics,³ that portrays a family living in northern Portugal who are forced to move due to the construction of a dam

that will soon submerge their home. After the prologue, which depicts the surrounding landscape, the camera moves closer to the house and begins to capture the unfolding of daily activities. Through static, long shots, the documentary portrays a family—a mother, a father, and two daughters—in their domestic space and farming the fields nearby

FIGURE 2. Stills from the first chapter of Displacement. Source: the author.







(fig. 2). The gestures, actions, and daily routine of the family sustain the unfolding of the narrative. Mundane activities, such as feeding the animals, weeding the fields, hand-washing clothes, and playing on the swing, become moving representations of reality, a mise en scène of bodies inhabiting the landscape and going about daily life.

The imagery manipulates notions of time and space by juxtaposing stillness and movement, playing with the filmic, subjective time, which contrasts with the real time gestures, rituals, and labours, and foregrounding the landscape as a set for exhibiting the mundane. Drawing upon Kenneth Helphand's thoughts (1986), and following the documentary tradition, *Displacement* portrays "landscape as subject," focusing on the human-environment relationship and foregrounding "the limitations the landscape places upon us, the human transformations of the landscape, and the cultures people have developed by interacting with the landscape" (2). As such, *Displacement* may be seen as a dynamic encounter between the family and the place they inhabit, as well as a portrait of the emotional bond humans develop with places by interacting with the landscape.

If, at first sight, the documentary seems to portray a nostalgic romantic vision of the rural countryside, we soon become aware that the film's subject is far from the picturesque. The sound of the radio news announces the construction of ten new dams, under the "Portuguese National Programme for Dams with High Hydropower Potential," forcing several families to move. Progressively, and while the family proceeds with their daily activities, moving within the house and in its surroundings, the camera begins to frame the subjects as fragments, and the imagery shows human body parts, glimpses behind doors, or reflections on different surfaces. As the sun goes down, a travelling sequence shot embodies the action of the family moving in twilight, leaving behind the house they had lived in for three generations (fig. 3).

FIGURE 3. Sequence shot of the family moving, Displacement. Source: the author.



The house becomes an empty space, inhabited only by the sounds of the family: we see the kitchen while listening to the family having dinner, the toy room while hearing the children play, the steam of the hot water in the bathroom mirror while listening to the children's bath time (fig. 4). From a synchronous, diegetic sound, the sound develops throughout the film into a disruptive device, denying its subordination to the image. This stance is close to that of Mary Ann Doane on voice-off (1980), who—elaborating around sound, space, and the spectator—posits that a spectator who overhears is the sound equivalent of the voyeur (43). Doane refers to the concept of "voice-off" to address the moments when a character's voice can be heard but their body can't be seen because is outside of the frame, off screen, eliciting in the spectator the desire to hear. Grounding this perspective in psychoanalysis, Doane compares the spectator to a child in the mother's womb and situates this pleasure in the divergence between the present experience and the satisfying memory of the first experiences of the voice. In fact, Doane states that "space, for the child, is defined initially in terms of the audible, not the visible" and, she pursues, "the voice has a greater command over space than the look" (44). Following Doane's

FIGURE 4. Stills from the third chapter of Displacement. Source: the author.





thoughts, the voice-off (or, in this case, the sound-off) challenges the limits of the frame while composing "the unity and the homogeneity of the depicted space" (38). Thus, separating sound or voices from the presence of bodies on screen contributes to the production of an uncanny effect, since the sound-off of the family's memories of living in the house while we watch the house in its empty state results in what Doane terms a "fantasmatic body" (34), which not only "deepens the diegesis" but is also "first and foremost in the service of the film's construction of space" (40). No longer inhabiting the house, the family's bodies become specular memories and the otherworldliness of the film remains oneiric and phantasmatic, and echoes in the space on screen.

THREE: INSTALLATION

There is a piece of white translucent plastic floating in front of me. It partially veils the dark room, where one can make out a projection, and partially allows moving images to be seen projected on its surface (fig. 5). On the plastic, wide angle shots show the morning mist over the river, thick clouds slowly hiding the wind turbines, the morning sunlight illuminating a house located in the fields. Landscapes, nature, objects, compositional lines, skylines... the contours are always concealed by the fogginess of the early morning dusk. The spatial and atmospheric images of the prologue are made even more ungraspable by the projection onto semi-opaque material, which enhances the evanescent properties of the landscape, diluting the screen and the images, and the distinction of reality and its representation. Furthermore, the gauzy, malleable, and wavy surface on which these images are projected emphasises the diffused imagery that cannot be fully grasped through sight, but can only be sensed through an ethereal experience, dragging the spectator to an oneiric, semi-imaginary diegesis. The images seem to escape our ability to see and seem to overflow the limits of the projected area, surpassing the plastic while the material flows.



FIGURE 5. The darkroom's entrance, with the prologue images projected on translucent plastic.
Installation plan for the 2020 Cerveira International Art Biennial (cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic). Source: the author.

As Oksana Chefranova (2021) notes, the projection on translucent surfaces explores the ephemeral properties of the images and challenges the design and technologies of the screen, not only on the physical and conceptual level, but also regarding its materiality, texture, and limits, and is an expression of the post-cinematic condition. The transparency of the screen enhances a sense of immediacy and allows the spectator to overcome the surface of the images, going beyond the projection and placing her/himself between reality and its representation. Instead of delineating a barrier or boundary, the translucent screen constitutes "a passage through and beyond projection, suspending the viewer between 'here' and 'there'" (Chefranova 2020, 191), an in-betweenness that mediates the space in the midst of the landscape and daily human life. The spectator is invited to walk through the translucent screen and enter the dark room, breaking the fourth wall and freely exploring the three projections, in a real-time viewing experience.

While the documentary presents a sequential, logical order that is almost chronological, the installation plays with the fragmentation and displacement of content. In fact, the installation's montage exceeds the single temporal line of the linear film and undermines the Aristotelian notion of narrativity and its logic of time as causality. Inside the gallery room, disrupting the linearity of the single-screen film, the documentary narrative is reconfigured into a sculpture installation, projecting the three acts on three separate screens on the walls around the audience (fig. 6). Instead of narrating a sequential account of reality, the installation fragments the daily life of the portrayed family and embraces the various dimensions of the audiovisual media to elicit a individually perceptible sensory experience, foregrounding the nuances and uncertainties of existential life (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). In the installation, the footage is arranged in the same three chapters, preceded by the prologue projected outside the dark room, but the sequence follows an inner, individualised sequence.

The installation transforms the temporality of the images in two ways. On the one hand, the duration of the shots is extended to engage the audience in a contemplative experience of the landscape and its characters, to explore an introspective position and deepen temporal and spatial consciousness; on the other hand, temporality is no longer defined by the director since control over duration has been transferred to the spectator, who decides how long to stay in front of one screen before moving on to the next one. This configuration emphasises experience-as-duration, and captures and preserves the audience's gaze, eliciting a "pensive spectator" who controls the narrative flow so it can "reflect on the cinema" (Mulvey 2006, 186). Taking a stand in the debate on exhibition cinema, Dominique Païni (2002) develops his reflection on the notion of "cinema museum" and pro-

poses a hybrid figure of the observer, a kind of mixture between the museum visitor and the movie theatre spectator, by introducing the notion of "temps exposé," a time which embodies a new existence of cinema, which nevertheless itself becomes what Royoux (2000) terms "cinéma d'exposition."



FIGURE 6. Installation plan for Displacement. Source: the author.

The gallery space is designed to elicit the audience to move around the room and explore the space and mediate interaction with the images projected on screen. No longer confined to a seated position in a movie theatre, in the gallery, the audience is itinerant, traversing the space that has been designed for precisely this purpose. The spectator becomes free from the armchair of the cinematographic spectacle in the "exhibition cinema" and makes an "unexpected return as the Baudelairian flaneur," trying to find postures for the contemplative attention of her/his gaze (Païni 2002, 65). Furthermore, the reconfiguration of the documentary into the installation presents an opportunity for the audience to walk through the experience of this family's life. In essence, the documentary provides a sense of realism, but it also actively engages the spectator to question the constructed nature of reality itself. In this sense, the installation described in this essay diverges from the traditional documentary by demanding a new spectator position, a spectator who performs an encounter with the sounds and images dispersed through the venue, as a body "being-towardthe-world" (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 160).

Merleau-Ponty (2013) considers the body's orientation toward the world to be essentially temporal and therefore the space of viewing also becomes an experience of time, both of the artwork's temporality and of the spectator's experience of duration, which changes according to how the viewer engages with work. Simultaneously, this approach promotes the displacement of bodies off screen, enabling the interaction of the audience with the bodies on screen. The spectator

engages in a kinaesthetic experience of a pre-conscious system of bodily movements and spatial awareness, acquiring what Merleau-Ponty terms a "body schema" (55). This strategy aims to reflect a matching experience on and off screen, and to engage the spectator in the lived reality, which cannot be removed from the account of the sensory (Merleau-Ponty 2013). The *détournement* of the documentary into a multiscreen documentary installation surrounds and immerses the spectator in the world represented, placing her/him in a dual position: (s)he becomes both a subject of imagination and an embodied subject.

FOUR: DENOUEMENT

The process of détournement of the documentary film Displacement into a video installation requires the consideration of several elements, such as narrative, temporality, fruition, and the spectator's position. By displacing the documentary footage to a video installation and presenting it on multiple screens, the spectator is invited to order the sequences at her/his will and limit or widen their attention and gaze between screens. The exhibition produces an experience which is inherently unstable and unrepeatable, since each spectator engages uniquely with the portrayed reality, emphasising the ephemeral nature of the installation in contrast to the permanence and durability of the traditional documentary narrative. The work expands notions of sculptural space in performance art and moves toward increased viewer participation. The spectator embraces various kinds of corporeal capacities and practices, such as sitting, moving, walking, watching, listening, and sensing, encompassing the ability of intertwining body with mind and merging the senses with reasoning. Between mobility and stillness, the audience becomes performative, interactive, immersed, moving beyond a spatial configuration imposed by the author, and freely exploring amidst screens, images, and sounds, across multiple channels of information and affect, formal and sensory. In this encounter, the installation blurs a clear opposition between object and subject, fostering a fluid circulation of affects.

While the installation denies the traditional chronological account of reality, it also submerges the audience beneath the surface of images, in a metaphysical and sensorial experience, evoking the perceptual reality in the audience's consciousness. Simultaneously, it provides an immersive experience fostered by the images and sounds to offer a new perceptual reality, an expanded experience of reality, encouraging the audience to perform the displacement of bodies off screen, while re-thinking and re-interpreting her/his own experience of the world. Merleau-Ponty (2013) argues that unlike knowing, sensing is a "living communication with the world that makes it present to us as the familiar place of our life" (53), affording

the perceived world with meanings and values that refer essentially to our bodies and lives.

From a time-based work, the documentary evolved to a spacesituated experience, where the depiction of the reality presents a more subjective vision that overcomes the referential account of the recorded indexical information. The gallery experience fosters an embodied spectatorship, in which interpretation develops into a physical response, in time and space, escaping the constraints of the linear passage of time. The spatial configuration of the exhibition induces the audience's bodily transformation, transposing the action depicted on screen to the gallery room and providing the impression of real, live, and physical situations. The immediacy of such display transforms the documentary into an all-encompassing experience determined by the physical presence of the audience on site, reshuffling the notions of time and space to elicit an ambiguous experience of the constructed reality. It opens space to the imagined, portraying an unrepresented perspective that escapes representation, and which cannot be portrayed through images and sounds but can only be sensed through the sensibleness of the lived reality.

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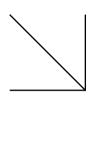
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