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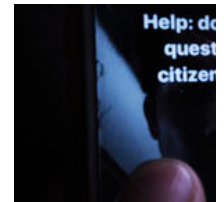
## Notebook Festival

# Art of the Real 2019

Highlights from the Film Society of Lincoln Center's annual festival for new kinds of documentaries.

**David Perrin** • 23 APR 2019

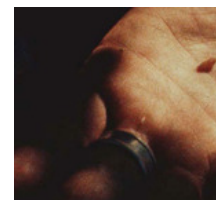
### Related Films



**NO DATA PLAN**  
Miko Revereza



**WHILE WE ARE HERE**  
Clarissa Camporeale  
Pretti



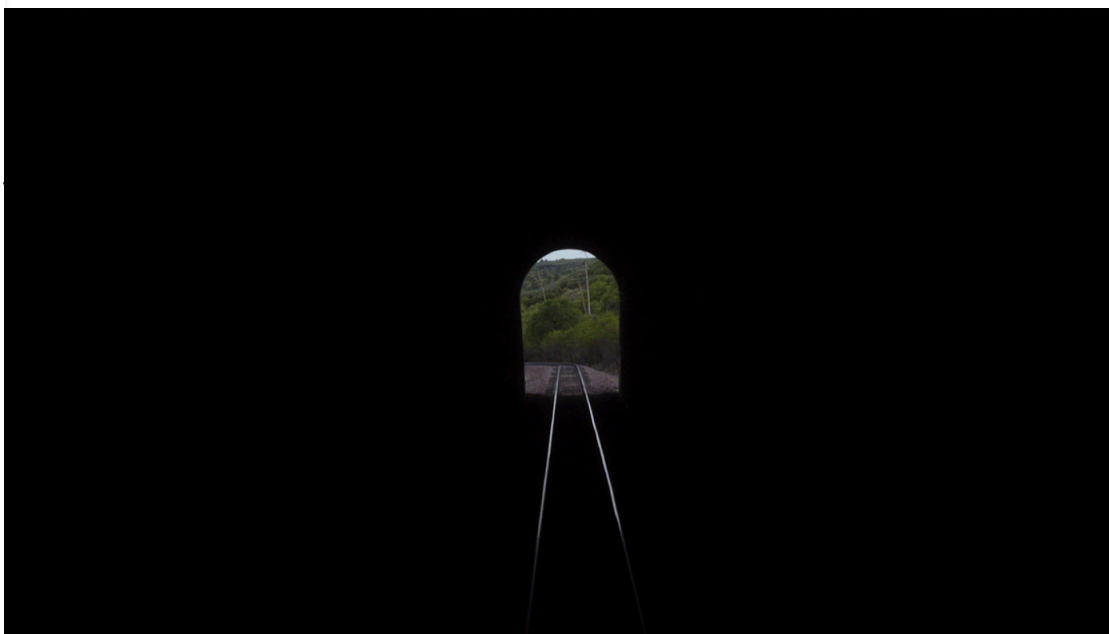
**ACCESSION**  
Armand Yervandyan  
Tufenkian, Tamara



**MOVEMENTS NEARBY MOUNTAIN**  
Sebastian Brann



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*No Data Plan*

Lincoln Center's Art of the Real festival has returned for its sixth edition, showcasing new works of independent cinema that expand and destabilize inherited definitions of documentary and fiction by fruitfully obscuring the line between those two seemingly opposite forms. Surveying the border where non-fiction seamlessly fades into fiction and vice versa, it is a festival that celebrates a kind of cinema that exists

**VAGABOND** Directed by **AGNÈS VARDA**

films that explore their own hybridity, while still engaging with content that is at once personal and very much tethered to the real world.



**SWARM SEAS**  
Sarah J. Christn

Take, for example, Filipino filmmaker Miko Revereza's travelogue ***No Data Plan***, a film modest in scale—Revereza essentially covers all production roles—yet one that is able to summon forth a network of associations and ideas that touch both on the present moment and reach into a relentless past. Filming his three-day journey across America from Los Angeles to New York aboard an Amtrak train, Revereza has crafted a delicate, near weightless piece of image-poetry not only on the peculiar in-betweenness of train travel, on being stuck in a state of constant departure while never arriving, but has also framed that experience—the paradoxical prolongation of stasis in motion—through the mindset of an undocumented immigrant. As the train progresses further into the country, Revereza begins to weave a whole web of narrative threads that uncannily merge with the iconic/banal American landscape that perennially slips past the window and the cold non-reflective surfaces of the train's interior: text detailing Revereza's mother's life as an undocumented worker in the States; her mysterious, potentially dangerous relationship with a man referred to as "the driver"; a woman recounting a dream of fires in the sky, the on-coming apocalypse; Revereza's own description of a nightmare he has of landing in Manila airport and being unable to leave. All coalesce into an oneiric, itinerant mediation (though not without its compounding climax) on exile, home, belonging and alienation in a country whose recent outright hostility towards migrants is no secret.

But this is also a road movie that is as much about the exhilaration of travel, and the inevitable boredom that is a part of a long journey than it is about the other topical themes it tackles. Much of the film is composed of long soothing shots out of the dust-speckled and scratched windows with views of towns and terrains sunk in the anonymous vastness of

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both inside and outside: quadrangles of sunlight drifting across the train interior while the landscape is curtained in the warm crepuscular shades of dawn and dusk, the lulling repetitive *tchuk-tuchuk-tchuk* of the train, and the overheard conversations of fellow passengers and strays who also opted for the long way round. Tapping into the hand-in-glove relationship between cinema and trains, Revereza has made a *motion picture* that reproduces the deferred here/not-here sensation of staring out of the window for a long time, when your thought and memory trails are swept up in the slipstream of the rails.

*No Data Plan's* formal beauty and attention to symmetrical composition, the way the shots in and out of the train have been intentionally framed rather than arbitrarily set up, as it seems so easy to do when shooting with just a handheld digital device, points to a creative mind behind the camera possessed with the same aesthetic rigor as, say, Chantal Akerman, with her film, *Les rendezvous d'Anna* (1979), also about a train hopping filmmaker living in a state of permanent wandering and exile. One moment in Revereza's gem in particular I cannot forget is a shot out of the back window of the train as it enters a narrow tunnel, the shot continuing to roll as the train gently glides away from the key-shaped tunnel entrance, whose size is eventually reduced to a minuscule pinpoint of vague haze, the image now interminably black until there is a sudden burst of light as the train exits the tunnel.



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*While We Are Here*

Traces of Akerman, especially her epistolary New York set film *News from Home* (1977), are also found in Clarissa Campolina and Luiz Pretti's miniature cross-continental epic ***While We Are Here***. Chronicling the relationship between Lamis, a young woman from Lebanon newly arrived in New York, and Wilson, a migrant worker from Brazil living in the city for ten years, the film freely roams through the city's crowded and deserted streets while alternating between a variety of different voiceovers that graft themselves onto the surface of the iconic metropolis like an additional skin: Lamis's letters to her uncle back home, Wilson's dairy entries and letters from his mother, an omnipotent third person narrator who guides us through their story that eventually take them on to Brazil and Berlin.

A hybrid between fictional diary film and city symphony that positions its personal tale of love and desire, migration and memory within the macro context of current socio-political issues, what makes it much more than that is its haptic relationship to spaces and places, the way it is able to transmit, for example, the texture of being alone in an unfamiliar city, or the sedating routine of a subway ride taken everyday year in, year out. ("When I first came, it was all discovery. Now I know only the time that passes," Wilson says.) Visually veering from still photographs of New York to hand-held street footage shot as if captured from the hip level, the film works as a mosaic-like sketch of the city, a place already so overburdened with representation that it is impossible to portray it without accessing or referencing a whole archive of already pre-existing sounds and images. And while Campolino and Pretti do include footage of an immediately recognizable New York—Times Square, the Chrysler Building, Midtown's skyline—so too do they show places strangely denuded and emptied of iconographic import moments simply

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apartment or wind-blown snow hurtling down a street. New York becomes a handful of topographical markers that Lamis and Wilson use to navigate through the city: the laundromat, the corner store, the place of work, the apartment, the subway. In fact, much of the film is dedicated to long train-scapes, the camera jerkily capturing the subway's progress across the East River, or positioned at the front window as it soars along the elevated line in Queens, or stealthily filming exhausted riders asleep in different positions, looking like the drained inhabitants of a subterranean world. All of these images, layered with Lamis and Wilson's voiceover of letters and diary notes, transform the city into a kind of memory arena that speak to their attempt to construct a new home—even as Wilson is compelled to return to Brazil, and Lamis moves on to Berlin—while still grappling with the inevitable sense of loss and dislocation.



*Accession*

Another work of epistolary cinema is Tamer Hassan and Armand Yervant Tufenkian's tactile and moving non-fiction ***Accession***. Shot in 16mm using a variety of film stocks, it is structured around a series of letters that were used between family and friends—all passionate seed collectors, gardeners, and farmers—to send and receive seeds to each other.

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back to 1806 (addressed to none other than President Jefferson with a request for seeds), and the more recent ones from just a couple of years back, the two filmmakers traveled across the flatlands of America tracking down the original addressees of the letters for them to read, and to film what they saw in those places. What emerges is a map of a vanishing rural country that seems solely populated by a secret community of dedicated practitioners of an arcane art that is on the verge of disappearing, with the letters like archeological artifacts unearthed by the filmmakers as evidence of a once popular pastime, but now destined to give up the ghost. Several of the readers, whose droll non-coached voices sound like capsules from another time, speak of the increasing difficulty of raising seeds, the scarcity of land, of having no one to pass their gardening practice onto—issues that surely point to wider labor and agricultural conflicts. Every element of the film is roped to the past, from the foregrounding of slow mail to the decidedly analogue, hand-processed look of the 16mm material with the images themselves unapologetically bearing marks of decay, the scar-like scratches and corrosive discolorations adding to the impression that we are uncovering an archaic mode of documentation that has long fallen into disuse. The film material's degenerating physicality goes hand in hand with the earthy imagery of things in decline, and it is as if the camera, through this anachronistic relationship towards its subject, is participating in this process of obsolescence.

The work is bathed in an incredibly warm and organic aura, making the cracked images appear almost touchable, like old time worn paintings gleaming with varnish: beautifully aged shots of prairie lands and clapboard houses under drained colorless skies, close-ups of hands webbed in elegant interplays of light and dark lovingly handling seed pods, a woman sitting at a sewing machine in a shadowed room as still and quiet as a Vermeer, or a wintry dirt country road bounded by bare

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careful and deliberate cultivation and digging of the earth—that is as old as we are, but have also contributed, by celebrating the unassuming diligence of those carrying on, their own elegiac visual love letter to the inventory.



*Movements of Nearby Mountain*

***Movements of Nearby Mountain*** by Sebastian Brameshuber is a calm, soothingly patient portrait of Cliff, a Nigerian mechanic working in a weathered warehouse located in the Austrian Alps at the foot of the Erzberg Mountain, which according to a local fable is said to contain iron ore that is to last forever. And so within this remote one-man enclave largely removed from the wider world—the only sounds of civilization that reach this non-place are the constant whoosh of traffic from a nearby freeway and the occasional discharge of paint guns from a paintball complex bordering the warehouse—we watch as Cliff manually disassembles old cars, removing their engines and other parts and preparing them for export to Nigeria. Existing on the edges of capitalism, Cliff is the unlikely node connecting this anonymous forgotten corner of Austria with global economic chains of commerce and exchange.

Instead of burdening the film with Cliff's backstory, or permitting himself

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means for us to feel a false, sententious identification with him, Bramehuber's attitude is to keep a respectful distance, to allow the camera to dutifully record in long peaceful shots Cliff's unhurried movements as he sweeps the floor of his garage, packages extracted engines in protective wrapping, or smokes a cigarette while resting on a row of car seats. It is in this gap between camera and subject (though the word "subject" here sounds rather impertinent) that Bramehuber makes us actually see Cliff, allows us to notice his serene rhythm and tempo, the nonchalant deliberateness of his movements and the small world that he inhabits, where time appears to expand and contract from moment to moment. Indeed, time in the film becomes its own hypnotic space, which like in an ancient epic where the passage of whole swathes of duration is radically condensed into a few words, so here too do the seasons change between shots and even within single camera movements. The most visually arresting sequence, in a film composed primarily out of static shots, is when the camera, positioned as a frontal medium close-up of Cliff chatting with his pal and compatriot Magnus as they make fun of the paintball players that they can see, but we can hear only hear, begins a 360 degree pan, and as the camera continues its wide swoop around the land both Magnus and the paintball complex suddenly disappear. How much time passed in that moment? Months, years? No matter. Cliff, like the mythical surrounding mountains, seems forever anchored there.

The transient nature of Cliff's surroundings is contrasted with the actual warehouse that he works in, a place bursting with material richness, a whole world of discarded objects and detritus that the camera captures soaked in a beautiful milky light that paradoxically infuses the location with both a physical heaviness and lightness. The shapeless piles of shattered rusted auto parts, the columns of used tires, the disarray of tools and the immobile silence of automobiles just sitting there for a

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and at times it is as if you can momentarily catch a whiff of petrol under your nostrils. Yet, there is also an unreal dimension about it; something about the fog hanging low over the surrounding forest; the silky layer of light that is perpetually draped around the area; or the endlessly long and calm driving sequences through parking lots, housing villages, freeways—no people, just cars and houses standing mute in the greying landscape.

Brameshuber has achieved that wonderfully simple thing where all you have to do is look and see and listen to what is happening on screen in order to get closer to another human being, where in the process of watching everything is revealed, and simultaneously kept mysterious.



*Swarm Season*

A certain level of obfuscation and strangeness is a key feature of Sarah Christman's debut **Swarm Season**, a film that effortlessly leaps between multiple tiers of existence, from the comparatively short lives of wild bees to the staggering enormity of a dormant volcano, with us humans positioned somewhere in the middle. Set in Hawaii in the environs around and on Mauna Kea, the island's highest peak, the film is a puzzle-like enigma that tantalizingly circles around its subjects: Alison and her 10

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indigenous activists protesting the construction of yet another telescope on the summit of the volcano, a site that the local Hawaiians deem to be sacred grounds; NASA scientists experimenting with the possibility of long-time space survival by training on a different area of the mountain that has been set up in conditions mimicking Mars. Meanwhile, the volcano itself appears to grow a life of its own, its surface breaking apart as it becomes alive with ominous rumblings and emissions of lava lights. Collapsing all of these strands by jumbling them together into a single narrative ecosystem, Christman's documentary resembles more a work of science fiction than anything else. The arid landscapes banked by ghostly strips of transparent clouds, the myriad telescopes that jut out of the surface like alien bodies, the weird presence of figures in hazmat suits poking around the side of the mountain, and, of course, the recurring imagery of bees, both in detailed close-ups and wide-shots, as they swarm through the air—all of these things look to us mysterious, incomprehensible. For a film that is so elemental—water, rain, dirt, plants and trees—nature has not looked and felt so undefined and unknowable.

Christman achieves this eerie feeling of defamiliarization of the Earth largely through the enhanced manipulation and juxtaposition of sounds over images, often layering, for example, the sound of buzzing bees and other effects over shots of spectacular landscapes, altering the terrain into an unreal or threatening presence. A complex soundscape of tones, rings, and clangs like peals of metal against metal, along with the use of a synthesizer make for an intensively operatic experience, almost like a re-structuring of the aural senses. The camera too will suddenly jump from the micro to the macro, lensing in incredibly up close shots the nimble bodies of bees as they slowly emerge out of their cells one moment to expansively breath-giving shots of bodies of water, forests, and star dotted skies in the next—the effect unsettling all sense of

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Despite such use of stylization that at times risks severing the content from the here and now, Christman's film is still very much earthbound, especially in the parts that deal with the local Hawaiians protest against the building of the telescope, which they believe to be tantamount to desecration. We see them as they camp out on the side of volcano in a kind of sit-down protest, and then later, through images that Manu watches on her phone, those same protestors being arrested as the camp is being torn down by police. It seems like they are fighting a losing battle, and they are not the only ones. Everything seems to be coming undone, nearing its end, from the survival probability of the bees to the volcano coming alive with troublesome activity. Nonetheless, in contrast to the scientists who are testing the possibility of continuing life on Mars or elsewhere, given the immense beauty and mystery of the planet that Christman shows in her film, I'd rather stay here.

*"Art of the Real" runs April 18–28, 2019 at the Film Society of Lincoln Center in New York.*

### Tags

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