Nottingham Contemporary

CAVES, DWELLINGS &VIBRATION

Sun 11 Dec
5 - 6:30pm

Bring breath to the death of rocks
Louis Henderson
in conversation with Nicole Yip
Live transcript

Transcript

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SPEAKERS
Nicole Yip, Louis Henderson

Nicole Yip 00:03
Hi, good afternoon, or rather good, good evening. I hope you've all been enjoying caves dwellings in vibration so far. My name is Nicole Yip. I'm the chief curator here at Nottingham contemporary. And I'm very excited to introduce this evenings screening of bring breath to the death of rocks from 2018. And even more excited to have filmmaker and writer Louis Henderson here with us to talk about the film. I suppose many of Louis's films can be described as documentary fictions that engage with subjects, such as post colonialism, history, politics, anthropology, really sort of rereading the past, as something intimately entangled with the presence. This film is no exception. So bring breath to the death of rocks as part of a long standing engagement with the political history of Haiti. It is narrated by the ghost of Toussaint L'Ouverture who was a former slave in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, who later went on to lead the Haitian Revolution in 1791, to create the first free black state in the Americas. The film moves from the French National Archives, where the handwritten memoirs of L'Ouverture are housed to the frozen landscapes of the Jura mountains in France, where L'Ouverture was imprisoned and where those memoirs were actually written. And then, of course, we descend to the caves below after that. I won't say too much

more about the film now, because we'll be talking about it afterwards. But please do hold on to any thoughts or questions that may come to mind. And because we will be opening out the conversation to the audience as well. The film is about half an hour. And I hope you enjoy it. Thank you so much. It's really, really great to have you here with us. And thank you so much for sharing this film with us. I was thinking earlier, it's actually so nice to have a chance to be in conversation, because I think, you know, the first time we spoke about the Haiti project was way back in 2015, at the BFI, when all of this was nothing more than an idea proposal. Yeah. So I'm really, really happy that we've now had an occasion to present one of the works that does emerge from this. And I wondered if, you know, as a start, you could just situate what we've just seen within the arc of the sort of bigger Haiti projects.

Louis Henderson 02:55
Yeah. Because it's a bit weird to just just just realise watching it. Now, it's a bit odd to show just this part. Because this is really the first act of a film in three acts, which is called Overtures. So that's why at the beginning, it said in those big Gothic script, Overtures, and then act one. And also because this act was shot in a very specific style. I made it four years ago. So watching it now, I find it a very weird relation between text and image, voice and image, which gets resolved in the second and third act of the film. So the kind of awkwardness of this section I find, comes clearer when you see the second and third acts. So to show just one act is really weird. It was kind of a weird move. But the film, the entire film is 132 minutes long. It's a feature film. And basically. So in 2013, I wrote a treatment for a film that originally was called going to be called, Let Us Die Rather than Fail to Keep this Vow. And that's a quote from CLR. James's Black Jacobins, which is a book about the history of the Haitian Revolution. And what I wanted to do was to make a film that would begin in the Jura, where Toussaint L'Ouverture was basically murdered by the by the French state. He was kind of starved to death and he froze in his cell. That was Napoleon's France after the revolution. And the film would begin there and then it would travel to Haiti, where we would find a group of young theatre actors rehearsing a play by James CLR, James wrote a play about Toussaint L'Ouverture, and then the film would kind of continue from there. And so I proposed this project, like Nicole said, at this kind of pitching thing BFI called on and for, which was in 2015. And that was how it was then. And then we managed to start making the film. And I went to Haiti, and I met a group of young actors. And we ended up creating this theatre and film collective called the living

and the dead ensemble. And what you hear at the beginning of this film, this French voice, or it's actually a Haitian voice, speaking French, reading out this information about Toussaint L'Ouverture, that's actually the beginning of the play that we did actually do. So we ended up not doing the play by CLR. James, we did a play by Edouard Glissant, called Monsieur Toussaint , which you see in this film we just watched. And we actually I went to Haiti in 2017, with my collaborator at that time, this guy called Olivier Marboeuf. And we worked with this group of eight young poets and actors. And we translated Monsieur Toussaint by Edouard Glissant, from French into Haitian creole. And we did a performance of that play as part of the Ghetto Biennale, which is an art biennial that takes place in Port au Prince, we did the performance of that play in the cemetery, the National Cemetery downtown Port-au-Prince, at dusk, in December 2017. And, and then we kind of elaborated this fiction, the semi fictional, improvised kind of ghost story, which we ended up kind of writing, adapting and translating together as a group. So when the film project was eventually finished in 2019, so imagine I wrote the first idea 2013, we finished it in 2019. By that point, we I had realised that the film had been authored collectively. So we decided to sign the film under the name of the theatre collective, which is the Living and the Dead ensemble. So that's how the film stands today. And we've been showing it in festivals and art museums and things like that. And just this section, we watch now, I feel that this was the only part that I offered you all on my own. So somehow, it's almost like it's kind of introductory piece that I've ripped off the whole work. And I've started showing it a bit more on its own. But now I start to reflect whether that's actually good idea. Maybe I should just commit people to watching 132 minutes.

Nicole Yip 07:32
Why not? Yeah, I love the name of the the group, the Living and the Dead ensemble. Yeah, it kind of brings to mind what Mark Fisher called the gothic flatline, is the sort of realm where it doesn't, there's no distinction between the living and the dead, the animate and the inanimate, and the kind of possibility of agency is not dependent on being alive. And even though the living and the dead ensemble don't necessarily feature in this part of the film, it feels very kind of irrelevant in what you're trying to do here.

Louis Henderson 08:09
Yeah, entirely. I mean, so that name, the Living and the Dead ensemble, really, it comes from Glissant as well. So in the play Monsieur Toussaint ,

there's a chapter called le vivant. And there's a chapter called le mort. So the living in the dead. And then and then this word ensemble, which obviously works for theatre, you have theatre ensembles, and you have music ensembles, but also ensemble in French just means together ensemble. So the Living and the Dead ensemble was just a way for us to kind of think about precisely that question of how, you know, if we're situating ourselves in the world of the living, we're constantly I mean, that world of the living is populated by the dead, perhaps more dead than living even. You know, there's a tendency to think that that's a specifically Haitian, sort of cultural trait, let's say coming from voodoo. But I would say as an English person, it's really part of the culture that I grew up with an in as well related to the romantic and gothic traditions and literature that tried to revive an interest in these kinds of things. And, you know, the 18th and 19th centuries as well, but for sure, in Haiti and Haitian voodoo culture, this is really that's the crux of, of their kind of worldview, which is, which is an animist worldview. And also, yeah, an animistic worldview within which, you know, the dead are very much populating the world of the living. And there's also the possibility for the living to enter into the realm of the dead, the world of the dead, through things like possession and trance. And also just like the cemetery where we did the first performance of the play Monsieur Toussaint, and also just to say, Monsieur Toussaint by Édouard Glissant. It's a play about Édouard Glissant that I'm sorry, Toussaint L'Ouverture as he's dying in his prison cell, he's on his deathbed. And he's dying. And he's visited by ghosts from Haitian history. So they've come all the way across the Atlantic, to his castle, prison. And they're kind of putting him on trial. And they're talking to him about his failures as a revolutionary leader. So the play itself is all about, as Glissant calls it, in his introduction to the play a particular like Caribbean understanding of how the present is haunted by ghosts from the past. And then we did the play in the cemetery in Port au Prince. So the actors are playing ghosts effectively in our play in our adaptation of Glissant, within the cemetery, and the audience that we're watching. If they weren't careful, they would trip over a bone or a skull, because the cemetery in Port au Prince is a somewhat kind of unruly cemetery. There's lots of bones and skulls kind of scattered in various parts of the place. It's also a sacred cemetery for the voodoo religion. And in voodoo and Haitian voodoo, that cemetery is considered both as the place where you go when you die, but also where you are reborn spiritually. So this thing of, I suppose the film, as well, and the work we do as a group, we're constantly trying to, you know, I suppose, even the idea of living dead. It's an interesting oxymoron. And I am fascinated

with oxymorons in the way that they can bring two apparently opposed terms together. It's a kind of dialectical way of thinking of language, and to bring living and dead together, we understand that, in fact, of course, they don't cancel each other out. They're actually sort of mutually kind of in agreement with each other, in fact, and the film here, I keep them pointing there, but it was here, tries to deal with that the whole way through. And especially with how this idea that literature, as stored in books or in archives is a sort of is a resource to the kind of access, you know, of the voices of those ghosts that might exist in the present.

Nicole Yip 12:21
And this sort of relationship that you that you build between the written word, and the landscape is something that's very distinct in the film. I mean, there's some beautiful sequences quite early on, where it almost feels like you're almost drawing this kind of equivalence between these reams of archival papers and the, and the sort of sediment layers of, of the landscape. There is, of course, a kind of lineage to this kind of methodology in the history of cinema. And I was curious to hear you say a little bit more around your thinking around this and perhaps also around any yeah, points of reference that guided your thinking.

Louis Henderson 13:06
Yeah, for sure. I mean, the main references obviously, the cinema of Danièle Huillet, and Jean-Marie Straub. And Jean-Marie has died actually recently, which is really sad. There are two French filmmakers who I appreciate enormously. And there's a book written by another French guy, I'm real. I'm a bit of a Francophile. There's a famous French guy called Gilles Deleuze, who wrote a book called Cinema 2: The Time-Image. And he writes his whole chapter, chapter nine, it's called the components of the image. And in there, Deleuze tries to kind of unpick and elaborate upon what he calls an archaeological image and the stratigraphic image. So he tries to think about certain types of cinema, which borrow their methodology and their aesthetics from archaeology, and from stratigraphy, and actually, Deleuze says, you know, the visual image in Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet cinema, is the rock. So the rock represents this, various different things in cinema as problem we, but specifically what he picks up on and this is what I've been fascinated in for many years, is this thing where you see in a cinema

of Straub and Huillet, and it's what I really tried to explore in this film, which is how, in cinema, you can see a shot of something, let's say, the landscape in the Jura, you hit you see a mountainside and then you can hear a sound that has, you know, in the first instance, no relationship to what we're looking at. So it's the sound is out of sync with the image that we're looking at, in the sense that it's non diegetic. So and in the cinema of Straub and Huillet it's often a voice, which is this non diegetic sound, and the voice even further in terms of its like, it's kind of like sort of this the, I don't know how you call it the sort of breaking of a kind of the like the way the voice brings the image even more out of sync and sound is that the voice speaks about something else that you're also not looking at. So you have this kind of disparity in the time space of the image between what you're looking at and what you're hearing. And but then you realise through watching the film, I don't know if it comes across in this film or not, perhaps it's not that important. But what the voice speaks of, is literally buried in that image. In the sense that what the what the voice is speaking about, or in this instance, you're looking at the landscape that those texts you're hearing were written in, partly because it's the landscape that imprisoned Toussaint L'Ouverture, where he wrote those letters that were hear. So yeah, anyway, so this is I mean, that's, that's something I borrowed from Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, and tried to push it into different ground, because this is the kind of subject matter I don't think they ever would have approached, because they're extremely focused on different things. Yeah, so it was like a way that I would be following on with that lineage, but also, as a decisive break away from their themes and topics as as such,

Nicole Yip 16:25
yeah, it may be a little bit different. But it also reminded me a little bit of some of the theories of landscape from Japanese cinema. And people like Masao Adachi, who, you know, saw this kind of like the ideologies and structures of power as being very much entrenched in the landscape. And I was thinking, as I was watching that, often, the landscape itself feels like it's almost a character. Yeah. And this is kind of supported by, again, some beautiful lines in the film about the snow being a white jailer. Yeah, and the grave being snow on the body. And I wondered whether you considered your treatment of landscape as

being kind of allegorical in a way?

Louis Henderson 17:19
yet no, entirely. I mean, so it's interesting, you bring up Masao Adachi, I can definitely say that Masao Adachi was not an influence on this film, particularly. But Masao Adachi and the whole landscape theory of cinema is something that has really influenced me. Like it wasn't a direct reference when I was making this work but it's something that's influenced many other films I've made. And it's something that's permanently present, I'd say within all the work I do. And on the first instance, what you said about so how the landscape is representative of these structures of social control and power. And actually, what happens in this film, I didn't really realise this until I'd finished making the edit, in fact, but you start to understand that the landscape is actually weaponized by the French state. Because if you see where the castle is built, it's right up on this thing, it's impossible to escape, and Toussaint's prison cell, his walls are, in fact, made straight from the stone of the rock of the mountain side. On one side, it's brick, which they built on the other side, it's just solid, thick mountain. So these are stuck inside that that very small space. And it's only when you descend into the depths of the of the of the castle, you can eventually find a way out, which obviously Toussaint never did because he died there. But in the film, I tried to dramatise the potential of his escape. But so the landscape is totally weaponized in the first part of the film, what it's shown as a landscape that has been weaponized by the French state, so you understand how the processes or the approaches that the French have had to landscape from a colonial position, both how they weaponize landscape, and how landscapers used to extract wealth and resources from doesn't only happen in Haiti, for example, it happens at home in France itself. And you kind of get that with this understanding that this Haitian revolutionary figure died in that landscape. And he'd never, he was never buried, they just threw his bones into an unmarked grave. So ever since then, there's been this question of the restitution of the remains of Toussaint L'Ouverture, and I think it was during Sarközy's reign and such that he offered some like bucketfuls of earth to the Haitians to say like, well, here's like the earth where Toussaint died. And for the Haitians. It's not good enough. It's like no, we need to know where the audience of this extremely important figure from history. So there's been a kind of

a strange discussion around that. And then also just the finish on that question. This idea of the landscape as a character is really important. In this instance, it's a character which is supposed to be somewhat sinister in the first part. And then as it melts, it then becomes something that aids because the landscape in the film melts, it goes, obviously, from ice and rock to water. And then it's supposed to be something that aids the kind of movement and transport of this person. And then later in the second and third act of the film, which was shot entirely in Haiti, the landscape is an extremely important and present character. Because the sites that we filmed in for the rest of the film, are all sites that were very important for the history of the Haitian Revolution. And if you're Haitian, or into Haitian history, you know, and when you watch the film, as a non Haitian or person, not necessarily interested in Haiti, you don't really know. You look at the landscape. And you might figure something happened. But there's nothing in the film that indicates things really happened. But when we screened the film in Haiti, or to Haitian audiences in Europe, it's always such a different exchange. And that's always quite exciting to, to witness. People really know that like, oh my god, it's they got Marie Jan, and oh, that's, you know, Pont Rouge. And this is the mystique or all these different places. So for us, yeah, landscape became one of the key characters that could speak about history, basically, and how history is, you know, haunting the present still.

Nicole Yip 21:49
I guess coming back to this question of returns and hauntings, I had a question that was, while I was rereading your contribution to The Contemporary Journal, which is our online publishing platform on the train up, and in that text, you you refer to Glissant's idea of the echo as a kind of spiral retelling. And, you know, of course, in that text, you're talking about that in relation to the histories of music and labour and liberation. But I think it also connects here. The spiral, the film opens with,

Louis Henderson 22:34
the film opens with a spiral, which is a spiral as a symbol for a specific understanding of history and time, also representative of an ammonite fossil as well, because that's just another fascination of mine. I'm fascinated with fossils, because, again, this gets to this as a Guyanese

writer who I'm doing my PhD on called Wilson Harris. And he writes about what he calls living fossils. Anyway, that's, that's for another day. But I like that this again, oxymoron the living fossil is very beautiful idea. But the spiral, so spiral retelling is an idea from Glissant. It's actually again, it's in his introduction to Poetics of Relation, which is his book from 1990s. And he says that poetics of relation is a is a reconstituted echo, or a spiral retelling of Caribbean discourse, which is a book he wrote, well, it's a collection of essays that was published in the 80s. And I found that really fascinating how a writer could take a new project and new work and say from the outset, this is just a reconstituted echo of a previous work. So this means that I'm looking back to that work, and I'm rethinking it in the present. And I'm bringing it into the present time, reconsidering it rewriting revisioning it with a purpose of turning it into something new. That's Glissant, what he calls a spiral retelling. So it means to begin at a certain point, you go back to the past, in order to then tell the future otherwise. And it's interesting, a spiral when we look at it on a two dimensional plane looks like this kind of infinite repetition that just goes on and on and on. But if you put it on, if you flip it on its axis into three dimensional plane, a spiral actually just moves forwards. So a spiral is quite intriguing. If you think about it as an evolution, it's a potentially infinite forms. It's an infinite form. It's what Wilson Harris calls infinite rehearsal. So Wilson Harris spent his life rewriting his previous novels, and he called them infinite rehearsals. And I think an infinite rehearsal is just a type of spiral retelling. I also think it's what Sylvia Winter calls the auto poetic overturn. I think in Caribbean literature and philosophy. This comes up again and again and again, with people taking their pre existing works and rewriting them And the way it relates to the film anyway, is that Glissant saw his play Monsieur Toussaint, as he called it a prophetic vision of the past. And he was writing about the Haitian Revolution as a way to try and project into the future, how he might think a Caribbean politics could become, you know, possible. If there was a way to go back to the past, and to rescue from the past, some elements, some political strategies that he felt had not been kind of explored fully. And it's the same thing that James does. CLR James writes, In the introduction to his book, Black Jacobins, he basically says the same thing about black Jacobins is like black Jacobins is, you know, I'm writing about the Haitian Revolution of 1791, to speak about the potential of decolonization on the African continent, in the 1930s. After

Ethiopia, basically. Yeah.

Nicole Yip 25:59
We're here to talk about caves. And maybe this is jumping around a bit, but maybe coming back to the idea of landscapes as characters. Can you maybe talk a little bit about how you were thinking about the role of the cave in this film?

Louis Henderson 26:17
Yes. So actually, yesterday, Kathryn Yusoff said this great thing, which is about how, if you she was describing about going looking into the underground, to try and understand how that has produced in terms of the extraction of wealth and resources, builds what is existing like overground, like above ground. So how you can have a city, let's say, and that city has been built off the back of, you know, the riches made from from mining, for example, and the underneath is this underground, and that the underground is for her anyway. And the work she's doing, is a space that's based on kind of racialized divisions of labour, especially in America, for example, racialized divisions of labour, through which, you know, yeah, like I said, resources were being extracted from the earth and from, from people from from human bodies. So in this instance, what I was keen to try and look into was how you have, I mean, I wasn't thinking about Kathryn Yusoff, because she just did that yesterday, to me, or to us. But this was at that time thinking about how you have this weaponized landscape above ground, and then what it would mean to go and look, you know, into the, into the kind of inverted landscape as such. And when you get down to those caves, so that those are literally the caves, just there, I mean, that the castle is in the Jura, in France, and the caves are in just next door in Switzerland, they called le grottes de Vallorbe, but it's literally the same, exactly the same landscape, but just sort of reversed somehow. And you understand underneath there, you know, you get to see quite clearly how that area that part of France, many, many, many years ago, had previously been an ocean had been this tropical ocean, that then essentially becomes fossilised. So what you have under the ground and above ground in that strata, and that stratigraphy that we're looking at in the film, it's a fossilised Jurassic ocean. So there's something that comes up in Glissant's book, he tries to present the castle in on that mountain side, as if it's a slave ship

floating in the sea. And that's why he says in the book, and you see in the beginning of the film, The my friend Jephthe in the archive, he's reading the book. And he says, or the voiceover says, Je traverserai la mer dans l'autre sens, I will cross the sea in the other direction. So it's this idea of the escape from that ship. And then the journey across the ocean, and he says dans l'autre sens, so back the other way, meaning back to Haiti, so this is the whole thing L'Ouverture will get back to Haiti. So for me, like what was that ocean? When you look at the landscape, there's evidently no ocean there's waterfalls and rivers. But those waterfalls and rivers seep underground, they create is actually much more water underground, the rivers a huge underground, and that's what you see one shot in the film, this extreme torrent of water deep in the cave. So my understanding was that it was only through the underground and the cave. With this understanding of it as a kind of inverted fossilised ocean, that L'Ouverture's ghost would eventually be able to seep out of the French landscape and make his way to Haiti. And at the end of the film, you see this waterfall that's that actually a sacred voodoo waterfall in Haiti called Saut-d'Eau. And actually I regret now I was going to add another shot on for the for tonight screening but I didn't I should have done the camera pulls out from the waterfall and you see a character standing in this tropical landscape. It's not the same, the same person. It's another person. It's a young Haitian actor called James Fleurissaint who then as the film progresses, you realise he's haunted by the ghost of Toussaint L'Ouverture. So, exactly. So the cave was always supposed to be offering this, it's like a portal. It's like a black hole. It's the space through which one sphere of existence gets destroyed, and another sphere of existence becomes possible. So I guess it's a liminal space between these different worlds. And in the film, in fact, France is supposed to be dead. France is the world of the dead. And he eventually becomes the world of the living.

Nicole Yip 31:04
And I guess all of these ideas are sort of amplified or or heightened by your choice of music. We are hearing Monteverdi?

Louis Henderson 31:18
It's Monteverdi and Purcell. Yeah, you hear Purcell at the beginning. It's it's a funeral march that Purcell wrote at the end of the Baroque

period, it's like 1695, I think. So it's like late Baroque. And it's chosen at the beginning to introduce this idea of a funeral, as if like France is, you know, being given a funeral, or the French National Archives French history as being funeralised. That's to say, I really dislike I dislike France. I lived there for so many years. And I still live there. But I just dislike it politically and philosophically. And that's why I make work about Haiti. Because I think Haiti poses the most interesting challenge to the French Enlightenment. Yeah, and the wine is good and the cheese, but um, so France is dead. And you have this funeral to announce France's death, this funeral music. And then later when we have this sort of this kind of supposed to be like erotic slightly camp scene in the cave, where Jephthe is like, massaging or masturbating the cave edges and. And then he enters this hole. It's all very, it's all loaded with sexual imagery, but also entering the hole, it's almost like he's entering into like, death and rebirth. And before you have that you have this piece of music from Monteverdi. And that's from his opera L'Orfeo, which is about the myth of Orpheus. And that particular fragment of music that you hear in the film, is the exact moment in the opera, where Orpheus is descending into the underworld to go look for Eurydice, I say with the French accent Orfeo and Eurydice. Anyways, Eurydice and Orfeo. And what you hear, he's at the entrance to the, to the, to the world, to the to the underworld, and he has to cross the river Styx. And apparently in the, in the Monteverdi version, because I think it's ever so slightly different. But in the Monteverdi version, you're hearing Orpheus tries to enter and he's not allowed. And the way that he manages to do it, because there's a guard at the entrance to Hades, I think, and the way that he manages to do it is he plays his lyre. And he plays the lyre so beautifully, that he managed to make rocks weep underground. And I found that so moving I was like wow, because I've always been fascinated with this idea of rocks speaking you know, we have in the film stratigraphy so strata can write so then we can read strata, so then started speaks to us, but then rocks crying. And then later you have the waterfall and it looks like this huge rock face just shedding tears. But you hear anyway Monteverdi Ofeo of plays his lyre. And apparently, it was so beautiful that, you know, I think the guard at the entrance to Hades falls asleep or goes into this stupor. And then Orpheus can kind of jump in. And what's amazing with that piece of music, is you hear it in the recording, they do this technique, and they do it on stage, where you have one lute player at the

front of the stage and one lute player at the back, and he plays a ring, and then the guy in the background plays the ring, and it's creates the effect of an echo. So they try to create how the cave resonance works, but on a stage And you hear that there you really hear Orpheus is lyre. As it's echoing within the cave

Nicole Yip 35:06
So they understood archeo acoustic back in the.

Louis Henderson 35:10
That's from 1607. Yeah. So that's it was ahead of its time. Wow. Yeah. So that's what you're hearing and the music is supposed to even if you don't speak Italian, even if you don't know or care about Monteverdi and opera, it doesn't matter, because that's actually what's happening while you're watching it. Yeah. So whether you understand it or not, it doesn't matter because it's happening. And it's supposed to seep into you as a viewer, and take you also into a sort of reverie. That then allows us to feel comfortable with the fact that the guy we're watching Jephthe is actually committing suicide. He actually kills himself. That's, that's the point of the film. He's enters the hole in the cave, and he never comes out again. He dies, and he kills himself to allow the ghost of L'Ouverture to go back to Haiti. It's heavy.

Nicole Yip 35:59
Amazing. I'm conscious of time. Yeah. Perhaps we should open it out to the audience now. I think there are some roving mics going around? Okay, people ask.

Ella Finer 36:30
Hello. That was, I don't know if this is working. Oh, yeah. That was absolutely brilliant. Thank you so much to watch a film to experience film, and then hear you both in conversation. And I, I just, I wanted to ask questions well, about sound. And then I realised, when you mentioned the cemetery, that what I think I'm thinking of is something about sound and heterotopias, and the kind of spaces that become kind of pluralized, and really complex ways through time, and space, and kind of confuse, I guess, different states of being different as atmospherics. And maybe a way into this was how we were talking before, Louis, and you told me

about the whale voice that was in the film. And I thought, it's, it's so extraordinary, the way sound helps describe space in other ways. So all of a sudden, we, we have this vision of the space. But the sound is also doing this kind of work of I guess what I'm going towards is like, the heterotopia, or the pluralization of space, the confusion of it. But also, it's very particularly chosen by you. So we moved, for example, through this kind of once underwater world, to the space of the opera to the space of the funeral march or the heraldic. And and I just wondered if, if you could speak to that a bit a bit more as this kind of confusion you call it, I think dialectic, or you are speaking to that a bit about the voice that also confuses space, about the way that sound brings a whole other kind of spatial dynamic to the vision.

Louis Henderson 38:15
Yeah, no, I think that's really interesting. And it's something I've dealt with in other works as well. I think the thing that I find particularly fascinating with what sound can do, especially when it's related to sound and cinema, sound, and cinema specifically, is, for me, really a totally special question in like, various different ways. In one instance, it's like you imagine you have an image, you have a frame, which is a sort of limited portioning off of space. And I know this from because like when I make my films, obviously, I do all the I, I do the editing and the sound, work myself, but I work with sound designers and I work with sound mixers. And one of the most exciting experiences I ever discovered as a young filmmaker, was when I did my first sound mix a 5.1 surround sound mix of a film, and you sit in the studio with your your film there. And you've always known the film as this flat space, basically, that perhaps, recedes into space. And then when you sit there with the mixer, and you realise that the sound is then what obviously fills the space here. So then you start to be like, Oh, wow, there's so many possibilities in terms of what I can do with the flatness and the limitations of the frame with sound. So sound for me then became the most exciting and interesting way that I can ever think about making films. So I shoot the films myself. Because I'm a photographer, that's where I really started making films was from images. But then it was from discovering sound that I realised that you can build this like this whole, like kind of arc of the narrative that like, supersedes the frame itself. So that's like the experience the narrative experience of a film,

within the space of its confinement as a projection, let's say. But the other way that I find it fascinating, and that's what I tried to do here is not just narrative that gets like added to it's a bit like how Godard I used to use music in his films, he would only ever use music, if it gave an extra or tripled or quadrupled, layering to the narrative. But what I'm interested in too, is how it can bring history into that space. So I wrote about this, in another article that I did called Evidence of Things Unseen, but Heard, which was an article I wrote for a book about riots. And I wrote about the film Handsworth Songs by the Black Audio Film Collective. And I'll give you quite a concrete example of what Black Audio Film Collective do. They show the funeral of a woman called Cynthia Jarrett, who was murdered by the police in Brixton, in the 1980s. No in Tottenham, sorry, in Tottenham, and they show her funeral, and they show the funeral hearses going down the road in London, and you hear this song, this Rastafarian song, with Nivingi drumming, and lyrics being sung in Amharic. And what I say in that text is that, like, the combining of those two very different histories, and geographies, gives, again, it's a kind of dialectics in that it gives you a much richer, and a more historicized. Also, in a different poetic kind of sense, as well, it brings in all this like, sorrow, and trauma and dread, from the history of the middle passage in relationship to why Jamaicans or why there is even Jamaica, and why there would even be Jamaicans in London. So, so in that instance, if we just had the shots of the hearse of Cynthia Jarrett, we would get the sense of trauma and dread and upset from her murder in 1985, in London, but with that addition of the sound from elsewhere, you know, from Jamaica, I mean, Cynthia Jarrett was Jamaican, right. And she's, that's the sense of it. And that sound can kind of bring you this completely different geography and history. But when it's brought into the space of that image, it kind of amplifies an echoes a space and a time from elsewhere. And it adds to the richness of the reading and the understanding of it. And this is the way that I've used music and sound in every single one of my films, I think, pretty much always. And, for me, that's one of the most exciting things. And the Deleuze says in his book, he's like, you know, it's only cinema that can do that. I mean, he's writing this in the 80s. There's obviously things have changed since then. But he's talking about theatre and cinema is like theatre, you can't do this. But cinema, you can really do it. You can have completely separate things, and you bring them together. And it creates quite a

unique understanding of the relations between those two things. So for me, that's Yeah. And that's related to stratigraphy. I think, for me, that's the stratigraphic. Like sound is what amplifies the possibility of understanding what a stratigraphic image can be, I don't believe you're gonna have a stratigraphic image without sound. You can't just film stratigraphy and say, stratigraphic a lot of artists, filmmakers do this. They just film a rock and they're like, that's geology. And you're like, right, but what, what is geology? And what are we doing with geology? Okay, we can show a rock. That's why I like voice and music, you know, it's Yeah. And sorry, we really didn't talk about caves. So if you came to caves, and you got shortchanged.

44:19
Hi, I just want to ask quickly, where I really, really, really liked all of it. I have lots of questions, but particularly the 3d animated water and What compelled you to use that? Because it was really beautiful, especially like the moment within the film.

Louis Henderson 44:38
That yeah, just that's a nice. That's a nice question. Yeah, the 3d animation at the end. Someone asked me the same question. I did a screening of this film the other day, and I could talk for hours, but I won't talk too much. Sorry. But I could talk so much about that a little. What is it 30 second chunk of CGI. That's also just my sort of fetish. CGI, I use CGI in a lot of films because it's just you can do a lot with it. It's very malleable. CGI is really split, like working with clay, you know, like the first part of the film is shot in 16 mil, which is really kind of like sculpting in marble. To be honest, it's such a fucking pain in the ass is really difficult. And it's like troublesome. But CGI is really just like smashing stuff together with clay. It's such a nice, medium to use. It's much less precious in that respect. And it's cheaper in some ways than film anyway. So the film is yeah, kind of goes from marble to like clay perhaps, to still thinking of geological metaphors. Well, that's not a metaphor, but. But basically what that section is supposed to be is the way through again, narrative, we can start to understand perhaps, how this ghost can travel from that frozen landscape in France, into the ocean, across to the country of Haiti, which is on the other side of the Atlantic. So it's somewhat representative of the of the middle

passage, the middle passage being the journey that ships took with enslaved people from the continent of Africa to the Americas. It's not representative of that exact journey, but it's representative of that movement across the because he says, I will cross the seas in the other way. So it's a question of crossing the Atlantic. But what you see is a CGI ocean. So that's a digital structure that's representing the shape of an ocean. It's not an actual ocean. And it's overlaid with a scan of 16 millimetre grain. That's where you get all this fuzziness. That's just like a piece of blue leader, like a strip of blue film that my cinematographer just scanned for me, because I said to her, I just need a blue grain. And she produced this blue grain, which I overlaid on top of just as a layer in the in the CGI programme in that structure. So what you're supposed to have, is also in very material sense, a kind of like amalgam of the tomb like media that I'm using to make that film, which is celluloid and digital, like imagery. So that that thing, that object that I made, it's a bit like a sculptural kind of object in the film. That's yeah, supposed to be this meeting point of these two media, because the film goes from 16 mil. And the rest of the film is in HD. So the CGI moment was supposed to be like the possibility of them melting into each other to create this kind of bastardised object, which sort of I don't know if that's the right word bastardised, but Frankenstein kind of, you know, mashing together of different things that then regurgitates this kind of space. And also at the same time, and I never thought about this that much at the beginning, but then it became clearer and clearer that it's, it looks like the mountains have become liquid. So the mountains look like they've become the ocean. And then that gets back to all these ideas that the landscape that we filmed in the Jura is quite literally, a pet, a petrified ocean. Petrified is a good word, because it's, it's a prison. And I'm petrified when I go to prisons. You know, I went to literally turn to stone in a prison. It's fucking awful. Prisons are the worst basis, I think we can imagine one of the worst spaces we can imagine. That's what I made this film. It's about a prison, and about the escape from prisons, and the abolishment of prisons in some respects, and how prisoners are deaf and outside of them there's life. And that landscape has become a prison for this character. And then through that CGI amalgam, it melts becomes liquid and then liquid. The ocean is a medium of transportation, we understand. And that's what happens. That's what's supposed to happen. And initially, I made it actually as a as an

installation, it was a 15 minute loop. You could go in and just watch this like, thing. The 15 minutes was a bit gratuitous to put in a feature film. So it became just that short fragment.

Nicole Yip 49:39
Yeah. I think we have time for one more question.

Louis Henderson 49:50
Anything on caves? I'll stop plugging that.

Emma McCormick-Goodhart 49:56
Just to pick up on the the CGI ocean In its sense of being a sort of epidermis or epidural felt so attached to the drumming and percussivity that that that anticipates image, I think. And question perception? I'm not sure but

Louis Henderson 50:18
No but that's extremely interesting. And I thought the same thing today watching it. So there's so many things to say about that. And I won't say too much. But one thing I forgot to mention, and this is good for the cave fans, in the feature film Overtures, which you will eventually watch one day I trust. The film ends in a cave. So the film begins in the cave, where Jephthe my poor friend kills himself by climbing into this boom, basically. And then the film ends. So that that's like, in the beginning, there's an individual, one guy, and he kills himself for the sake of the grand good, which is the revolution which is Haiti. And then the end of the film, you have eight young Haitians walking in a cave in Haiti. And that's a sacred voodoo cave called Grotte Marie-Jeanne, where the indigenous so called Taino's of the island hid from the Spanish colonisers. It's also where people that were running away from slavery hid, so the marron, maroons in English, would run away. And it's considered in the voodoo culture as one of the kind of birthplaces of, of the voodoo religion, because it's a meeting point between the maroon enslaved Africans and the indigenous from the island. So we filmed in Grotte Marie-Jeanne one of the moments you hear drumming again. But what you hear is the drumming of the cave. Because when we went to the Grotte Marie-Jeanne, the guide that took us down into the deepest level that we could possibly visit showed us. I was explaining

this earlier, these beautiful seams of limestone that looked like waves, and they have the most incredible tones, and they can be drummed. So he was telling us that, apparently, those caves, I mean, this is in Haitian folklore. So in Haitian music, musical traditions, you get lots of different rhythms with different names that have stemmed from, obviously African diasporic music traditions that came across, unfortunately, because of slavery. And the different rhythms communicate different messages. And those rhythms he claimed, would be drummed onto the very surfaces of the of the cave. And that was to be a form of communication to people in other parts. And when you feel that you like, the cave is a membrane, its skin. The surface of the interior of the cave is is like a skin, which can be drummed. And that's what I felt when I first ever visited the caves in Switzerland, the Grottes de Vallorbe, and you spoke about this humidity, this constant liquification of rock to water. And when you're inside deep inside a cave, you, I remember having this hallucination I was like, I'm in the belly of a fucking beast. I felt like I've been swallowed by the whale. You know, I was like, inside the mountain. And inside the mountain, you feel the blood and the mucus in the sweat. I was like, Jesus, this is like a living thing. Or it's not blood and sweat and mucus, it's other types of molecules and different things. And and then so then going to Haiti to that cave. And seeing that guy drum the surface I was like, God, again, it's skin. It's the if the membrane that you know, the keeps all of this stuff in. And yeah, and it was beautiful to experience. How the cave could be drummed, basically. And that was such an amazing thing to hear. In the film, it's only a very short passage you don't really doesn't really come across as magnificent as it was in real life. But I guess that's the one of the downfalls of cinema. But yeah, anyways, and then so the blue thing Yeah, the blue CGI thing. You I think you're quite right to say it kind of looks like that thing. And just one way to finish quickly is like also this idea of the skin and the membrane is quite beautiful. I mean, this goes off on a complete different tangent. But there's like in a, I don't know if anyone's a fan of this writer, Nathaniel Mackey, who's a great writer, he wrote a book which I'm really big fan of the Bedouin Hornbook and in that book, he talks about the drumming of goat skins. And how you would take a goat you sacrifice the goat you'd stretch the goat skin over a drum and you beat the drum. And every time the drum is beaten That ghost that that goat sorry is animated into being like, through the ritual and through the drumming. The skin of that

goat holds within itself, something of the life of the goat before it was killed. And that's what we felt like when we heard the drumming of that cave. It was hallucinatory in the sense that you then suddenly realise how inhabited that cave is, with all the ghosts of all the people that pass through and died there. And that's what we have at the end of the film. So the, the what you haven't seen, but you will see, the the end of the film is so populated with death, you know, and it's only possible through the cave. It's that it's that place of death.

Nicole Yip 55:54
Amazing. Well, if that's not enough for incentive to watch the full film then I don't know what will be.

Louis Henderson 56:02
If you want to watch it, you pay me a fiver and I'll give you a link. Now I'm joking. Actually, I can just share a link with people if they want to see the whole film. For sure. I didn't know how but we'll figure out one day. Thanks for

Nicole Yip 56:19
Thank you so much for such a generous conversation. Thank you

Colophon
Curator: Canan Batur
Assisted by: Philippa Douglas
Technician: Jim Brouwer