

SANGRE DE CRISTO

by

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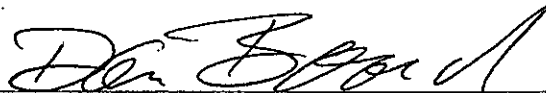
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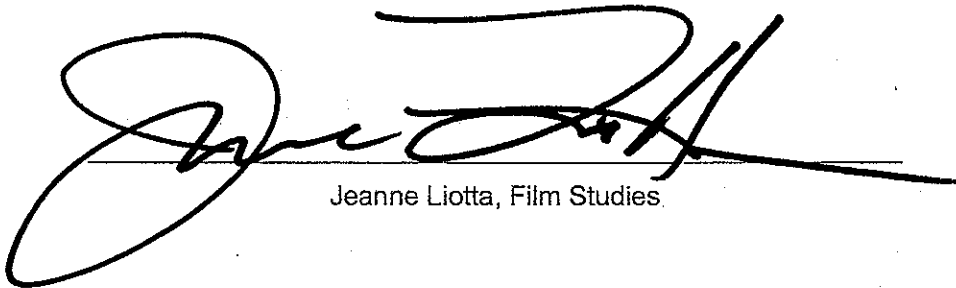
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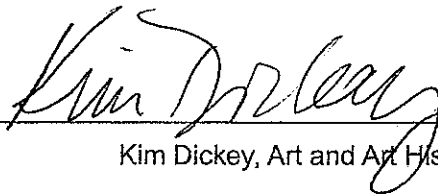
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Sangre de Cristo

Thesis directed by Professor Dan Boord

ABSTRACT

Through the use of hybrid forms of documentary-based art practice, *Sangre de Cristo* draws on diverse stylistic resources in order to develop an investigation into oppositional histories of a particular landscape, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, in a way that mirrors the complexity and character of the place as well as its inhabitants, past and present.

Utilizing a vignette structure grounded by repeated returns to the mountain landscape, the film *Sangre de Cristo* includes multiple tellings of the story of Cuerno Verde, a Comanche chief in the 1700s, and the continued presence his story has in the landscape; a fictional recreation of the meeting of the murderous Espinosa Brothers with the Virgin Mary in the 1800s; an interview with anarchist activist Ben Morea recounting the time he and his wife spent living on horseback in the Sangre de Cristos in the 1970s; an observation of the legacy of counterculture architecture in the landscape; and fictional text excerpted from Rudolph Wurlitzer's novel *The Drop Edge of Yonder*. Throughout the film, shifting modes of documentary style and small acts of reflexivity reference the process of creating historical representations on film in an effort to establish a critical relationship between viewer and film that relates to the critical relationship between the histories presented and dominant cultural discourse.

The photo portion of *Sangre de Cristo* re-presents the film in two dimensional form and points toward the reality of photography as a time-based medium, complicating critical notions of the relationship between photography and film.

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
<i>Sangre de Cristo</i> Film.....	2
<i>Sangre de Cristo Stills</i>	12
Form.....	15
Context.....	17
Conclusion.....	20
Bibliography.....	22

SANGRE DE CRISTO

Introduction

In my thesis work, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of Southern Colorado and Northern New Mexico are examined as a site where embedded layers of oppositional history converge and are revealed through traces of the past in the present landscape.

In the video, multiple strategies of representation, including re-creation of historical events, interview narration, meditative observations of landscape and fictional text, are used to present historical vignettes rooted in a sense of place. These include the 18th century conflict between the Comanche chief Cuerno Verde and the Spanish Governor of New Mexico, Juan Bautista de Anza, seen through interpretive markers and place names as well as a play on horseback, *Los Comanches*, performed each year in Alcalde, New Mexico; the Espinosa brothers, José and Felipe, who claimed that the Virgin Mary inspired them to murder Anglo settlers in the wake of the Mexican-American war; an interview with anarchist activist Ben Morea, who moved with his wife to the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to live a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle on horseback in the 1970s; and documentation of counterculture architecture in the contemporary landscape that serves as material evidence of the new ways of life envisioned by people drawn to the region. Woven throughout are words drawn from Rudolph Wurlitzer's 2008 novel, *The Drop Edge of Yonder*, which depicts the exploits of a mountain man from the Sangres in the waning days of trapping on the frontier.

In the gallery presentation, the film is accompanied by 12 still images that serve as a portrait of the film itself, with each photo documenting the projection of a portion of the original 16mm film used to create the video.

Sangre de Cristo Film

The film begins with a panning shot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. This opening contextualizes the rest of the film within the mountain landscape. The film repeatedly returns to this landscape between vignettes, and develops the mountains as a constant presence. The text from *The Drop Edge of Yonder* that follows serves as an introduction to a character, Zebulon, and his relationship to the mountains. These brief textual excerpts serve as a minimal fictional throughline that recurs between sections of the film, forming a mini-narrative space amongst the historically-based vignettes.

The film returns to shots of the landscape, after which a narrator appears on screen to contextualize the mountain images. Here, from within a rough-hewn cabin, an actor dressed in clothing that evokes the past but is ultimately temporally ambiguous begins to explain the relationship between a place name, Greenhorn Mountain, and the historical narrative that the name refers to. As the actor, performing the position of an expert such as the ones who explain things to the audience in traditional “talking-head” documentaries, is about to continue the story of Cuerno Verde, there is an abrupt cut to a sign for the Cuerno Verde Rest Area. The storytelling shifts from the performative enactment of documentary direct address to the historical markers contained by a highway rest stop.

This area is shown to have the bland architectural features of a contemporary highway stop-over, yet it also serves as a vehicle for disseminating information about the history of the landscape. Because of the weight of historical events in the area, about 25 miles south of Pueblo, Colorado in the Greenhorn Valley, the construction of the rest stop and the images and text of its interpretive markers was a site of contention between the developer and historians who were consulted in order to balance a desire for historical accuracy with the

needs of travelers stopping briefly to use the facilities.¹ In the film, the malleability of histories via interpretive markers and place names is alluded to as the text of the Cuerno Verde Rest Area marker, on screen long enough to read, is referenced several shots later by another marker in which the Comanche Chief Cuerno Verde is referred to as a “cruel scourge” triumphantly defeated by Juan Bautista de Anza, highly emphatic language that is absent from the attempts at neutrality embodied by the rest stop interpretation. This juxtaposition points toward the constant negotiation of public memory in the landscape, traces of which are also visible through a shot of Cuerna Verde Street and, later, an abandoned drive-in that appropriates a caricature of a Comanche as its logo. While in a film like John Gianvito's excellent 2007 work *Profit Motive and the Whispering Wind*, looking at historical markers and gravestone inscriptions serves as both an elegy to an under-remembered political past and a connection between past and present, in my film these markers serve as a reminder of the multiplicity of historical interpretations as well as the mundane traces of “heroic” events in the contemporary landscape.

After the story of Cuerno Verde is “told” on-screen via historical markers, it is told again through the historical recreation of a play, “Los Comanches.” This play, most likely written at the end of the 18th century, has been performed on horseback and in the original Spanish by community members in Alcalde, New Mexico each year after Christmas alongside Matachines dances since at least the 1950s, in a revival of performances that took place throughout Northern New Mexico starting in the 19th century². Though it is influenced by the *moros y cristianos* tradition of performances in Spain and later the new world that celebrated the conversion of Muslims to Christianity by their Spanish conquerors, “Los Comanches” is

1 Douglas Seefeldt, “Constructing Comanche Pasts: Public Memory and the Cuerno Verde Rest Area Colorado City, Colorado,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 81, no 1 (2005).

2 Sarah Taylor and Sarah J. Townsend, *Stages of Conflict: A Critical Anthology of Latin American Theater and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 93.

ambiguous in its position on the side of either the Comanches or Spanish. In the play, the Spanish denounce the Comanches as savages, but are denounced in turn for their arrogance and greed.³ This ambiguous positioning is accentuated in the film through a lack of translation.

In my editing process, I chose to edit the sound based on tonal qualities and a notion of who is speaking in terms of conquistadors or Comanches, but with only an untranslated version of the play as a guide and a poor command of Spanish, the untranslated, unsubtitled audio does not give a condensed overview of the whole play but rather an impressionistic excerpt. What is seen is the act of working through the conflict of claims to the land, of conquerers and conquered, and the cross-cultural negotiation of history through repeated reenactment. After the battle scene in which Cuerno Verde is killed, the actor portraying Cuerno Verde immediately comes back to life to receive the appreciation of the audience. In a way, this presents another historical alternative to his death as recorded in the previously seen historical markers. The act of performance and historical recreation for the camera is emphasized in the film through shots of audience members approaching and taking pictures after the play's conclusion.

This first section sets up a precedent for the rest of the film in the way it cycles through disparate methods of documentary representation. The next section continues in the mode of historical reenactment, as actors portray a small part of the Espinosa Gang story. The Espinosas were brothers who hid out in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the wake of the Mexican-American war and murdered Anglo settlers who they felt were illegally encroaching on their land. In the film, a recreation is presented of José Espinosa's claim that the gang, composed of brothers and cousins, was inspired to kill by a visit from the Virgin

³ Ibid., 95.

Mary. I chose only a small slice of the larger potential story, one that touches on the larger themes of resistance that I feel unify my film but which allows for open-ended speculation as to the ultimate outcome of the Espinosas.

In an interview, the filmmaker Jill Godmilow pointed to the problem with documentaries, such as those produced by Ken Burns, that replicate a sense of satisfactory closure in emulation of narrative films, attending to the demands of the box-office rather than providing a complex view of history:

To survive, to take public space and attention, it (documentary) has to borrow all kinds of structural and strategic devices from fiction in order to achieve what I would call "satisfying form," that is, to send the audience out of the theater (and/or off to bed) feeling complete, whole, and untroubled. One of those borrowed devices is narrative- which entails sentiment and closure.⁴

Godmilow argues that this sentiment produces the idea in the audience that they have now learned all they need to know about a given history, preventing a more active and critical engagement with the subject matter. In this section of my film, I unapologetically adopt narrative strategies such as a script and actors, but the overall effect resists closure.

I present the apparition of the Virgin Mary in a way that seems to take José Espinosa's claim of visitation at face value. I use a handheld camera and mirrors to reflect the sun directly into the camera lens as a way to reproduce a subjective experience of divinity. The costume design is based on the purported historical evidence of Our Lady of Guadalupe, who according to Catholic tradition left an imprint of her image in the mantle of Juan Diego after she appeared to him near Mexico City in 1531. The dialog is based on messages delivered by the Virgin Mary, according to believers, to the congregation at Medjugore, Bosnia-Herzegovina, where she has been appearing regularly since 1981. Through this language,

⁴ Ann-Louise Shapiro, ed, *Producing the Past: Making Histories Inside and Outside the Academy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University, 1997), 84 .

the Virgin Mary references her displeasure at Anglo settlement in the Sangres post Mexican-American war, and directs José Espinosa to take revenge. Because I had “evidence” about the appearance of the Virgin Mary in her incarnation as Our Lady of Guadalupe, but not of what she might sound like, I left her words in Spanish text, subtitled in English, so the viewer could decide on the sound of her voice, hearing it inside his or her head in the process of reading. While the visitation is, to an extent, “played straight,” the performed nature of this recreation of a visitation is clearly visible on-screen through hands that hold up the mirrors creating the heavenly light, as well as in the grimace of the actor portraying the Virgin as she is forced to look toward the sun. This subtle but persistent acknowledgment of the process of creating a historical recreation in the present is echoed in the costume design of the Espinosa brothers. Their clothing references not so much a perfectly period-accurate outfit circa the 1850s, but rather a more generic “old west” look gleaned from the history of the western film genre. Additionally, one of the actors continues to wear his own contemporary shoes. Although not as prominent as temporally dislocative strategies such as Peter Watkins' anachronistic use of “television reporters” in his historical documentary about the Paris Commune,⁵ these small inclusions nevertheless reference the process of historical recreation as recreation of the past occurring in the present moment of the film's production.

In the next section, actors on horseback are not meant to enact a recreation but rather to serve as a visual counterpoint to the interview with Ben Morea, a militant anarchist activist who left New York City for the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in order to pursue a more spiritual aspect of the warrior mentality through immersion in the natural world alongside his wife. Morea, who was involved with the groups Black Mask and Up Against the Wall Motherfucker! in the Lower East Side of New York City in the 1960s, is credited in anarchist and activist

⁵ *La Commune*, directed by Peter Watkins, 2000.

communities with coining the term “affinity group,” which he defined as a street gang with analysis. As I researched communes in the region for this project, I asked the people I encountered if they knew who he was. Although no one was familiar with a “Ben Morea,” the description of a Lower East Side activist who lived on horseback in the 1970s was enough to lead me to Morea under his current name. He was gracious enough to allow an audio-only interview as he had recently re-emerged to write and speak about anarchist politics under his former name. For me, his story is emblematic of the draw that the Sangres have for people who live outside of the mainstream of politics and culture. Like the Espinosas or Cuerno Verde, Morea's acts of resistance are both tied closely to a deep relationship with nature and the land, while his references to militance and guns place him on the fringes of even the 1960s counterculture, which was predominantly non-violent.

Here, I use the documentary strategy of voiceover narration coupled with images that stand in for archival material that could, conceivably, exist. The (non)recreation serves as a visual imagining of the horseback lifestyle that Morea describes, and locates his story of resistance to cultural and political norms firmly within the mountain landscape. Again, the process of creating reenactment is referenced briefly in a shot where the actor standing in for Morea begins to walk with his rifle into the woods. The shot is interrupted by my voice saying “nevermind,” at which point the shot begins again and is then allowed to play out to completion, the disappearance of the actor into the wilderness.

In the final section, the documentary strategy returns to the look of the camera onto the landscape, accompanied by sound recorded in the spaces depicted. The previous sections explored stories of individuals in the landscape of the Sangre de Cristos; the last section observes the legacy of counterculture architecture created by inhabitants of the region.

In the introduction to her book *California Vieja*, historian Phoebe Kropp asks “Can we

read the history of a place in its buildings?"⁶ In this section of my film, I hope to reveal something about the people drawn to living in the Sangres since the 1960s through attention to the dwellings that they built for themselves. In a way that is somewhat similar to the teasing out of utopian futurist fantasies of previous decades from the remaining buildings and sites of past World's Fairs in Michael Robinson's 2007 film *Victory Over the Sun*, by looking and listening closely to buildings and landscape, I aim to situate the people who created and interact with the architecture and place I explore within the context of the spirit of resistance and independence developed elsewhere in the film, without showing the people themselves.

In his interview, Ben Morea mentions communes and the general desire post-1960s to return to living closer to the land; the film then observes the material evidence of the construction of lifestyles that provide an alternative to mainstream culture. Folklorist Henry Glassie has pointed out that "buildings like poems and rituals realize culture."⁷

As culture, architecture is conceptual, a matter of shaping memory into plans, plans into things that can be sensed by other people. The mode of its thinking connects architecture to all culture. The mode of its realization distinguishes architecture radically from other communication. To be architecture, an idea must be realized in materials. Materialization raises complexities in architectural communication not met in verbal communication. Materials limit concepts. Just as every building records intentions, so does it record situation, the resources in the scene beyond the mind that curtail intentions, making all buildings compromises between will and circumstance.⁸

These shots depict dome homes, communal adobe dwellings, biomorphic forms created from recycled materials, and gardens that, again, reference the idea of going "back-to-the-land;" these dwellings serve as materializations that realize a counter-culture drawn to the mountain landscape. The filming took place at Libre, near Gardner, Colorado, a community built by people involved with Drop City in Trinidad, Colorado, the first hippie commune; New Buffalo, a

6 Phoebe Kropp, *California Vieja* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2006), 1.

7 Glassie, Henry, "Vernacular Architecture and Society," in *Vernacular Architecture*, ed. Mete Turan (Aldershot and Brookfield: Avebury, 1990), 271.

8 *Ibid.*, 272.

former commune outside of Taos, New Mexico that is transforming itself into a sustainable agriculture research and learning center; and a community of Earthships also outside of Taos built by a group that has been developing ultra-sustainable off-the-grid houses since the 1970s.

Concepts such as Buckminster Fuller's scientific "machine for living" and his geodesic dome designs meet budget limitations and an encounter with vernacular architecture and local materials such as adobe, reclaimed wood, and recycled tires and bottles in these buildings created by Sangre de Cristo inhabitants. It is possible to extrapolate the ideas realized in the architecture, ideas that reject the separation of humans from the environment and instead envision a more utopic space for living. Following that, it is possible to work back to the kind of people who developed this counterculture architecture, and their relationship on the fringes of society to the characters that inhabit the previous sections of the film.

In this section, the idea of performance is primarily enacted through the visibility of my own hand as a filmmaker. As pointed out by documentary theorist Bill Nichols,⁹ filmmaking style can be foregrounded in documentary film to the point where it becomes its own performative mode of address. Inspired by the films and writings of Trinh T. Minh-ha, I include in this section more prominently than others the re-framings and multiple perspectives that reveal the process of my choices as a filmmaker. Minh-ha describes the impact of her own process in an interview with Scott MacDonald:

It is common practice among filmmakers and photographers to shoot the same thing more than once and to select only one shot- the "best" one- in the editing process. Otherwise, to show the subject from a more varied view, the favored formula is that of utilizing the all-powerful zoom or curvilinear traveling shot whose totalizing effect is assured by the smooth operation of the camera.

9 Bill Nichols, "A New Mode in Town," presentation at the 7th Annual Brakhage Symposium, Boulder, CO, March 11-13, 2011.

Whereas in my case, the limits of the looker and of the camera are clearly exposed, not only through the repeated inclusion of a plurality of shots of the same subject from very slightly different distances or angles (hence the numerous jump cut effects) but also through visibly hesitant, or as you mentioned earlier, an incomplete, sudden and unstable camera work.¹⁰

In certain earlier landscape shots in my film, I do utilize relatively smooth panning camera motion, but immediately cut to (or from) a static shot of the same subject, disrupting expectations of forward momentum created by camera movement. Additionally, slight reframing or an adjustment of exposure occurs in shots in a way that creates a subtle but insistent reference to the process of filming. While in broadly post-Marxist film theory, self-reflexive reference to the creation of the film itself helps to assure the film is a “good” political object as opposed to a conduit for dominant ideology, in my film small acts of reflexivity serves to create a unifying sense of performativity in the production of documentary history. The final shot emphasizes this performance as I film a sunrise; my hand places and then removes a neutral density filter in front of the camera lens in the film's final view of the mountain landscape that draws to it the resisters and countercultural dreamers depicted throughout the film.

Between these sections, fragments of narrative from Rudolph Wurlitzer's 2008 novel *The Drop Edge of Yonder* appear. These brief texts combine with the interstitial landscape shots to unify the separate stories through fictional characters' experience of the same landscape. As their own section, they display yet another form of address to the viewer, that of text that does not accompany imagery. Each section refers to images appearing either before or after, but in some instances, such as the reference to the characters Zebulon and Hatchet Jack reaching a cabin, the following shots, in this case of the Espinosa Brothers, the connections made by the viewer are at least partially misleading. As the film progresses, it

¹⁰ Trinh Minh-Ha, *Framer Framed* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 115.

becomes clear that this section of text is its own discrete story, as is each of the other sections.

The inclusion of fictional text fragments by Wurlitzer form another connection within the film to ideas of western landscape and counterculture. Novels such as *Nog*, written in 1968, resulted in a strong association between Wurlitzer and counterculture in literature due to an experimental, non-linear writing style that evoked an inner experience which can be seen along with Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* as a type of literary manifestation of psychedelic consciousness. His novels gained the attention of directors including Monte Hellman and Sam Peckinpah, who took advantage of the "New Hollywood" atmosphere of the late 1960s and 1970s to create stylistically innovative auteurist and genre-revisionist films, resulting in Wurlitzer-penned screenplays for cult classics such as *Two Lane Blacktop*, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* and, later, Alex Cox's acid western *Walker*.

In the preface to the recent reprint of *Nog*, Erik Davis argues that Wurlitzer's writing "cemented the link between the counterculture and the scruffy, antinomian drift of the wild west."¹¹ Wurlitzer discusses his attraction to the non-narrative possibilities of the western landscape in a discussion of popular author Louis L'Amour:

Somewhere in the early seventies I wrote a piece for an obscure literary magazine. The title was: "The First Two Pages of Louis L'Amour." I was enamored with Louis L'Amour's first two pages, which were almost always about a man riding through the vast phenomena of open Western space. A rider, riding, without intention, into emptiness, with no beginning, no end or assigned direction. Off the map. East equal to West or South or North, the rising sun usually behind, the setting sun in front, leaving civilization behind, riding always within the mysterious rhythms of unannounced form and emptiness. The open range, silent and spacious, the rider never having a particular name or identity or defined boundaries, inside or outside. So it was just riding, always riding. But then, inevitably, after these introductions, Louis L'Amour, needing to hook the reader, would set the trap of 'self', the rider finding himself inside the entertaining and seductive prisons of plot, character and story, to what James Bugental calls the 'self-and-world construct system.' And so inevitably the reader would be squeezed and manipulated into a grid of good and evil Judeo-Christian myths

¹¹ Erik Davis, introduction to *Nog*, Rudolph Wurlitzer (San Diego: Two Dollar Radio, 2009), 6.

that so mark the Legends of the Old West.¹²

Wurlitzer's own version of the west, explored both in his screenplays and *The Drop Edge of Yonder*, resist these narrative and mythological constraints to develop an open text that engages the reader with complexity and ambiguity. It is these attributes, in addition to references to the specific landscape of the Sangre de Cristos, that I connect to in the decision to include excerpts of his writing in my film.

Sangre de Cristo Stills

Trinh Minh-ha's description of multiple views of the subject, as well as my use of that idea in the film, seems to contradict a filmic equivalent to Henri Cartier-Bresson's notion of the "decisive moment;" "at one precise moment, things arrange themselves in an order that is both aesthetic and meaningful."¹³ The cinematographic version is the perfect camera angle to capture the shot. This concept has been central to much photography since Cartier-Bresson developed it in the 1950s, and much of the discourse surrounding ontological distinctions between photography and film relies on it. The idea is that the photograph captures a moment, a point on the linear trajectory of time, rather than representing the passage of time. This translates to discussions of film, for instance by Henri Bergson, who felt that cinema could therefore only create an illusion that movement could be "captured."¹⁴ While Deleuze contradicted Bergson somewhat with his own conception of the Movement-Image, the prevalent view is that the individual frames that comprise the film strip do not, in themselves, represent duration but rather combine to create the illusion of duration.¹⁵ In addition to the use

¹² Rudolph Wurlitzer, interview by Erik Davis, *Yeti Magazine* no. 7 (June 2009).

¹³ Clement Cheroux, *Henri Cartier-Bresson* (London and New York: Abrams, 2008), 96.

¹⁴ Garret Stewart, *Between Film and Screen* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 86.

¹⁵ For example, the continual reference in cinema studies to "persistence of vision" as an explanation for the illusion of movement produced by film, despite its debunking by cognitive researchers Joseph and Barbara

of re-framing shots within my film, I also seek to problematize this seemingly obvious relationship between film and photography through the still images that accompany my film in the gallery installation.

Instead of stills extracted from one frame of the film, or alternative views of subject matter from the film such as the stills that accompany installations of films by Sharon Lockhart, for example, my still photos are long exposures that re-present extended sequences of 16mm footage used to create the edited video. Although I point out a difference in the process of creation, the photos serve a function similar to what some of Lockhart's photos do in relationship to her films; they support a gallery-based viewing situation. It is possible that a gallery visitor will not watch all the vignettes comprising my film, but they can still, in a sense, "see" the whole film as it is contained by my photos.

The exposures, created on positive film with a 4 x 5 camera, range in exposure length from three to almost seventeen minutes as I projected the 16mm film workprint on a wall, replicating the gallery projection situation, and photographed that projection as the workprint played. The imagined relationship between photography and cinema is inverted here; instead of a focus on the way that film encompasses a multitude of individual pictures, twenty-four of them in each second, the photographs become the vessel which encompasses the film. In twelve photos, all of the footage used to make the film is visible. Or mostly visible; certain portions of the film, such as the Virgin Mary section, become illegible through the long exposure. In that case, seeing the Virgin Mary becomes an act of belief that recapitulates the experience of the character José Espinosa. In other instances, details of each shot are clearly visible in the photo, and as a result conclusions can be formed about my filmmaking process.

Anderson among others; Garret Stewart's reluctance, despite his sympathy toward Deleuze, to reconcile with the concept of the Movement-Image as movement rather than an illusion of movement made up of discreet "slices" of time in *Between Film and Screen*; or the struggle to explain the vacillation between "movement and stasis" in George Baker's article "Photography's Expanded Field" in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*.

For instance, the compositions in the photo that encompasses the traces of Cuerno Verde in place names and landscape frame one another, with the lines of an interpretive map skirting the shape of a stop sign surrounded by the outline of one of the Cuerno Verde monuments. Horizon lines also blend and collapse in many of the photos, with the desert or mountain colors, purple and warm earth tones, splitting the frame with intense blue sky. As a result of the long exposures, human figures, with the exception of the cabin narrator from the first section, are rendered invisible, foregrounding the landscapes at the core of the film.

Other contemporary artists work with long-exposure photographs, such as Tokihiro Sato. In his photos, the way that time and photographic emulsion conspire to erase the figure allows him to paint with light in a way that creates an almost magical, but still seemingly instantaneous image of light sculpture. The actual duration of the exposure is not foregrounded. In the *Sangre de Cristo* stills, it is impossible to not think about how photography is, in itself, a time-based media. Because the progression of time represented by the exposure of most photographs, including the ones that make up the film strip, is so small, it is easy to think of a photo as instantaneous. However, these photos make visible the passage of time that is in fact inherent to all photography, collapsing somewhat the harsh dividing line between photography and film.

In general, I feel that insistence on ontological distinctions between media, such as between photography and film or film and video, are misguided; however, while specific media may not have rigidly inherent characteristics, it remains important to consider the strengths and weaknesses as well as the possibility of effects on the viewer of different media. For this reason, I chose to use film as my medium for both the photographs and film.

Form

Digital photography has not yet developed the capability for extended exposures to the same degree possible with film emulsion, rendering the choice for my stills obvious. Less obvious, perhaps, is the use of 16mm in my film. Throughout *Sangre de Cristo*, representations of different temporalities, the 1700s, 1800s, 1970s and the present, are situated within the same contemporary landscape. The treatment of history and historical time periods as something that can, in essence, be “seen” in and through the contemporary regional landscape is central to my depictions. Because of this, it's important that the medium supports the idea of history and time. 16mm film, especially when it is the workprint as opposed to the negative that has been transferred to video as it is here, emphasizing the grain and leaving room for the inclusion of some dust and scratches on the image, denotes a sense of undefined past-ness to the contemporary viewer who is accustomed to pristine digital images as the standard for contemporary film and photographic practice. The use of film emphasizes the sense of history and memory, and adds to the feeling of a temporal palimpsest as layers of history are revealed in the landscape. Time is inscribed into the material of 16mm film; as Ben Rivers has pointed out, for the filmmaker, even the time between exposing film and developing it serves as a reminder of the different temporal sense film has as opposed to the instantaneity of digital video.¹⁶

The potential of film to foreground time as a subject matter is particularly important in my film, where historical events are explored within multiple time-spaces; the ephemeral personal experience depicted by fictional re-enactment or an interview, the attempts to create historical memories that will persevere into the future through yearly performances or historical plaques, the houses and structures that provide both shelter and a material form to

¹⁶ Ben Rivers, interview by Ed Halter, *Mousse Magazine* no. 19 (2011): <http://www.moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=678>.

ideologies first explored in a different era than the one we currently inhabit but which may continue to speak to the contemporary landscape, both in the physical and cultural-political sense, and finally the recurring geologic time of the mountains, encompassing and bearing witness to historical events large and small while remaining unmoved and unchanged. Yet the mountains both contain and reveal traces of these comparatively insignificant human histories if we look long and close enough, a deep sense of looking that I explore in the film.

Overall, I sought to develop a form for the film that would be in dialog with the subject matter presented. Each story or space depicted is in some way engaged with the idea of a radical departure from socio-cultural norms. Whereas dominant contemporary documentary practice utilizes the same forms- primarily talking head interviews mixed with archival or other footage that illustrates the testimony of experts- to explicate any number of subjects, I feel it's important to work with forms that relate to and can interact artistically with non-fiction content. It's this reason that films such as Sam Green's Oscar-winning *The Weather Underground* are somewhat disappointing to me; the radical nature of the militant leftist organization the film centers on is in no way mirrored by the conservatism of the film's form. This may result in a film that reaches the broadest potential audience, but I am more interested in investigating the potential linkages between the fringes of history, society and landscape and the fringes of film and documentary aesthetic practice than in disseminating information as widely as possible.

As *Sangre de Cristo* cycles through multiple modes of documentary representation, all grounded by relatively long, quiet and non-didactic shots of landscape, the process of constructing history and landscape through filmic representation is foregrounded, potentially resulting in a more active dialog between the viewer, the film, and the performative acts of the filmmaker. Because of the general lack of didacticism, the viewer must engage in a critical relationship with the film in order to experience it fully. This relationship feels essential in a

work focusing on people and places that had and have a critical relationship to dominant culture, and histories that diverge from the dominant historical narrative.

Context

I situate *Sangre de Cristo* within a larger context of non-fiction filmmaking and documentary practice in art. *Sangre de Cristo* exists in a territory similar to the experimental 16mm documentary investigation of fringe characters and the landscapes they inhabit created by Ben Rivers; like Rivers, I am interested in traversing the space between the cinema and the gallery, documentary and contemporary art, with work that can exist in both contexts. According to media art scholar John Ellis:

Recently, documentary's search for truth has brought it closer to many of the concerns of artistic practice, and documentary has begun to appear in gallery spaces. Film-makers like Isaac Julien have reinvented themselves as artists working with film in gallery spaces. The reason is clear: there is something of an ethical crisis playing itself out in the arena of documentary film-making. The documentary notion of fidelity to reality has become more of a problem. To understand this is to see that we may well have arrived at the point where the ethical concerns of documentary and art are converging.¹⁷

I would argue that a constant "crisis" and renegotiation of the use of stylistic devices in the search for truth is inherent to the entire history of non-fiction filmmaking, including the reenactments employed by Robert Flaherty, the Direct Cinema of the Maysles Brothers, the reflexivity of Dennis O'Rourke or Trinh Minh-ha, and the "ecstatic truth" of Werner Herzog. Still, it's clear that film, including documentary-based works by artists such as Harun Farocki and the Otolith Group, has recently become more and more accepted in contemporary gallery contexts.

My use of recreation as a style or strategy is possible to situate within the realm of

¹⁷ John Ellis, "Dancing to Different Tunes: Differences in Approaches to Factual Filmmaking," in *Truth or Dare: Art and Documentary*, eds. Gail Pearce and Cahal McLaughlin (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Books, 2007) 60.

documentary in part due to the pioneering work of Errol Morris, who pointed out that “the belief that style- or the absence of style- somehow guarantees truth is an especially pernicious assumption of *cinéma-verité*. Style is style, and truth is truth and, as such, isn't guaranteed by anything.”¹⁰ This statement is supported in my film by the use of a multiplicity of documentary styles, among them direct address by an expert (or an actor portraying something of the sort) to the audience; sync-sound “dramatic” recreations of historical events; non-synchronous interviews; observation of actions such as the play on horseback as well as of landscape; and text.

In addition to documentary practices, I find inspiration in West Coast avant-garde filmmakers such as James Benning and Robert Nelson. In particular, Nelson's *Suite California: Stops and Passes (Parts 1 & 2)* from 1976-78, is a model for the situation of fictional conventions such as sync sound, actors and scripts within what is primarily an observation and chronicle of landscape and place. Due to its genre hybridity and lack of adherence to avant-garde aesthetic concerns of the time, *Suite California* was not successful in finding an audience when it debuted, but it's clear from a historical vantage point that the very same hybridity that proved a challenge to its acceptance by experimental film audiences of the late 1970s lends it a freshness and unexpectedness that has been sustained over decades. This type of hybrid use of genre form can also be seen in James Benning's *Landscape Suicide* from 1987.

Since the late 1990s, Benning has focused on a highly formalist approach to documenting landscape, but in earlier films he combined his interest in landscape with other forms of documentary address such as text and historical recreation. In *Landscape Suicide*, two murderers, teenager Bernadette Protti and the infamous serial killer Ed Gein, have their

¹⁰ Errol Morris, interview by Livia Bloom, *Errol Morris Interviews* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 7.

stories examined through a prolonged look at the places in which they lived. Additionally, Benning uses actors, primarily to recreate interviews with the murderers based on court transcripts, but also to portray “fictional” members of the communities from which the murderers came. For me, this blending of long shots of landscape that evoke structural film with narrative conventions such as creating fictional characters and historical recreation, as one might find in a television crime show, an Errol Morris film, or the relatively new theatrical genre Verbatim Theater,¹⁹ is far more exciting than any one of those genres alone. To me, the possibilities of what “experimental” or “avant-garde” film is capable of are truly exploited when those categories are treated not as aesthetic guidelines but rather as a license to draw from the broad range of ways that cinema is capable of producing signification.

This type of hybrid approach has recently gained traction as experimental documentary techniques that push against genre constraints and reveal possibilities of form have received increasing attention from festivals, academics and filmmakers. Festivals such as Punto de Vista in Pamplona, Documenta Madrid, The Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival (CPH:DOX), Cinéma du Réel in Paris and, on a smaller scale, the Iowa City International Documentary Film Festival are all among many newer festivals that program work that subverts conventions of documentary practice in favor of expressive forms. Journals such as *Jump Cut* and *Millennium Film Journal*²⁰ have both devoted recent issues to experimental documentary, and experimentations with form including the blending of fiction and documentary, among other strategies, are being carried out with increasing frequency by contemporary hyper-independent filmmakers. This can be seen in films like Ben Russell's *Let Each One Go Where He May*, which is comprised of a wordless fictional recreation of a

¹⁹ In verbatim theater, actors use more or less unaltered records of interviews and transcripts as a basis for performance; see *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, Will Hammond and Dan Steward, eds.

²⁰ *Jump Cut* no. 52 (2010) and *Millennium Film Journal* no. 51 (2009).

historical journey in Suriname and has screened widely at documentary film festivals; Matt Porterfield's *Putty Hill*, which is a fictional narrative utilizing documentary techniques such as interviews with the actors as though the filmmaker were documenting their daily lives, which, in a sense, he is, as he developed the story with actors who are also residents of the titular Putty Hill neighborhood; and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's *Sweetgrass*, which utilizes long takes, a focus on the landscape and avoidance of dialog, techniques that are more often associated with the formalist avant-garde than with the documentary, ethnographic, or visual anthropology spheres that Castaing-Taylor works within. All of these recent films, and many more, point toward a growing dissolution of traditional generic boundaries between documentary, fiction and experimental practices.

Conclusion

In both the film and photography portions of *Sangre de Cristo*, I seek to combine and hybridize approaches: movement and stillness, linear time and instantaneity, multiple documentary forms, text and image, "fiction" and experimental film. According to Walid Raad, who produces work as fictional collective The Atlas Group:

What we have are objects and stories that should not be examined through the conventional but reductive binary of fiction and non-fiction. We proceed from the consideration that this distinction is a false one and does not do justice to the rich and complex stories that circulate widely and that capture our attention and belief. I must say that it remains unclear to us what we mean by this proposition, "to do justice to the rich and complex stories that circulate widely and that capture our attention and belief." But we are working on clarifying it.²¹

"Doing justice" to complexity requires the use of complex strategies such as hybridity.

Through the use of multiple forms, I attempt to draw from the diverse stylistic resources at my

²¹ Olivier Lugon, "'Documentary': Authority and Ambiguities," in *Documentary Now!*, eds. Frits Gierstberg, Maartje van den Heuvel, Hans Scholten, Martijn Verhoven (Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 2004), 66.

disposal in order to develop an investigation into oppositional histories of a particular landscape, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, in a way that mirrors the complexity and character of the place as well as its inhabitants, past and present.

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