

**Emanuel Licha, zo reken. Film documentaire, 2021, 85 minutes,
français et créole haïtien
Emanuel Licha, zo reken**

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and the United States. This type of panel was used originally in Vietnam by the American army to encircle landing zones for helicopters. Recycled from the military-imperialist complex, this artefact represents both the domination and the protectionism of an arrogant, but frightened, United States.

The first gallery that we enter is a replica of a detention centre that migrants call *la hielera* (the ice house) because it is so cold after the crossing of the burning-hot desert. We take off our shoes and socks and, alone in the room, barefoot, we wait, feeling cold and uncomfortable. Around us, torn knapsacks and worn-out shoes are clues to the migrants with whom we can identify through our own discomfort. An alarm blares and a flashing red light indicates the door to take.

The immersive experience itself takes place in that gallery, where we walk on cold, pebbly sand. A gallery worker helps us put on a virtual reality mask, earphones, and a knapsack. It begins: it's dawn in a desert landscape. In the half-light, we can hear the voices of men, women, and children speaking Spanish. They are barely audible as they advance and hide behind bushes. A helicopter patters its blades, flies over the group, and aims its blinding spotlight. Two cars emerge, and armed border guards get out, accompanied by their dogs. Soldiers and migrants scatter and shout, confusion reigns around us, and we feel the chaos, even panic. Suddenly, everything goes quiet. We notice people sitting around a picnic table in the centre of which a boat made of modelling clay is tipping over. Castaways get out and disappear beneath the surface of the table. We can't help but think of migrants attempting the crossing of the Mediterranean in leaky boats, often with a tragic ending. Then, suddenly, the nightmarish

border returns. The tone rises once again; the border guards are nervous. We no longer know where to turn if we want to follow everything that is happening around us. The most traumatic moment occurs when one of the armed men trains his assault rifle on us. This is how the virtual journey ends. The place is once again a desert; the sun is rising in the distance. During all this time, disembodied, we are among the migrants but not one of them; we can't interact with them, we are a bodiless phantom.

Once the harness is removed, we leave this gallery and put our shoes back on. The following room presents a series of video portraits of people whose avatars we have just spent time with. Texts superimposed on the faces give a brief history of each: country of origin, reasons for migration, current situation of the undocumented immigrant, motivations, and so on.

In *La Presse*, Myriam Achard admitted, "It was the first time I cried wearing a virtual reality helmet."⁵ In *Le Devoir*, she

said that she was overwhelmed by this experience, "in which emotion takes over from the intellect."⁶ "Feeling" predominates; tears become gauges of authenticity. So, are we to believe that we are exonerated of thinking, analyzing, and understanding?

Filmmakers working in the heart of Hollywood plod along with the impression of reality. Movies run on identifications and projections in order to "bring alive" emotions or inspire empathy. If it were only ten minutes of immersive film, *Carne y Arena* would be just a new version of the cinematographic cocoon in which viewers can cuddle up to "feel." Here, as in cinema, the viewer is only a witness, never a protagonist.

Íñárritu was more astute: he didn't take the easy way out. His immersive film articulates something other than simulated reality. The scene in which a shipwrecked boat is animated is an intervention that breaks the immersive unity and demands a hermeneutic effort. This short scene broadens the work's

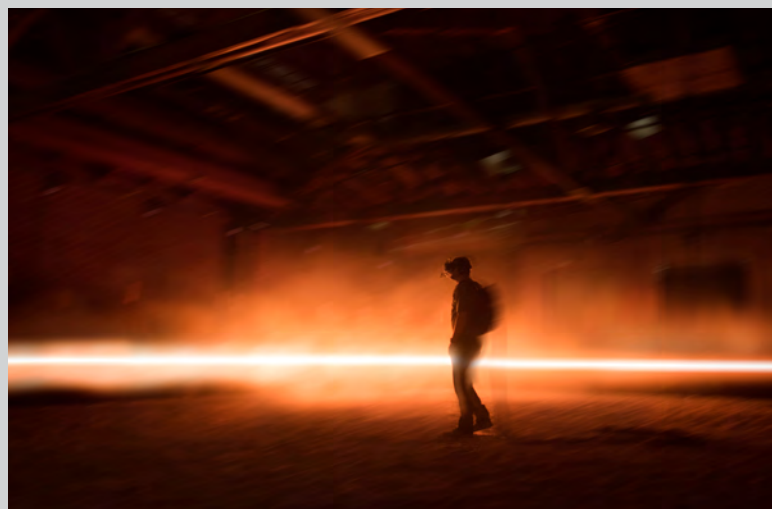
discourse. Beyond their immediate feelings, viewers are forced to interpret what is before them. It is when they're in the gallery, looking at the portraits of the migrants with bits and pieces of their history, that true empathy is born, for there's no way to feel attachment to avatars – only to faces.

Carne y Arena questions art's effectiveness, role, and power to generate change by oscillating between emotion and intellect, the sensory and the intelligible. Viewers take in the experiential shock of the immersive situation but must articulate the elements of the work in order to produce an interpretation of it. Because it is virtual reality, it seems that one can be content with the sensory. Virtual reality is a good match for our individualistic times – it's a solitary pleasure – in which we are attentive to what we feel, whereas a bit of intellectual distancing would enable us to understand and to act.

Translated by Kätthe Roth

1 Centre PHI has made this a specialty in recent times, and the galleries Art Mûr and Ellephant present it occasionally. 2 Marc Cassivi, *La Presse*, October 16, 2020. 3 He has directed, among others, *Amores perros* (2000), *Babel* (2006), *Biutiful* (2010), *Birdman* (2014), and *The Revenant* (2015). 4 In Montreal, *Carne y Arena* allowed three users in three different galleries to participate in the experience. 5 *La Presse*, October 16, 2020. 6 *Le Devoir*, March 17, 2021.

Jean Gagnon, who holds a PhD, is an exhibition curator, art critic, and independent cultural manager, after having worked for more than twenty-five years at the National Gallery of Canada, the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, La Cinémathèque québécoise, and the studio of artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. He contributes to art magazines and is a member of the boards of directors of Ciel variable and V/Tape in Toronto.



Carne y Arena, 2017, photo : Emmanuel Lubezki

Emanuel Licha

zo reken

Film documentaire, 2021

85 minutes, français

et créole haïtien

On dit de la vérité qu'elle est la première victime de la guerre. N'est-ce pas inévitable dans la mesure où ceux qui la mènent s'appuient souvent sur des mensonges et se nourrissent de propagande pour justifier sa nécessité?

La guerre est aussi affaire de mise en scène – ne parle-t-on pas du théâtre des opérations? L'artiste montréalais Emanuel Licha explore depuis un bon moment cet aspect, mais dans une démarche ni tapageuse ni spectaculaire. Qu'il opte pour la photographie, la vidéo, l'installation, et de plus en plus le cinéma documentaire, Licha scrute surtout ses représentations : à travers le filtre des médias (*War Tourist*, 2004–2008), dans ses formes architecturales (*R for Real*, 2008) ou celles des intérieurs aseptisés cherchant à camoufler les horreurs du passé (*Hotel Machine*, 2016).

Il semble s'éloigner de ces préoccupations et d'une pratique plus formaliste, optant pour la linéarité du cinéma dans *zo reken*, plongeant dans un pays en proie aux soubresauts de l'Histoire, et à ceux d'un sol instable, propice aux tremblements de terre. En fait, jamais les nombreux protagonistes de ce film

ne parlent d'Haïti avec lyrisme. Pour eux, « la perle des Antilles » est surtout le symbole d'un chaos ambiant, tous épuisés de vivre dans ce « pays de stress », surtout sa capitale, Port-au-Prince.

Haïti n'est pas à proprement parler « en guerre » au moment où Licha décide de s'y aventurer. Et il le fait non pas de manière frontale, mais par de nombreux détours, aussi attentif à ce qu'il capte qu'à ce qu'il relègue dans le hors-champ. Une posture habituelle pour celui qui s'interroge à propos du caractère subjectif de notre regard, formaté par des entreprises médiatiques voulant nous faire croire qu'elles nous livrent la réalité. Une démonstration depuis longtemps établie pour celui qui expose des images de saccages dans *R for Real*, décors fabriqués de toutes pièces pour les entraînements de la police française, ou résolument exotiques,



TOUTES LES PHOTOS / ALL PHOTOS: Les Films de l'Autre, Les Films du 3 Mars

comme ce village irakien construit à l'identique en plein désert californien pour l'armée américaine dans *Mirages* (2010).

Pas de guerre annoncée, certes, mais un climat insurrectionnel, parfois survolté, agite les rues de la capitale haïtienne au moment du tournage en 2019, avec souvent le nom du président Jovenel Moïse écrit sur les murs, et assorti d'insultes. Ce panorama se déploie devant la caméra de Licha, mais à distance, et doublement cadré : d'abord par l'image, ensuite par les fenêtres d'un de ces nombreux et robustes « 4 x 4 » qui ratissent la ville, très prisés des organisations humanitaires. Et de plus en plus par la police locale.

L'expression « zo reken » signifie d'abord « os de requin », puis alcool de canne locale, et maintenant ce véhicule étroitement associé à la communauté

« Deux petits tours et deux petits châteaux, puis s'en vont », dira l'un d'entre eux à propos des travailleurs humanitaires, et il n'est pas le seul à croire que ces institutions dites charitables se construisent « sur la misère de pays comme Haïti ».

Une indigence qu'Emanuel Licha capte à partir de ce véhicule forcé de zigzaguer entre barricades et manifestations, périple entrecoupé de contrepoints ironiques : quelques lents travellings au milieu d'un immense entrepôt de Médecins sans frontières situé à Mérignac, en France, aseptisé et structuré comme si l'endroit était sous le contrôle d'Amazon.

Dans une démarche dépouillée et cohérente, Emanuel Licha livre un état des lieux en forme de chronique urbaine, laissant toute la place à ses protagonistes, jamais identifiés, tous

artist Emanuel Licha has been exploring this aspect for some time, but in an approach that is neither ostentatious nor spectacular. Whether through photography, video, installation, or – more and more – documentary film, Licha examines mainly the representations of war: through the filter of the media (*War Tourist*, 2004–08), in its architectural forms

Haiti was not, in the true sense of the term, at war when Licha decided to set foot there. And he ventured not frontally but by numerous detours, as attentive to what he was filming as to what he relegated off screen. This is a habitual posture for him, as he probes the subjective nature of our gaze, formatted by media companies that want to make us believe



they are presenting us with reality. He has long been making this demonstration, with images of pillages in *R for Real* – on sets fabricated from scratch for French police training exercises – or ones that are resolutely exotic, like the Iraqi village faithfully reproduced in the California desert for the U.S. army in *Mirages* (2010). There was no war declared, certainly, but there was a climate of insurrection in Haiti, sometimes boiling over, in 2019; as Licha was filming the streets of Port-au-Prince, the name of the president, Jovenel Moïse, was often scrawled on walls accompanied by insults. This panorama was deployed before Licha's camera – but at a distance, and doubly framed: first by the image, and then by the windows of one of the

internationale en terre haïtienne. Une présence jugée vampirique, hypocrite et dévastatrice. Mais ne demandez pas à Pascal Antoine ce qu'il en pense. L'homme est en quelque sorte le chauffeur désigné d'Emanuel Licha, conduisant prudemment ce mastodonte jamais à l'abri des projectiles, ni de la colère sourde des passants.

Au milieu de ce véhicule, Haïti se révèle dans une proposition esthétique parfaitement circonscrite, regard balisé comme si le spectateur était en quelque sorte lui aussi enfermé dans cet espace clos. À part quelques arrêts, prétextes à des chants ou des conversations politiques à bâtons rompus, la ville en proie au désordre ne sera vue que de la banquette arrière de ce rutilant symbole des puissances étrangères.

C'est également dans cette position que des passagers de tous les âges, de toutes les conditions sociales et de tous les horizons professionnels, certains grabataires et d'autres bien portants, commenteront la révolte populaire, la décrépitude du système hospitalier, et surtout la présence déstabilisante des organisations non gouvernementales.

très singuliers dans leurs prises de position. Même leurs silences, parfois pesants, en disent beaucoup sur le courage et la noblesse de cette nation. Pas nécessairement en guerre, mais toujours en lutte.

— **André Lavoie** est critique de cinéma et journaliste indépendant. Détenteur d'une maîtrise en études cinématographiques de l'Université de Montréal, il collabore au journal *Le Devoir* depuis 1998, et pour les magazines *Sélection du Reader's Digest* et *L'actualité*. Deux fois lauréat aux Grands Prix du journalisme indépendant, dont pour la meilleure critique culturelle, il est également conférencier et modérateur de débats.

Emanuel Licha zo reken

It is said that truth is the first casualty of war. That seems inevitable, as those who wage war often base their actions on lies and feed on propaganda to justify its necessity.

War is also staged – hence the expression “theatre of operations.” Montreal



(*R for Real*, 2008), or through aseptic interiors seeking to paper over the horrors of the past (*Hotel Machine*, 2016).

He seems to distance himself from these preoccupations and from a formalist practice, opting for the linearity of film, in *zo reken*, which plunges us into a country prey to the upheavals of history and to those of the literally unstable ground of an earthquake zone. In fact, never do the many speakers in this film speak of Haiti poetically. For them, the “pearl of the Antilles” is mainly a symbol of ambient chaos, and they are all exhausted from living in this “stressful country” – especially in its capital, Port-au-Prince.

numerous and sturdy 4x4s that rolled through the city, vehicles coveted by humanitarian organizations and, more and more, by the local police.

The expression “zo reken” means, literally, “shark bone,” but it is also used for the local cane liquor and, now, for this vehicle closely associated with the international community on Haitian soil – a presence deemed vampiric, hypocritical, and devastating. But don't ask Pascal Antoine what he thinks of them. He is Licha's designated driver, carefully steering the behemoth as it is constantly targeted by projectiles and the muffled anger of passersby.

From within this vehicle, Haiti is revealed in a perfectly defined aesthetic offering, a gaze delineated as if the spectator were also shut into this closed space. Aside from a few stops, pretexts for songs or fragmented political conversations, the city awash in unrest is seen only from the backseat of this gleaming symbol of foreign power.

It is also from this position that passengers of various ages, social conditions, and professional backgrounds, some bedridden and others in good health, comment on the popular uprising, the

disrepair of the hospital system, and especially the destabilizing presence of the non-governmental organizations. "Two short tours and two little cheques, and then they're gone," one of them says about the humanitarian workers, and he isn't the only one who believes that these "charities" are built "on the misery of countries like Haiti."

Licha captures this destitution from inside the vehicle, which is forced to zig-zag between barricades and demonstrations. His journey is intercut with ironic counterpoints: a few slow travelling shots

taken in the middle of a huge Médecins sans frontières warehouse in Mérignac, France, as sterile and structured as if the place were run by Amazon.

With an uncluttered, coherent approach, Licha delivers his report in the form of an urban chronicle, giving centre stage to his protagonists, none of whom are identified and all of whom have a unique viewpoint. Even their silences, sometimes heavy, say much about the courage and nobility of Haiti. Not necessarily at war, but always struggling. *Translated by Käthe Roth*

— **André Lavoie** is an independent film critic and journalist. He holds a master's degree in film studies from the Université de Montréal and has been a contributor to the newspaper *Le Devoir* since 1998, as well as to the magazines *Sélection du Reader's Digest* and *L'actualité*. He has been awarded two *Grands Prix du journalisme indépendant*, including for best cultural critic, and is a speaker and debate moderator.

Paul Walde

Requiem for a Glacier

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

March 10, 2021–February 27, 2022

Paul Walde's four-movement oratorio *Requiem for a Glacier* was originally performed in July, 2013 on a glacier in British Columbia's Jumbo Valley – or Qat'muk, as it is known by the Ktunaxa First Nation, the region's original stewards. At the time of the performance, the ancient glacial area was under direct threat of both climate change and resort development, as the building of a (now-cancelled) ski resort had obtained provincial approval despite resistance from environmentalists, local residents, and the Ktunaxa. Performed for the glaciers, with only the fifty musicians and thirty crew members present, the event was described in the press as a protest, an homage, and, of course, an expression of grief. For a space considered sacred by Ktunaxa, the grandiosity of the requiem gesture is both appropriate and questionable as it honours the spiritual import of the area, but in a language and tradition historically imposed on Indigenous lands.

Footage of the event was later incorporated into a video installation of the same title, in which the recorded oratorio is accompanied by field recordings and the visual documentation is supplemented with long shots of the landscape, vignettes of individual performers, and temporal and visual effects that mirror the dramatic urgency of the oratorio. The installation is on display at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts as part of the exhibition *Ecologies: A Song for Our Planet*, curated by Iris Amizlev.

Loosely based on a Catholic requiem mass, the score is evocative not only of mourning but of an odyssey or a struggle, the audio and video working together to construct something of a narrative arc. Walde drew on a variety of sources to compose the score: the first two movements are generated out of the letters j-u-m-b-o, referencing both the non-Indigenous name for

Qat'muk and the controversial resort; the libretto is a Latin translation of a 2012 press release announcing the BC government's approval of the resort's development; the third movement is drawn from data detailing temperature readings of the area from 1969 to 2010, with the increasing tempo reflecting rising temperatures; and the final movement pairs instrumentation with a droning hum to mimic the presence of an electrical power grid. All four movements are animated by the video in ways that distinguish the installation

frame; in another, a timpano conjures thunder to accompany a lightning storm. Interspersed throughout the score are field recordings of dripping and running water; it is, arguably, this sound of melting that is the most melancholic.

Visually, the evocation of melancholy, of Romanticism, and of the sublime is undeniable. The piece ends with what others have agreed is a clear reference to Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818).¹ The slender figure of the conductor, Ajtony Csaba, dressed in black tails, stands in the

broader climate concerns tackled in the exhibition. When it was first performed, in 2013, it was directly linked to then current and regional politics. As of January 2020, after a thirty-year-long dispute, the controversial resort development has been permanently abandoned. The Ktunaxa have partnered with government and environmental organizations to preserve the area, with the First Nation back in charge of stewardship and conservation.² Despite these political shifts, the area remains vulnerable to the effects



TOUTES LES PHOTOS / ALL PHOTOS: *Requiem pour un glacier* / *Requiem for a Glacier*, 2013, vidéo HD à deux canaux / two-channel HD video, 40 min, MBAM / MMFA

from the initial performance. As rising temperatures are translated into musical notes, soprano Veronika Hajdu is pictured walking in slow motion, taking step after arduous step across the glacier's surface. At more than one point in the video, a black rectangle appears overtop time-lapse footage of the mountain range, like a censor-bar blocking access to the image. In one instance, the shape slowly expands to fill the

centre of the screen, filmed from behind, against the immensity of the mountain range – a *rückenfigur*, contemplating not only the awesome environment but, perhaps, its precarious future.

Although *Requiem for a Glacier* is included in the MMFA show, it is displayed in a separate wing of the museum. Visitors are therefore able to immerse themselves in the installation while also considering it in relation to the

of global warming, and Walde's installation remains evocative and arresting. The dispute over the glacier range encompassed, but often overrode, Indigenous territorial and spiritual claims. The projection of such a distinctly Christian and European lamentation as a Latin requiem onto sacred Ktunaxa territory raises additional issues that cannot be avoided. That being said, Walde's rooting of the score in both ancient