Soul of the Documentary
Hongisto, Ilona

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Hongisto, Ilona.
Soul of the Documentary: Framing, Expression, Ethics.
Amsterdam University Press, 2015.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66433.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66433

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2356720
After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe was in a state of tumult. States that had previously been directly or indirectly under Soviet rule were suddenly independent and the rest of Europe had to review its relationship with both the newly organized East and its own ideological convictions. The situation created a commotion in bodies and thought as people could move more freely and as the physical and mental borders with which the continent had been divided needed redrawing.

Chantal Akerman approaches this agitation in her documentary film *From the East* (*D’Est*, Belgium 1993). In an essay on the making of the film, Akerman asserts that “while there is still time, I would like to make a grand journey across Eastern Europe.” *From the East* documents the journey from East Germany to Moscow, passing through seasonal changes from the summery beaches on the Baltic Sea to the snowy Russian capital. “While there is still time” refers to the historical change in the East that Akerman captures in her frames.

Kanerva Cederström’s *Trans-Siberia – Notes from the camps* (Finland 1999) intertwines with the same historical turning point as *From the East*, but from a different perspective. The starting point of Cederström’s documentary is the quietness that ensued following the fall of the Soviet Union, while Akerman is intrigued by the imminent change in the East. Cederström recounts that she was surprised by the lack of analytical discussion following the change of regime in 1991. She was particularly taken aback by the overall tendency of forgetting and moving on that prevailed over the possibility of engaging analytically with the silent sites of the Soviet Empire – such as the gulags in Siberia.

An interesting feature of both *Trans-Siberia* and *From the East* is that even though they deal with specific historical events, the moments are not identified with temporal signifiers of before and after. Nor are the individual gulags or stops along the journey marked in any clear way. In Akerman’s film, borders between Germany, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Russia blur. Shots from fields, rugged country roads, private homes, city streets, train stations, and concert halls follow one another in a series that does not point to distinctions and resemblances in a straightforward way. Rather, Akerman notes that she “would like [...] to make you feel the passage from one language to another, the differences, the similarities.”

Put differently, Akerman’s documentary evokes a feeling of the passage across Eastern Europe instead of engaging in overt conversation about
the stakes of the historical situation. *From the East* captures the journey between the different countries with variations of stillness and movement in its frames and editing. The primacy of feeling, then, draws attention to the ways in which the sensation of the passage frames the political stakes of the documentary. In *Trans-Siberia*, this happens through the form the documentary gives to the temporal experience of the gulags, a form that bypasses explicit arguments and equivocations about the prison system. Both documentaries posit the primacy of feeling as their pathway to a discussion about Eastern Europe, thus also rearticulating the political dimension of documentary aesthetics.6

**Stillness and movement**

*From the East* consists of long ethnographic shots of groups of people in public spaces: women harvesting potatoes, people waiting at bus stops or stations, or walking down an icy road. In private homes, people are depicted doing everyday activities such as making a sandwich, playing the piano, or putting on lipstick. In both spaces, the ethnographic quality of the shots is simultaneous to a sensation that exceeds the frames. The shots in *From the East* coexist with a hypnotic rhythm.7 This results in the sensation that even though each scene is allowed to come to its end, it never quite feels like an end. There is an inconclusive feel to Akerman’s frames.8

There is no narrating voiceover in Akerman’s film, which gives prominence to the frames and the activities depicted in them. The camera captures the places and the people with still frames or lateral tracking shots. In public spaces, the stillness of the frames is emphasized by people, cars, or trains moving through them. People enter the frame, for example, from the side
or from behind the camera and thus either elongate the depth of field with their movement or traverse it by entering from one side and exiting from the other. The stillness gains in weight with the lateral tracking shots, as the tracking is often done in parallel with groups of people standing and waiting at bus stops or sitting on benches at stations. In these shots, the camera is often placed at eye level or below, and always mounted on a support that makes its movement stable. The tracking shots capture the stillness of the people in relation to the movement of the frame.

The perpetual movement of the frame is often transposed to processions of people walking through still frames. Movement started in one scene with a moving frame is transposed to the next where it continues with the bodies moving through or in the frame. Moving frames turn into still frames with moving bodies, and still bodies in moving frames suddenly start moving in relation to still frames. The variations of movement and stillness in the documentary give form to a sensation of dynamism, hypnotic agitation. What is most interesting about the created momentum is that although it takes shape in relation to the excessive stillness of the bodies and frames and the wandering tracking shots and bodies moving en masse, it is nevertheless not visible as such.

Put differently, the audiovisual form of the documentary – the transpositions of movement and stillness – produces a feeling of momentum. As waiting at the train station does not amount to actually getting on the train, nor does harvesting potatoes amount to an end result, there is an inconclusiveness to the documentary’s form. However, with the pitting of movement against stillness and stillness against movement indetermination intertwines with a sensation of commotion. This feeling in a way doubles the actual movements and stillnesses, and gives them an additional dimension. Standing, waiting, walking, and sitting are imbued with a sensation of time passing; the feeling of a force that suspends the bodies from determinate actions and instead envelops them in the indeterminate commotion of historical change. This is what Brian Massumi calls a “perceptual feeling,” a sensation of momentum that flows through objects and forms and affords them with dynamism.9 Akerman’s technique of framing places and people at the turn of the 1990s captures and expresses the East in suspension – imbued with a momentum that has yet to be harnessed into a clear direction.

In this way, “while there is still time,” Eastern Europe is not offered as an entity moving from one form to the other, one regime giving way to the next, but as a populated landscape with suspended differences and similarities. The overarching hypnotic momentum of the documentary has encouraged some to anchor the film back to clear markers of distinctions
and resemblances. Ivone Margulies, for instance, emphasizes the differences between each shot of the film. For her, each individual shot is a block comparable to the compartment of a train. The shots are individualized with small gestures that make each of them different. In a scene shot with a static camera, a person unexpectedly walks through the frame on a snowy field; in another fixed shot, potato harvesters move perpendicularly toward the camera along the furrows on the field and occasionally stop to gaze at the camera. In a lateral tracking shot of people waiting at a bus stop in snowy dusk, a young boy observes the camera mounted on a car slowly passing the place where he stands. The boy disappears from the frame as the camera moves to the left, but he picks up the camera's pace and enters the frame again at a later point in the same shot, still chewing his gum and continuing his curious observation.

For Margulies, these individuating gestures in the shots resist the anonymity often attributed to Eastern Europe's "block societies." In her view, the documentary provokes the viewer to distinguish between the oversimplified image of the East produced for Western consumption and the differences in personal history that individuate from the presumed mass. With these gestures, From the East "momentarily dispels their uniformity, probing their faces as the very index of a resistance to anonymity."

Put differently, Margulies conflates the suspended bodies and actions – and the created momentum – with the political task of representing the East in a more favorable light. By insisting on the individuating gestures that differentiate each shot, Margulies argues that the indecisive momentum, or what she calls a hypnotic rhythm of the documentary, is equal to a "hypnotized mass" from which individuations may arise. For her, the feeling evoked by the passage across the East speaks of personal histories individuated from the mass.

In my view, neither the political work, nor the feeling evoked in the passages between stillness and movement speaks of individuations from the mass. This has to do with the film's particular way of framing imminent change in the East. The scenes shot in private homes are especially important in this regard. Rather than following Margulies and viewing these scenes as personal histories that surge from the mass, I take them as breaks in the journey across the East and as moments where the momentum created in the transitions of stillness and movement is expressed as internal to the scenes.

In private homes, people are framed doing everyday activities. A teenager puts on lipstick in a bedroom, a woman cuts bread and salami in the kitchen, and an elderly woman sits in a chair by the television. The camera is placed
a couple of meters from them, framing their bodies in full. The duration combined with the still frame induces a curious sensation in the scenes. The elderly woman sits in the chair for more than forty seconds and the repetitive gestures of the woman and the teenager are even longer. The scenes depict banal everyday actions, but the actions themselves are excessive, suspended from determinate efforts of actual results. The woman prepares her sandwich for over two minutes and the teenager applies lipstick for over a minute – reminiscent of the repetitive gestures in Akerman’s 1975 film Jeanne Dielman where comparable gestures of washing dishes and cleaning are used to question the conventions of identity imposed on women. However, instead of a metahistorical critique of representations of the East, the excessive, suspended actions in From the East give form to a temporal experience of suspension between two extremes. In this way, the documentary offers its viewers a direct experience of the hesitations, disorientations, and insecurities that marked the early 1990s in Eastern Europe.

Here, the work of the frame that contours the bodies in suspended excessive action is particularly important. The frame regulates the relationship between the body and its environment, and thus plays a part in how that relationality is experienced in the documentary. In From the East, the relationship between frame, body, and environment is expressed in tableaux vivants that have a pulse of their own. This is comparable to the internal rhythm of a painting. In his discussion of Francis Bacon’s works, Deleuze argues that the internal rhythm in his paintings consists of the movement between the body and the field that surrounds it. This movement is regulated by contours that frame the body within the paintings. On the one hand, the field exerts its force on the body; on the other hand, the body moves toward the field in a kind of a spasm – moving out of its contours. Deleuze speaks of this movement as “the athleticism of the Figure.” He detects an extraordinary agitation in, for example, Bacon’s painted heads – an agitation derived from the enveloping field of the painting exerting its force on the immobile head, and the heads moving out of their contours. This two-directional movement is composed of a systole contraction that goes from the field to the figure and a diastole dissipation that goes from the figure to the field. The coexistence of these movements is the internal rhythm of the painting. It is “the sensible form related to sensation; it acts immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh, whereas abstract form is addressed to the head, and acts through the intermediary of the brain, which is closer to the bone.”

In the scenes shot in private homes, the framed bodies are particularly agitated. Following Deleuze, one could say that the pressure of the field – the
yet to be determined changes in Eastern Europe – press on the bodies to such an extent that in the excessively long shots that frame them, their stillness becomes athletic and the repetitions more intense. The duration of the frames regulates the relationship of the bodies to the surrounding field, and it is precisely the duration of the frames that offers “hypnotic athleticism” as the perceptual feeling of these scenes.

The momentum of imminent change created in the editing and the internal rhythm of the *tableaux vivants* wrest the affective work of the documentary from alternative narratives and variance in representation to affection that works on the viewer directly. What works on the viewer is the felt perception of a momentum that accompanies the framed bodies but is not visible as such. Here, the desired political effect of documentary experience is transposed from mimicking bodies in action to the mimesis of momentum. The documentary invites the viewer to sense imminent change and to respond to its momentum. Hence, the experience of change “while there is still time” offered in *From the East* exceeds the recognition of personal histories and geographical specificities. The documentary offers to perception much more than individuated stories and objectively perceivable activities. Paraphrasing Massumi, the documentary operates with a perceptual feeling as the extension of forms, structures and their historical patterns. The documentary’s audiovisual form is the launching pad for felt perception, but this feeling (of momentum) is not reducible to the actual forms on the screen.

**Archives of experience**

The sensation that there is more to the film than meets the eye has inspired interpretations of *From the East* as a representation of the filmmaker’s personal history. Alisa Lebow argues that Akerman’s film is a transitive autobiography in which the director essentially wanders around her Jewishness. Similarly to Margulies, Lebow foregrounds the domain of the documentary that has no visual correspondence in the film, but she reads the domain that exceeds the persistent shots and the lateral movement of the camera as indices of autobiographical filmmaking. For Lebow, the documentary is enveloped in the dispersal of Jewish culture after World War Two and Akerman’s consequently transitive experience of her Jewish subjectivity.

From this perspective, even though Akerman systematically eschews elements of her personal history – she does not visit the town her family
comes from, nor does she include any iconographic Jewish markers in the facade of Eastern Europe – the past that she on one level seems to evade nevertheless sticks out in the landscapes and portraits she records. In Lebow’s analysis, the documented landscape is held together by a past life that the filmmaker has experienced only transitively through her mother. In this sense, From the East is a representation of the filmmaker’s quest for a past that is experienced only indirectly in the present. Akerman’s “while there is still time” becomes, in Lebow’s analysis, an index of a process in which the search for flashes of resemblance and commonality of Jewish culture is represented indirectly with the very absence of Jewish iconography. Here, the ethnographic frames are instances in which Akerman looks for herself in the faces of others.

In Lebow’s reading, the sensation of inconclusiveness becomes a sign of the filmmaker’s personal history. Thus, similarly to Margulies, Lebow places the context of the film before the felt perception of its momentum. Put differently, both implicitly argue that the film can be felt only after it has been understood. In my view, From the East avoids the metahistorical strategy of reconstructing the historical moment with audiovisual means and opts for a more experimental methodology of capturing and expressing the momentum of time’s passing in its form.

In this sense, the audiovisual form of the documentary can be defined as an archive of experience. Archiving refers to the capturing of the momentum of on-going change in the form of the film. Here, “a body or object is a self-archiving of a universe of felt relation.” In the documentary context, this refers to the self-archiving of felt relation on the level of the subjects and objects filmed, and consequently on the capturing and expressing of this felt relation with an aesthetic of the frame in the documentary.

Considering objects and bodies as archives of experience connects From the East to Mark Hansen’s reading of Bill Viola’s Anima (2001) as a trace-form of affect. Viola’s piece consists of three video portraits placed side-by-side. In the videos, three individuals portray the passages between joy, sorrow, anger, and fear. Filmed at a speed of 384 fps and projected at 24 fps, Viola’s work offers an overload of stimuli that perception cannot objectively register. The passages between the emotions extend to eighty-one minutes of playback time although the recorded time was merely one minute. As a result, the viewer encounters the supersaturated microstages between the emotions that Hansen calls affective excess. In his view, “the affective excess is a dimension of the living present that by definition cannot become a content of perception; it is a nonlived paradoxically within the living present.”
Hansen’s affective excess archived in the temporally oversaturated images in Viola’s Anima can be linked to the sensation captured and expressed in Akerman’s still frames. Viola’s Anima depends heavily on the experimental use of the cinematic technology of time, particularly the discrepancy between the recording and projection speeds, whereas Akerman’s frames are saturated by the length of the shots and the stillness or repetitive gestures of the people in the frames. Akerman’s audiovisuality might be less experimental than Viola’s but it nevertheless bears witness to time’s passing in a similar manner. In From the East, the momentum captured and expressed in the documentary’s frames is not content that could be registered objectively. Rather, it is affective excess within the living present of the depicted bodies that exerts its force on the viewer directly.

As an archive of experience, From the East resonates in a fascinating manner with the sensation captured and expressed in the French filmmaker Nicolas Rey’s cine-voyage across Soviet Russia made in 2001. The Soviets and Electricity is a three-hour documentary that consists of the filmmaker’s audio-diary, documentary shots recorded along the way, and a few biographical elements the filmmaker surveys en route. The film is an exploration of the historical and political resonances of Soviet Russia in the present. The journey itself took six months and it extended from Paris, France to the city of Magadan on the Pacific shore. In the Soviet state, the Siberian city of Magadan was synonymous with deportation. It was founded in 1941 to house the gulag workers of the region.

Rey’s documentary frame is remarkable for two primary reasons: the film stock and the shooting speed. The film stock used in shooting the documentary was long past its expiration rate. In the intertitles the filmmaker declares: “To shoot a long traveling shot from West to East on these Soviet super-8 reels and see the colors that appear.” The Soviets and Electricity was shot with 27 cartridges of super-8 Orwo Sviema stock produced in cooperation between the Soviets and the GDR at a factory in the Ukraine. The number of available cartridges limits the length of the film to approximately one hour. As The Soviets is a three-hour long film, the remaining two hours can be accounted for in the shooting speed and frames of black leader that punctuate the scenes.

The Soviets was shot at a speed of nine fps and with the length of the film, the movements in the frame become strangely indecisive. It is as if movement was somehow suspended from the cars, boats, people, and animals Rey frames with his camera. In one scene, somewhere on a river – supposedly on the river Lena – Rey’s camera finds a group of people on a small rowing boat. They row and they row, but they barely seem to move.
On a different occasion, Rey films the demounting of a statue – the slowness of the process and the reduced frame rate turn into an incertitude about whether the workmen are, in fact, demounting or remounting the statue.

As the documentary suspends movement from the events it films, it creates a sensation of indecisiveness that invites the viewer to move in the historical layers of the Soviet era. *The Soviets* bypasses clear positions of the past and the present, and instead focuses on the depths of history that can be explored from a point of view in the present. For one, the history of film is placed in an immanent relationship to Rey's documentary frame. The Orwo Sviema film stock places the film within the technological possibilities of Soviet cinema – it in a sense simulates the images that might have been shot some twenty or thirty years ago. The strange tinted yellows and blues as well as the peculiar grain of the film allow the documentary to capture possible images from the Soviet era. The images of Rey’s visit to the nuclear power plant and its surroundings in Chernobyl are not far from the Zone depicted in Andrei Tarkovski’s *Stalker* (USSR 1979). On the soundtrack, Rey announces that one of the places he absolutely wants to visit is Dniepropetrovsk, a city where Dziga Vertov realized some of his films. “As if that would not be enough of a reason,” he states.24

The suspension of decisive movement in *From the East* as well as in *The Soviets and Electricity* points to the primacy of feeling as momentum that is felt before it is understood. In Akerman’s documentary, the variations of stillness and movement produce a sensation of inconclusiveness. In Rey’s work, the suspension of movement from the actual events produces a sensation of indecisiveness. The captured and expressed momentum connects the two films to the way in which Kanerva Cederström’s *Trans-Siberia* approaches the Siberian gulags.

**The impossibility of knowing, the necessity of feeling**

For Cederström, Siberia is a site with mythical dimensions. Her explorer grandfather had told her stories about the massive rivers of Siberia and the Soviet state produced further images of vast natural resources and working class heroes. She describes the clash between these mythical images and the awareness of the gulags as decisive for the making of *Trans-Siberia*.25 After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Western left remained relatively silent about the massive prison system – partly because of pressure from the Russian Federation. The silence was complemented by the fact that many nevertheless assumed to know what had happened in the gulags. There are,
of course, such accounts as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s literary document *The Gulag Archipelago* and Marina Goldovskaya’s documentary film *Solovki Power* (1988), which had already offered information about the camps, but the silence, in this instance, refers above all to the sentiment that these accounts were enough and that it was not necessary to think about things further. The starting point of *Trans-Siberia* is the impossibility of knowing what went on in Siberia and the simultaneous impossibility of not being aware of what happened in the penal colonies.

Cederström approaches the prison camps with the combination of contemporary footage and the notes of two prisoners. The imagery consists of people, train stations, and landscapes recorded over an eight-day journey on the Trans-Siberian express. There are no images of the camps in the film. Eight years after Cederström imagined the possible lives of her disappeared uncle in *Two Uncles*, she felt that archival footage had gone through inflation and was too often used to just visualize history. Hence, although archival material had just become more readily available from Russian sources, she decided to combine contemporary footage with the notes of two prisoners. Amalia Susi (1889–1972) and Andrei Sinyavsky (1925–1997) served years in the Siberian prison camps. Susi was imprisoned in 1942 and served ten years in Siberia. Sinyavsky spent seven years in the camps after he was imprisoned in 1965. Their notes are heard on the soundtrack of the documentary.

The authors of the notes that accompany the journey on the Trans-Siberian are connected only through Siberia: Amalia Susi was an Ingrian math teacher who inscribed the daily routines of the camps on 28 pieces of fabric – drapes, dresses, sheets – after her release. On the frail sheets, she chronicled the freezing cold train carriages, bloody struggles over food, sicknesses, and stealing. The carefully hidden notes were found only after her death and eventually smuggled to Finland fearing that authorities might destroy her descriptions in case they were found. Being an Ingrian, Susi wrote in Finnish, which explains why the notes were brought into the country and later placed in the Finnish National Archive. The fragile sheets at the National Archive played an initiating part in the making of the documentary.

Andrei Sinyavsky – a Muscovite author – wrote bi-monthly letters to his wife from the camps. The letters are philosophical in tone and more literary in form than the word “note” might suggest. In the letters, Sinyavsky describes the temporal experience of the gulags and its effect on thinking and perception. He explains how isolation and the feeling that time is standing still actually give greater freedom for thought. Sealed off from the rest of the world, the faces of other prisoners feel expressive of everything that
is missing and the surrounding clouds become displays of infinite dramas. Sinyavsky outlines human existence on the axis of freedom and imprisonment, the good and the evil. After his release, Sinyavsky immigrated to France where he published the letters as the novel *A Voice from the Chorus* (1976/1973). Sinyavsky’s role as the protagonist of the documentary is loosely based on the novel.26

*Trans-Siberia* takes off from Finland, leading the viewer through the corridors of the National Archive into an apartment in St. Petersburg. There, a woman introduced as Amalia Susi’s niece types up the diary notes from the old cloths. The camera stays close to her hands, investigating the subtle and determined gestures of her fingers. On the soundtrack, the filmmaker tells the viewer that Amalia’s niece has taken on the task of collecting the memories of Stalin’s victims. The camera sweeps over the surfaces of the pieces of fabric, documenting the handwriting on the fragile cloths. A cut from the apartment takes the viewer onto a train heading to Vladivostok. At the end of the film and at the end of the rails, on the Pacific shore, another cut takes the viewer to the Bibliothéque Nationale de France in Paris. In the library, the camera records Sinyavsky’s interview from a computer screen.

The prologue and the epilogue place the documentary in a context of collecting and archiving the memories of Stalin’s victims. However, the body of the film, the time spent on the rails, suggests a different approach to the prison system. As the documentary withholds images of the camps and relates the notes on the soundtrack to contemporary imagery, the emphasis moves from collecting and archiving personal histories to the prison camps as an experience that extends beyond the two individuals that guide the viewer to Siberia. The documentary does not dwell on the personal histories of the two prisoners but just lets them speak. Hellevi Seiro delivers Amalia’s notes in a deep voice that resonates with the harsh daily content of Susi’s notes.27 Tomi Jarva reads Andrei Sinyavsky’s philosophical notes with a soft tenor that foregrounds the reflexive content of the writing. The voices heard on the soundtrack connect with contemporary sceneries, fellow travelers, and cities along the rails in a manner that extracts the experiences of the camps beyond the life stories of the two guides.

**Imaginary worlds**

In his notes, Sinyavsky compares the psychological experience of the camps to travelling on a long-distance train. The movement forward gives meaning to the days because their passing at least serves the purpose of nearing the
future, the final destination. People could, Sinyavsky notes, be happier if they knew what to do about waiting for time to pass. In the camps, an ordinary sense of days, weeks, and months disappears as letters that could give a sense of time passing outside the camps take a month to be delivered. One lives simultaneously a month ahead and a month behind according to the letters written and received; either too early or too late.

In isolation, days pass by and mornings follow one another but time also stands still. Prisoners preserve the manners and expressions they had once imprisoned. Days are comprised of activities that fill them without any concrete end beyond the acts themselves. Sometimes, Sinyavsky points out, it feels as if time had stopped and one was simultaneously still and flying beyond oneself:

While space practically ceases to exist here, time that shrinks together in front of any obstacles tends to reach past them, running years ahead inside your mind. When you wake up in the morning, time seems to be either nearer or further off than you had expected. It slows down at times, then picks up again, past itself. It is both too big and too small for what it used to be.

The documentary expresses the sense of isolation and the simultaneity of stillness and flying in its audiovisual form. Most of the time, the camera stays inside the train, looking out the windows or observing the other travelers. Being in the train foregrounds isolation from a typical everyday schedule: people read, drink tea, and play games in their cabins. They fill their days with activities that bring them closer to their destination. At times, the pace of the images picks up and at other times, the images roll in slow motion giving the sensation of being further or closer to the destination.

Sinyavsky points out that in the isolated context thought actually runs more easily. The surrounding faces and objects acquire imaginary dimensions in isolation. In the documentary, the views from the train occasionally turn into an “imaginary world” tinted with distinct colors and a floating rhythm. The camera captures people walking on a platform and as their movement is expressed in slow motion they seem to float and be lifted off the platform. In another instant, the camera descends from the train and captures a train station at night. The expression of the space is reminiscent of a science fiction film replete with dusky fog and the occasional bright light. The floating visuals are lined with percussions that echo around the imaginary space. In one scene, a forest by the railway is filmed through the train window. The smudgy window is in focus in the foreground whereas
The forest in the background is just a black pointy shape. The frame of the windowpane divides the image in two areas, in a manner reminiscent of a Mark Rothko painting.

The experience of being still and nevertheless floating, which Sinyavsky describes in his notes from the camps, is captured in the audiovisual form of Trans-Siberia. The inside of the train is contrasted with the imaginary outside where common dimensions and rules of orientation have ceased to exist. Thought running faster in prison is expressed with the landscapes and sceneries that acquire an imaginary feel that exceeds the isolating walls of the train. The sceneries captured in the present thereby become a trace-form of the prison camp experience. Trans-Siberia archives the sensation of the prison camp experience in its audiovisual form.

Although the personal experiences of the two prisoners are the path the documentary takes to preserving the prison camp experience in its form, the preserved sensation flows through particular locations or individuals. The flickering reflections of trees the camera captures on the bank of the rails or the red clouds on a clear blue evening sky preserve the sensation of an imaginary world in contemporary landscapes. Similarly, the images captured inside the train, the accelerations and the slowing downs, preserve a sensation of time’s passing that is in excess to Sinyavsky’s individual experiences.

Politics of affection

The documentary as a trace-form of sensations initiates Trans-Siberia’s political leanings. The sensations preserved in the documentary’s audiovisual form could be interpreted as a documentary strategy that encourages the viewer to think about what the documentary nevertheless refuses to show. In other words, as Trans-Siberia aligns the notes of the two prisoners with contemporary footage, it makes the viewer feel what the documentary only suggests in images. This observation coincides with Bill Nichols’s conceptualization of “oblique politics” that draws from the magnitudes that exceed the documentary. This is a politics of affection conditioned on “a tension between the representation and the represented as experienced by the viewer.” The tension emerges from the absence of the historical referent in the images. According to Nichols, this is a question of “rendering felt what representation may only allude to.”

Although this conceptualization purports the primacy of feeling in documentary politics and takes the magnitudes that exceed documentary images
into account, it nevertheless seems problematic, given what *Trans-Siberia* is interested in doing. More specifically, the oblique politics of affection is geared to overcoming the absence of a historical referent by awakening the viewer to its absence. This awakening comes about by rendering felt what the images only suggest. To my mind, *Trans-Siberia* is ultimately not as interested in awakening the viewer to the absence of a historical referent as it is in pointing out that we are not yet thinking.

The choice of not showing the camps at a time when ample material had just become available and when a general awareness of the camps was already established speaks of a politics of which the purpose is not to enhance perceptions about what is not or cannot be represented. The politics of affection at play in *Trans-Siberia* does not feed on the referential, but becomes operational within the composition of the documentary. This emerges with particular valence in the disjunction created between Amalia Susi’s notes, Andrei Sinyavsky’s reflections and the contemporary imagery.

Amalia Susi’s notes cut through the imaginary world preserved in the form of the documentary. Her observation of a man being beaten to death because he was falsely accused of taking two servings of food creates a fissure within the preserved sensation, somehow obstructing the fulfillment of the philosophical reflections into ideas about the camps. In the manner of a meticulous chronicler, she gives an account of the icy cold walls one could not sleep against, the stolen goods market led by bandits, and the transportations from one camp to the next during which people died. Susi’s notes cut through the imaginary world as the impossibility of fully imagining or knowing what it was like to tend to the fireplace in the middle of the night and get a place to sleep only after somebody got up and space was liberated.

The notes of the two witnesses are the closest the documentary gets to the camps and they serve two distinct yet connected roles in *Trans-Siberia*. With Sinyavsky’s existential reflections, the documentary preserves the feeling of the temporal rhythm of life in prison. With Susi, the documentary creates a fissure into its audiovisual disposition and thus creates a shock that – instead of making us think about the prison camps – presents the sentiment that we are incapable of thinking about the camps at this moment in time. In this way, the documentary responds to the political climate of the 1990s by foregrounding the void that exists in thought itself.

Moreover, the politics of affection at play in *Trans-Siberia* speaks of a paradigm shift in how cinema itself is understood. Nichols’s oblique politics pertains to cinema as a “machine of the visible,” a machine that enhances our perception and understanding of the external material
world by producing impressions and reproductions of that world. Here, the politics of affection patches the gaps in visibility and works toward the end of making us more aware of the world that surrounds us. *Trans-Siberia*’s take on the prison camps in the late 1990s, however, operates in a register where audiovisual worlds are not so much disembodied representations to be viewed, but thoroughly immanent to the ways in which we think. Instead of mediating an external world, the audiovisual composition of the documentary *immediates* a situation where, despite the abundance of evidence, the prison camps are neither discussed, nor analyzed critically.

This ties in with the paradigm of invisibility in cinema. As a machine of the invisible, cinema no longer explores an external reality, but weighs the conditions of awareness and their transformability in reality. This is crucial for Deleuze’s conception of cinema and its relationship to thinking. Drawing from Antonin Artaud, Deleuze notes that cinema has replaced our capacity to think for ourselves. A camera consciousness has replaced subjects who master and own their thought processes with subjectivities that are, by definition, networked with orders that exceed them — such as cinema. However, instead of simply announcing this condition as a given in our lives, Deleuze adds that Artaud “believes in the cinema as long as he considers that cinema is essentially suited to reveal this powerlessness to think at the heart of thought.” The paradigm of invisibility locates cinema as immanent to the viewer’s perception and thought processes, and thus it modifies the political work of cinema from enhancing perceptions about an external reality to showing our capacities to think in reality.

In *Trans-Siberia*, then, the split between the contemporary sceneries, Sinyavsky’s reflections, and Amalia Susi’s notes expresses precisely the powerlessness to think. Rather than investing in the absent historical referent, the documentary builds on the sensation of disconnection in the present. The documentary offers the viewer sensations of a prison camp experience but simultaneously posits that these experiences cannot be thought of as such. Deleuze continues: “[I]f it is true that thought depends on a shock which gives birth to it (the nerve, the brain matter), it can only think one thing: the fact that we are not yet thinking.” The fissure in *Trans-Siberia* does just that.

However, as with Artaud, a given impossibility is also an issue of potential. In *Trans-Siberia*, the powerlessness to think about what went on in the gulags turns into a politics of affection where the “unthought in thought” is the condition for thoughts to come. By making us viewers feel that we are not yet thinking, the documentary inaugurates a necessity to think when thought is missing. This happens through the effect of first being invited to
share and understand the prison camp experiences and then being denied that possibility.

The audiovisual forms in *From the East* and *Trans-Siberia* wrest the documentaries from the figurative tasks of representing the change of regime in Eastern Europe or the atrocities of the Siberian gulags. *From the East* captures and expresses the incipient change in its hesitant rhythm and engages the viewer with an affective non-localizable momentum. *Trans-Siberia*, on the other hand, first preserves the experience of Siberian gulags in its audiovisual form, but then, with a remarkable change of tone, the documentary deploys the traces of first-hand gulag experiences to point out that these experiences cannot be accessed, conveyed, or even thought of as such. However, rather than ending with a bleak vision of incapacities and impossibilities, the documentary posits the impasse as the viewer’s point of entry to a re-evaluation of what we know and how we know it, and consequently also of the ways in which we attune ourselves to the world we inhabit.