

Reviews

FILM/DOCUMENTARY

Wasting Naples

nicol*angrisano, 2009, 77 minutes,
Insu^TV [www.archive.org/details/WastingNaples]
Reviewed by Alessandra Renzi



“Here the ‘state of emergency’ is another form of government, they should teach it in political science: there is monarchy, tyranny, democracy...and ‘Emergency!’” *Wasting Naples* narrator gives voice to some of our own experiences when he jokes about this new mode of governance. How often have we watched our sheriffs pull out the emergency gun from their holster whenever the star-shaped badge no longer did the trick?

More than a review, this is a tale of how some communities faced off against the gun, using video cameras to pose unwanted political questions about the environment. It is a tale because, once a documentary becomes a tool for collective narration, it is hardly possible to tell its story without contributing to the narrative. This contagious practice is now spilling out of the setting where a surreal tale about a 15-year-long garbage emergency originated. It is reaching other ears and mouths, because garbage does not only feed the dysfunctional (some would say dystopic) Italian state. What was once considered useless material has become a source of financial accumulation. It is the monetary afterlife of property, forever turned into gold from the (poisonous) ashes of (incinerator) hell.

Watching this movie, Naples’ crisis may make Toronto’s 2009 garbage strike seem more like a minor inconvenience, but shouldn’t leave us feeling too good about the smell of our garbage. Who is behind the design and management of waste plans? Which communities are affected the most, and why? Where does the money come from and where does it land? Do we care where our garbage goes? We should, and *Wasting Naples* teaches us why through the voices of the communities affected by an emergency, those who caused it, the ones who tried to solve it, the ones who had no interest in solving it. It is time we stopped thinking that tree huggers should deal with recycling and green bins while we march to the drums of labour, war and other causes. It is time we brought garbage into our critique of capital: to see where it intersects with other issues and to use it as a way of acting politically. The effects are in the process. Use your imagination.

Documentaries have a director, producers, camera operators, editors, musician, and so on. They have huge budgets and copyrights. *Wasting Naples* has none of this, at least not how we know it. Mind you, this is not your usual grassroots movie either.

The name nicol* angrisano, appearing under the label “director,” is a collective identity for those behind the Insu^TV project (www.insutv.it). This non-profit, pirate television channel is a node in the Telestreet network (www.telestreet.it), set up in 2003 to bypass Prime Minister Berlusconi’s control of 90% of the Italian media, and to enable different forms of expression through the language of television. Their public persona “stands for a multiplicity of visions and perspectives, it uses a low letter case because s/he refuses the concept of authorship; s/he takes the asterisk to inflect for all genders. It is a collective—a connective—identity radically searching for different reading cues to transform simple narrations into tools of struggle and liberation.” nicol* is as much a symbol as a mode of collaboration.

Catalysed through Insu^TV, under the guise of nicol*, hide countless helpers and volunteers: the communities, the bottom-up producers, a famous actor who lent his voice (and face), a couple of cinema personalities, post-production studio donors, independent musicians, promoters and so on. *Wasting Naples* condenses over 500 hours of recorded or borrowed tapes. During their collection, the director let herself be contaminated by the experience of the communities hit by these events, gathering more momentum and voices. Many more people joined nicol* as producers through the website *Produzioni dal basso* [bottom-up production] (www.produzionidalbasso.com). Here video collectives can post a trailer of their movie to buy on pre-order thus contributing to its production. What brought everyone together were not the expectations of box office revenues but an unstoppable need to tell a story about places we live in, and what we are doing to them while we assume that waste removal is merely a civic service. nicol* is now invited to screen *Wasting Naples* everywhere, to help support new struggles.

Framed like a story, with all the mean characters and heroes that belong to this oral genre, *Wasting Naples* presents a multilayered analysis of the relationships and conflicts among government, the media, the “ecomafia,” powerful corporations, and poisoned areas, crops and inhabitants. It does so by calling forth all the aspects and groups that intersect with garbage. Obviously, it was all there before the movie,

but no one had brought it all together, not even the judge involved in the ecomafia investigations who, at the premiere, (somewhat pompously) declared that he “will follow up on the evidence presented to the audience.”

Unlike much grassroots video work that neglects expression for content, the language of *Wasting Naples* is also constitutive of its production process. Aggressive in its pace, the movie also offers loving images of Neapolitan scenery and its deturpation. Violence and frenzy have been a marker of the garbage emergency. Still, the police beatings, expropriations and army incursions did not erase all the optimism of protesters. The real tragedy though is how, for years, these environmental struggles were portrayed by the media as the work of thugs recruited by the local mafia to maintain control of the garbage business. Adding insult to injury, the foul mountains of garbage in the streets of Naples became the mythical silver bracelet adorning the scapegoat banned from the city. Only now, through *Wasting Naples* connective practices, the goat comes back to tell her story, and to show us how to tell our own.

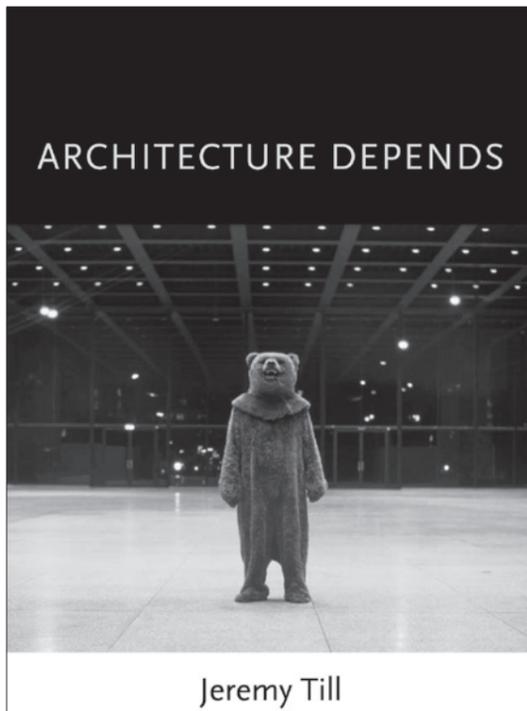
Alessandra Renzi is a post-doctoral fellow at the Infoscience Research Lab - Centre for the Study for Social Media, where she is looking at examples of dissent criminalization through the G8/G20 in Toronto. Alessandra’s work emphasizes the development of radical research methodologies and collaborative creative practices that relay the links between academia and activist communities.

TEXT

Architecture Depends

Jeremy Till, MIT Press, 2009, 232 pp.

Reviewed by Lucas Freeman



Jeremy Till’s reality check for the architect: your projects are subject to contingencies, like most other things cast into the world; act accordingly. This may seem like an obvious point to be making and, from the outset, Till admits as much. After all, most of us who have carried a “creative baby” to term, only to let it loose in the end, encounter the discomfort of turning an idea into an event. We can never fully anticipate what our work will be like amidst the various real-world forces that condition its arrival. Production is a nebulous affair. While such a conclusion hardly offends common sense, it is not something that architecture students and professionals are encouraged to face with productive enthusiasm. Quite the contrary, Mr. Till argues. His *Architecture Depends* is offered as a “tough love” lesson for a profession that struggles vainly to avoid cross-contamination, waste, and loose ends. In reality, Till stresses, architecture will always depend on a complex social and institutional mess: “mess is the law.” With this insight squarely in the frame, he insists, there is an opportunity for the profession to transition from representing its practitioners as elite problem-solvers or legislators of hard space to conceiving of them as interpreters of space or “citizen sense-makers.” Optimizing the agency of the architect depends on normalizing this transition, starting from the first days of architecture school.

Architecture Depends lays out the broad outline of a “perspectives course,” one that avails us of the many minds that eschew the Vitruvian foundations of the architecture profession. Thankfully, he reminds us, for every Vitruvius there will be a Bataille. The first of three parts provides a collection of perspectives on architecture’s cultural battle against contingency, describing the foundation and transmission of architecture’s culture of detachment and elitism. Till illustrates that, in general, architecture “tribesmen” continue to manifest a range of unworldly pathologies, from narrow social indifference to delusional messianism. Part two is a whirlwind tour through the coincidental nature of space and time, one that aims to demythologize the authoritative terms of “purity” and “stability” and to expose the practical disadvantages of blandly privileging space over time as the subject matter of architecture. He suggests that timing concerns are inadequately conceived and communicated at the various stages of architectural planning and production. Part three moves on to promote the architect’s agency as an interpreter of space and as a facilitator of spatial possibilities. Mr. Till shifts our attention from the architect-expert who “sets the scene” from outside to the “situated” architect-citizen. In this way, the book ends by highlighting a kind of democratic ethics appropriate for the architecture professional.

The value of *Architecture Depends* does not lie in having responded to a new problem. Nor does it lie in the analytic rigour with which the author pursues each topic he discusses. The true value of the book is that it presents, in a relatively tight space, a wealth of smart anecdotes, analogies and images that help us conceive of a more worldly architect. To list a few, most readers will find Mr. Till’s case for the analytic value of trash, the acrobat-architect analogy, and the significance of Joyce’s *Ulysses* for architecture compelling and illuminating. The book performs a wonderful contextualizing function, making architectural intervention, from idea to event, depend on the wide range of human habits and spheres of influence that we normally sum up as “the world.”

Lucas Freeman is a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto, in the department of Political Science. His work focuses on the relationship between political psychology and public art and architecture.

FILM/DOCUMENTARY

24 City

Jia Zhangke, 2009, 112 minutes, China, Hong Kong, Japan

Reviewed by Kin Tsui



In early March, 2009, Jia Zhangke’s new film *24 City* began to be shown at movie theatres in Chinese major cities. It is a film that is quite different from Jia’s former films in the way that it uses the documentary form. *24 City* is the name of a real estate project in construction on the site of a state-run airplane engine factory (now called Chengfa Group) in the city of Chengdu. Like many Chinese state-run factories that moved out of city centres during the ‘structural reform’ of the mid-90s, Chengfa Group and its workers underwent a painful experience in this unprecedented social change. Structural reform uniformly amounted to factory closures, worker lay-offs, and the selling of land to real estate developers, or the setting up private-public joint-ventures. Reflecting this transformation on film is a challenging job for a film director who works in a social environment that lacks of basic freedom of speech and with a government that frequently intervenes in any film production that might challenge its power and ideology.

Jia Zhangke is a Chinese film director who is well known for representing the daily life of migrant workers in urban areas, a very sensitive topic in China that other directors refrain from addressing for both political and commercial reasons. Jia purposely keeps his distance from mainstream Chinese commercial films and sincerely tries to use his specific perspective to represent marginal social groups that are often neglected and forgotten in the grand narrative of globalization. In *24 City* Jia uses a documentary approach. His camera does not construct a narrative, or arrange the plot with its consequent closure, key elements to most feature films. By using the documentary format, the camera acquires freedom and independence from narrative, and can capture any object, event, or detail, that reflects social reality or a certain social group’s daily life. In comparison with his early films that focus on migrant workers or young people who live in rural areas or small cities and towns, but yearn for big city life, this film directly touches on issues of land development and financial capital, both of which play an extremely significant role and function in the drastic reconstruction and reshaping of urban form and urban reality in present-day China.

Jia bases his film on interview and portrait photography, letting interviewees tell their own stories and explain their experiences of daily life directly to the camera. He is able to promote a marginal social group’s image on screen to a dominant position usually occupied by the upper class in a portrait painting of traditional art history, or by the main ‘heroic’ characters in a commercial film.

There are a number of details within the film that are worth ruminating on. At its beginning, factory workers attend a land transfer ceremony arranged by the factory management and the property developer. Together they organize a performance to create a celebratory atmosphere. This is quite common in China, but what appears incongruous is that the workers continue to prefer to sing socialist songs popular in the 1950’s to 1970’s. On one hand, this reveals the workers’ social identity and their historical memory. On the other, it reflects China’s social reality: that socialist ideology and the capitalist market economy coexist in an extremely contradictory way within the ‘reform and opening’ era and that the state still steadfastly believes that ‘socialist’ ideology can dominate and control the capitalist market economy, even though the reform policy adopted in the past three decades by the state is substantially neoliberal. The next scene can be used to further explain the extreme contradiction of the current social situation in China and the great impact of reform policy on a state-owned enterprise worker who has devoted his or her lifetime to the state, and the construction of socialism. While the sound of the speech delivered by a