

Through the Keyhole: (Photographic) Desire and Astronomical Imagination*

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Images by Malena Szlam

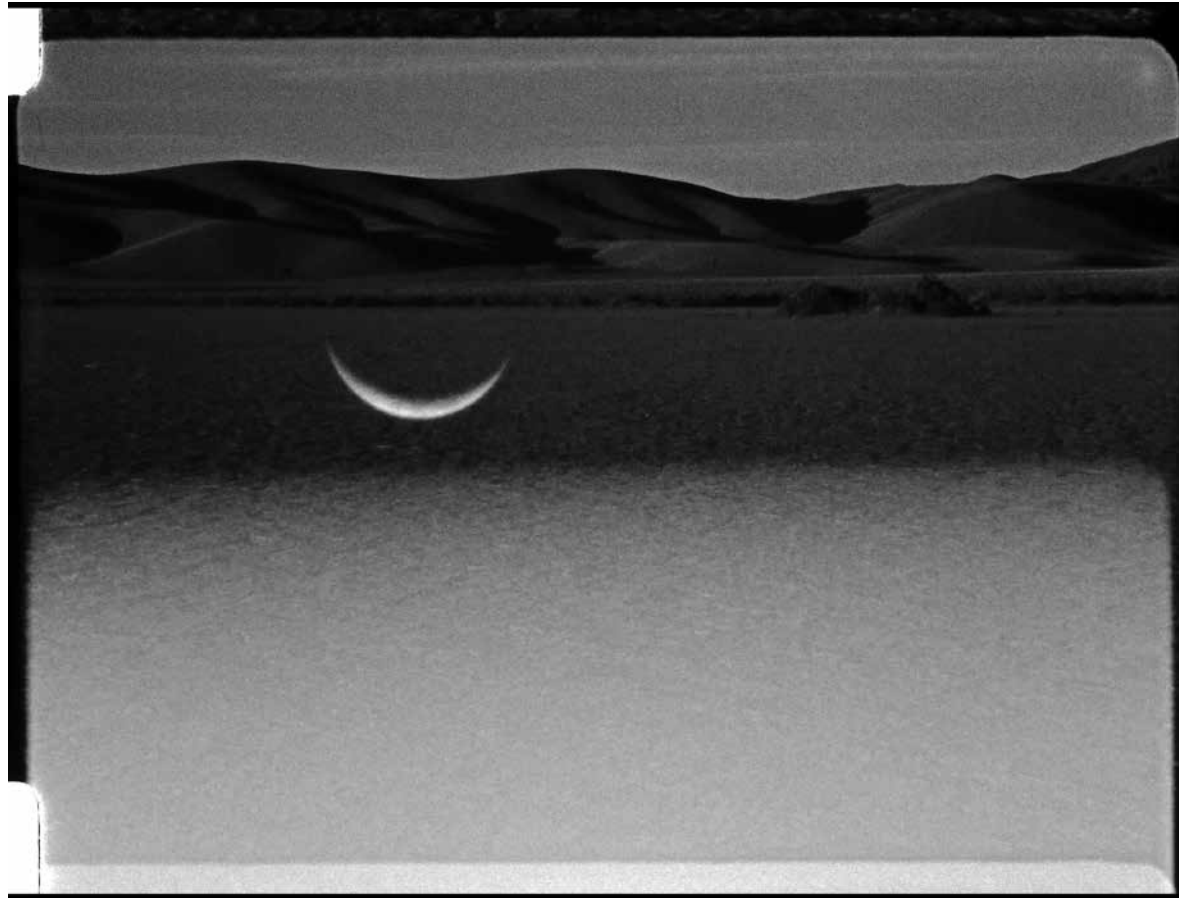
The etymological meaning of desiderium harkens back, it seems, to sidus—meaning the celestial body (l'astre), or constellation. Nostalgic regret had thus been paired to the idea of a “dis-aster” (“dés-astre”), which means much more than a simple uprooting (depaysément). Because the loss of ground (sol) is then worsened by the loss of cosmic protection.

Jean Starobinski, L'encre de la mélancolie [1960] (2012)

These curious lines, taken from Jean Starobinski's wondrous historical exploration of saturnine sentiments, depend on the translation of words such as astre and depaysement, which hardly find their

equivalent in English. Astre refers to any celestial or astronomical body—its Latin expression sidus being the etymological root, the author tells us, of the word “desire.” Depaysément signifies, literally and metaphorically, a change of scenery, a sense of astonishment, of (cultural) disorientation, of being uprooted from a country (pays), perhaps even a particular “landscape” (paysage). What Starobinski seems to suggest, then, is the intimate—or at the very least, linguistic—connection between celestial objects and desire. The loss of the former holds the potential to cause a “dis-aster” greater than any other. What might it mean, then, to “hold on” to the astres, to gaze at them intimately through the keyhole,¹ to reproduce them mechanically, with intensity and patience?

This text takes as its source and impetus the fascination of two women, a century apart, with the architecture of the nightly



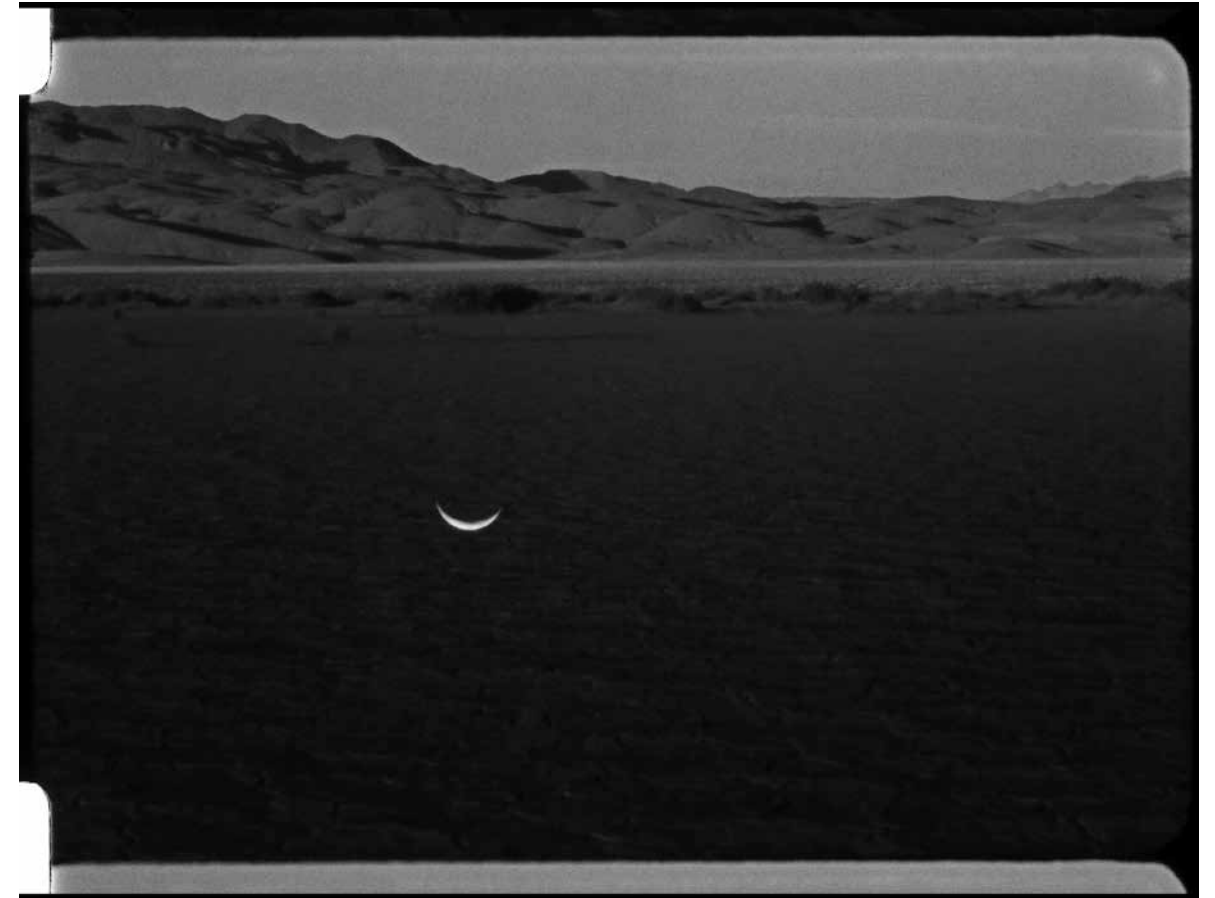
Malena Szlam, image filmed in the Altiplano, Chile, 2015; 16mm film, colour; Courtesy of the artist.

skies: Malena Szlam, a contemporary visual artist and filmmaker, and Annie Jump Cannon, an acclaimed astronomer who worked at the Harvard Observatory at the turn of the twentieth century and was passionate about photography. These two figures provide very different narratives—polar opposites, you may say. Yet their juxtaposition sheds light on a fragment of photographic history, one which conjoins landscape and desire,² as well as on the legacies of an “astronomical imagination” whose unconscious force was fueled by movements between Northern and Southern axes, by displacements and *depayséments*, by wonder and despair, and by imperial geographies reaching—beyond the earth’s exploitation—still further, towards the mastery of the sky. If we are ready to

consider that these processes have their share in the current (ecological) moment, then this text/image collaboration hopes to follow the motifs associated with the etymology of desire (*sidus*) to bear witness to the vast entanglements that form moments of “dis-aster.”

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Malena Szlam’s filmic and photographic images offer slivers of light, fleeting visions of colour unearthing what Gaston Bachelard, in his writings on the “images *directes* de la *matière*,” called “la racine même de la force imaginante.”³ Bachelard insisted that poetic creation, much like dreams, was first and foremost structured and directly fed by the imaginative force of materials. He



Malena Szlam, image filmed in the Altiplano, Chile, 2015; 16mm film, colour; Courtesy of the artist.

thus called for an interpretation of dreams that would also be “psychophysical” and “psychochemical.” Szlam’s oneiric films—shot on 16mm and Super 8mm—seize the sensuous shapes of the world around her, which emerge subtly from the darkness when innervated by light and colour. Her films are silent, and many function as night skies in themselves: black canvases within which the world appears in a profoundly subjective, dream-like transfiguration. At the moment of capture, she already inhabits a perceptual darkness like that of the theatre in which her images will be later projected.

In *Lunar Almanac* (2013), the moon takes the central stage of a short film entirely edited in-camera: a haunting play on the repetition and visual reverberations

of this celestial body, obtained through superimpositions and long exposures. Szlam’s film presents several moons at different stages filmed from various locations—including her personal “observatory” (i.e. her balcony in Montreal). The moons appear simultaneously, in single, phantasmagorical frames that welcome an incessant play between stillness and movement. The artist reconfigures the very passage of the moon across the sky by way of a cinematic movement that, however, implies a deeply photographic approach. Countless single-frame shots—over 4,000 images, some of them exposed up to five times—are animated to form a radically new temporal reality. Ektachrome⁴ becomes the vibrant fabric on which we come to perceive the moon as it mediates another source—the sun’s refracted light. Despite its non-emitting



Malena Szlam, image filmed in the Altiplano, Chile, 2015; 16mm film, colour; Courtesy of the artist.

character, the moon—or luna—has inherited the very name of “light,” as both rise from the ashes of the Latin lux and lumen.

Three riveting lines from Walter Benjamin’s Berlin Childhood around 1900 evoke the peculiar force of lunar light: “The light streaming down from the moon has no part in the theater of our daily existence. The terrain so deceptively illuminated by it seems to belong to some counter-earth or alternate earth.”⁵ In Benjamin’s text, objects are described as imbued with enigmatic radiance, as moonlight brushes across the child’s room. This sculpting of space by light is key to the cinematographer’s craft. Thus the moon might count as an inherently suggestive cinematic metaphor, one that also embodies the circular beam of a film projector and

the screen onto which humans across the globe have “projected” countless pareidolia (a human face, the silhouette of a rabbit or a toad).⁶ Such projections spring as much from folklore as from scientific rituals, such as when the International Astronomical Union baptized, in 1935, one of its craters “Daguerre” in honor of the co-inventor of photography. While it is said that Louis Mandé Daguerre had failed to properly fixate the moon onto his sensitive plate in 1839, his name officially clings now to one of the orb’s crater.

Shortly thereafter, on the other side of the ocean, successful daguerreotypes of the moon were made at the Harvard College Observatory, where astronomer Annie Jump Cannon worked in the early 1900s. During the years of the medium’s “birth,” photography

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held a crucial place in Cannon’s life and career. Her celebrated innovations in the realm of astronomy relied entirely on the study of photographic wet plates, which became the translucent windows through which she measured the stars and their spectra. Numerous women—then called “human computers”—worked at the observatory,⁷ leaning before negative photographic plates of the sky to classify thousands of infinitesimal black dots on a white sky. An oblique wooden frame held the plate, while a mirror was placed under to reflect as much daylight as possible: in this way, black stars were backlit by sunlight.

Scientific precision fuelled the imperial desire to “scan the heavens” through the patient scrutiny of still, colourless images. Yet Cannon’s sustained affection for photographs exceeded her professional activity. She processed her own images in the familial household pantry, which “in former days (was) given over to ginger cakes and mince-meat pies,” she writes in her published book of travel photographs. It is no accident that early amateur image-making practices came to bear the aura of magical recipes, and converged in such literal ways with the realm of cooking. Cannon describes how she serendipitously subverted the domestic function of her pantry, recycling starch boxes for the fabrication of candle-lit “pleasurable ruby lanterns” made to oversee the revelation of her images in the dark—an exhilarating moment she conceived of as “second journeys” into the various locales she had captured while traveling. Her book, In the Footstep of Columbus⁸—an inspired visual journey in the old continent, in which Cannon literally attempts to embody the explorer—opens with, in lieu of an epigraph, an ardent love letter to her “Kamaret,”⁹ in which the “queer looking box” becomes anthropomorphized as a faithful traveling companion, one who “never lies.” Pages are replete with the irresistible temptation to set-up her photographic device for several minutes-long exposures. This object facilitated, she claims, her circulation in a

foreign country, and its name became the magical word, pronounced in an invented language that opened local hearts and gateways: “‘Camera photographica4r,’ I murmured. My Spanish may have been at fault, for I know not even now what they call them, but it answered the purpose.” She captured strangers’ faces, projecting the alluring magic of photography onto her subject’s presumed beliefs: “Could you but know that I have brought you back to America with me, you would think me a Moorish magician returned to the sunny Andalusia!”

Perhaps the greatest (magical) power that Cannon attributed to the camera was that of being an omniscient “interpreter” who “enabled (her) to obtain the views of all nations.” In the footsteps of a continent’s discoverer, traveling in foreign countries, capturing views with a camera made in America, brought her to have faith in the alleged universal language of the photographic image. This was also the view shared by the scientists of the observatory, as they accumulated more data than its workers were even able to process or catalogue, ordering shipments of plates from Harvard’s Peruvian station and producing all the more from its own powerful telescope. If Cannon’s camera became a “universal interpreter” it is perhaps because just like herself, the Kamaret was thought capable of rendering a “true image” of nature. In her earliest diaries, Cannon writes: “May I be led into some way of using my faculties interestingly. In learning the eternal truths of nature.” In the late 1800s, when this entry was written, women had come to bear, in the scientific community, the same objective, mediating function as the photograph.¹⁰ Indeed, photography’s invention was intimately connected to the desire of seeing “nature” “fixating itself,” “revealing itself,” “drawing itself spontaneously with its own pencils.” For proto-photographers such as Niépce, Daguerre and Talbot, “nature”—understood as a pictorial landscape—was imagined to speak via its own imprints onto photosensitive surfaces. As Peter Galison and Lorraine Daston have aptly demonstrated

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about what came to be appallingly called the observatory's "harem": "The workers were identified with the machines and, like the machines in their 'emptiness' they offered a transparency through which nature could speak. [...] Beyond their supposed 'lack of skill,' women were presumed to offer a 'natural' predilection away from the grand speculative tradition."¹¹

Annie Jump Cannon found herself historically at the juncture between these various practices and discourses, as both a so-called "human computer" and photography aficionada. And yet her trajectory subverts these narratives. Her theoretical innovation in the realm of spectra classification was recognized worldwide,¹² and her passion for celestial bodies went far beyond her professional duties. Astronomy nourished her heart and imagination since childhood in ways perhaps only the abundant poetry found in her scrapbooks—written by herself and others—can fully capture. Thus, jotted down in dark blue ink somewhat in haste, appear the words of poet Matthew Arnold:

A look of passionate desire
O'er the sea and to the stars I send
Ye who from my childhood up have
calm'd me,
Calm me, ah, compose me to the end!

It is the poetic dimension that Malena Szlam's work seeks to redeem, as it finds itself at the crossroads of cosmic and photographic desire. Despite how far apart late-nineteenth-century (astronomical) photography may be from a contemporary filmmaking practice such as Szlam's, something about, on the one hand, the handmade treatment of filmic/photographic materiality, and on the other its potential for "spontaneity," remains.¹³ Early photographers fantasized a profoundly realistic image that would represent "nature" spontaneously according to "its own terms." The process involved a static, lengthy exposure of landscapes, which the sunbeams would engrave—hence Niépce's invention of the term "heliography." 1900s reproductions of nightly skies depended on

such long exposures to allow the apparition of starlight—a spectral light traveling to the eye from a deep past. Similarly reliant on light as a sculptural element structuring the image, Szlam seeks a photographic spontaneity that does not claim nature's objective truth. Yet her dream-like filmic collages depend on organic and technical processes that exceed her control. Impelled by their "psychophysical" and "psychochemical" composition, Szlam's films rely on the serendipity of photochemical processes and the beauty of mechanical accidents—still haunted, perhaps, by the spectres of "heliography."

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"How it appeared? Well... by chance." It was during a trip to Chile that the moon made its pulsating intrusion, frame by frame, into Szlam's camera. This motif has perforated at times surreptitiously, like a needle of light, her recent works in film. This journey to the mountains and lakes in the South of her home country was meaningful, as she traveled with her mother and the soft rattle of her Super 8mm camera. In her luggage, a Spanish translation of Bachelard's book on water and dreams, found in a flea market in her native Santiago, and a notebook in which her mother tongue and English begin to intermingle:

textos efímeros y foráneos
ephemeral and foreign texts

...texts I want to transform into
something else
correct my grammar correct my
grammar
correct my body and so on...

Written words, seeking to exist through linguistic and bodily uncertainty, begin to accompany her in the process of filming—a diaristic practice reminiscent of the films and writings of artists such as Carolee Schneemann, Chick Strand, and Bill Viola. Diary form meets the process of Super 8mm in-camera editing. Both become records of the everyday, offering intimate snippets of daily experience organized around the

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various cycles of one's own body, and of the earth. Interestingly, both practices seem to have other equivalents, stemming from other epochs. Like the 1960s, when avant-garde filmmakers kept humble visual Super 8mm journals documenting quotidian details. In the case of Schneemann, one finds rushes of the cat, views from the window, even the spiraling image of a moon.¹⁴ Or perhaps the turn of the twentieth century, when diaries—such as those found in Cannon's archive—had the vocation of recording "a line a day." On the pages, one could follow with precision the fluctuation of daily weather, or the countless hours spent working. Certain diaries were divided by day and meant to last several years, such that one may see on the very same page the accumulation of five years under, say, "January 1st." Such a spatial rendering of personal and atmospheric experience would inscribe the consciousness of previous years in one's reflection of the present day, adding a cyclical dimension to the seemingly linear temporal progression of life. Similarly, yet with a different purpose, by rewinding film in-camera to expose the same frame, time and again and at various moments, Szlam creates palimpsests of images that offer a portrait of the temporal complexity of lives in which dreams, memories, and the imagination co-exist with the quotidian passage of time.

While Szlam's first attempt at filming the moon took place in Chile, this sidereal scene continued to make intermittent appearances in her works, before emerging as a full object of attention with Lunar Almanac (2013).¹⁵ In her film Anagrams of Light (2011), fireworks were filmed in single frame shots and edited in-camera: their rhythm is jolted, as if mad. The spectacle of light and smoke evokes both celebration and catastrophe. Sparks disseminate on an ebony sky. The moon appears at the very end, glowing and pulsating like a burning heart, before vanishing. Beneath Your Skin of Deep Hollow (2010)—whose title was taken from Mallarmé's Hérodiade—also takes place at night, and is filmed entirely in Super 8mm in Montreal's botanical garden. One can barely

recognize this space of fantasy, this luxurious simulacra of "nature," seen through exotic prisms of "culture" implanted in the midst of of a working-class neighbourhood. Through Szlam's lens, the colour of lanterns and various sources of light emerge from the mirroring surface of black waters, always fleeting, murky and refracted. At times they are eaten up by thorny pine leaves, which become nibbling shadows in the foreground. We are brought to share a peculiar intimacy with various elements, almost accessing for a moment the point of view of an animal, or of the trees themselves. A moon appears again as an enigmatic coda. It offers, in the last instance, a fixed, hypnotic anchor, blazing with light: illuminating yet blinding, immensely seductive yet consuming.

When describing the sensory effect of moonlight, Benjamin hinted towards a momentary dialectical relation between the earth and its satellite. Lit by the moon, "it is an earth different from that to which the moon is subject as a satellite, for it is itself transformed into a satellite of the moon."¹⁶ Ultimately, Benjamin asks how the moon can remain but a supplementary satellite when it transfigures so deeply half of our experience on earth. How to explain the intimate intensity of an orb bound, for most humans, to remain but a distant image? What exactly is burning, radiating, when film allows us to gaze at a moon that might have more to say about our own bodily state, our own current earthly existence? In his acerbic critique of the Enlightenment, Theodor Adorno offered the indelible image of "a fully enlightened earth radiat(ing) disaster triumphant."¹⁷ Thus, perhaps, Szlam's moons may reflect the beams of the Sun as much as, for the contemporary viewer, Earth's disastrous radiation.

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As I viewed Szlam's work and listened to her during our many conversations, I sensed the naiveté of one of my initial questions (when did you "first" film the moon?), which betrayed a wishful attempt at locating a stable origin. The tale I was provided with was a



Malena Szlam, *Lunar Almanac*, 2013 (detail), Canada; 16mm film, colour, silent, 4 minutes; Courtesy of the artist.

scene by a lake where she and her mother had stopped overnight, in a wooden cabin:

warm translucent rivers emerging from
the earth
they spring and continue their course
under the wooden house
Harbor for the immigrant family
the door opens and the wind pulls me
outside

This was in fact the house as it appeared in a dream she had jotted down the next morning in her notebook. I imagined this house, ensconced at the edge of a lake, and translucent rivers “like bloodstreams,” she writes a few entries later, flowing under the wooden planks. And between those lines, out of that floor made of wood, emerged the harbor of an “immigrant family.” Her paternal grandparents, perhaps—exiled Polish Jews forced to flee and cross the Atlantic Ocean to reach South America in 1938. A ghostly wharf, stable and yet subject to moisture and erosion, as it hangs over a continuous stream. And while reading her text, the curious sense of hearing the flow of blood—whose was it? That of a (barred) biological connection to the land; or the very blood shed by the destructive potential of such a claimed appurtenance? The question of origins, not unrelated to the imagined matter of blood—translucent blood, all the more—kept wavering, as did my dull question about the “first” apparition of the moon.

Ephemeral images
in the absence of a recognizable
cartography,
of graves and documents.
The process of invisible remembering
marks the dislocation of bodies and
history

The corporeality of Szlam’s films is intimately linked to the desire to dwell, to imagine ephemeral homes in places in which one can never (and can one ever?) find the tangible extremity of a root. To think about roots, whether they appear in a text or when narrating one’s artistic practice, we might

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be ready to consider that, as Jacques Derrida noted in his early writings, they “live only by that representation, by never touching the soil.”¹⁸ Throughout our conversations, intergenerational narratives mingled under the troubled sense of sharing a nomadic mode of existence: her displaced ancestors from the Calchaquí tribe, her Polish grandparents exiled to Argentina, her parents’ emigration from Argentina to Chile, and back and forth again several times—each time also as political exiles. And finally, her own move to Canada. Genealogy expressed as forced transience, interruption, absence—grafted upon a sense of loss experienced in the present. As she recalled her travels to Southern Chile, she remembers filming water:

I was doing an observational research on water as an embodied element—related to the human body, the female body. The womb. Water is not just water. It is many waters. I grew up thinking water was singular. But there are solid waters, muddy waters, transparent waters, dead waters. And this manifests itself through color too. Blue, silver, brown. Following water recalled my sense of feeling uprooted, she says, displaced. Of a sense of loss within myself. Landscapes are linked to a sense of being lost, to my need to find myself in this place.¹⁹

“What place?” I asked. “Well, Canada, Chile, South America and North America...” Images of moons, lakes and skies allow to conjoin very distant geographies. Her answer seemed to gesture towards a form of roving that both encompassed and exceeded geographical considerations—perhaps even language itself. Interestingly, in most writings addressing the question of “landscape,” language falters. Raymond Williams’s astonishment at the word “nature” and its extreme complexity is time and again revisited as a plethora of etymological excavations revealing semantic dispersion and uncertainty.²⁰ Critics often resemble Freud at the outset of his astonishing piece on the “uncanny”—a subject matter described as a “province” of the aesthetic

realm—digging in the various dictionaries of the world only to find the most contrasting significations and to come back to what was, uncannily, “long old and familiar” in his German language.²¹

Starting from the suffix “scape,” Kenneth Olwig unearthed multiple significations from the limited domain of Germanic languages: carved out shapes, male and female procreative organs, birthing processes, organic growths.²² The prefix “land” allowed him to conjoin the term to its twin concepts nature and nation: an (agri) cultured space identified to a people through blood ties and/or the ploughing of the soil. For Olwig, landscape was to be considered by its structural opposition between city and state, and he retraces this oppositional relationship back to the writings of Virgil, which may find a powerful aesthetic resonance with the images of astronomy. For the Roman poet, nature was a “unity of opposites”: “the sexual cosmology in which a female earth and a male sky (was) conceptually linked in a seminal process of cosmic intercourse.” According to this ancient cosmological conception, celestial knowledge was closer to geometrical, mathematical precision and urban imperialism, whereas the earth offered rural, “organic, biological wisdom.” Olwig ultimately locates “landscape” as conceptually and mythically opposed to the sky—and as the imagined locus of communal identity: “it is in organic, biological terms of breeding and cultivation that power within the community is legitimated.”²³ Mechanical reproductions of the sky—especially twentieth-century astronomical photographs—would seem to be quintessentially opposed to such an understanding of “landscape.”

The worlds conjured by Szlam are not inscribed in the fetishization of a specific national attribute, nor do they afford the stabilization and domestication of a fixed, recognizable locale from which one might be forcefully inserted or expelled. Yet the creative processes involved in crafting Szlam’s “landscapes” enact a form of inhabitation. Writing, filming, and building installations



Malena Szlam, *Lunar Almanac*, 2013 (detail), Canada; 16mm film, colour, silent, 4 minutes; Courtesy of the artist.

become modes of “ploughing” a soil on which one can exist. In this process, Virgil’s mathematical sky may well become re-coded as “land” through artisan-like image-making practices, where the moon is carved out from the preserve of scientists and taken for the richness of all its other possible rhythms and uncanny repetitions: calendric, menstrual, oneiric, filmic, photographic. Repetition, in fact, is crucial to the aesthetics and creation of *Lunar Almanac*. The moon filmed in Caburga will later be re-filmed in Canada, and it is the latter that will appear in the single-channel film. The simultaneous similarity and disparity Szlam finds between the places that appear in her films are manifested in her notebooks, and hint towards the ways in which landscape itself—the word and concept—might be considered as *Das Unheimlich*: homely and unhomely at once.

Fusing landscapes...
 Dissolution and condensation...
 Last night I arrived in Caburga...
 I’m farther South from Canada,
 on the edge of a lake in the south of
 Chile...
 a lake that mirrors the ones farther
 north, in Canada...
 that mirror strikes me...
 and only exacerbates the differences

In Szlam’s notebooks and films, lakes appear as sites in which light is reflected, but they also echo other lakes. These lakes become copies, doubles, substitutable, at once homely and uncanny. They are the natural/artificial anchors onto which is projected and displaced a desire for home. It is no coincidence that it is before a lake that Szlam films the moon: for Bachelard, the lake is the eye of the world, and gives way to a “cosmic narcissism,” when the sky engraves itself on the surface of the water. Film embodies such lakes—as a surface on which the moon was reflected first in Chile and later from the perspective of a northern sky. How may it be that by photographing or filming otherworldly bodies, one finds an (outer) space to inhabit, perhaps even to call home?

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In a strikingly similar moment of dépaysement—a radical “change of scenery”—astronomer Annie Jump Cannon also turned to the sky as an anchor. It was 1 March 1922. After studying for decades plates that had traveled North by ship from Harvard’s observatory in Peru, Cannon finally embarks for her first trip to South America to realize the longtime dream of observing through the telescopes a sky she had only studied in photographic form. She stood on the dock, ecstatically gazing at the stars and initiating others to astronomical observation. “All the world began to look strange by day and by night,” she writes, as her travel progresses. This sense of estrangement only intensified once on land. Gazing inside and outside the window of the train to Arequipa, she describes a picturesque landscape in and as movement:

Strange sights within and without that
 “Coche de Salon,” the Pullman of the
 Southern Railway. [...] At times the
 coloring of the desert was reminiscent
of the Grand Canyon of Arizona. In
 mid-desert, there appeared to my
 eyes foamy waves dashing over rocks,
 unbelievably distinct to be only a mirage.
 Then came the marvelous crescent-
 shaped sand dunes, always in the form
of a new moon, some as high as 20 feet
 and 200 feet broad and weighing 8000
 tons. They too are traveling over the
desert, but while our train went at least
 20 miles an hour, the dunes progress, as
 has been measured, only 2 inches a day.
 They are all moving towards the north,
 in the same direction as the prevailing
 wind. [...] The life of these heaps of sand
 is 2,000 years or more.²⁵ (my emphasis)

Again, foreign vistas appear at once familiar and estranged. They too are pareidolia: from the colour of the desert of Islay emerges the American Grand Canyon, and the new moon from its dunes. While the dunes travel towards the North, she travels by train, by their side, musing on their ancestral temporality. Attempts to familiarize the unfamiliar were

also at work in her contemplation of the sky, which she had always signified through the words of poets and which the shift of perspective suddenly pulled out of the realm of “nature”: “The next night, came my first survey of the southern sky. To one to whom the northern constellations had been familiar since childhood, could anything have looked more unnatural? ‘The old familiar stars which climb each night the ancient sky’ (Emerson) had gone through an unbelievable metamorphosis... There were strangers in that ancient sky.” (my emphasis) And yet despite this strangeness, it is ultimately when gazing at the stars that she expresses a sense of home: “These glorious nights made me feel equally at home under the southern as previously under the northern stars.”

The peculiar “familiarity” of these skies was cultivated by Cannon through her own diaristic writings, and through the affectionate collection of words written by poets such as Emerson, and others. These poetic texts open astronomical aesthetics to the question of sublimity, and religious or philosophical transcendence.²⁶ Though it is impossible to do justice to such complex theoretical entanglements in this context, we must consider how celestial bodies—which most humans are unlikely to ever touch except, perhaps, through processes such as light impression on a photographic plate—are always already somewhat “imagistic,” and bound to be seen from afar. Their capacity to exceed human physicality and lifespans both awakens the conscience of finitude and becomes grafted onto the ways death inscribes itself into life.

In 1894, Annie Jump Cannon began a notebook immediately after the death of her mother. Only two years later was she to begin working at the Harvard College Observatory, and dedicate her life fully to astronomy. The deep blue journal is one of mourning, which brings to the fore the forces that drove her scientific perseverance, and the ways in which astronomical bodies appear in her writing under registers of religiosity, finitude, and the otherworldly:



Malena Szlam, *Lunar Almanac*, 2013 (detail), Canada; 16mm film, colour, silent, 4 minutes; Courtesy of the artist.

February 15th

It is so cold to-night. When I opened the window it almost drove me wild to see the moon shining on the white snow... O, could I but have something. A dream, vision, a fancy to soothe my troubled brain...

March 18th

... Have had no dream or vision or sight. I have tried to crowd every day with busy work ... Busy—as if I had to rush from one day to the other and never think about what ought to be done next... I am here, and she is lying calmly by Silver Lake. [...] When, or where is her spirit? ... I long so for more real feeling of her spirit-life. For a visible communication with the other world... The stars help me more than anything else. The glorious orbs greeting me every night and the words of revelation have saved my mind ...

April 8th

The giver of all my good things is beneath the earth at Silver Lake. I can hardly endure life. I would give anything for one look into her beautiful face, for one sound of that lovely voice ... I do not want just the spirit. I want her hair, her eyes, her very body.

Celestial bodies accompany her as she attempts to make sense of the absence of a loved body, to imagine what a “visible communication with the other world” could be.²⁷ In this process, the moon “drives her wild,” and the stars have “helped her”—their light offering the visible otherworldly emission she so longed for in the absence of a sign, of a “spirit-life.”

This is the very emotion, it seems, shared by many protagonists of a film by an(other) Chilean filmmaker, Patricio Guzmán. In *Nostalgia de la Luz* (2010), in which astronomy is said to be a widespread fascination and pastime in Chile. Guzmán explains this by recalling the imaginary linked

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to the many famous observatories located in the Atacama Desert in Chile, which offers unparalleled conditions to observe nightly skies. Astronomy becomes the lens through which to speak about the country’s troubled history in the aftermath of the dictatorship, as many people who have suffered from the political violence recall holding on to the study of the stars in moments of profound despair. Ex-political prisoners return to the abandoned cells where they were held in the desert as they show where and how they collectively gazed at constellations. A woman whose parents were both killed under the regime—and today works for one of the main astronomical associations in Chile—explains how the study of astronomy offered a mode of making sense of her loss, as she gained access to stellar temporalities reaching far beyond human finitude. In this film, the past is considered at multiple scales: from the astronomers in the desert observing light received with incommensurable delays, to archaeologists—in the same desert—looking for the traces of long-deceased human beings, to the painful, recent past which has been unable to be addressed.

Thus, a third group appears throughout Guzmán’s film: women scanning the desert with the hope of finding the bodily remains of their loved ones, killed under Pinochet’s regime. On the surface of this moonlike landscape, we see them digging, wandering with their eyes glued to the ground. Demanding more than the nearness of a “spirit-life,” they seek the tangible bodies scattered throughout a crackled earth, as if to bear witness to and counter-act the very physicality of displacement. Again, Szlam’s notebook comes to mind, and takes on a new meaning:

Reconfiguring the language of history that has been invisible. Tracing those inhabited spaces where the history has been violated erased and killed. Landscape emptied of people. Full of memories, there, apparently invisible.

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Landscape is a fracture of mapping history, a history of repression, the history of being uprooted. Relocating y refuncionar collective memory. Arte de desplazamiento.

How arresting that a scene such as the moon may have entered Malena Szlam’s camera at the same time—“by chance”—while simultaneously carrying many other possible moons. Daguerre’s failed photographic inscription. Schneemann’s spiraling Super 8mm moon. Chilean astronomic desires as traced by Guzmán, a filmmaker who elegantly evokes how culturally specific astronomical imaginaries may arise from histories of global transnational scientific projects (such as the construction of observatories) and offer both an object of collective desire and a mode of turning one’s gaze away from the unbearable wounds of history experienced and unearthed on land. How may we understand such logics of “chance” by respecting the double movement of interconnectedness and contingency?

Photographic moons allow us to consider a series of movements, oscillating from North to South and back again, and hint towards broader geographical histories of celestial observation and reproductions at once collective and irreducibly intimate. American telescopes implanted in Peru... German telescopes in Chile... stargazing on photographic plates or through a telescope in Massachussetts and in Arequipa... moon-gazing in Southern Chile and later in Canada, either through the sensuous, constricted space of the camera’s viewfinder or before rushes projected in a dark room. In these different moments, *sidus*—the astronomical bodies (of desire)—consistently exceed their status as aesthetic motifs offered to naked and technological eyes. As bodies, they inevitably interact with ours. In and around them, feelings of uprooting (*dépaysement*) congeal and find an anchor—a call for solace, perhaps, in order to circumvent “dis-aster” (*dés-astre*).

NOTES

* I would like to thank Marilyn Ivy at Columbia University for her encouragements, her careful reading, and for providing the initial context (a seminar entitled “Ecocriticism for the End Times”) in which this research emerged.

1 One might be reminded here of the title of Judith Mayne’s [The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women’s Cinema](#) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

2 My understanding of such a photographic history draws inspiration from Geoffrey Batchen’s seminal work, [Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography](#) (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997). The section entitled “Desire” is almost exclusively concerned with the question of images of landscapes and views of nature.

3 Gaston Bachelard, [Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter](#) (Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1983).

4 Ektachrome is a reversal film produced by Kodak and has been officially discontinued since 2013. Its vivid and contrasted colours are highly sought after by filmmakers still using analogue techniques.

5 Walter Benjamin, [Berlin Childhood Around 1900](#) (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 115.

6 [Pareidolia](#) derives from the Greek [para](#) (beside) and [eidolon](#), or [eidos](#) (appearance, form). The Online Merriam-Webster suggests this definition: “the tendency to perceive a specific, often meaningful, image in a random or ambiguous visual pattern.

‘The human brain is optimized to recognize faces, which could also explain why we are so good at picking out meaningful shapes in random patterns. This phenomenon, pareidolia, could be responsible for a host of otherwise unexplained sightings, such as the face of the Virgin Mary on a toasted cheese sandwich.—[New Scientist](#), 24 December 2011.’”

7 On this topic see the work of Margaret Rossiter, [Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940](#) (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), and

Londa Schiebinger, [The Mind Has No Sex ? Women in the Origins of Modern Science](#) (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999). On the Harvard College Observatory, see Pamela Mack, “Straying from their Orbits : Women in Astronomy in America” in [Women of Science : Righting the Record](#), ed. Gabriele Kass-Simon, Patricia Farnes, Deborah Nash (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 72–116). See also Peter Galison, [Image and Logic: A Material Culture of Microphysics](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

8 Annie Jump Cannon, [In the Footsteps of Columbus](#) (Boston: Barta and Co., 1893).

9 The Kamaret, patented in 1891 by The Blair Camera Company, was the first American camera to move the film spools to the front of the camera.

10 It was during the last decades of the 1800s that the crucial figure of the female “typewriter” emerged, as documented so deftly by Friedrich Kittler in [Gramophone, Film, Typewriter](#) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). Also, for a detailed study of the ways in which “nature” and “women” have been historically conflated—and how both have been exploited by capitalism—see Carolyn Merchant, [The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution](#) (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990).

11 Lorraine Daston, Peter Galison, [Objectivity](#) (Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books & MIT Press, 2007), 341.

12 [The Henry Draper Catalogue](#) (1918–1924), which Cannon co-authored, catalogued over 300,000 stars and was an absolutely pioneering effort in stellar spectra classification for the time.

13 Geoffrey Batchen insists, in the early proto-photographers’ discourses, on the recurrence of the trope of “spontaneity” in the revelation of the image on photographic surfaces.

14 It is remarkable that Marielle Nitoslawska’s riveting film [Breaking the Frame with Carolee Schneemann](#) (2014) begins with a spiraling image of the moon she found in a stack

of Schneemann’s Super 8mm outs. She opens with such an evocative scene as a way of conjuring up what she calls the “perplexity of the see-er in the seen,” one of her film’s forceful motifs.

15 Prior to this, the philosophical motif of the sphere was already present in Szlam’s work. See her own text inspired by Jorge Luis Borges’ short essay on Pascal’s sphere: “Una Esfera,” [Pausa 2](#) (Chile Council for the Arts and Culture, November 2004): 62–67.

16 Benjamin, [Berlin Childhood](#), 115.

17 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, [Dialectic of Enlightenment](#), trans. John Cumming (New York: Verso Books, 1997), 3.

18 Jacques Derrida, [Of Grammatology](#), trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 101.

19 Conversations with Malena Szlam, March–June 2015.

20 Raymond Williams, [Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), in particular the entry “nature.”

21 For example, J. B. Jackson, editor of [Landscape](#) magazine, who after 25 years of scholarly work on the topic wrote that “the concept continues to elude me.” “The Order of Landscape,” in [The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes](#), ed. D. W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 153.

22 Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” in [Writings on Art and Literature](#) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

23 Kenneth R. Olwig, “Sexual Cosmology: Nation and Landscape at the Conceptual Interstices of Nature and Culture, or: What does Landscape Really Mean?” in [Landscape: Politics and Perspectives](#), ed. B. Bender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 307–343.

25 Annie Jump Cannon archive, “Southern Skies” (1922), Harvard University.

26 Spiritualist groups that gathered in Paris around new astronomical and photographic discoveries at the end of the nineteenth century. See Giordana Charuty, “Standing

Upright Before the Heavens’: Metamorphoses of Customary Christianity,” [Diogenes](#) 52, no. 1 (February 2005): 67–81.

27 We should be reminded here of Immanuel Kant’s famous early phrase (which was reproduced on his tombstone) in which he expressed his awe before two seemingly incommensurable realities: “The starry sky above me and moral law within me.” For an elaborate critique of Kantian philosophy, correlationism, and the question of finitude, see Quentin Meillassoux, [After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency](#), trans. Ray Brassier (London/New York: Continuum, 2008.)