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## Three Beautiful New Latin American Documentaries Paint Portraits with Sound

Surire, Site of Sites, and Black Sun are highlights of this year's Neighboring Scenes showcase.



**S**alt flats are truly bizarre ecosystems, fields of mineral deposits under vast expanses of sky. The Salar de Surire is no different, a vast white desert in the shadow of the Arintica volcano and its flanking glaciers. It sits in Northern Chile, but in **Iván Osnovikoff** and **Bettina Perut**'s breathtaking **Surire** it seems to sit in a dimension of its own. The locals sometimes refer to a road as the way "to Chile" with much the same tone as they give directions to neighboring Bolivia. Even to those who live there, the Surire is a land apart.

Osnovikoff and Perut, to their credit, resist the temptation to build a film entirely from enigmatic landscapes. Instead, they understand the equal

significance of sound in the character of a place, however stunning its sights. This marvelous awareness is a virtue held by all of the documentaries in Film Society of Lincoln Center's Neighboring Scenes, an annual showcase of new Latin American cinema. Between *Surire*, ***Site of Sites*** and ***Black Sun*** is a veritable masterclass in sonic portraiture.

*Surire*, for its part, begins with the strangest single sound. Water violently bubbles on the surface of the salt flat. Osnovikoff and Perut pair this percussion with an extreme close-up, examining the minute changes occurring in this rare climate. Shortly after, the sound of laundry banging against the side of a metal washtub creates a strange sort of music. These rhythmic moments hint in the direction of a naturalist techno, as if the film is mixing the salt flat.

But, for the most part, the Salar de Surire is a quiet place. Local herds of vicuna stroll by in silence, fading into the shimmering impressionist images caused by the heat. The rabbits and flamingoes are equally mute. A dog quietly makes eye contact with the camera as its own trims its hair with an old pair of scissors. The local people, a small Aymara-speaking community, are often captured in quiet moments of contemplation and rest.

Against this neutral silence, every sound seems to some degree like an intrusion. Trucks drive loudly by. A fire leaps onto the roof of a house. In the film's most powerful scene, an old woman slowly skins a vicuna. Her body unable to handle the strain of the work, she stops and starts. "The devil is blocking my work," she cries. These bursts, like the volcano above, are just as essential to *Surire* as the silent, picturesque landscapes.



This makes it the sonic opposite of **Natalia Cabra** and **Oriol Estrada's** *Site of Sites*, which uses sound to smooth the transitions between its visually distinct settings. It is also a film about a single location, but its subject Dominican beach town is cleft in two by the socio-economic distinctions of labor and housing.

Cabra and Estrada observe and juxtapose their subjects with an almost Scandinavian distance. Construction workers on the beach use their break to debate the rules of love and sex. A bored young woman lounges by a pool outside her luxury home. Nearby, a gardener comes inside to chat with his girlfriend, who cleans the same house.

There is no narrative direction, except perhaps the gradual progress made by the earth movers down by the water. Sand is pushed around, dumped into the water to subtly alter the coastline. Yet Cabra and Estrada deny a glimpse at the final product, content instead with the uncanny images of a deconstructed beach. It seems as futile as the golf games played by wealthier locals, whose inability to sink a ball becomes a recurring joke.

These scenes are connected by the hushed wind that constantly flows between these disparate locations. The sound of the breeze smooths over the gulf between the contexts of the working and golf-playing classes. It doesn't elide the differences; this is as blunt a representation of economic disparity as any. But *Site of Sites* also captures something essential about the way time flows for everyone in this place, a single languorous atmosphere that wafts across the island and holds this beautiful documentary together.



Sound also unifies ***Black Sun***, a family self-portrait by **Laura Huertas Millán**. It begins with a voice lesson. The filmmaker's aunt Antonia, an opera singer, runs breathing exercises with a student. As she leads her student through scales and breaths, her own voice slowly warms into its own beauty. It is her art that lights her up, evident both in her music and in subtle details, like the fact that all her Facebook posts are in German.

Yet she also struggles with addiction. She lives in a temporary group home, which seems primarily occupied by younger men. She looks on as they gather together and freestyle rap, a form of therapeutic composition that shares a spirit with her own operatic self-expression.

Later, aunt and mother both divulge their painful family history, of which

Antonia's drug use is only a piece. In a moment of stylized mourning, Millán transports her aunt to a dark landscape that suggests the outskirts of a city. There, in a black dress and dark makeup, she performs a selection from Luigi Cherubini's *Medée*. Medea's pained murder of her own children becomes a metaphor for Antonia's own regret.

But this pageant of grief and guilt is not the endpoint of this artistic investigation. The traumatic childhood of the sisters slowly unwinds in conversation. Millán centers on the testimony of her mother, whose own voice becomes the temporary center of this sonically precise film. Her confession is perhaps less transcendent than her sister's singing, but it contains much truth in its directness.

The film closes with Antonia, alone in a cavernous old opera house. She sings Robert Schumann's "Du ring an meinem finger," a heartrending contemplation of the deep value of life and the conclusion of childhood's dream. Alone on stage, Antonia identifies with the tranquility of Schumann's music and finds peace in the wake of her sister's storytelling. Her voice, unaccompanied, brings about catharsis.

**Neighboring Scenes runs at the Film Society of Lincoln Center in New York City from January 26th through 31st. Additionally, *Surire* is available for rent or purchase [on Vimeo](#).**

Documentary Latin America Dominican Republic Chile Opera

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