

June 2019

## Levine, Alison J. Murray. *Vivre Ici: Space, Place, and Experience in Contemporary French Documentary*. Liverpool UP, 2018.

Tessa Ashlin Nunn

Duke University, [tessa.nunn@duke.edu](mailto:tessa.nunn@duke.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Nunn, Tessa Ashlin (2019) "Levine, Alison J. Murray. *Vivre Ici: Space, Place, and Experience in Contemporary French Documentary*. Liverpool UP, 2018.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 43: Iss. 2, Article 13. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2086>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

---

**Levine, Alison J. Murray. *Vivre Ici: Space, Place, and Experience in Contemporary French Documentary*. Liverpool UP, 2018.**

**Abstract**

Review of Levine, Alison J. Murray. *Vivre Ici: Space, Place, and Experience in Contemporary French Documentary*. Liverpool University Press, 2018.

**Keywords**

Documentary, Embodied Spectatorship, Contemporary France

Alison J. Murray Levine. *Vivre Ici: Space, Place, and Experience in Contemporary French Documentary*. Liverpool UP, 2018. 303 pp.

Since 2000, French documentary films' production and popularity have significantly increased. Along with this expansion in documentaries' visibility, the stakes and artistry of these films that typically struggle to be financed have likewise reached new heights. Responding to these esthetic and social shifts, Alison J. Murray Levine's *Vivre Ici: Space, Place, and Experience in Contemporary French Documentary* does exactly what its title indicates. This monograph examines the ways in which French creative documentaries, produced since 1998, invite spectators to experience these films and live with the spaces, places, and embodied subjects inhabiting the screen. Levine assesses the cinematic strategies that question the viewer's situation as a political and embodied subject in France today. Although esthetics and narratives are central to these films, what they do occurs not only on screen but also in what Levine calls the "ecosystems" generated by a network of virtual connections and shared spaces among the filmmaker, the documentary's public, and the subjects represented.

Setting aside voice-over-heavy explanatory documentaries, Levine argues that documentaries aiming to unsettle and displace spectators can activate uneasiness and unresolved questions, emphasizing the limitations of being an observing subject that resonate long after the moment of viewing. By eliciting an embodied, exploratory viewing experience in which the spectator simultaneously becomes conscious of her proximity to and distance from the filmed subjects, these documentaries engage with viewers as political subjects capable of taking action. This is not to say that the films didactically imbue spectators with a partisan agenda. Rather, creating an observational style, they encourage new ways of seeing, hearing, and feeling.

Levine provides the right amount of description for readers to imagine the films as she analyzes the visual and, though less often, aural techniques that guide spectators to adopt an active, embodied manner of observing the filmed subjects and places. Her investigation of how viewing subjects become political subjects by co-creating meaning with the artist, the artist's subject, and the viewed object could easily apply to studying media other than cinema. The book's introduction could therefore serve as a concise overview of theories of spectatorship and observation for an undergraduate- or graduate-level course.

After a history of the French documentary industry's development from the invention of cinema to today, five chapters analyze how five sites "feel" for the filmmakers and the filmed subjects of relatively successful documentaries. These everyday spaces include the planet, roads, schools, farms, and places that do not make space for the subjects inhabiting them, such as the Calais "jungle" and Parisian streets occupied by homeless persons. The chapter on environmental

documentaries, in addition to being the only chapter considering high-budget films, offers a cogent examination of visual methods implicating the viewer into adopting a non-human point of view and inciting multisensory engagement as Levine differentiates creative and explanatory documentaries. Focusing on autobiographical road trip documentaries by Raymond Depardon, Agnès Varda, and Chris Marker, the third chapter shines light on how movement between places saturated with memory creates uncertainty as the camera herds the viewer along its itinerary. The political stakes of the fourth and sixth chapters are perhaps the most poignant as Levine demonstrates how five documentaries represent schools as potential agents of social justice and then how documentaries by Claus Drexel, Sylvain George, and Alice Diop create space and visibility for precarious persons denied a place in the viewer's world. Although in-depth film analysis constitutes the majority of these chapters, explanations of the modes through which viewers learn about and watch these films, which often reflect a rising consciousness or discontent among citizens, further reveal how these documentaries exist in and with French society. Beyond outlining the intricate and interconnected nature of the documentaries' esthetics, production, and reception, each chapter concludes with a well-researched summary of the recent developments surrounding the chapter's theme, thereby bridging cinema and social-political realities. As a whole, this collection of contextualized film analyses demonstrates how these documentaries incite audiences to question the notion of contemporary France as both a political entity and a shared space for its diverse denizens.

Engaging with a multitude of film theorists in each chapter, the book weaves together a clearly delineated approach to film analysis in relation to larger political contexts. In particular, the author's explanations and uses of French filmmaker and theorist Jean-Louis Comolli's work provide a substantial introduction to his texts on critical and active cinematic spectatorship that uphold Levine's central argument. Regarding its novel contributions to the field, *Vivre Ici*, drawing on Vivian Sobchak's and Laura Marks's respective notions of embodied viewing and haptic cinema, positions corporeality within questions of space and place. This critical move amplifies the stakes of such viewing practices. For, the viewers, like the filmed subjects, simultaneously dwell in sensate bodies and ever-changing, unpredictable spaces. Acknowledgement of this shared humanity allows for ignored or shunned subjects, portrayed in documentaries, to gain prominence, not as social problems, but as fellow beings. Although Levine suggests that the films themselves make this connection apparent, learned viewing strategies for heightening awareness of the interconnectedness between viewing and viewed subjects could increase the affective, intellectual, and political effects of documentary-watching experiences. *Vivre ici* indeed offers such strategies.

The enthusiasm and care with which Levine writes inspires interest in contemporary documentary and willingness to reflect on how one experiences, or

lives with, these films. This monograph is pertinent for scholars of film or contemporary French history. Furthermore, its readability lends it to being a useful addition to bibliographies for film and culture studies courses as well as an enjoyable book for cinephiles or Francophiles outside of academia.

Tessa Ashlin Nunn  
*Duke University*