

BREATHING WITH THE CAMERA

A portrait of Orkney through experimental films

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ABSTRACT: The outward representation of the Orkney archipelago, around 10 miles off the north coast of Scotland, is mainly predicated on scenic imagery, of standing stones and other archaeological settlements, sea cliffs and wild seas, fishing boats in harbour townscapes, expansive beaches with turquoise waters, all playing a prominent role in projecting a sense of ‘islandness’. Yet, this representation lacks cultural depth, using landscape as a setting based on objectified and disengaged tropes, of the ancient past, remote or wild places, or insular communities. In contrast, Orkney based artists working with film allow us to emerge into a sense of place charged by cultural, experiential and ecological qualities. In their work we see tired tropes of landscape replaced with creatively charged expressions of the island as a relational place. Across this study, the evaluation of these artists’ films is framed through a set of relational qualities, the island as a situated, imagined, sensed, ambient and resourceful place, ultimately being a constructed place where filmmaking and island life merge.

KEYWORDS: Orkney, film, place, relational, islandness

Introduction: The island as a relational place

Island is a special place where impossible assemblages are created by a blend of isolation, routine of the seasons, stories brought by travellers, strange objects washed up on shore – where history and folklore are personal creations as everyone and every rock has got a name. ...and every roadkill is amending eco-system. You have to as responsible here for your action as a time traveller can be. Only our weather can keep the place in balance – bringing down, crumbling everything what is abandoned. (Ivanov & Chan, 2015 p. 11).

What makes islands so special? For those who visit Scotland’s many islands, the allure of remote, natural environments, dramatic coastlines, secluded beaches and harbour towns nestled in sheltered bays are common aspects of outward representations produced to entice people to visit. As one of the most popular island destinations, the outward representation of the Orkney archipelago, around 10 miles off the north coast of Scotland, is largely predicated on scenic imagery, of standing stones and other archaeological settlements, sea cliffs and wild seas, fishing boats in harbour townscapes, expansive beaches with turquoise waters, all playing a prominent role in projecting a sense of ‘islandness’. Certainly, this outward projection has been successful in establishing a sizeable tourism industry, with approximately 400,000 visitors each year, primarily seeking out experiences of scenery and

landscape, or history and culture (Orkney Tourism Strategy, 2022). However, this outward representation lacks cultural depth, using island settings based on objectified and disengaged tropes, of the ancient past, remote or wild places, or insular communities. In contrast, Ivanov & Chan's statement, while being grammatically idiosyncratic, reflects Hay's idea that "island meanings, divergent or convergent, emerge from a deeply visceral lived experience" (2006, p. 34). As such, their quote conveys a sense of island life based on a more instinctive and emotionally charged articulation of how islands become special places for those who live there and where what really matters is shifting relations charged by cultural, experiential and environmental qualities.



Figure 1 - Map of Orkney indicating places mentioned in the study.

Considering the island as a relational place provides a starting point to explore a series of artists working with film, and how in their work we see static tropes of landscape replaced with creatively charged expressions, offering a relational view of island life. Across this study, the evaluation of these artists work is framed through a set of place specific qualities: the island as a situated, imagined, sensed, ambient and resourceful locale, ultimately being a constructed place where filmmaking and island life merge.

Margaret Tait (1918–1999) was a pioneering filmmaker and poet who was born in Orkney and used the islands as the subject of many of her films. In 1950 Tait moved to Italy where she studied filmmaking at the Centro Sperimentale di Fotografia in Rome, with particular interest in the poetic cinema of Jean Vigo. This informed her own style of filmmaking, working from a profound personal attachment to the people and environment of Orkney, depicted not as a passive backdrop or remote space, but an active place, inhabited by people who work the land and rely on its resources (Tait, 2004). Tait’s work was relatively overlooked during her life, but has latterly received critical acclaim, with major retrospectives at the Edinburgh International Film Festival 1970 and 2004, and the National Film Theatre in London 2000.

Colin Kirkpatrick is an Orcadian artist, whose island upbringing made him acutely aware of how Orkney exists as a place of natural resources. These resources feed into an internal culture of farming and fishing, informing his perception of a kind of ‘prairie’ land, depicted in his 2006 film, *The Cowboy and the Spaceman*. Kirkpatrick’s upbringing during the North Sea oil boom of the 1970s, and more recently the rapidly expanding development of marine renewables, inform his sense of Orkney being a frontier for major energy production. As with much of Kirkpatrick’s artwork, his film plays on associations with cowboy movies, presenting an impression of a frontier landscape caught in dualistic tensions.

Sergei Ivanov and **Tsz Man Chan** are artists, originally from Russia and Hong Kong respectively. After moving to the small island of Papa Westray (known locally as Papay) in 2011, they established Papay Gyro Nights as an arts platform, from which they organised an international arts festival with particular focus on experimental film, alongside visual art, performance, music and architecture. Using the island as a place of inspiration, the festival ran between 2011 and 2017, bringing many artists to the island and making it a place for research, discussion and live interactive performance. Papay Gyro Nights remains as an arts platform, now focused on a forthcoming film, *The Artist Who Disappeared* (directed by David Kew, in post-production at the time of writing), a feature length documentary exploring the festival’s legacy for eclectic experimentation, alongside the sudden disappearance of Sergei Ivanov.¹

Mark Jenkins, a self-proclaimed incomer to Orkney (incomers are known locally as ‘ferry loupers’), is now an established islander, contributing to a range of film-based projects and organisations. As an award-winning filmmaker and editor, he has produced many short documentaries, often exploring island life by drawing on archival material, folklore and local history, or capturing the quality of ecological sites. Alongside these commercial projects Jenkins wrote and self-produced *The Imaginary Worlds of Scapa Flow* (2012). Inspired by the memoirs of service men and women based in wartime Orkney, the film brings attention to this significant period in Orkney’s history, while in many ways being relative to Jenkins’ own experience, of moving to the island and making it home.

¹ See Stuart Mclean (2024) for a poignant account of Sergei’s life and disappearance.

The island as a situated place

As the above profiles emphasise, these artists' work stems from a conscientious sense of being situated in relation to Orkney. While this is not an insular sense of being situated, as there is also a keen awareness of more extensive cultural movements, there is an expression of contentment in belonging to and dwelling in Orkney. For instance, when Tait returned to Orkney from Rome, she produced *A Portrait of Ga* (1952) capturing a deeply personal and intimate filmic portrait of her mother. The film portrays the details of her mother's lifestyle, where the Orkney landscape is used as a setting for her mother's daily routine (Figure 2). There is nothing spectacularly scenic or dramatic in this portrait, as Tait was more interested in shooting the details of landscapes, as opposed to its scenery. This focus on detail extends to the film's subject, following her mother through various intimate settings: picking heather on a moorland, the close-up of her hands unwrapping a sweet, her clothes, a simple walk, the shadow of a chair (Neely, 2008). What is revealed through this focus on detail is how to know someone, and how to see them situated within the place they live. The film conveys a strong sense of contentment in this everyday experience of island life. Reflecting the filmmaker's own return home, Tait's voiceover concludes that Orkney "is a wonderful place to be brought up in."



Figure 2 – Still from *A Portrait of Ga*. (Source: Moving Image Archive, National Libraries of Scotland.²)

In contrast to Tait's non-scenic approach, Kirkpatrick's *The Cowboy and the Spaceman* conjures a landscape of scenic grandeur, of expansive prairies with crops swaying in the wind, craggy sea cliffs and remote beaches, big skies, presented in a wide screen scenographic frame. However, he is not interested in the tired tropes of hill and sea most often associated

² <https://movingimage.nls.uk/biography/10032>

with the representation of the Scottish Highlands and Islands but in conjuring a cinematic equivalent to cowboy Western style landscapes, of Orkney styled as Wyoming. Kirkpatrick includes details: rusting farm machinery, barbed wire snagged with sheep's wool, a bull's skull lying in long grass, all contributing to his narrative of Orkney as a kind of Wild Western frontier. Within this frontier, two principal characters emerge, one being a cowboy rancher, roaming across the prairie on horseback, the other a spaceman, descending from outer space. While these characters may seem somewhat peculiar to Orkney, they are playful abstractions based on a deep concern Kirkpatrick has for the Orcadian landscape, of Orkney being a frontier encompassing inherent dualisms characteristic of island life. This dualism can be interpreted in various ways; of an island situated between local and global interests (Baldacchino, 2008), of a deep-rooted cultural place situated against the need for "progress," of conservation pitted against infrastructural development.

In a similarly scenographic style, Jenkins' film, *The Imaginary Worlds of Scapa Flow*, opens with broad seascape settings, filmed into the low winter sun, bringing the structural silhouettes of robust military defence installations, which still line many of Orkney's coastlines, into looming presence (Figure 3). From this setting, ghostly figures start to appear, bringing presence to various characters situated within an estimated 40,000 army personnel stationed across the islands in World War Two, which was almost twice the local population at that time. From the opening seascape shots, the film shifts to a kind of dreamlike cabaret, with a variety of characters. Based on memoir accounts, the film depicts how Orkney became a home and world removed from the intensity of the war: "it was so peaceful, the war seemed a million miles away" (voiceover character 10). One voiceover points to Orkney as not a bad place to be situated, with "every home open to the man in uniform, always a meal and a welcome" (voiceover character 21), albeit eggs being a constant staple; "eggs for breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner" (voiceover character 18). Jenkins situated his filming within places significant during wartime occupation. Alongside the structural war installations of gun batteries and watch towers, he uses Cromarty Hall, in St. Margaret's Hope, that lends itself well as a stage for various memories to come alive, of people dressing up in costumes, exercising, drinking, and dancing.



Figure 3 – Still from *The Imaginary Worlds of Scapa Flow*.³

³ <https://iwosf.wordpress.com/>

Papay Gyro Nights took a more direct approach to situating the festival within the islands. Taking place in February meant participants had to negotiate the route to one of Orkney's most northerly islands at a time of extreme weather conditions. Getting to the festival became an act in itself, requiring people to take the inter-island ferries across channels with fierce seas, to an island plunged in mid-winter darkness, enlivened by the sound of clattering waves. Within a season of short daylight hours, the experience of the festival was an immersion into a shadowy landscape, punctuated by an artistic blend of fire and media-based illuminations. The Papay Gyro Nights festival derived from an old island tradition, The Night of the Gyros, which last occurred in 1914.⁴ Playing on this traditional ceremony the festival was a reflection on folklore and ritual as a stimulus for experimental forms of art, music and architecture. This reinvention of a lost ceremony was, in itself, a speculation, informing the festival's aim to instigate new forms of experimental practice through mythologising and reimagining as a collective act, where each festival became a co-created reinvention of the Gyro Night ceremony. As such, the festival was situated between a physical place and mythological space.

The island as an imagined place

The Papay Gyro Night festival became increasingly structured around specific thematic "rituals" involving magic, death, grass, animals and so on. The form of experimental practice was mostly hybrid, often involving collaboration, improvisation and speculation. Notably, the theme of Ocean offered particular resonance to the festival's setting with regard to its purpose "to look at OCEAN as a way of action, philosophical paradigm, world of folklore, post-human ecology, or as a mass of water." This description draws attention to how islands are perceived, not just as places defined by the encircling sea, but also places signified through collective imagination, seen by Ivanov and Chan as "not a limitation, but an opportunity to dissolve borders and boundaries, to "become like water," to submerge a rigid landmass" (Ivanov & Chan, 2015, p. 11).

Jenkins' film draws from its own sea of texts, of the memoirs of service men and women interpreted from history books, including three publications: *Scapa Flow* (2008) by Malcolm Brown & Patricia Meehan, *Sky Over Scapa* (2007) by Gregor Lamb, and *Bloody Orkney?* (2006) by Virginia Schroder. The film seeks to present an alternative view to the often negative accounts expressed in Schroder's book:

The hardships one forgets, the beauty, never. The hardships were outweighed by memories of the wind, wild seas, terns diving over the rocks and above all, the kindly, friendly Orcadians. (Voiceover character 32.)

Jenkins' film playfully evokes an imaginary world, of cowboys and pirates, 'bearded ladies,' invisible pets, zoos and gardens, all formed as imaginative departures from military routine, or the imagined affliction known as "Orkneyitis":

⁴ The *Orkneyjar* website relates that, "on Gyro Night, the young boys of the island made torches, which they set alight, before venturing out into the night. The purpose of their foray was to entice the "gyros" out of hiding. These gyros were usually the older lads, wearing masks and dressed as repulsive old women. If the torchbearers met a gyro, "she" would pursue the youngsters, striking at them with a piece of rope, or tangle, until they were able to outrun 'her'. The origin of this tradition is unclear, but it is likely that *gyro* derives from the Norse, *gygr*, meaning a giant, troll-woman." (Orkneyjar, 2024).

Invisible budgies, dogs, cats, lions, tigers and ducks followed their masters everywhere, and were fed, groomed and quartered by their owners amid ceremony and serious respect. It was occasionally a trick to obtain extra helpings from the cookhouse but, surprising though it was, it became generally accepted amongst the rank and file that these creatures actually existed.
(Voiceover character 36.)

Dubbed by Kirkpatrick (2013) as Orkney's first sci-fi western, *The Cowboy and the Spaceman* also presents a mythologisation based on the artist's own sense of cultural particularities; the machismo of male Orcadians represented as cowboys traversing the islands imagined prairie lands. We then follow the spaceman falling to Earth, seeking a route to civilisation from the less than hospitable rugged coastline. Chancing upon the cowboy's tent at dusk, with entrance open, a welcome is provided from its inhabitant. As with the memoirs of army personnel in Jenkins's film, the spaceman finds the islands a hospitable place. Yet, after this welcome into the cowboy's tent, a game of cards ensues, suggesting that hospitality extends so far, before terse negotiations over contending interests take hold.

Tait's 1974 film, *Aerial*, personifies her interest in "film poems" that avoid any prescriptive narrative or plotline, instead working from an imagined world derived from what she refers to as the 'available actuality' of immediate surroundings (Tait, 2004 p. 132). Given the date of its production, *Aerial* is a pioneering filmic expression of what constitutes our environment, of granular elements, combining through the film as an aggregate whole. Short snapshots of various elemental parts, an aerial on a roof, snowfall on a street, a worm in earth, a dead bird on a street (Figure 4), rain falling on a puddle, and so on, juxtapose with a variety of sounds; cars, wind, birds, etc mixed with irregular piano notes.



Figure 4 – Still from *Aerial*. (Source: Moving Image Archive, National Libraries of Scotland.⁵)

⁵ <https://movingimage.nls.uk/biography/10032>

While we can detect the sense of situatedness in each artist's perspective, it is also evident how the islands are equally an imagined place, charged by various extensions into philosophy, mythology, and (post-human) ecology. However, these visions do not create imaginary islands, as being situated in cultural particularities and "available actuality" means they are grounded in a sense of a real, relational place. Instead, the range of ways imagination intersects with a sense of place conveys an intensification of phenomenological experience; the island as an imagined place conjured through attunement to its varied contextual qualities.

The island as a sensed place

Aerial is an alluring journey into Orkney's landscape, made up of an ocean of elemental processes, conjured into a whole. The focus is often on things overlooked, commonplace or close to the ground (Reynolds, 2004), of details of lichen, worms, dead birds, branches, and so on, with a sense that nature is all around us, as a relentless environment of atmospheric processes. Loosely structured around the four elements, sequenced as air, water, earth, fire, air, the appreciation of living qualities may stem from Tait's own background in science, as a qualified doctor, attuned to the molecular configuration of life. For Tait, the film camera often took on the role of poetic microscope, observing and measuring the world through attention and precision (Mayer, 2019).

As evident in *Aerial* and many of Tait's other films, the representation of time is prismatic and multifaceted. In some ways this was partly down to her use of a Bolex 16mm camera, which only allowed for short takes. Even those short takes were often edited down or intercut with other footage to create a processual form and rhythm to many of her films (Todd, 2004). This often included many non-conventional vantage points, of looking down or up, or observing almost voyeuristically from afar. There is a sense of immanence in Tait's films, as they capture an impression of a cultural present, caught within a sense of the temporal, where the seasons, sedimentation and climate, bring emphasis to natural qualities. Equally, many of Tait's films capture social qualities, mostly concerned with the everyday, of the social without the need for a storyline, instead working with "films' fundamental ability to record and hold moments of time" (Reynolds, 2004, p. 65). While this reflects Tait's emphatic interest in process and the everyday, her own voiceovers lend a metaphysical quality, often providing short and rather enigmatic reflections loosely related to the imagery. In configuring her films in such a manner, Tait's aim was not to follow a plot, or set of points, but instead create sensations, sensed by the film maker and presented as a journey into the temporal qualities of the landscape; of being and presence.

While Tait mainly worked outside of the commercial mainstream, her work attracted attention. Renowned Scottish documentarian John Grierson offered to support her but his advice to edit down and reconfigure Tait's 1955 film, *Orquil Burn*, was rebuffed, severing any future connection with him and, for that matter, the documentary film industry. Rather than hinder Tait, this seemed to liberate her from any concern to follow commercial or conventional documentary film techniques (Neely, 2008). Instead, she developed her own independent style, following techniques associated with avant-garde experimental filmmaking, such as rhythmic edits, sound being abstract and asynchronized with imagery, aesthetic rather than interconnected narrative form. Other films, notably *Calypso* (1955), involved direct experimentation with film stock, such as painting onto the film.

Tait's experimental style is personified in the personal rhythms of *Orquil Burn*, a film that traces the interwoven connections between a linear stream and its many intersecting human histories, alongside personal recollections of the filmmaker. In Tait's poetic films, observation and craft present a vision of the world that makes seeing happen, presenting the world as real, rather than losing 'reality' in a manner she felt complicit in conventional documentary filmmaking. If there is a poetic intention Tait conveys through *Orquil Burn*, one can sense the journey through this intertwined natural and cultural landscape in search of the burn's source and, in turn, cultural origins. As Tait describes, "it turned out that the sources were many, the origins widespread" (2004 p. 159), implying that the deep-rooted cultural connections between people and environment were complex and beyond simple conveyance.

For Papay Gyro Nights, deep cultural history and the extreme climate of the island form a sense of the temporal, where "present time in a film is the past, present and future at every single moment" (Ivanov & Chan, 2013 p.11). On Papay, the archaeological site of Knap of Howar, a 5000-year-old domestic farmstead, attests to the island's deep history, as a fertile place to farm and sustain a population. More recently, this population has fluctuated, reaching a precarious low of around 50 in the 1990s. However, stemming from a sense of cooperative concern, the islanders set about renovating available housing, helping to stabilise the current population of around 90 people (2011 census). The festival's emphasis on ephemeral structures (e.g., Figure 5) and improvisation plays on the fragility of small island communities, but equally points to a collective endeavour to sustain island life through cooperative projects.



Figure 5 – Still from video interview concerning Simon Hjermind Jensen's *Fire Shelter* installation (Papay Gyro Nights, 2014).⁶

In *The Cowboy and the Spaceman*, Kirkpatrick also plays with a sense of temporal life, setting a particular pace by which we follow the characters. Both characters, cowboy and spaceman,

⁶ <https://papaygyronights.wordpress.com/page/2/> - posted on 27/03/2014

present transient figures in an expansive landscape. Neither character seems unduly worried by time, diligently moving at steady yet unhurried pace. There is no conclusion to the film, beyond the ensuing game of cards, meaning the viewer is invited to imagine the rest, as if we are dwelling in a filmic place that is open ended. This pace of life and its non-conclusive ending may seem to reinforce the frequent cliché of island life being slow and lacking greater purpose. However, Kirkpatrick's film reflects a particular quality of island life that is purposeful yet relaxed, as opposed to slow.

As indicated, each artist conveys a strong sensibility to how temporality is experienced in ways that seem particular to island life, of the everyday set against tensions with deeper, relentless temporalities of culture and nature. There is a clear resistance to 'external' sensibilities or problematic clichés about the slow pace or simple ways of island life. Instead, the island is articulated as a sensed place, of multifaceted and intermingling processes, subjectively evoked through the artist's ability to bring expressions to time and temporality through filmic techniques, of rhythms, durations and sensations.

The island as an ambient place

In Tait's approach to conjuring a sense of island life, imagery and sound form two layers, seldom synchronised, with sound added as a separate layer in post-production. Most often, the soundtrack, including ambient sounds, indigenous music, and spoken word, creates an asynchronised layer to enliven the imagery. In some films, such as *Aerial*, the completely non-synchronised soundtrack creates a complex juxtaposition between image and sound, all varied to the extent of creating "a complex web of associations" (Tait, 2004 p.62). In juxtaposing particular sounds against imagery, there is often a sense of the urban infiltrating the rural, or vice versa, bringing expression to an island where the boundaries between the two are seldom distinct.

In its 2013 programme, the Papay Gyro Nights festival suggested "screenings for seals, for birds, for the deaths and for humans too" (Ivanov & Chan, 2013 p.11). In this way the festival brought attention to the island as co-habited place, a multispecies environment where humans have responsibility to respect the presence of other species (Figure 6). The programme reminds us that this respect was not always there, dedicating the festival to the last Great Auk, 200 years since the last one was killed in 1813 by an islander called William Foulis. The northern part of Papay is a bird reserve, dominated by the ambience of its diverse bird population. However, this ambience is steadily diminishing, with a drastic decline in sea birds, attributed to anthropogenic impacts of overfishing, habitat destruction and climate change. Like many small islands, the sense of ecological stress is more acutely felt within the relative boundedness and proximity of island life (Hay, 2013).

Orkney is a place of linguistic and musical traditions that contribute to the islands' distinctive dialect. Tait's own poetry is often used within her voiceovers, enigmatic in content and inflected with a cadence distinct to the Orcadian Scots' dialect, it adds a layer of spoken language that seems in itself quite experimental in form. Respect for Orcadian dialect and folklore was included within the Papay Gyro Nights festivals, with local storytellers routinely included. For instance, Orcadian storyteller and folklorist, Tom Muir, was a regular feature and constant reminder that local stories, while much alive today, are part of a tradition as old as the archaeological remnants dotted across the islands. This reflects a tradition for

atmospheric storytelling, enlivened by mid-winter fires, with flickering shadows cast as ephemeral imagery.



Figure 6 – Still from Maija Saksman performing *Not just for humans but for all living things*. (Pay Gyro Nights, 2014.)⁷

In *The Spaceman and the Cowboy*, Kirkpatrick uses a voiceover with English subtitles. For many, the assumption will be that the language of the voiceover is Norse, or possibly Gaelic. However, as a playful twist, the spoken language is actually North American Cree, narrated by Willie Ermine, professor at the First Nations University of Canada. Kirkpatrick's aim is to play with viewers' expectations, but with a serious point regarding Orkney's historic connections to Canada's First Nations. In this, the sources and origins also become significantly complex. Through the 17th to 19th centuries, the Hudson's Bay Company administered a vast territory in Canada, with a significant proportion of Orcadian men making up its workforce. Liaisons between Scottish fur traders with the Cree and other tribes are recorded as far back as the 1600s, with an increasing number of marriages between Orcadians and Cree women, resulting in bloodlines that can be traced by people on both sides of the Atlantic (Parkhomenko, 2018). In effect, the use of this reference point doesn't interfere with the film, as the action and subtitles can be followed quite separately. The use of Cree language adds an additional layer of association to Orcadian culture that one could associate with the complicit role many Orcadians played in the historic frontierism of colonisation, when Hudson Bay workers appeared like transatlantic cowboys intent on exploiting environmental resources. In Orkney you can find a large totem pole near the village of St. Mary's, carved by a visiting group from the Squamish First Nation in 2007, whose homeland is in British Columbia. Many people may simply drive past the totem, without any sense of its origins. Like the use of Cree in Kirkpatrick's film, for those acquainted with this complex history, the film's voiceover, like the totem, have particular resonance; of problematic histories being reconciled through cooperation and understanding.

In *The Imaginary Worlds of Scapa Flow* Jenkins creates a rich soundtrack, again, produced as a separate layer to the imagery. The voiceovers are deliberately detached from the actors, often with voices of differing age expressing the sense of retrospection the film is based on, of memories and voices from the past. The soundtrack plays an important role in bringing

⁷ <https://papagyronights.wordpress.com/page/2/> - posted on 25/03/2014.

life to the range of different music heard during the wartime, including marching bands, orchestral works, through to popular singers of the day, interspersed with military personnel and local musicians providing their own music. This blend of styles is complimented by Orcadian composer and musician James Watson, whose own style of blended classical and folk music lends quality to the soundtrack.

The island as a resourceful place

The Imaginary Worlds of Scapa Flow involved 33 islanders filling the roles of actors, voice-over artistes and crew, while the production of the film was supported through a film residency with The Pier Arts Centre, Stromness. For a film that is essentially about dwelling and friendship, this is extended to the process of making the film, being a social process that requires the cooperative resource of a willing community. In turn, opportunities to work cooperatively on film projects draws on local talent in productive ways. For instance, James Watson gained recognition for the quality of his input, becoming further established as a composer for films.

The sense of working from within a cooperative community was also evident at the Papay Gyro Nights festivals, where the whole island was transformed into an art space, with screenings and installations occupying old farm buildings, a boat house, workshops, ruins and open landscape. While the festival developed an international reputation that enticed a range of renowned artists and theorists to the island, it was organised in a manner that respected the local community as the resource it was situated within. For instance, the festival had several off-shoot art initiatives, with the Knap of Howar art prize being judged by “the population of the island” (Ivanov & Chan, 2013 p. 227). What was evident at the Papay Gyro Nights festivals was the need for small island communities to act resourcefully, to reappropriate, improvise, and make do, with what is around them. This approach reflects a culture of resourcefulness, where:

as islanders, Orcadians are accustomed to a high degree of self-reliance. If you need something, you make it; if it breaks, you fix it. If you want a dance, you organise it – and so on. (Matarasso, 2012 p.58.)

At Papay Gyro Nights this resourcefulness created an interesting juxtaposition, with the range of digital media brought by artists, forming a rich blend between technological, material and ecological elements, intermingled as improvised sets, costumes and props.

For Kirkpatrick, the scale of resource was much more expansive, both physically and culturally. *The Cowboy and the Spaceman* is predicated on ideas set out in US economist Kenneth Boulding’s seminal essay ‘The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth’ (1966). Boulding sets out two emerging systems for the world’s economies that he refers to as the “cowboy economy” and the “spaceman economy.” The former looks out on the world as an endless horizon of possibilities, described by Boulding as “symbolic of the illimitable plains and associated with reckless, exploitative, romantic, and violent behaviour” (1966, p. 10). In contrast, the spaceman prudently recognises “the earth as a single spaceship, without unlimited reservoirs of anything, either for extraction or for pollution” (1966, p10). Personifying Boulding’s contending economic systems, *The Cowboy and the Spaceman* brings these two characters into expression. Once they encounter each other, they enter into a dualistic game of cards, implying the trade-off’s inherent to frontier economies. Kirkpatrick

plays the role of both characters, implying the dualism is as much the composite nature of a local islander, caught between concern for an inherent sense of ecological and cultural fragility, set against the need for technological progress. Kirkpatrick sees that, in striving for a sustainable future, “it is the individual’s inner ethical economy that hosts the debate between the two outlooks” (Kirkpatrick, cited in Neil, 2006).

Kirkpatrick made the film during the formative years of the international hub for marine renewable research and production Orkney has become. While this low-carbon initiative for marine renewables may promise the sustainable system akin to Boulding’s spaceman economy, it has equally taken on characteristics of the open system personified by the cowboy economy, of illimitable resources and multiple competing prospectors vying for an ever-expanding range of multi-million-pound developments. Like following the descending spaceman in Kirkpatrick’s film, Orkney has become grounded in the Earthly world of frontier card games (Figure 7), where cowboys make it their business to be dealt into any deal worth having. And, Orkney has its fair share of cowboys.



Figure 7 – Still from *The Cowboy and the Spaceman*.

From the Oil boom of the 1970s, now competing with the ever-expanding presence of marine renewable and low-carbon industries, for islanders like Kirkpatrick, who have experienced these developments emerge around them, there is no surprise the island can be represented as having perpetually reinforced frontier-like qualities (Neil, 2006). While playful in expression, *The Cowboy and the Spaceman* conveys a serious point; that the relatively bound geography of an island reflects the finite resourcing of a spaceship, being finite in terms of spatial and natural resources, as a fragile ecological and cultural environment that seeks to sustain its inhabitants from within.

There is an interesting connection between Kirkpatrick’s film and several of Tait’s films. In *The Cowboy and the Spaceman*, the opening sequence includes a shot of a rusting Massey Ferguson tractor that, through its mass production from the 1950s onwards, became an almost ubiquitous feature of increasingly mechanised farming in the UK. Given the period and focus on farming families in many of Tait’s films, a number of her subjects are seen driving these early series Massey Ferguson tractors, which replaced horse drawn machinery in Orkney and brought about a widespread shift to mechanised farming. For instance, in the

1981 film, *Land Makar*, we follow an intimate portrait of Tait's farming neighbour Mary Graham Sinclair, filmed driving a Massey Ferguson tractor on the fields of her Orkney croft (Figure 8).

Land Makar is both a study of an Orkney croft, capturing the hard labour and routine activities of its elderly owner and, at the same time, emphasises that there is an old woman behind the camera (Mayer, 2019). The film brings focus to the rarely captured life of a female farmer, as if a reflection on Tait's own journey through the male dominated worlds of art and science (Neely, 2008). *Land Makar* is structured through the seasons, following its subject through different periods of the year, each requiring its own sensitivity to the land and the seasonal resources it provides. The title provides a poignant reference to the Scottish term for poet, *makar*. Both women are *land makars* of their own making. *Land Makar* provides an expression of small-scale farming, of being attuned to land, the seasons, and how this forms the basis for a way of life that has sustained Orkney's inhabitants since its first settlers arrived some 6000 years ago. It reflects the intimate bond between people, land, animals, and objects that can be observed in many of Tait's other films. While Orkney exists as a frontier and horizon of negotiable possibilities, at the same time, island life sustains itself from within, as a culture centred on intergenerational farming families. As a poetic work, *Land Makar* conveys a sense that people shape the land and, in turn, the land shapes the people.



Figure 8 – Still from *Land Makar*. (Moving Image Archive, National Libraries of Scotland.⁸)

Conclusion: The island as a constructed place

Many of Tait's films feel purposively unfinished, or of a style where the raw process is more important than a refined outcome. Tait's aim was to produce works that "the audience had to respond to, rather than follow intellectually" (Tait 2004 p84). In most of Tait's films there is no real sense of what will come next, meaning her films disrupt the expectations of the viewer. For Tait, the process of making a film included its sharing and she would often organise screenings for those who were the subject of her films, seeking "a response at the time" (Tait, 2004 p. 92). All this is purposeful, inviting the viewer to construct their own impressions, to become *makars* in the process of sharing in the experience of the film. Papay Gyro Nights and Tait share similar ambitions for a form of experimental filmmaking that

⁸ <https://movingimage.nls.uk/biography/10032>

resists many conventional rules, such as the rejection of screenplay and linear narrative, working with post-production sound as a counterpoint to imagery, creating sensory experiences that are atypical of mainstream films, and so on (Verrone, 2014). The filmmakers' intentions seem more focused on producing perceptual sensations, compelling the viewer to go along with the journey, constructing meaning through the audio-visual experience.

Papay Gyro Nights collectively promoted the idea of cinematic incoherence, working with experimental filmmakers, including Bertrand Mandico, Katrin Olafsdottir, and Patrick Bokanowski, to produce a realisation of Mandico's *Incoherence Manifesto* (n.d.). In turn this formed a sense of an "incoherent festival," where works of art were "shared equally with the landscape, the sea, irrational animals of the island and inarticulate magical beasts of folktale as well as human inhabitants and visitors" (Ivanov & Chan, n.d.). While experimental in ethos, what emerged was a constructive process, seeking to attune itself to the ephemeral atmosphere and transient existence of this small island on the periphery between Europe and the Atlantic, where art works and ideas arrived to the island as a "shipwreck and later becoming part of the place" (Ivanov & Chan, 2015 p.3).

In structuring their films through carefully scripted screenplays, Kirkpatrick and Jenkins may follow a more conventional approach to narrative structure, but even then, neither of their films is overly prescriptive in asking the audience to follow a particular thread or plotline (which also informs the framing of this study). Their films may be less experimental in form, but still require the viewer to construct their own impressions of subject matter that is layered, abstract and evocative. What seems common to all of these artists' work is a sense of commitment and empathy with island life, in all its varied forms. They are all islanders first, artists second, although none of them probably consider such a division between their art and life. This sense of empathy extends to the process of filmmaking itself, of which Tait described as allowing images "to have their own voice" (2004 p. 17). Even the apparently abstract idea of incoherence is rationalised as a process of working from the heart, of being "honest in conversation with the elements of the surrounding world" (Ivanov & Chan, n.d.). There is a strong sense that the camera is not simply used as a technological tool, but as an emotive, organic extension of the filmmaker. They are all *makars*. Tait's poetically driven sensibility best conveys this attitude to filmmaking, as requiring an openness to the moment of being alive, of "breathing with the camera."

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