



Project
MUSE[®]
Scholarly journals online

of *Winter Soldier*, following his involvement with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and other antiwar protests up to the present. This is followed by two short documentaries from the same period used to help finance the distribution of *Winter Soldier: Americal Division* and *First Marine Division*. Both films use footage from the feature film and are themselves equally powerful and revealing. The DVD also contains an eighteen-minute conversation with the filmmakers in which they discuss their experiences producing and distributing the film. A stills gallery contains hundreds of images from the Detroit testimony and other protests by the VVAW during the early 1970s. In addition, there is a trailer for the film's 2005 rerelease and "The Winter Soldier Files": 1,500 pages from Scott Camil's military file and FBI files on Camil's antiwar efforts that may be accessed on DVD-ROM. The disk is subtitled in French and German and is closed-captioned in English. All these extra features add insightful context for the film itself.

home movies, satellite imagery, and archival film footage. *Cabin Field* weaves together these materials to manifest, rather than simply tell about, the complexity of a single piece of land called Cabin Field and, more generally, of the unrecognized richness of our landscape.

Much contemporary experimental film and video that makes use of archival footage does so less as a means to directly illustrate an idea or provide a window onto some past reality than as a method for reflecting on the very idea of "history" or "representation" or "cinema," true to modernist strategies of reflexivity. Documentary filmmaking conventions dictate that archival footage be used primarily in the service of a film's claims to truth, whether to provide visible evidence of a specific event, person, et cetera, or to paint a general impression of an era or place. In *Cabin Field*, an experimental documentary or essay film, these differing uses for archival material collide in important ways. "Important" because as much as Kissel's film contributes to a body of knowledge about agricultural life and cultural landscapes in south Georgia, it also significantly challenges quaint renderings of farm life and fields as aesthetic objects as well as conventional methods for telling the story of a place. While the film is, in the tradition of documentary, about a specific piece of land, the people who have lived and worked on it for the past fifty-odd years, and the dynamics of race and gender in the rural South more generally, it is also, in an experimental tradition, as much about the languages and media we use to document and narrate our understanding of place and culture.

Cabin Field weaves a visually dense fabric of archival and original footage and images, combining transferred 16mm film from the Fox Movietone News and Fox News collections at the University of South Carolina Newsfilm Library and the Andrew Avery Home Movie Collection at the University of Georgia Libraries' Walter J. Brown Media Archives, original 16mm film, digital video, and photographs. The film opens on a vividly colored satellite image of a large area of what appears to be agricultural land but looks more like abstract, irregular shapes marked with lines in shades of green and brown. The image starts to spin as we zoom in on it, as if tumbling and falling to the ground far below. More muted, much closer photographs of the area

Avery Home Movie Collection,
University of Georgia Libraries



Cabin Field (2005)

DIRECTED BY LAURA KISSEL

Julia Zay

Laura Kissel's new film *Cabin Field* (2005) picks up where her previous work *Finding Lula* (2002) leaves off, as it attempts to read the surface of the land for evidence of what humans have done there. Through this film Kissel paints a portrait of a site, a mile-long parcel of agricultural land in rural south-central Georgia, and of landscape more generally, marked and remarked by human use through time. Her task in making this film is excavation, pursued through media old and new: oral histories, maps, digital video,

taken from the U.S. Geological Survey emerge as the satellite image fades out. The almost treeless surface of the land resembles faintly stained paper; decades-old patterns made by the planting of cotton rows, invisible at ground level, here form their own kind of watermark on the land. These are the kinds of archival images everyday geographers are becoming more familiar with as applications like Google Earth and Web sites like Terra-Server now allow Internet users to view high-resolution images of the surface of the Earth and zoom in on precise addresses at the click of a button. All of this has the effect of defamiliarizing these archival images and the land itself, prompting us to consider the natural landscape as something that is *made*, something covered in marks, signs, and patterns to be deciphered, something discursive, written and written upon.

Geographers and landscape historians use the concept of “landscape autobiography” to describe how a person’s life and the “life” of a physical place can be understood as mutually constitutive. To write any history of a place, environment, or landscape one must actually develop an intimate familiarity with the history of people’s use of the land, and to understand a person or group of people in a cultural sense, one should consider the landscape those people make and make use of as much as one does their own narratives. In this sense the landscape itself is the medium that records the history of human activity there. *Cabin Field* writes a kind of landscape autobiography in which connections are drawn between the stories within this particular site and the larger cultural narratives that circulate through it. Continuities between people and place are illuminated in the juxtaposition of first-person narratives of five interview subjects, all people who have owned, lived on, or worked on Cabin Field, with the satellite and aerial photographs of that place that bear the traces of their shaping of the land and footage from the Andrew Avery Home Movie Collection. Continuities between past and present, and myth and testimony, are revealed in the juxtaposition of the Fox Newsfilm footage and the Avery footage with Kissel’s original video.

The mostly color 16mm film footage of small-town and farm life shot by Andrew Avery in southern Georgia from the 1930s through the

1950s included in *Cabin Field* looks at once like home movie and amateur ethnographic film, simultaneously informal and analytical. We see small fragments of Avery’s footage early in the interview of octogenarian and former resident sharecropper at Cabin Field, Easter Mae “Tob” Byron, who points out the location of the house she and her family lived in and describes its “shotgun” floor plan. A flash of Avery’s vivid color film takes us to a dirt yard filled with chickens and an unpainted clapboard house in the background. A black woman in a 1940s Sunday dress feeds the chickens with a small boy by her side. We return to Easter Mae. Then, a high-contrast black-and-white flash of Avery’s film shows us a group of black men and women, most in Sunday clothes, on the front porch of a house as if posing for a portrait. While it is not clear if these are images of life on Cabin Field, what is clear is that we are meant to reflect here on the art of memory itself. When we return to Easter Mae, she muses almost incredulously, “It just looks different, because the house and everything is torn down and that mill up yonder ain’t there no more, it just looks different, you know, everything just looks different.”

Other Avery Collection footage featured in the film includes fascinating images of peanut harvesting with mule and tractor and of black men picking cotton and riding toward the camera in a horse-drawn wagon filled with cotton. A sequence near the end of the film entitled “The Southern Girl” is given over to a stunning array of Avery footage depicting only white or black women—they are markedly and regularly segregated. In some shots women in brightly colored cotton dresses and 1940s-style shoes with thick heels pose or twirl for the camera or march past it, usually in groups and often in parallel rows as if putting on a show. A medium close-up depicts a white woman in a rhinestone tiara standing at a microphone while being presented with a cake that is angled toward the camera. In another shot three or four black women are lined up behind a table, facing the camera, holding out what look to be tall glass mason jars of prize preserves. There is an air of display and performance and also a strong sense of industriousness, contest, and competition. Possibly these films were taken at local fairs, church picnics, or other gatherings where women brought all kinds of food, and even

themselves, to be judged and awarded prizes. Avery's choice to film these particular kinds of events and perhaps even stage these demonstration "parades" of women for the camera seems to spin a myth about the sturdiness of a community, its strong Protestant work ethic, and its fertile, productive women. Kissel's choice to isolate this particular part of the Avery collection for viewing is a compelling "curatorial" move, sorting the collection according to one organizational logic (only women, only white women here, only black women there) and honing in on it for critical contemplation.

The Fox News (shot without sound) and Fox Movietone News (shot with sync sound) footage used in *Cabin Field* casts a much more formal and public gaze on its subjects. The film combines fragments, outtakes, and one nearly intact newsreel, mostly of agricultural activities involving cotton in La Grange, Georgia (1919), Memphis, Tennessee (1928), Tarboro, North Carolina (1942), and Blytheville, Arkansas (1942). This footage is interspersed throughout the center section of the film among footage of Kissel's interview subjects discussing cotton farming and images of industrialized cotton production at Cabin Field. Of the four groups of footage, three depict black children exclusively. In the 1942 Tarboro footage, the camera peers through cotton stalks at low angles at school-age children in wool coats slowly plucking cotton for the camera. The La Grange outtakes from a 1919 newsreel about a "Cotton Conference" show a well-dressed white woman holding a small black girl in her arms. The girl looks shy and afraid of the people and cameras and the woman looks expectantly and awkwardly at the girl, bouncing her in her arms and smiling at the camera. Suddenly a hand thrusts in from offscreen and hands the woman a tuft of cotton. Kissel uses repetition here to focus attention on the aggressiveness of the adults toward the child, repeating the gesture several times, cutting on the hand's entry into the frame, and syncing it with the thunk of cotton machinery in the gin.

One of the most compelling and unsettling pieces of archival footage used in *Cabin Field* comes from a three-minute-twenty-second piece of footage shot in Memphis for Fox Movietone News in 1928 and composed of unedited, raw footage. Titled "Negro Children Spiritual

Singers," it depicts a group of about fifty black children from the Memphis Industrial Settlement ranging in age from three or four to about fourteen. Dressed in their Sunday coats and crowded into the frame, many of their faces and bodies are obscured by others in front of them and they are flanked on one side by a woman in a plaid coat. We see parts of this fragment three times over the course of the film; the group sings for the camera in each iteration. It quickly becomes clear that the children have been positioned in a cotton field to perform the traditional spiritual "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." White heads of cotton bloom in front of them in the foreground and they face the camera as if for a group portrait. As they sing, the woman bends down and picks a piece of cotton and walks slowly and awkwardly toward the camera, saying to them "Come on, Come on" over and over in a high, soft voice. Next is a high-angle shot of the same children standing near the edge of the cotton field, pausing before they again sing "Nobody knows the trouble . . ." and then bend down to pick cotton.

This archival film fragment functions as important connective tissue here, and through its incremental presentation we are compelled to watch closely, becoming perplexed, fascinated, irate, mournful. By 1928 black spirituals had become visible again on a large scale in American popular culture. Their first period of popularity among white and black audiences in the United States and Britain was in the 1870s and 1880s. The Fisk University Jubilee Singers, composed of students and faculty from the Memphis university founded just after the Civil War for freed black men, toured widely outside of the South and introduced a broad range of audiences to this musical tradition. By the beginning of World War I and the "Great Migration" of blacks out of the south, and as a result of the Harlem Renaissance, spirituals were again gaining popularity in urban centers as blacks performed the music for new audiences in new contexts. By 1925, noted concert singers Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson had both performed programs of spirituals at large venues in New York and recorded "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." Thus by 1928, when this footage was filmed, largely white moviegoing audiences would have been quite familiar with the song. If the goal of many of these kinds of

newsreel stories was to present amusing or novel people, places, and situations to their audiences, then this image, in the context of an edited newsreel, can be understood as being intended to entertain. Viewing it as a fragment, however, though presumably an outtake for a newsreel that may have existed, we see the edges outside the frame. We see the heads and tails of the shots; we see the stillness of the posed children as they wait for direction, the awkward looks off camera. Moreover, we are struck by this scene of black children being directed to perform a white fantasy of their quaint docility. It is as a fragment that this footage bears a particular witness to the machinations of Hollywood as well as to the lived experience of black children in the rural south in 1928.

Like the forgotten traces of activity on the land, archival footage can be understood as a kind of ruin, Kissel has said.¹ The quotation by art historian Charles Merewether that opens the film describes the temporality of ruins: “Ruins remain. They persist, whether beneath the ground or above. In remaining they are always already of the past, yet given to the future.”² In being “of the past” and “given to the future,” ruins, for Merewether, at once inhabit at least two distinct contexts, and perhaps collapse the distinction between these contexts altogether.

Kissel has also said that her editing strategy in *Cabin Field* is directly informed by Merewether’s words and works to sustain two logics simultaneously, that of the “surface” view and of what’s beneath. The extensive archival footage Kissel excavates of rural south Georgia is presented to us in exactly this way; read both as evidence—we are encouraged merely to look—and interpretation—placed in a new context among interviews with former sharecroppers and landowners or repeated over and over—we are pushed to critically imagine the circumstances of its production or focus on a gesture or look we might have missed the first time. *Cabin Field* pores over what might otherwise be overlooked in the archive—amateur films from rural Georgia and newsreel outtakes of farm laborers—and reminds us again of the immeasurable value of the work of excavation and recirculation of historic film. *Cabin Field* is distributed by Laura Kissel. More information can be found on her Web site at <http://people.cas.sc.edu/kissel/film+video/cabinfield.html>.

NOTES

1. Laura Kissel, personal interview, March 20, 2006.
2. Charles Merewether, “Traces of Loss,” in *Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed*, ed. Michael S. Roth with Claire Lyons and Charles Merewether, 25–40 (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 1997).