

pered by cautionary reminders of an imperialist past. Thus Tsu observes that some politicians in Tokyo still pretend “that wars never happened,” and MacLachlan argues that Japanese sojourners must be “team players, not colonial overlords,” and must realize that, for them, “all the world is their stage.”

As in most conversations, however, some issues are noted but unexamined: barriers between Japanese workers and Singaporeans, for example, and sexism that still denies women a place in “Japan, Inc.” Moreover, the discourse is often less dialogue than monologue, for both Tsu’s charge to students to learn expatriates’ version of their own stories and MacLachlan’s boast that all the world is the sojourners’ own stage hint at a Japanese exceptionalism. Whose story is this, anyway? Should Tsu’s students learn not only about an imperialist army’s ravages but also about the people whose land has been invaded and colonized? Should MacLachlan’s critique of corporate sexism link the image of the young cosmetics executive sitting among colleagues in a karaoke bar and listlessly singing “Moon River” to the complaints of Fujimura and Kanemori that Japanese have too little contact with Singaporeans?

In recent years Singapore has entered American consciousness as the city-state where Filipina domestic worker Flor Contemplacion was executed after being framed for murder, and where American Michael Faye was caned as punishment for juvenile vandalism. Many regard Singapore as does William Safire, who says it is ruled in a manner that silences dissent and suppresses labor unions (“The Dictator Speaks,” from the *New York Times*, 2 Feb. 1999; <http://www.sfdonline.org/sfd/Link%20Pages/Link%20Folders/Interviews/safirelee.html>). Organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Solidarity condemn Singapore’s repressions, and viewers of *Under Another Sun* must wonder whether Singapore’s prosperity—and, by extension, Japan’s trade there—is at least partly a function of brutal domestic policies. The web page of Singaporeans for Democracy claims, “The side of the story rarely told is the price Singaporeans have had to pay” for their nation’s wealth (<http://www.sfdonline.org/Link%20Pages/aims3.html>). Is it enough, then, for Tsu to teach the lessons of Japan’s imperial soldiers and expatriates, and for MacLachlan to boast that Japanese sojourners may take pride in their role in Singapore’s prosperity?

Whose story is it?

Ruins: A Fake Documentary. 1999. 78 minutes, black and white, subtitled in Spanish and English. Directed by Jesse Lerner. Distributed by Jesse Lerner, P.O. Box 24B53, Los Angeles CA 90024-1153. Tel./Fax (213) 482-3121.†

HILARY ELISE KAHN
Indiana University of Indianapolis

Before even watching *Ruins: A Fake Documentary*, viewers are challenged by Jesse Lerner’s provocative sub-title. The side-by-side use of two inherently contradictory terms, “fake” and “documentary,” perplexes and subsequently prepares the audience for a mischievous delivery of artifice and authenticity. However, no one can be properly braced for the compelling adventure they will embark on as they encounter an onslaught of postmodern fragments, from the far-fetched to the institutionally verified. Representations and misrepresentations, the unquestioned and the dubious, animated pen and ink drawings, travelogues, ethnofiction, “newsreel,” “documentary,” and “home movie” footage, omnipresent narrators, scholarly experts, a variety of musical scores, challenging voices, creative editing, and lots of playful deception comprise this brilliant film. Jesse Lerner deserves significant praise for visually reducing the institutionalized dichotomy between “authentic” and “artificial” to rubble and for demonstrating that a critical, thought-provoking piece of scholarship can be not only visual but also complete and unadulterated fun.

Though Jesse Lerner wants to implode any possibility that the viewer might again consider anything as “authentic”—specifically regarding archaeological and ethnographic representations, art, and film—he has a particular bone to pick with the subjectivity, ethnocentrism, and errors embedded in the scholarship bolstering past and present definitions of “the Maya.” His emphasis is the ancient Maya and their ruins, though he suggests that research on the contemporary Maya is equally misrepresentative, merely being another installment of

† Readers of this review will be interested in Quetzil E. Castañeda’s article *Approaching Ruins—A photo-ethnographic essay on the busy intersections of Chichén Itzá*. VAR 16.2. pp. 43-70, 2000-2001, as well as Jeff Hemptel and Castañeda’s 1997 film, *Incidents of Travel in Chichén Itzá* (DER). (ed.)

an endless list of fake documentaries.

To make his point, he first introduces the viewer to an array of scholarly figures from the fields of Mayan archaeology and epigraphy. We see and hear Sylvanus Morley, Alfred Kidder, John Lloyd Stephens, and Sir Eric Thompson, among other experts, defining the Maya for what seems to be their own purposes and through their own ethnocentric ideologies. The

film opens to Sylvanus Morley teaching English to a Mayan girl, and we later see him sitting on a chacmool explaining the lost grandeur of the ancient Maya. John Lloyd Stephens depicts the nineteenth-century Maya, on the backs of whom he is imperialistically carried through the jungle, as dull reflections of their accomplished ancestors. Sir Eric Thompson regally sits atop a Mayan temple and later explains how the Maya were unable to think abstractly. Lerner throws fragment atop fragment—and I do admit these experts' words are suspiciously void of context—methodologically depicting the hodgepodge nature of accepted scholarship.

We shortly meet Maria, a fictive protagonist who, ironically, represents the most authentic indigenous voice in the film. She elucidates Lerner's argument



Fig. 1. *Ruins*, film capture. Transporting Pre-Columbian Authenticity.



Fig. 2. *Ruins*, film capture. Constructing curios of culture.

through an ethnofictive script. She explains how her father worked for, and was exploited by, Morley in the archaeological excavations at Chichen Itza. She unabashedly describes how Señor Morley erred in his reconstructions, filtering the conceptualized world of the ancient Maya through his own elitist, Western, and rose-colored glasses. She laughs at his “far-fetched” theories and ridicules Thompson for wasting enormous amounts of time in his attempts at deciphering the ancient glyphic writing.

She shakes her finger at these Western scholars for exploiting locals for labor and cultural knowledge. Then, we see and hear Margaret Mead. She is explaining how ethnographic studies of primitive people help us understand our ancestors, reminding the viewer that this exposé of the injudicious construction of Mayan scholarship can be applied to the entire discipline of anthropology, and beyond. We are all guilty of profiting from these falsehoods. Even Maria is culpable of a sort of reverse ethnocentrism, arguing for the “legitimate” rights to her own postmodern version of authenticity.

The filmmaker, of course, is part of this hoax. Within the first minute of the film, we learn that we cannot take anything at face value. We see Mayan ruins, and we assume they are from original, early twentieth-century film footage, due to the scratchy black and white, slightly off-synch

images. The camera slowly pans left. We now, unexpectedly, face late twentieth-century Cancun, with its high-rise hotels replacing ancient temples as contemporary versions of neo-colonial (touristic) appropriations of Mayan culture. Wait a minute. This was one camera movement. This “authentic” footage is not what it seems to be. Jesse Lerner is taking us for a postmodern journey through images of veracity and dubiousness. Sit back and enjoy, but realize that this is not only about being amused.

Along with an overt tinge of cynicism, Lerner has a unique ability to critically and profoundly theorize through visuals, and this is where I find the true brilliance in this film. Images, according to far too many scholars and filmmakers, are not quite capable or delicate enough to handle deep theoretical issues. Perhaps it is the physicality of film that precludes its domination by cerebral, theoretical words. Jesse Lerner, however, takes a sledgehammer to this academic hierarchy between images and words, along with erasing the disparity among method and theory. His critical theory is embodied in the film format, spilling into his stylistic and editorial choices. He discusses intricate analytical issues, bringing them to life in an aesthetic medium. His images make statements of their own, standing tall without the oft-needed word for support. This is not to say that there are no words. There are plenty, though they are as dubious as the animated pen and ink drawings. They are the bricks of empty canons, the brushstrokes of masterpieces that gain value merely through their supposed authenticity.

And, Jesse Lerner does indeed take a stab at “art.” We meet Brigido Lara, a Mexican sculptor who (actually) was arrested for trafficking in antiquities. He was exonerated only after he proved that he himself was the creator of the looted pre-Columbian artifacts, sculpting a small collection of Totonac “treasures” while behind bars. He fooled them all. His forgeries were considered “authentic” and they were subsequently deposited around the world, in museums and private collections, as classic prototypes of ancient Totonac sculpture. One was even in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But, they were not real at all, even though their assumed authenticity turned them into priceless objects of “art.” The point here is that replicas can surpass originals in aesthetics and authenticity, though they are valueless and the originals are priceless. But, what really is the difference? Is this not the same as what archaeologists and ethnographers

do as they reconstruct Mayan ruins and lives? Are not scholars aspiring for the “aesthetic” and “authentic?” Is this what Jesse Lerner is doing too? Is *Ruins* part of this great big sham? The slippage between lies and reality begins to get uncomfortable.

Indeed, Jesse Lerner implicates film, particularly documentary film, in these misguided creations of authenticity and subsequent misplaced value and meaning. The female narrator, who sounds, not surprisingly, as objective, non-emotional, and paternalistic as possible, verbalizes the self-critique for him. “It is this concern for authenticity that links the forger and the documentary filmmaker. Both create an illusion of the real through an elaborate web of artifice.” I wish Jesse Lerner had not felt the need to explicate himself through these words. In fact, this is the only, very minute, disappointment of the film. We are fed the punch line through words, even though we did not need it for comprehension. His film spoke for itself. We already got it. Scholarly concepts, reconstructed worlds, reproductions or “art,” and, yes, documentary film are all implicated in the making of authentic wholes out of fragments, clays, brushstrokes, and biases.

Ruins is completely in black and white, making it easier for Lerner to play with his audience’s implicit and unquestioned links between black and white imagery and veracity. The film is also entirely bilingual, with English and Spanish subtitles opposing the spoken word. The length of the film, 78 minutes, may make it awkward to show in university classes, though I would make an effort to do so. I consider it a must for anyone engaged in the scholarship of Mayan archaeology, epigraphy, or ethnography. It is also highly appropriate in courses dealing with issues of representation, critical theory, and museum studies. Visual anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers would find an insightful critique of our own discipline’s strident requirement of whole representations and accuracy.

Ruins is a truly remarkable accomplishment. Most scholars are willing and capable, due to hindsight, of criticizing the misguided assumptions, misinterpretations, and problematic reconstructions of Mayan culture. However, no one does it so eloquently or in so few words as does Jesse Lerner in *Ruins*, and few would dare to playfully and poignantly implicate the entire fields and canons of archaeology, ethnography, art, and documentary filmmaking as corroborating participants in these institutionalized creations of fake documentaries. This

is what Jesse Lerner set out to do, and this is what he achieves. He uses the Mayan ruins of Mexico as springboards to dissect the entire institutionalized structure through which we gain and define authenticity. Brick by brick, brushstroke by brushstroke, piece by piece, he brings the entire edifice crumbling down. I stand and applaud the ruins.

To the Land of Bliss. 2001. 47 minutes. Directed by Wen-jie Qin. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources, 101 Morse Street, Watertown, MA 02472, USA. 800-569-6621, docued@der.org

HUN Y. LYE
University of Virginia

To the Land of Bliss is a fascinating documentary centered on the death of an old Buddhist monk on Mt. Emei in Sichuan province, southwest China. In spring 1998, while conducting fieldwork research on Mount Emei on the revival of Buddhism by Chinese Buddhist nuns, Wen-jie Qin, then a Ph.D. candidate in “Chinese Religions and Film” at Harvard University, had the rare opportunity to witness and film the death of Juechang, a venerated and beloved monk on Mt. Emei. As Qin noted in the introduction to her dissertation, *The Buddhist Revival in Post-Mao China: Women Reconstruct Buddhism on Mt. Emei*, what she managed to film was not only the death of a respected and elderly monk but “a cultural tradition dealing with death and a community brought together by the event of death.” *To the Land of Bliss* has indeed captured “a cultural tradition dealing with death.” But this is no ordinary death; nor is it the death of an ordinary person. Instead, it is the death of a monk described by Qin as “an eminent monk” who apparently had many monastic and lay disciples, disciples who flocked to Mt. Emei upon his death and gathered for a funeral befitting a monk of Juechang’s standing.

Over almost fifty minutes of beautifully filmed and carefully edited footage, viewers are provided a window into the death, lives, beliefs, and practices of contemporary Chinese Buddhists—particularly attitudes towards death, beliefs and interpretations on the afterlife and the “Land of Bliss” (a Buddhist heaven better known as the “Pure Land”), the cultic and ritual performances occasioned by the death of an important monk, the miraculous happenings that believers associate with the

death of a monk, the participation of the laity, and the articulate voices of the nuns on Mt. Emei.

This documentary begins in the autobiographical mode as Qin tells of her own relationship with Mt. Emei and Buddhism, which began in her childhood during the last days of the infamous Cultural Revolution. The actual death was not documented by Qin’s filming as she was “in group meditation” when the monk passed away early in the morning. The documentary gives the impression that the monastic community that attended to Juechang as he was dying was probably disappointed that the actual death was not filmed as Qin was specifically requested by Juechang’s disciples “to film his last few moments in this world.” From Qin’s dissertation which was submitted to “The Committee on the Study of Religion” of Harvard University, we learn that Juechang was one of “three eminent monks” on Mt. Emei who died within two weeks in April 1998. Juechang’s death thus marked the inevitable passing away of the last generation of Chinese Buddhist monastics trained on the eve of communist China.

Qin’s authorial voice runs through the entire documentary—sometimes as narrator explicating what is seen and other times as the interviewer speaking to monks and nuns. Qin’s personal reflections on the state and future of Buddhism on Mt. Emei, on her own mortality, and on the afterlife are also woven into the documentary. Rather than attempting to distance herself as the author, producer and director of the film and in doing so give *To the Land of Bliss* the veneer of an ethnographic documentary independent of any external agency, Qin unambiguously lets herself be a part of the film. Although there were times in the film when I felt that Qin’s authorial voice could be softer, in general, I appreciated her decision to allow her personal reflections to be included in the film.

Although the documentary starts off with a clear chronology of events immediately following the death of Juechang, somewhere in the middle, viewers are left to guess the actual number of days between events witnessed in the film. We learn that although Chinese Buddhist tradition dictates that seven days should lapse between the death of a person and the moving of his or her body, the community decided to prepare and move Juechang’s body after four days as his death had occurred during a series of warm days. We see the removal of Juechang’s body from the position and the room he died in to a brick structure that we learn later