

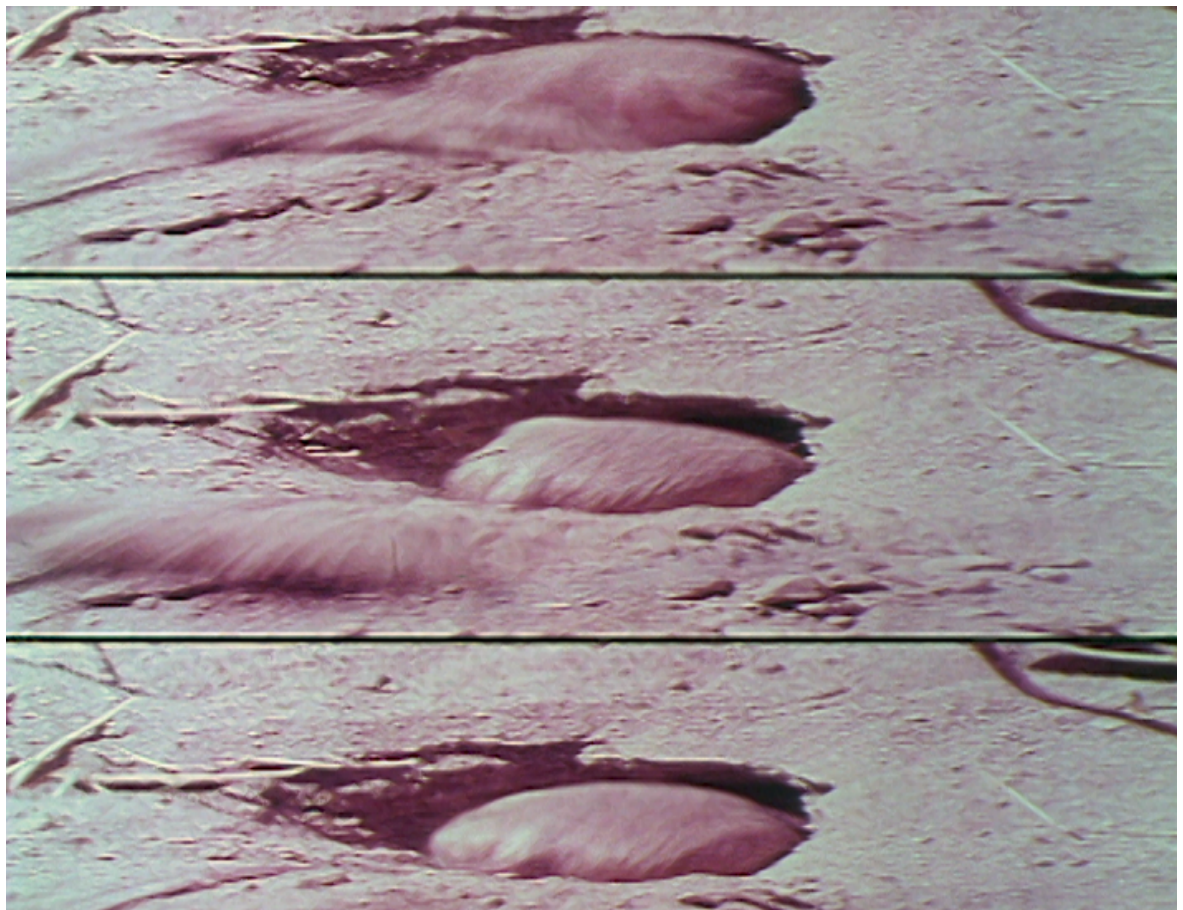
Dave Tompkins

Winter is a planet

A kangaroo rat kicks out a wisp of sand. Cute enough to pass for hamster but affiliated with pocket gophers, the rodent is equipped with stretch jowls and spring-loaded feet. It doesn't scurry as much as teleport, blipping itself across the desert for spans of three meters, clearing snake and scrub, all without disturbing the seed stash in the pouches lining its outer cheeks. Seeds hold its water supply.

The rat-not-rat appears, or disappears, in a grainy print of *The Wandering Dunes* (1977), a science educational short that examines the footwear of desert inhabitants. In one shot, the creature seems to be launched by a pop of grit that's attached itself to the film's gelatin surface, as if *The Wandering Dunes* was trying to jump ahead in anticipation of temporal loss and decay, or optimistically 'the future,' to be discovered in a canister marked 'Yak Rocket.' It eludes the frame's capture while fleeing a biologist on the same goofy size 11s that, we're told, have desert traction. Did the kangaroo rat just slip time itself? Disjointed by the notion, the film slides off its telecine, freezing action and subject, which is busy burrowing for its life, blasting sand. Not the best time to pose an existential question to the kangaroo rat's rear end. Or ends. Three of the same beige boulesque haunches are stuck in three frames, leaving one of the desert's more clever food-chain fugitives trapped in a vertical judder, caught forever trying to get the hell out of *The Wandering Dunes*. Human negligence unwittingly makes the final cut in the film's case for the ecology.

The triple mouse caboose flashes in the film leader of Frances Scott's *Aureole*, an aberration between numbers, smudges, and sprocket holes off track. This glint in the grain. What is it? A rock? A dinner roll? There's no time to hover. The countdown, lifted from *The Making of Dracula*, is down to 3. A rocket ejects its booster back through the ozone. A cave painting of a bison flashes for a been there and no more, just long enough to be misplaced in a false memory of your grandparents' Time Life encyclopedias.



Humankind's duration in fifteen easy installments. A glacier calves and a diorama of gazelles tries to look past it all, through the noseprint on the vitrine, a child's breath left behind. So many glimpses and visions, some never meant to be seen but wind up book-ending other films, found in a discard bin of new beginnings and endings. It all happens in a blink, rubbing a blur from the lens. Were we ever?

A slip of telecine, 'the gate weave effect,' bends sound into image. A clock tower bongs well past its appointed time, a distorted tone dip into a future unintended. Or an extraction repurposed. A mosquito nosedives into a little boy's arm, into platelets that zoom out into concentric red suns. One vision's blood becomes the center of the solar system. From a time of a makeshift, galactic spirals were painted on domed ceilings drifting overhead, stars as snow, dreamt at a tilt. Forsaken films in abandoned planetariums, looping on their own, celestial bodies in passing. *Celestial Earth, Beyond the Solar System, Waves and Energy, How We Explore Space, Cosmic Zoom*. Something labeled 'Magician Set-up.' Another called 'Re-enactment and Mayday.' To see these films in recovered fragments, a collage of alchemical exchange, is to watch through someone else's childhood recall, attention span pulled between deep space and deep lunch box, wondering how these imagined futures might've turned out differently.

Aureole's meatballs for meteors now tumble through my memories of *Dark Star*, ingenious discount effects stored in the garage with the rip cord mower, entanglements of blown Christmas diodes, and a stationary bike with rotary dials. There are solar systems unglued, spattered backdrops, and moons in maché. A Jupiter cut-out in plywarp, its storms dust-banded, leans against the brick wall next to a watering can from a rogue greenhouse in space. The gardener droid from *Silent Running* is still rattled from Saturn's turbulence. *That you, Huey?* A burnt-out percolator sits on a shelf next to expired weed killer and a flying toaster from *Hardware Wars*, last seen projected on the wall of my second grade science class, launching two slices of evenly browned toast at a steam iron.

Planets move through *Aureole* as if on a pulley system, past the lens en route to spring cleaning. An archive in motion, the film is in appreciation of the twenty-two films that have been edited into the (approx.) running time of the longest lunar eclipse. The medium's disintegration fools with the lighting. 'The curl (distortion) of film, its decay, how it fades to coral,' says Frances. 'Even the stench. All appealing. The possibility to image that.'

A solar storm recalls winds in a chimney, a distant planet resonating through a cavity of stone and bat roost. I'm listening to *Aureole* next to the fireplace, accompanied by wind roaring up the ridge from the valley outside. The chimney whistles in an eat-your-sleeping bag frequency, the wind searching out crevices and nodes in the flue. *Aureole* replies with a recording of a woman feeding a loaf of white bread to a hippopotamus. The kitchen responds with my mom's dog, studiously licking the dishwasher door. He just finished his green beans and oatmeal. We're low on gichy michy so it's back to recordings of solar storms from NASA. Back to life, bivouacked on a frozen planet.

The voice of Michael Curran ushers a 'susurrus of blown snow' into the room, reading from Ursula K Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, a story that continues to gather more stories and ways of telling. For Gavilán Rayna Russom, Le Guin's 1969 novel inspired her ambient album *The Envoy*, becoming her own layered space, of and between frequencies feminine and masculine. 'There is this power in music to create liminal zones, like at nighttime, when the edges of things soften,' Russom would tell Science fiction writer Charlie Jane Anders, who also identifies as trans. Anders found the book a world-building map of possibility: 'The darker the events in this book turn, the brighter its spark of hope and friendship becomes.' Harold Bloom wrote of its triple refrain of other. For a retired school superintendent in Virginia, *The Left Hand of Darkness* was a good reason to mute the Ravens game and catch Toumani Diabate reading the ending on the radio. 'Time that is past and lost and yet is permanent, the enduring moment, the heart of warmth.'

For Curran, the reading left him melancholy, watching *Aureole* ‘collapse into a series of revelations and losses.’ His voice only drops out for two words, leaving us with the vocoded shadow of *nothing else*, an amplified loneliness. A neutron star, a pulsar, spins out. The subaudible pulse of ‘Brighter Days’ grows close, a Chicago House classic by Cajmere filtering through the tent’s ‘slanting plane of faint sound.’ I suggest returning to *Aureole* in headphoned darkness, for Frances and Chu Li-Shewring’s sound mix. Then reread Le Guin’s dispatch from Planet Gethen with this listening memory, shelter in mind. Maybe watch the video of Theo Parrish mixing into ‘Brighter Days,’ hanging onto his head, hat swiveled over his eyes. You’re watching someone else’s ecstasy (and generosity, sharing a sustained build) as a way of listening. It’s a gathering at the threshold. Dajae’s voice crumbles the planetarium (or church, chimney, observatory, etc.), ascending to star, and into solar eclipses, both real and animated, heard of and retold.

Aureole ends in a return to another Earth. The faint pulse of ‘Brighter Days’ lingers, as if remembered, held close in waking reverie. It’s always time to do ‘The Percolator’ somewhere. Morning is grainy. Leaves quiver with trichome fuzz, backlit. Filename ‘Woodland Web.’ The tent has melted into critter burble and crowcoded squawk, a world that’s been up to something during our abandonment. It’s the woods that have returned. ‘We come out in another place, changed,’ says Frances. ‘Like when the animals creep out from their hiding places after the visitation and see something else.’

Ursula K Le Guin’s carrier bag shakes out in a roadside picnic. Notable, among the ‘tiny grains of things’ was a mouse’s skull, ‘full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations and far more tricks than conflicts far fewer triumphs and snares than delusions, full of spaceships that get stuck, missions that fail and people who don’t understand.’

The kangaroo rat, that nocturnal time-hopping seed vault, didn’t survive reentry. But their story does, in the woodland moss, with sunlight dappled through the eyes of a skull that once dreamt beneath the desert. By daylight unseen, of another sky.

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Image: Frances Scott, *Aureole* (2021), still from single-channel, 16mm film and betacam video transferred to digital, colour, stereo, duration: 07:32. Courtesy of the artist and Matt’s Gallery, London.



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