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presents:



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# ABOUT THE FILM

Sundog lives out in the Sonora Desert on the Mexican border. He is an elderly gentleman, who lives off anything that the brutal nature gives him, be it a wild boar or the psychedelic poison of a toad. *A Shape of Things to Come* gives precedence to the sensory materiality of the desert instead of to explanations and dialogue, and moves beyond the human scale and down to animal perspectives.

It creates a world that stretches from a distant past in the ecological movements of the 1960s to a possible future in the aftermath of the apocalypse. But the border patrol agents are threatening the peace in Sundog's desert kingdom, which the armed recluse is prepared to defend. With the desert as the ultimate existential (and cinematic) setting, the film shows the relationship between humanity and nature at a critical time, when civil disobedience is the provocative answer to the most pressing questions. (Grasshopper)

83 min. | USA | 2020

## Philosophy for Living by Matt Turner

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“Underneath it all, I’m just here enjoying life on planet earth,” says Sundog, the radical environmentalist protagonist of Lisa Marie Malloy and J.P. Sniadecki’s *A Shape of Things to Come*, stating his philosophy for living during one of the few moments in the film in which he speaks. Despite being present onscreen for 90 percent of the film and active as a key creative collaborator (1), Sundog is arguably still not the film’s principal subject. Rather, Sundog is a cypher through which to focus on the desert landscape in which he lives, scavenging self-sufficiently in direct opposition to what ecophilosopher Derrick Jensen has termed the “the dominant culture.” For both every aspect of the way that modern civilisation is arranged is in some way harmful, so to participate in mainstream society is to be complicit in the earth’s destruction. (2)

Sniadecki met Sundog whilst making *El Mar La Mar* (2017), also co-directed (with Joshua Bonnetta) and also shot entirely within the Sonoran Desert, a 100,000 km stretch of land that connects parts of Arizona, California, and the state of Sonora, Mexico. As well as being home to a rich ecosystem of plant and animal life, this subtropic desert—as a key site for cross-border migration—is also a contested and politicized area. Filmed in six stretches between July 2017 and 2018, *A Shape of Things to Come* finds these complexities converging through Sundog’s experience of this land. (3) An opaque film,

which world-premiered in CPH:DOX's main competition, *A Shape of Things to Come* favors atmospheric detail over the provision of information. These contexts (e.g. migratory politics, ecocide, the impending apocalypse) are found peripherally, teased at rather than directly stated. At its center, the film is a straightforward observational portrait (albeit one with an unusual sensitivity to sensuous details) of Sundog's life in his makeshift shack, a homemade abode that he shares with one black cat and a small drove of pigs. The film traces him as he undertakes a series of activities in the desert wilds such as plant-picking, pig-feeding, herb-mixing, and even toad-smoking, all the while avoiding supplying any background details. These routine behaviors lead to a series of small crescendos, events which problematize our understanding of this character, revealing more about his relationship to the land he lives in symbiosis with and the wider society that he is distanced from.

Like much of the work of filmmakers with former associations with Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab, the film has aesthetic qualities that rival anything contemporary documentary has to offer. Images are remarkably composed, with consistently interesting framing and smart manipulation of natural light, as well as sound design and editing that intensifies the visual environment being depicted or serves to link scenes together smoothly and create continual flow. Seemingly minor observations are heightened in sensation, shifted slightly in focus, or tweaked and dialed up in some often imperceptible way. As a result of these alterations, regular actions and ordinary scenarios seem unusually interesting; the routine is made engaging again, the ordinary is rendered sublime.

The film's first sequence evidences this, opening with a closeup of Sundog snoozing in a field, his bushy beard almost indistinguishable from the reeds that surround him. His eyes are shut, his expression restful; the scene should be dull but the images in it are rich, suggestive of a coming meaning that lies just beyond current comprehension. Indeed, his situation seems idyllic, but it is quickly complicated. The scene is intercut with a shot of a grave in the desert that recalls similar ones seen in *El Mar La Mar*, an unmarked patch with a small cross that suggests it marks a life lost during an imperilled crossing. Next, Sundog slings a rifle over his shoulder and readies for a hunt. Though his eventual target is a stray javelina—which he is seen gutting, cooking and then sharing with his pigs in the extended, particularly fascinating sequence that follows—the scene's initial ambiguity is such that it is not clear who or what he is going after. Abstraction, as engineered here, produces a tension which, it later becomes clear, is intentional.

These scenes set several precedents that the film's trajectory follows. Sundog is particular and principled, and whilst his off-grid life is seemingly peaceful, it is also—subject as it is to a violent state and a destructive society that poses a threat to both man and nature—tinged with danger. Sundog's purpose then, as he sees it, is to resist the infringement of the state on the land “in any way [he] can think of,” or at least take strides to “slow it down, fumble it up, stop it in its tracks.” From this informational tidbit, viewers are left wondering several things about Sundog: What led him to this life, but equally, where does this life lead? While for now, he explains, this mainly means smuggling migrants

across the border or committing petty acts of resistance, the assumption that the film's title invokes is that soon this may translate into something more severe.

While the film's early scenes then place the film in the territory of a lineage of artist films with a fascination for hermetic characters—recalling Luke Fowler's *Bogman Palmjaguar* (2007), Ben Rivers' *Two Years at Sea* (2012), or Ann Carolin Renninger and René Frölke's *From a Year of Non-Events* (2017), to pick a few examples—a closer comparison might be James Benning's *Stemple Pass* (2012), which takes a prolonged look at the Montana mountains in which “Unabomber” Ted Kaczynski built his isolated cabin. Late in the film, Sundog is seen engaging in an act of eco-terrorism, which firmly establishes him—at least within the context of a film in which fantasy and reality are never clearly delineated—as someone prepared to take action when he deems that such action is required. (4)

The title's other inference—referencing *The Shape of Things to Come*, a book H.G. Wells wrote in 1933 that offers speculations about the future of the world through to 2106—gives another indication as to what the film might be about—beyond simple portraiture of this landscape and its solitary inhabitant. That which Sundog strives to protect is certain to face considerable imminent change, and whatever you make of it, the way he lives is certainly a more sustainable model of engagement with the world than is accomplished by most. The film then, while not exactly a prediction of “the shape” of things to come, does offer “a shape,” a sketch of one of many possible futures for how life will be lived in the form of a lone man making do within a hostile land.

(1) <https://www.wexarts.org/read-watch-listen/studio-session-lisa-malloy-jp-sniadecki>

(2) <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/j-p-sniadecki/>

(3) <https://www.wexarts.org/read-watch-listen/studio-session-lisa-malloy-jp-sniadecki>

(4) <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/j-p-sniadecki/> ♦



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