

RUPTURE, REPAIR

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Huda Awan

The word *slet*, as the opening text of Marta Popivoda's film *SLET 1988* (2025) makes clear, has two denotations. The Slavic word originally signified flocking, which refers to a group of same-species birds feeding, resting, and traveling together to protect themselves from predators. Drawing on the ostensibly harmonised movement of a flock in flight, the word '*slet*' was later appropriated to name the mass performances staged by the Sokol movement, an all-age gymnastics organisation founded in Prague in 1862. In the post-World War II era, *slets*—comprised of games, gymnastic routines, and coordinated dances—were utilised by socialist states to foster a sense of the social collective. Popivoda's interest is in the former Yugoslavia, where the most famous *slets* were organised to celebrate President Josip Broz Tito. Though the communist revolutionary was born on 7 May 1892, he maintained an 'official' birthday on 25 May, marked annually by a symbolic relay race across the country, which culminated in Belgrade's Partizan Stadium. In footage of the highly choreographed performances staged at the stadium, the simple, repetitious, and synchronised movement of bodies subsumes all sense of individuality. The grandeur of the performance doesn't rest in the talent or skill of the performers, but in the coordination—and control—of a big crowd.

SLET 1988 focuses on Yugoslavia's final *slet*, staged just two years before the state's violent and protracted breakup began. On its surface, the film is a character study of the seventy-four-year-old Sonja Vukićević, who was once a principal dancer with the Ballet of the National Theatre in Belgrade. Contemporary footage of Vukićević depicts her exercising alone in a modernist gym, the camera isolating her body and her movements as she stretches and warms up. These images are interspersed with wide-angle external shots of children playing amidst socialist-era buildings, and archival footage which shows a much younger Vukićević dancing the 'lead role' at that year's *slet*. Weaving in the voiceover narration of a teenage girl's diaries from 1988, the film moves away from simple character study to build a thesis of the 1988 *slet* as an anomaly by placing Vukićević at its centre. As footage on YouTube can attest, *slets*, before then, had been characterised by uniformity; no individual was privileged with a leading role. Given the eventual trajectory of the Yugoslav state, Vukićević's performance, exalting and captivating as it is to see, comes to symbolise a profound rupture in the state's increasingly fragile social fabric.

Critics have long argued that the unity ascribed to Tito's rule had not been a deeply rooted communality, but the façade of one, maintained by the suppression of dissident voices and the production of propaganda. Popivoda's film suggests that the *slet* lost its efficacy as image of social cohesion as it became alienated from its original intent—egalitarianism. To my mind, however, the word had also become estranged from its original meaning—flocking. Flocks of birds, notably, have no leaders. Any one bird can initiate the group's movement, and that movement is not a 'planned' synchronicity. Instead, birds track their closest neighbours in a domino-effect kind of following, which accounts for the rippling, wave-like movement of the starlings' murmurations. The highly-choreographed human *slet*, with its insistence on bodily and social control, might, in the end, have had little relation to birds.

At the beginning of this month, the first crewed flight to the moon since the Apollo mission in 1972 was launched from the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida. *The Guardian* hailed the Artemis II mission as "a truly unifying international project" for the fresh images it would produce of the Earth captured in its entirety from afar. Christina Koch, one of the four astronauts on the mission, has spoken previously of this 'overview effect', where, by viewing the Earth from a distance, "you don't see borders, you don't see religious lines, you don't see political boundaries ... All you see is Earth, and you see that we're all way more alike than we are different."

Towards its end, Graeme Arnfield's *The Case Against Space* (2026) nods to the wonder astronauts experience when viewing the Earth from space. For much of its duration, however, the film presents a critique of space travel by describing the distinctly inhuman aspects of zero-gravity conditions. Built on years of painstaking research, the film narrativises the first labour strike in space, which took place in 1973 aboard NASA's first orbital space station. Using transcripts of tape recordings from the mission as source material, Arnfield imaginatively re-enacts the conditions that led the three crew members—Gerald P. Carr, Edward Gibson, and William R. Pogue—to take collective action. Arnfield positions space labour as doubly alienating; not only are the crew estranged from the product of their labour, they are, for the eighty-four days of their mission, severed from the rhythms and familiarity of their home planet, too. Under continual observation by their superiors at NASA, they spend their days performing tedious experiments and producing reams of abstract data. Their progressive isolation from one another as the tasks pile up is conveyed formally in the film's images; rarely do the film's characters appear in shot together, each occupying the film's tightly cropped frame in turn. Meanwhile, the spectral qualities of Arnfield's 1970s CCTV camera fixes them in a haunted, lo-fi resolution that evokes the insubstantiality of their extra-terrestrial experience.

For me, the greatest achievement of Arnfield's second feature is its emotional sensitivity, and the profound empathy he has brought to his dense and technical source material. *The Case Against Space* doesn't merely describe and document alienation; the film *feels* it—and then acts its way out. Collectivity, in Arnfield's film, is not the achievement of functions by a body in rote unison with others. Instead, it's brought about by a sensation in the body—and by the recognition of that same feeling in the body of another. "To be in outer space is to be ill," says one of the astronaut-narrators about halfway through the film. But without any mirrors on board, the astronauts must "look at each other" to perceive this illness in themselves. As Christmas approaches, the astronauts become increasingly fatigued by their working conditions and the near-constant surveillance of their bodies. On the forty-ninth day of their mission, they stop work, cease communications with ground control, and spend the time they've clawed-back for themselves gazing out at the beauty of their home planet.

Arnfield presents a speculative montage of what they see, composed of satellite photographs of the Earth's lustrous textures and colours. The images are sublime, breathtakingly so—but wordbooks don't list 'sublime' as a synonym of 'unity'. On Earth, we are as ill, and alienated, and exploited as the Skylab crew. *The Case Against Space* is not so naïve as to suggest that a mutual recognition of this condition would be sufficient in bringing about political change. Nevertheless, the film courageously gestures to a foundation for repair—one more durable than an image of a 'Blue Marble' Earth, held away at a comfortable distance.

This text was commissioned by Open City Documentary Festival to accompany the programme SLET 1988 (2025; dir. Marta Popivoda) + THE CASE AGAINST SPACE (2026; dir. Graeme Arnfield) at Institute of Contemporary Arts, 19 April 2026.

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