

LESSONS IN PATIENT DISSENT

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Sophia Satchell-Baeza

Dig below the surface and every landscape has a story. In *As Estações* (2025), Maureen Fazendeiro finds many of them, nestled in the nooks and jagged rocks of the ancient region of Alentejo in southern Portugal. The stories are fragmentary and dispersed, but together add up to a portrait of a place, one told as much through sound as image.

The film starts as an observational study of the landscape, lingering gently on goat herders and fields of flowers, before segueing into fabulation, as regional myths and legends come to life in the song of a siren on a hilltop. *As Estações* uses various tools to expose the landscape's buried histories of collective action and folk opposition; drawing on field recordings and scientific diagrams, letters and local folklore, poetry and oral history, each mode brings its own qualities to the filmmaker's patient study of human interaction with the landscape.

In one of the film's opening moments, we see an archaeological dig in Castelo de Cuncos, an Iron Age/Roman Republican-era settlement, where workers excavate the land with spades, brushes, and shovels. An area which has experienced successive waves of conquest and conflict, Alentejo holds one of the highest concentrations of megaliths in Europe; the letters and field recordings of German archaeologists Vera and Georg Leisner, who carried out one of the first studies of dolmens in the Iberian Peninsula before war broke out in Europe, are a focal point of Fazendeiro's film. As one of the first coherent marks made by humans on the land, the megalith points to the beginnings of human society, around which agriculture developed and community was established. Built by prehistoric cultures, their original purpose remains elusive, although theories abound, ranging from the astronomical to the artistic, fertility to funeral rites.

From Charlotte Prodger to Derek Jarman, David Larcher to Daniel & Clara, standing stones have dotted the landscape of artists' moving image, where they form part of a wider 'geological turn.' The monuments can appear as stand-ins for the unknown and the unmoveable—portals into the *genius loci* or 'spirit of place.' Like other kinds of abandoned monument, the megalith is a relic of past ideologies. They show us that ideas can decline or lie dormant, but that they rarely disappear completely.

A similar sentiment animates Ann Carolin Renninger and René Frölke's *Links von der Tanne* (2025). Made from the offcuts of a longer film (*From a Year of Non-Events*, 2017), the film is set in a bucolic farm near the small town of Glücksburg. Willi, an elderly man, returns to his garden in search of a tree that no longer exists, to which he was clearly attached. Set to move to a retirement home, Willi surveys and inhabits his environment for what feels like the last time. His verdant and overgrown paradise is crowded with gnarled trees and animals pecking on the ground. The camera quietly tracks him eating and sitting in his chair, as he instructs the film crew on the former whereabouts of his beloved tree.

Watching the films in this programme, a poem by the travel writer and trans pioneer Jan Morris came to my mind, in which Morris describes the "naked outfacing of time and the / elements" of standing stones as "a valuable lesson in patient dissent." That patient dissent is there in the rocks in Fazendeiro's film that have withstood centuries of wear and tear. But we hear it, too, in workers' songs, passed down

from generations, or the local poems set to memory—as local elders reflect on labour struggles, agricultural collectives and the dulcet beauty of the natural world. That dissent is also alive in Willi's refusal to forget the tree. Both of these films offer personal interpretations of humanity's attachment to landscape and the traces we leave behind. In both, the land is alive with birdsong and the images sing of transient beauty and a stubborn resilience. Shot in the warm textures of 16mm celluloid film, these works quietly home in on the immaterial traces of daily life, as a means to reflect on impermanence.

If standing stones are relics of bygone ideologies, they also remind us of humanity's ever-present desire to create and document lived experience. In *As Estações*, a group is led down to the Estoural Cave, a grotto rich with grooved engravings and faded cave paintings. The guide points out a specimen in the surrounding rock art: an animal with two heads. Could this be an unknown figure in the Neolithic bestiary or is it, rather, as the guide surmises, an animal in motion? Stone Age cinema, or, as the guide puts it: "the easiest way of depicting what they saw outside." Both films in this program show what is outside, too. The film camera becomes a divining rod, a memory device—a means of recording history from below.

This text was commissioned by Open City Documentary Festival to accompany the programme TO THE LEFT OF THE FIR-TREE (2025; dir Ann Carolin Renninger & René Frölke) + THE SEASONS (2025; dir. Maureen Fazendeiro) at Institute of Contemporary Arts, 17 April 2026.

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