

This place is a message

A film by **Webb-Ellis**
Text by **Gwen Burlington**

It's estimated that 100 billion people have lived and died in the past 50,000 years. According to the philosopher Roman Krznaric, if twenty-first-century birth rates and lifespans remain constant for the next 50,000 years, 6.75 trillion people will be born. 'How can we be good ancestors?' Krznaric asks, 'I consider it the most important question of our time'. These vast time horizons and those who inhabit them are the concern of Webb-Ellis' film-making practice.

This place is a message breaks out of the temporal myopia of now and considers the staggering parameters of nuclear semiotics; how to communicate warnings through deep time. Webb-Ellis have tasked a group of local teenagers with the formidable question; how do we tell our distant descendants where nuclear waste is buried and that it's dangerous for humans to be around? Via a time-travelling limousine, they are let loose in a chalk quarry – in an area of the country longlisted for Nuclear waste storage – and clad in the garb of their school leavers do. An off-camera narrator speculates on a shared future, 'who will proclaim the end of this specific act in the ongoing process of existence and announce the next?'

Initially, there is a sense of wayward teenagers kicking about as they usually do, languidly passing time around a fire, but asking weighty questions about existence. 'Why are we here?' As one boy rocks back and forth in an old wooden rocking chair – oddly out of place in the wild – and throwing scraps into a fire, there is an end-of-world feeling of post-apocalypse. Are these the last ones standing? Or juvenile delinquents on the run? One girl postulates about the past; "we only evolved instead of the Neanderthals because we were able to work together and build society to keep each other safe." These affinities linking pre-history and far future grip the film; how to comprehend life 10,000 years into the future when language breaks down, and any sense of commonality is hard to imagine.

This is brought to bear in an inscrutable vocal sequence. Forced into an alternative method of communication through body and voice, we bear witness to the work of Phil Minton's *Feral Choir* and choreographer Lucy Suggate. "We speak in voices that are not human. That cannot be heard with biological ears." Ferality comes into play but not in frenzied hysteria. Expressionless faces make noises as if they embodied their throats, mouths, teeth, lips and gums for the first time. They speak the gobbildy-gook of their toddler years.

Sounds writhe, turning into shrieks, mad barks and howls as well as soft singsong as the group grow increasingly maniacal. A message must be told but cannot escape from the straitjacket of the body, of nowness. Not knowing quite what's afoot, the strangeness lends way to surreal humour, yet the escaped noises are accomplished with stony-faced candour.

This scene makes apparent the trusted space Webb-Ellis and their collaborators have created. The close-up takes precedence in their filmic storytelling and we are presented with blank, pubescent faces. These, however, are the antithesis of the Instagram Face, the 'cyborgian amalgam' forged by social media, plastic surgery and Face Apps, defined by catlike eyes, poreless skin and cartoonish lashes. No technologies have been employed to disguise or mask their features. These faces are vulnerable. Their frontal address of the camera demands a sense of responsibility.

The embodied presence of the teenagers is punctuated with digital child musings through the porthole of a computer screen, who offer their own solutions. Their seemingly premature intelligence and wit is confounding and it comforts to see them take on the breadth of the issue with earnestness. I have found myself returning to the same questions these past few weeks. What universal symbols are there, that will retain the same meaning we hold for them now? It reminds me that our genealogies bind us to each other and the planet. The teenager's fruitless attempt to make a flag with chalk that fades almost immediately, is perhaps an allegory for our attempts to tackle it. There is a sense of necessity in the task but also of tribal play and lunacy in its urgency. In a febrile dance sequence, they mime and move dynamically with the chalk rocks – a call to arms, perhaps.

A research-driven film, its scope is broad and ripples out in many directions to Posthumanism, philosophy, ecology, language and communication, to name a few cornerstones, but it is also about touching worlds beyond ours. Webb-Ellis implore us to reach across time, beyond mortality and to consider the welfare of the billions of people who will be born in the centuries ahead, and who far outnumber everyone alive today. The off-screen narrator states, 'We considered ourselves to be a powerful culture.' If we think beyond our present selves, maybe we can be.

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