

WHERE THE RIO GRANDE MEETS THE SEA,
THE ROCKETS OF SPACE X ARE
LAUNCHED; ASTRONOMERS GAZE
SKYWARD, HAWKERS SHILL THEIR WARES
AND ENVIRONMENTALISTS SURVEY THE
DAMAGE. WELCOME TO BOCA CHICA, USA.



SHIFTING BASELINES



INTERVIEW WITH JULIEN ELIE

AT THE SOUTHERN TIP OF TEXAS, SURROUNDED BY PRISTINE WETLANDS, LIES BOCA CHICA. IN 2018, ELON MUSK CHOSE THIS COASTAL TOWN FOR SPACEX'S NEW HEADQUARTERS. THE VILLAGE IS NOW DOMINATED BY TOWERING 50-STORY STARSHIPS. MOST RESIDENTS HAVE MOVED OUT; ACCESS TO THE BEACH IS BECOMING HARDER AS SPACEX GAINS CONTROL OF THE AREA.

THE VILLAGE HAS BECOME A MECCA FOR SPACE-JUNKIES DREAMING OF MARS AS AN ESCAPE FROM EARTH'S PROBLEMS. ACROSS THE RIO GRANDE, MEXICAN FAMILIES FISH UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYE OF THE BORDER PATROL. ONE GROUP OF PEOPLE DREAMS OF LEAVING, ANOTHER WOULD RISK EVERYTHING TO CALL IT HOME.

MEANWHILE, SCIENTISTS WORRY ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF THIS CURRENT SPACE RACE. THE 1970S "KESSLER SYNDROME" WARNED THAT SPACE DEBRIS COLLISIONS COULD TRIGGER A CHAIN REACTION, DESTROYING EVERYTHING IN ORBIT. ONCE UNLIKELY, THIS IS NOW A REAL CONCERN FOR MANY ASTROPHYSICISTS. A SHIFT HAS OCCURRED, BOTH IN THE SKY AND ON EARTH. ARE THESE VISIONS OF A PROMISING FUTURE OR RECKLESS AMBITIONS LEADING TO OUR OWN DEMISE? SOMEHOW, THE ENTIRETY OF THE HOPES AND DREAMS, THE FEARS AND MISGIVINGS OF OUR HUMAN-SPECIES ARE ON DISPLAY HERE, ON THE BANKS OF THE RIO GRANDE, IN THE SMALL TEXAN TOWN OF BOCA CHICA.

CHARLOTTE SELB Your past two films were shot in Mexico. How did you end up just on the other side of the border, in Boca Chica?

JULIEN ELIE Apparently I find it difficult to leave Mexico! I spend several months a year there. I am drawn to Mexico, but also to all the complex tensions associated with the border. It all started when I was on a summer vacation with my friend in the countryside and we were observing the stars. We could see the Milky Way, which has become a rare phenomenon in Quebec. What astounded me was that we also saw dozens of satellites. I was not aware of the mad space race going on. I started to do some internet research and happened upon a photograph in the *Le Monde* newspaper: it was a picture of a rocket, in the middle of a coastal village in a lost corner of Texas. I immediately realized that there was a story to be told. I am often inspired by a book, a sentence or a photo when I direct a film. In this case it was a photograph that inspired me.

I was already planning a trip to Texas for another project, a fictional work about femicides in Mexico. I was travelling to the opposite side of Texas, so I crossed the whole state to the Gulf of Mexico and discovered this improbable place. I have rarely encountered such a naturally cinematographic situation, already built with "actors" wandering about - a whole cast of bizarre characters. I felt like I was in a Jacques Tati film, who is one of my favourite directors. So I decided to direct a film without fully knowing where the story would take me. I felt an urgency in making this film, that this place would not remain accessible for much longer. After that, things moved quickly. I started filming before writing the treatment. With my film editor Xi Feng, we decided to edit during the filming process. I was writing while the production team worked on funding.







CS The SpaceX launch station is the starting point for an anthropological, scientific, environmental, economic and at times metaphysical exploration in this film. Did you realize from the beginning the ramifications of this subject or did you discover it as you advanced in the filming process?

JE The subject of the film is above else a place, with the characters that inhabit it, and the cinematic surroundings. I wanted to capture daily life in this little coastal village of retirees, 40 kilometers from the closest shops without even a gas station. The landscape is some of the most breathtaking I have ever seen with deserted dunes as far as the eye can see. It is also a place saturated with history, marked by tragic events such as the massacre of the indigenous population by the Spanish. Elon Musk built his launch structure on a cemetery. The closest border town, Brownsville, is populated by working and middle class people with many hispanic immigrants that cannot afford to travel further than Boca Chica on the weekend, and has long been designated a natural reserve managed by the American federal government.

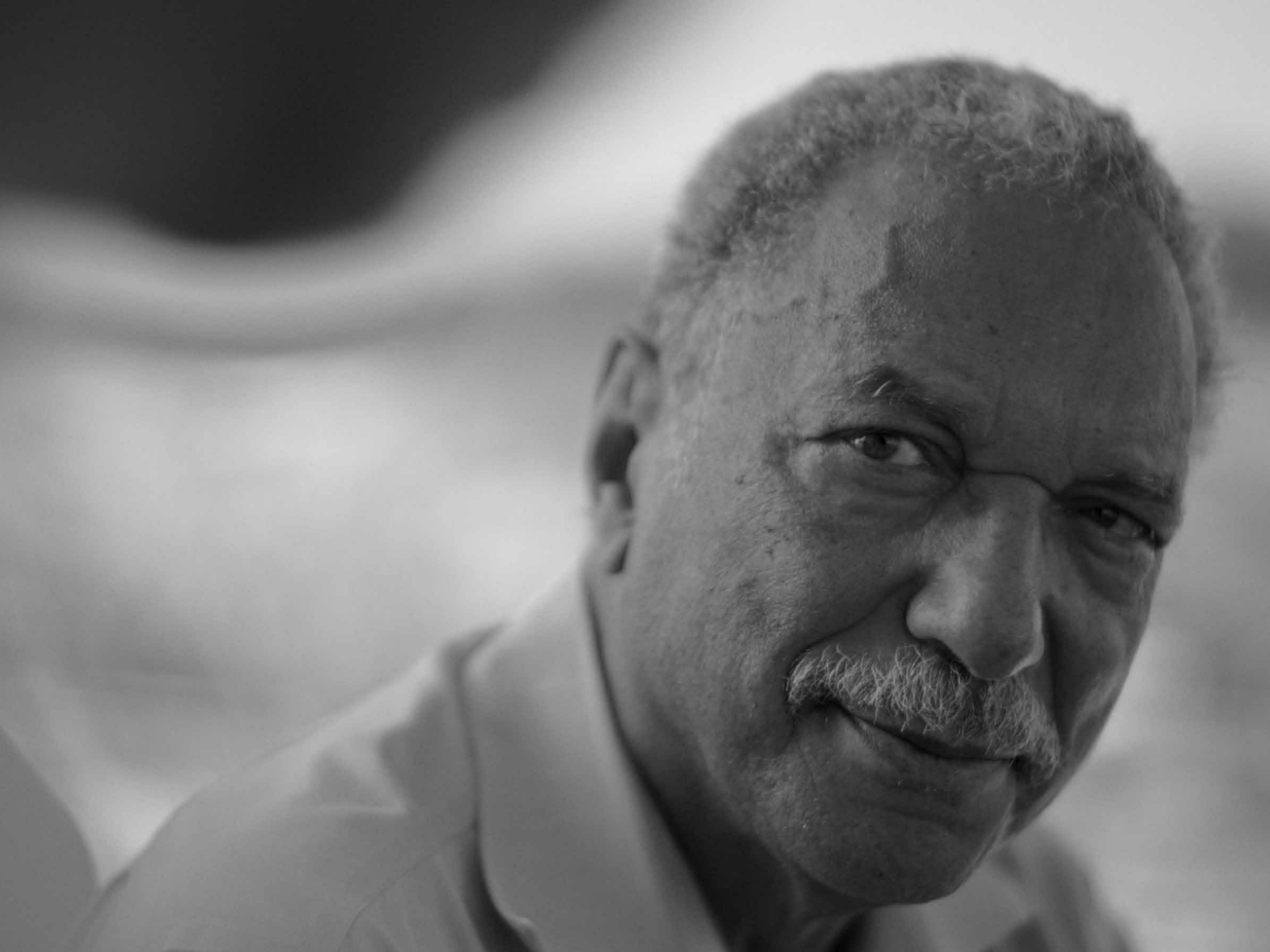


Afterwards I became aware of the major issues surrounding the devastation of outer-space. I saw this place as the starting point for the conquest of the last frontier humans are attempting to dominate. All of my films address colonialism in some way. In Boca Chica, on the land of a decimated people, we are once again attempting to dominate new lands. There is also a deep humanity in this quest to discover, and in the many concerns that are pushing people to want to leave Earth. I try to take an anthropological and humble view of our fellow human beings.

CS The industrial complex in Boca Chica, which is related to space, real estate, tourism and also media, is in constant tension with the local ecosystem that is attempting to survive this new sprawling empire. How did you try to emphasise this contrast?

JE It was quite simple because of the distinct surroundings! All I had to do was start filming. Black and white worked perfectly in this circumstance. On the one hand you have the metallic and brilliant retro looking rockets, on the other the wild beauty of the natural reserve with coyotes, migratory birds and snakes. Contrast was everywhere. We filmed instinctively, allowing ourselves to be guided by what we saw. It was a real gift to be there and at the same it raised huge questions. It is heartbreaking to observe the state of this place as it disappears. I have been drawn to forgotten spaces for a long time, that have disappeared from our collective memory and been physically erased.

CS You draw parallels between the extinction endangering the local animal species and the possible disappearance of humanity that is the motive for Elon Musk's mad dream. However, I have the impression that it is not so much this dystopian vision that motivates



SHIFTING BASELINES AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SPECIES

IN 1995 PROFESSOR DANIEL PAULY INTRODUCED THE CONCEPT OF SHIFTING BASELINES WHICH IS NOW EXTENSIVELY USED IN BIOLOGY TO EXPLAIN OUR ACQUIRED TOLERANCE TO TRANSFORMATIONS IN OUR SURROUNDINGS. OUR BASELINE REFERENCE EVOLVES FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION AS WE NEGLIGENTLY ACCEPT THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SPECIES AND CLIMATE CHANGES. THAT WHICH SEEMED UNIMAGINABLE 25 YEARS AGO HAS BECOME ACCEPTABLE TODAY.

MY CINEMATOGRAPHY HAS ALWAYS BEEN INSPIRED BY THAT WHICH IS DISAPPEARING AROUND US, BOTH IN THE PHYSICAL WORLD AND THAT OF MEMORY. FOR SEVERAL YEARS I CONTEMPLATED A FILM ADDRESSING THE NOTION OF SHIFTING BASELINES WITHOUT KNOWING WHERE THAT MIGHT TAKE ME, UNTIL I REALIZED THE RADICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE SKY BY PRIVATE ENTERPRISE.

you, but rather the symbolic loss of our humanity that is displayed in the simple disappearance of a starry night sky.

JE Absolutely, that is precisely what drew me there: a desire to observe the destruction of what we are as human beings. The atmosphere in Boca Chica is very unique: people dumbstruck with admiration, happy, under the impression they are witnessing a major event in humanity's history. But in reality, we are causing a magical place to disappear, a place of breathtaking beauty - and we are preparing the destruction of the sky! It is very paradoxical. Boca Chica is the meeting point of the destruction of the Earth and of the sky. It is also a place lost and in the middle of nowhere, bordering a part of Mexico that is one of most dangerous areas in the world. Drug traffickers have free-reign with no state presence. It is an out of the way place far from view, that perhaps allows Elon Musk to do as he likes.

CS The image of colonization and the myth of discovery repeats itself in your film several times as characters display a misguided nostalgia for the expeditions of great explorers and the exploitation of new territories. Is it not ironic that this obsession for new frontiers is evident next to one of the most violently defended borders of the world?

JE Elon Musk's evolution is hard to describe: his goal at first was to abolish borders. "If we go to Mars we will reconstruct humanity!" But as you have pointed out, it is a very militarized place under extreme surveillance as it is at the heart of many political and geostrategic issues. Drug traffickers and migrants are very prevalent, as well as the border police - in the air, on the waterways and the roads... There are even border crossing checkpoints within the United States to intercept illegal migrants on American territory. And that is not even including the high security surrounding SpaceX.

During the 18 months of travel to and from Boca Chica, the landscape changed completely. SpaceX acquired state roads. Public space has been privatized at an alarming rate! Land that was protected breeding ground for various species of animals has been transformed into giant parking lots. There is ongoing construction of new roads and an employee town where people work and live; the workers are all there in the service of space conquest and have no reason to leave the base as they have everything they need there. Many locals have left because of this. Boca Chica has become unlivable. There is constant noise and dust is omnipresent. Trucks come and go on the main road to the village, which is always under construction to allow for the passage of the heavy loads and rockets. A place that was once a paradise has become almost infernal.

CS Privatization and commercialization of public space seems to haunt all the aspects of this film. Even the name of the beach on the Mexican side of the









border “Playa Bagdad” is a fateful reminder of one of the most brutal episodes of privatization in the 21st century. With this in mind, I wonder how the new role of Elon Musk in the Trump administration has affected the meaning of your film. His cost management approach towards the American government and his recent racist leanings give a whole new political dimension to your film.

JE Yes, that is a rather delicate issue. I have to admit that initially I was not at all interested in Elon Musk. I wanted to avoid making a film about him or SpaceX. Today it is difficult to ignore. He has gained influence on nearly the whole planet. However, I attempt as much as possible to not mention his name during the film. For me the question is not Elon Musk as a person. Or SpaceX. I am not interested in one particular company but in a system. We have been colonizing territories for nearly 500 years: if that dynamic is embodied by Elon Musk today, it will be by someone else tomorrow. Even now he is not the only representative. I hope that my film transcends this one individual and his project through the way it is edited.

Unfortunately, the danger that Elon Musk represents transcends the subject of my film. His space project is only one among many dangers.

CS You chose to balance the discourse surrounding SpaceX admirers with that of scientists, biologists and environmentalists. Could you please elucidate this choice and the choice to integrate passages filmed in locations other than Boca Chica and Playa Bagdad?

JE I realized very rapidly that the implications of this place were too large and important to not look elsewhere. Without wanting to stray too far from the main subject, we filmed in Saskatchewan, Canary Islands, Belize and in Cambridge with various scientists. We needed to highlight the danger and explain the risks involved with giving the floor to fanatics of space conquest. We are talking about complete privatization of space, without any regulation. It is total chaos, like the Wild West.

I deeply believe in the value of science. The scientific voices in this film bring an essential perspective. During the pandemic, irrational discourse emerged in a virulent way, and unfortunately remains very prevalent. It is important to make space for scientific thought. I was always captivated by the stars and the immensity of the universe, but didn’t have much knowledge of the subject. Through my research, I discovered the work of dozens of renowned astrophysicists, with whom I corresponded. Astrophysicists inherently understand cinema: on the one hand they work with images and lenses, on the other hand they are dreamers, even artists. There was a synergy between us. This allowed me to very naturally fulfill my desire to give a voice to scientists in one of my films.





CS I would like to return to your choice of filming in black and white. This aesthetic choice allows very different landscapes to appear similar: the sand on the beaches of the Gulf of Mexico can be confused with the snow in Saskatchewan.

JE People always ask me why I film in black and white. It always depends on the film, but the short answer is because I love black and white! For me, they are the two fundamental colours of photography. When I was young, I travelled the world taking black and white photos with my film camera. That is how I learned about film, the image and framing. So it is quite natural for me, but not just a superficial aesthetic decision, simply because “it will be prettier in black and white”. It has to have meaning for the film.

In this case it was the rockets that reminded me of old Eastern European science fiction films from the 60’s, as well as a certain nostalgia for the toy rocket. They did not look real, and black and white added distance. Black and white also allows for the various locations to be drawn together: Saskatchewan has a lunar and glacial feel, whereas some of the scenes in Texas give you the impression of being on Mars. The use of black and white allows for the thematic comparison and timelessness that would not have been possible with colour.

I could direct five more feature films in black and white and the meaning would be different each time. Even if it is an instinctive choice, when I question myself, the use of black and white always reinforces the theme of the film. It is never just artifice.

CS You mentioned that you wanted to finish filming rapidly since you sensed that access to the area would become difficult. Was it hard to get authorization for your filming?

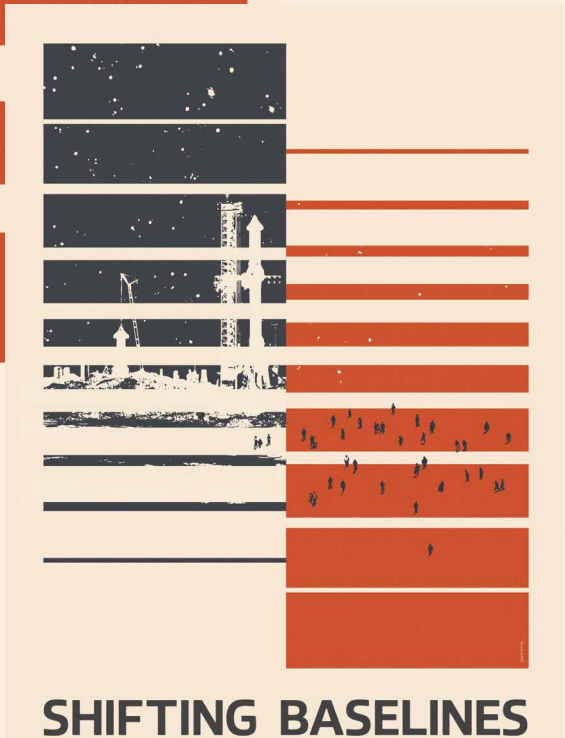
JE I do not seek authorization, I just film. Except for when prohibited, I think this is the best way to work. The only time we had to pass through bureaucratic processes was to film the observatories.

CS You were present for the launch of a rocket and the subsequent explosion. What was the experience like?

JE Seeing this event from close up is indescribable. Your insides start to tremble. The noise is staggering. It is one of the only sounds that we could not recreate during the sound mixing of the film: we had to use the original sound. It sounds like the devil’s train. We were very nervous about filming the launch. We couldn’t miss the moment, while being scared that the rocket would explode over our heads! That is exactly what happened, but 30 kilometers away. It seems unreal when it launches, you wonder how this thing can fly. And then sure enough, it crashes quite quickly!

CHARLOTTE SELB, EDITOR & CRITIC.





SHIFTING BASELINES

In 2002 Julien Elie directed his first documentary about the death penalty in the USA, followed by a medium length documentary filmed in East Africa the same year. After taking a fifteen year hiatus from cinema he returned in 2018 with his film **DARK SUNS**. The epic story about the wave of violence that has affected Mexico for years won multiple awards and distinctions (CPH DOX, FICUNAM, Hamburg Film Festival, etc.) and was presented in nearly sixty festivals worldwide. In 2023, **LA GUARDIA BLANCA**, a second feature length documentary filmed in Mexico, addressing the devastation of landscapes and territories by private companies was released. **SHIFTING BASELINES**, his latest film is premiering at Visions du réel (Nyon) and Hot Docs (Toronto) in April 2025. It will be released in cinemas in the next few months.

A FILM BY JULIEN ELIE

SHIFTING BASELINES

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IN COLLABORATION WITH CINÉMA BELMOPÁN

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