

film, a travel document, and an engagement with a culture that is not Silva's own, *Rock Bottom Riser* bears formal traces of the early films Silva made in Morocco, Haiti, and India, but also elaborates his more recent cultural histories of pocket regions of the US. While Hawaii is of course an American state, which nominally makes *Rock Bottom Riser* an "American" film, the island—a space that is crisscrossed with conflicting histories, in which the domestic and the global are ineluctably merged—has more in common with Puerto Rico, a land continually relegated to a twilight zone between state and colony, than with Florida or New York. And like Puerto Rico, Hawaii is historically a multiethnic state, its identity forged through a complex history of colonialism. It has only been American capitalism's success in redefining Hawaii, turning its culture into a consumable simulacrum—a place for Americans to "get away from it all"—that allows this deeply racist nation to accept Hawaiian otherness.

What Silva shows quite clearly through his oblique strategy of creative nonfiction is that the radical flattening of culture and history on which global capital thrives actually has its limits. The Indigenous activists who object to the construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope on Mauna Kea have successfully blocked its progress for over ten years now, and the matter is not even close to being resolved. The mosaic of voices in *Rock Bottom Riser* presents a wide array of perspectives on what counts as science, who gets to define Indigenous culture, and whether conservation represents a roadblock to progress or the protection of an ecological patrimony that some refuse to appreciate or understand. But in the end, after all the arguments have long since been silenced, the island's volcanoes will continue to provide their own answer. From the earth's core to its surface, Hawaii regenerates itself, writing its own history in molten rock. ♦

Acropolis Cinema presents:



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ABOUT THE FILM

From the earliest voyagers who navigated by starlight, to present-day astronomers scanning the cosmos for habitable planets, explorers have long made Hawaii the hub for their searching. Today—as lava continues to flow on the island—another crisis mounts as scientists plan to build the world’s largest telescope on Mauna Kea, Hawaii’s most sacred and revered mountain.

In his dynamic feature debut, Fern Silva examines myriad encounters with an island world at sea. Drawing from subjects as seemingly disparate as the arrival of Christian missionaries and the controversial casting of Dwayne Johnson as King Kamehameha, the film weaves a vital tapestry of post-colonialism and pop culture with cinematic brio and a wry wit. *Rock Bottom Riser* is an essential document and an exhilarating tour-de-force, a palimpsest that traverses geology, ethnography and astronomy.

Format: 35mm
70 min. | US | 2021

Journey to the Centre of the Earth by Michael Sicinski

The following is an excerpt of an article originally published in Cinema Scope 86, Spring 2021

Fern Silva’s films cannot be described as ethnography, personal/mythopoeic film, or essay filmmaking, although they often partake of all of those modes. Though his films are rooted in particular places and cultural spheres, they assiduously avoid the rhetorical or declarative traps of typical nonfiction filmmaking. Instead, they envelop the viewer in a diffuse but concrete ambiance, conveying the palpability of land and water, the weight of the air surrounding hills and trees. They represent a doubled physicality—the world as unavoidably there, inseparable from the cinematic substrate of 16mm filmmaking itself—and the result is a hybridized form of documentary “fiction,” in the classical Latin sense. Silva’s films are made, formed in the interface between reality and those human and mechanical processes that bring it into being.

Fittingly enough, Silva’s feature debut, *Rock Bottom Riser*, is about natural events and human interventions, about historical and contemporary ruptures that have happened, will happen, or must be avoided. The film is about Hawaii and its long tradition of scientific and spiritual inquiry, and takes as its central point of conflict the Thirty Meter Telescope, a proposed interstellar observatory on the mountain of Mauna Kea. Not only is Mauna Kea one of the most sacred sites in Hawaiian cosmology, but it is also a flashpoint of America’s colonial dominance over the island. Building on this site poses environmental risks, and further threatens protected lands that have already been compromised. As with other proposed public/private initiatives like the Keystone

pipeline, the governmental institutions behind the telescope plan are connected to the long-term commercialization of Hawaii, the destruction of its landscape, and the marginalization of its Indigenous communities in the name of neoliberal “progress.”

Silva includes the voices of a great many participants in this struggle, clarifying the degree to which a single public works project represents the latest example of a long history of Western aggression and expropriation. However, a scene near the start of the film—an aerial shot zooming in on a river of lava issuing from the Kilauea volcano—clues us in to the existence of another important voice, that of the earth itself. In purely cinematic terms, this sequence is piercing, with hot yellow-orange molten rock forming a river alongside a geothermal plant. We see bubbling lava as it hits certain immovable crags and solidifies, becoming ashen igneous rock. This volcano, which is used as a visual refrain throughout the film, tells us many things about the battle for control of Hawaii—most notably that the island-state is still evolving, a work in progress, born of millions of years of geological activity. Anyone who thinks the landscape is merely there for the taking is deluded, willfully ignoring the accretion of history that can make its way to the surface without warning.

At its heart, *Rock Bottom Riser* is a film about competing knowledges. We hear the words of Christian missionaries, academics and activists, theatrical performers and historians, and are shown the various acts and objects that seek to establish one’s place in the universe, from the inner workings of telescopes to intricate traditional feather capes (made by Rick San Nicolas, who is currently working as a costume designer for an upcoming Robert Zemeckis film starring Dwayne Johnson as King Kamehameha). We hear the words of leading astronomers such as Frank Marchis of the SETI Institute, which are placed alongside those of men like Nainoa Thompson, who navigated his canoe from Hawaii to Tahiti entirely without the use of Western instruments, relying on traditional Hawaiian understandings of astronomy and oceanography. It is the listener’s job to evaluate the different assertions in the film based only on their persuasive force.

If *Rock Bottom Riser* represents a shift in Silva’s filmmaking, it is not because of a sudden embrace of documentary rhetoric. Rather, the new film juxtaposes the ideas and experiences of others in much the same way Silva’s earlier films combined potentially conflicting image and sound sets, breaking given cultural spheres apart and poetically reassembling them as competing temporalities. Walter Benjamin spoke of “dialectical images,” particular historical arrangements whose complexity could reveal the thick archaeological history that led to their present dispensation. This, I think, is as close as I can come to offering a satisfactory description of Silva’s films. By showing us a collage of discontinuous moments from a given lifeworld, Silva expresses the density of any given social formation, its atmospheric pervasiveness and resonance. As such, his films show us things that serve to emphasize just how much we cannot know. [...]

Although the move from short to feature filmmaking is a significant one for any artist, Silva’s expansion of his time frame in *Rock Bottom Riser* is an organic development, one occasioned by his continuous furthering of his themes and orientations. A landscape