

Film review of:

!Aitsa (2023)

Directed by Dane Dodds. Copenhagen, Denmark.

The principal subject of this most remarkable documentary film is the tension arising from the treatment of indigenous groups by scientists constructing one of the world's largest radio telescopes for the investigation of deep space in the Karoo desert, South Africa. The film has many levels, and encourages the audience to think and reflect about the subjects and issues raised, in preference to openly advocating a particular standpoint, leaving the audience to draw their own conclusions. Although no sides are taken (there is no narrator, only testimony) the moral issues arising from relict colonial attitudes towards indigenous cultures are clear.

From an anthropological and archaeological standpoint, !Aitsa is a unique record of the culture of the San themselves, depicting many aspects which not been revealed to outsiders before. Most notable of these, is the filming of the dance used by the San to

enter a state of trance, which some readers will recall is known to be connected to the process of making San rock art. The film is commendably well researched and testimony from the San people themselves are contextualized, explained by expert researchers.

From the perspective of a rock art researcher, the film is particularly interesting for a number of reasons:

- Firstly, it takes the audience on a journey illustrating the use of images as an information technology and the role they play in orality, namely as mnemonics for narratives of various kinds relating to the history and traditions of the San. Consequently, the scenes where informants explain the underlying significance of imagery are true gems for researchers studying the prehistoricpast, where such explanations are unobtainable.



- Secondly, and perhaps most uniquely, the images give insights into the role sound plays in rock art. Students of the emerging field of archaeoacoustics will find particularly interesting the descriptions of the use and significance of sound. From an artistic standpoint, it is also worth highlighting that the entire soundtrack of the film is derived from sounds made on lithophones: a remarkable feat. Although this reviewer did not have the opportunity to experience the film with surround sound, such an experience is highly recommended.

!Aitsa is currently touring Film Festivals worldwide and is expected to become available to stream online next year. Viewings can be requested at www.aitsafilm.com

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That such a pedagogical instrument comes wrapped with outstanding cinematography, editing and sound, makes the end product a work of art. For all of these reasons, this reviewer hopes the film will reach a wide audience.

