

AUDIOVISUAL APPROACHES AND THE ARCHIVE

The Holes We Left Behind

The Holes We Left Behind is a videographic exploration of the film, *Breaking Away* (1979), made by the British film director Peter Yates. *Breaking Away* was shot on location in Bloomington, Indiana, and one of its narrative themes concerns the limestone industry of that area. In *The Holes We Left Behind*, I combine clips from *Breaking Away* with recently discovered archival videos that describe the life and work of a specific stoneworker who appears in the film. These videos, along with archival photographs of the Indiana limestone industry, amplify the film's limestone theme, while redirecting it in new historical and ecological directions.

The stone carver Harold Dugan Elgar was 70 years old when *Breaking Away* was shot, and he appears in a scene when the father of the film's protagonist, played by Paul Dooley, visits a limestone mill. Elgar was only supposed to have one line of dialogue, but when Dooley addressed him with the improvised line, 'Dugan, I thought you'd retired,' Elgar spontaneously responded, 'They won't let me retire' (Dawson 1980: 1). Inspired by this improvised encounter in the film, I wanted to learn more about Elgar. Searching the archives of Bloomington Community Access Television (BCAT), I discovered a videotaped interview with Elgar entitled, 'Harold Dugan Elgar: Master Stone Carver,' which was



shown in the 1970s on local access community television in Bloomington. Further discoveries in the BCAT archives followed: an appearance by Elgar at a conference sponsored by an Indiana University oral history project and a locally produced documentary on stone craftsmen. In addition to these archival videos, I worked with images from a recently released collection of photographs from the archives of the Indiana Limestone Company.¹

Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell write that videographic criticism involves seeing a film like *Breaking Away* as 'an archive of moving images and sounds' (Keathley & Mittell 2016, 2019). One result is that the film becomes newly permeable to other audiovisual archives. In the case of *The Holes We Left Behind*, archival videos and photographs extend and enrich the depiction of the limestone industry we see in *Breaking Away*, complicating the film's depiction of 'town and gown' tensions between local workers and university students, the labour involved in stonework, and the presence of Italian immigrants in the industry.

These archival reconfigurations shift *Breaking Away*'s centre of gravity to the topic of limestone, and that in turn facilitates an environmental analysis of the film. One method of environmental film studies examines a film's setting, and my environmental critique begins by asserting that the characters

in *Breaking Away* move through a limestone environment. One particular setting – the Indiana University Library – is a meeting place between *Breaking Away* and the BCAT archival material: it is both the site of a pivotal scene in the film, and a point of discussion in Elgar's account of the history of stone carving.

During the scene at the library, the father talks about his experience as a stone worker and lovingly touches a limestone bench. That moment of tactile reverie serves as a gateway into a geological perspective on Indiana limestone. The sequence that follows uses audio from a lecture on the ecological foundations of Indiana limestone found in the BCAT archives to explain the geological proximity between limestone deposits of the Mississippian period and fossil fuel deposits of the Pennsylvanian. This sequence is intended to bring a geological timescale to the film, and music was an important videographic tool in that regard. The music heard throughout *The Holes We Left Behind* was created by running cues from the *Breaking Away* soundtrack through a software tool for audio stretching called PaulStretch, which massively lengthened their duration while maintaining their pitch and timbre. Audio stretching transforms up-tempo orchestral passages into slowly evolving blocks of sound in a process that mirrors the vertiginous feeling of stretching one's temporal awareness to a geological scale.

At the culmination of the IU Library sequence, I assert that *Breaking Away* is an example of 'petrocinema'. Petrocinema is a term that has been used in environmental media studies to describe films that were sponsored by oil and gas companies, or that depict the oil industry, or that relate in significant ways to the consumer culture created by oil.² It is something of a provocation to assert that *Breaking Away* might fit in the same category as films like *There Will Be Blood* (2007), *Giant* (1956), or *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023), but playfully expanding the term points to the ways in which extractive industries have long overlapped and intersected. Note that the prefix petro- is derived from the Latin *petra*, meaning 'rock', and has been used to denote things made from or associated with rock (like petroglyph). Petrocinema is thus a useful framework for my argument that *Breaking Away* is a 'coming-of-age' story, not only in terms of the transition from adolescence to adulthood,

but also in its depiction of a transition from a limestone economy to a car culture reliant upon oil.

The Holes We Left Behind ends by returning to archival clips of Elgar from the BCAT archives. In the expanded audiovisual archive created by this videoessay, Elgar is not just a bit player who adds local colour, but a creator in his own right, with his own ideas about the duration of art and what gets 'left behind'. The improvised line of dialogue in his interaction

with Paul Dooley now feels like an assertion of his own creative agency. We see Elgar's hand touch his Pieta sculpture, the last of a series of tactile interactions that serve as transitions in the video essay, others being Dooley patting Elgar's leg, and touching the limestone bench. The fragile materiality of archival video has a distinctive poetic and evocative power in this shot that, for me, rivals and compliments the stunning 1970s colour cinematography of *Breaking Away*. These two

visual poetics coexist in the expanded audiovisual archive of *The Holes We Left Behind* and point beyond themselves to other temporalities and other archives, from the cemetery where Elgar's limestone grave marker sits, to the online video sharing platform where this video essay is housed and curated.

<https://vimeo.com/1099652055>

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¹ The Indiana University 'Building a Nation: Indiana Limestone Photograph Collection', <https://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/images/splash.htm?scope=images/VAC5094>

² On petrocinema, see Dahlquist & Vonderau (2021); LeMenager, (2014); Lifset & Black (2012). *Breaking Away* can also be viewed as what Priya Jaikumar and Lee Grieveson call an 'extractive film' (2024).

