

CronanLand Media & Jan Cieřlikiewicz Film
present

ECHOES OF THE INVISIBLE



A film by Steve Elkins
2020 / US & Poland / 106 Minutes

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LOGLINE

Daring explorers embark upon seemingly impossible journeys into the most extreme environments on Earth to find the connective tissue between all things seen and unseen.

SYNOPSIS

"Echoes of the Invisible" interweaves a mosaic of profound quests. A blind man runs alone through Death Valley as journalist Paul Salopek walks 21,000 miles across the world to retrace our ancestors' migration. Photographer Rachel Sussman struggles to capture the oldest living organisms on the planet while astronomers and physicists attempt to penetrate the furthest depths of time. These ambitious explorers, alongside monks journeying to the earth's furthest reaches, are connected through their tireless search to touch the human heart in a world of noise and division.

FILMMAKER STATEMENT

The road that led to “Echoes of the Invisible” began unexpectedly during production of my first feature documentary “The Reach Of Resonance.” In that film, I had been exploring diverse ways music can allow us to experience - through our bodies - aspects of the world around us which would otherwise remain invisible or intangible: the Earth’s magnetic field, the social patterns of insects and plants, the physical and emotional forces that shape our relationships to each other. As part of this journey, I found myself in Toronto, where I was documenting John Oswald’s permanent sound installation at the Royal Ontario Museum, in which thousands of events happening around the world are heard simultaneously in the main atrium at the exact moments they happen in their respective parts of the globe: drum rituals in Africa, Big Ben chiming the hour in London, the call to prayer in Mecca, whales singing as they migrate through the oceans.

This massive attempt to make a sonic map of the entire globe got me thinking about how each of us forms our inner maps of what the world is actually like. I had recently visited the Very Large Array telescope in New Mexico, where technicians laid railroad tracks across 23 miles of remote desert to move massive telescopes into positions where they could look deeper into space. They reminded me of monks I had seen in India who spend years bowing across the desert to look deeper into the human mind; flattening themselves face first on the ground in between every step. The contrast of these two painstaking and slow undertakings - one track at a time, one bow at a time - struck me as a moving contrast of the extremely diverse paths we can take to connect deeply with who we are and where we come from. That we all carry within us, from the time we are children onward, untapped depths to accomplish that which seems intuitively impossible: to see the invisible.

As I set out to explore this human impulse on film, the internet and high speed “convenience” technologies were expanding their ubiquity as the primary tool we use to “see the invisible,” to make us feel more connected to the world and each other. But ironically these technologies have also revealed their capacity to disconnect us, to control our vision, and place a frame around what we believe to be possible. “Echoes of the Invisible” developed into a reflection on how each of us connects the dots of the world within ourselves, and what is gained or lost in the paths between them. It is a snapshot of this moment in human history, when our relationship to technology is rapidly and radically altering the world we are handing down to the next generations.

-Steve Elkins

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

“Echoes of the Invisible” follows the daring journeys of scientists, athletes, monks, journalists and artists into some of the most extreme environments on Earth, so it may come as no surprise that making the film involved unique and profound challenges. Over the course of its eight years in production, director Steve Elkins found himself filming in sandstorms in the driest desert on Earth, which partially disabled his camera, free climbing with monks up nearly vertical cliffs to reach remote filming locations in Ethiopia, navigating cracking ice (forty kilometers from shore) on the frozen surface of the world’s deepest lake in Siberia, and filming by candlelight half a mile under the earth in an abandoned Minnesota iron mine.

In Chile and India, Elkins filmed at locations over 16,000 feet in altitude. Oxygen masks were sometimes required to breathe. Some monasteries in India could only be reached by trekking across the Himalayas on horseback or foot. To reach them, Elkins had to find locals who could provide horses to carry his film gear across the mountains, in regions cut off from the outside world most of the year due to impassable snow and ice. Significant scenes were filmed in two of the hottest places on Earth, including the Danakil Depression in Ethiopia, where daytime temperatures rose to 128 degrees Fahrenheit and at night remained over 100. Private military escorts were required to guide Elkins through the boiling oil lakes and salt mountains of this region afflicted with unpredictable outbursts of tribal warfare and kidnappings.

Many of the film’s locations had no power sources for filming equipment or batteries. Extreme environmental conditions caused electronic equipment to malfunction. Meticulous pre-production planning was paramount. Elkins spent four years petitioning for access to film in a restricted military zone on the border of Tibet (which was eventually granted after collaboration with the King of Ladakh). Another location near the border of Pakistan required traveling on roads that were undergoing shelling attacks. Production with musicians, shamans and hunters in remote villages near the borders of Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and China was almost disrupted by an undercover Russian agent following Elkins and his small crew en route to Kyzyl, Tuva.

But in some ways, the most extreme location for production was CERN’s Large Hadron Collider, a 17-mile-long underground microscope beneath Switzerland and France, which when operating is the coldest known place in the universe. It generates a magnetic field 250,000 times stronger than the Earth’s, searching for extra dimensions, the “God particle,” anti-matter, and forces akin to those that took place in the first trillionth of a millisecond after the Big Bang.

These extreme undertakings were necessary not only to tell the stories of the extraordinary pioneers who require these extreme environments to push the boundaries of our knowledge; but for Elkins to experience firsthand one of the film’s themes: the transformative value of slowing down and struggling in contrast to the impact of speed and convenience which increasingly alters our relationship to the world around us.

FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

STEVE ELKINS - PRODUCER | DIRECTOR

Steve Elkins' photography, music and documentary filmmaking has been presented in over 20 countries via television, radio, film festivals, universities and art galleries, including a permanent exhibition of his work with Western Arrernte Aborigines at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. Elkins also serves as a film production mentor for at-risk youth in southern California public schools, through the Youth Cinema Project founded by Edward James Olmos.

His previous feature, "The Reach Of Resonance" (2010) juxtaposes the creative paths of four musicians who use music to cultivate a deeper understanding of the world around them. Among them are Miya Masaoka using music to interact with insects and plants; Jon Rose, utilizing a violin bow to turn fences into musical instruments in conflict zones ranging from the Australian outback to Palestine; John Luther Adams translating the geophysical phenomena of Alaska into music; and Bob Ostertag, who explores global socio-political issues through processes as diverse as transcribing a riot into a string quartet, and creating live cinema with garbage.

By contrasting the creative paths of these artists, and an unexpected connection between them by the world renowned Kronos Quartet, the film explores music not as a form of entertainment, career, or even self-expression, but as a tool to develop more deeply meaningful relationships with people and the complexities of the world they live in.

JAN CIESLIKIEWICZ - EXECUTIVE PRODUCER | PRODUCER

As someone who is always searching, Jan has a close relationship to the themes presented in "Echoes of the Invisible" – he is an artist and an entrepreneur, mathematician by education, and grew up as a competitive athlete.

His photography project, 'Null Hypothesis' reflects on our need for certainty and aversion to ambiguity, and has been published and exhibited internationally. Currently a lot of Jan's time is focused on a start-up he founded, that makes it easier for urban professionals to connect offline.

In his slightly younger days he was a Polish national swimming champion, earned a degree in Applied Mathematics from Harvard University, and started his career as a quantitative trader on Wall Street.

SCOTT CRONAN - EXECUTIVE PRODUCER | PRODUCER

Scott is a gifted visual storyteller. Over his career he has worked independently as a Producer, Director, Cinematographer, and Editor creating engaging visual content for major national clients such as Apple, Fandango, Upworthy, Coca-Cola, LA Times, Sony Pictures, Disney, Lighthearted Entertainment and more.

Pushing his own boundaries of creative outlet, Cronan's 35-minute art film, *Forgiveness is a Weapon*, was awarded Best Short Film at the Festival of World Cinema in London in 2015.

Under the banner CronanLand Media, he is currently in development on his first narrative feature film, *In Memoriam*.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Directed by
Steve Elkins

Producers
Jan Cieřlikiewicz
Scott Cronan
Steve Elkins

Executive Producers
Jan Cieřlikiewicz
Scott Cronan

Director of Photography
Steve Elkins

Production Companies
CronanLand Media (US), Jan Cieřlikiewicz Film (Poland)

Cast
Paul Salopek
Rachel Sussman
Al Arnold
Anil Ananthaswamy
Linda Lynch
Losang Samten