ECOCINEMA THEORY AND PRACTICE

EDITED BY

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ROUTLEDGE

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For Alice and Donovan
and
for Dan and the dogs, who suffer and indulge my passions
and
for Alison, and for Zebedee the wonder dog,
who never sees anything the same way twice.

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> *It was as if the boy had already divined what his senses and intellect had not encompassed yet: that doomed wilderness whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes who feared it because it was wilderness, men myriad and nameless even to one another in the land where the old bear had earned a name, and through which ran not even a mortal beast but an anachronism indomitable and invincible out of an old dead time, a phantom, epitome and apotheosis of the old wild life which the little puny humans swarmed and hacked at in a fury of abhorrence and fear like pygmies about the ankles of a drowsing elephant.*
>
> William Faulkner, from paragraph three of *The Bear*

> *Knowledge of sensible realities thus comes to life inside the tissue of experience. It is* made*; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time.*
>
> William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*

This essay is a revised, updated version of "Toward an Eco-Cinema," originally published in *ISLE*, 11.2 (Summer 2004).

The traditional filmstrip embodies the struggle between permanence and transience in complex ways. We can hold the filmstrip up to the light and *see* the image captured there, but we know that whatever light is allowing us to perceive the series of fixed images along the celluloid strip is causing them to fade ever so slightly, and further, that the formal presentation of the imagery inscribed on emulsion-based cinema accelerates its inevitable destruction: the strong light and the friction embodied in the mechanism of the projector does damage to the print every time it is shown. In the best of circumstances, the damage is minor, even invisible; nevertheless, it is occurring. The original negative of a film can, of course, serve as a protected matrix, but like any other material object, is itself susceptible to the ravages of time. Further, though few of those who appreciate celluloid cinema are conscious of it, the filmstrip, at least on one level, encapsulates the way in which modern life and the natural world are imbricated: the light-sensitive silver salts that create a visible image when exposed to light are suspended in a thin layer of gelatin, one of the chief ingredients of which is collagen. Collagen is produced by boiling the bones and tissues of animals. Celluloid, the base on which the emulsion is layered, is made from cellulose. That is, the "life" we see moving on the screen is a kind of re-animation of plant and animal life within the mechanical/chemical apparatus of traditional cinema.

The arrival of high-quality digital imaging and projection has given new life to many films originally recorded on celluloid, but it has also hastened the demise of the older medium. While much of industrially produced popular cinema has made the transition to digital, many remarkable independent films, especially those shot in 16 mm and meant to be seen as 16 mm films, seem unlikely to be carried across this transition because of the costs of good transfers. Further, the emergence of digital imaging has tended to destroy the infrastructure that makes 16 mm presentation possible. While some educational institutions—colleges and universities, museums—still have the capacity to show 16 mm film, this form of exhibition is increasingly precarious, and many significant films can no longer be widely shown. It is also true that the very precariousness of celluloid cinema has attracted a younger generation committed to both the older way of making cinematic art and to the traditional look of emulsion-based cinematography. For some young filmmakers and aficionados of celluloid cinema, the continual transformations of digital hardware and software make digital image-making at least as unstable as what it is replacing.

All this is, of course, only one instance of a much larger reality: the explosion of population across the globe. The Earth now sustains billions of inhabitants, all of whom have physical needs and material desires. The result is that those dimensions of the Earth that encapsulate something like continuity—particular landscapes, specific biota—are increasingly circum-scribed and infiltrated. This pattern causes the natural world in all its myriad

variety to seem increasingly poignant, and the growing international commitment to preserve some vestiges of particularly distinctive and/or undeveloped landscapes and biota—most obviously in the increasingly ubiquitous systems of national parks—implicitly reveals just how quickly such places are slipping away from us. We can be grateful for the considerable efforts that have allowed us to hold on to what continue to seem remarkable, comparatively natural environments, even as we recognize that these environments are as much works of environmental art as they are vestiges of original nature, and further, that our enjoyment of these environments inevitably contributes to their destruction, or at least to their transformation.

Recent decades have seen the development of a tradition of filmmaking that uses technology to provide cinematic experiences of being immersed within the natural world. While even the most interesting of these emulsion-based films and digital videos are prey to the material limitations I've described, the experiences they provide transcend these limitations at least for the durations of these particular works and, like other forms of cinema, in memory. That the motion pictures in this tradition have not attracted large audiences is to be expected, given the distractions of contemporary life. Nevertheless, visual artists working both in 16 mm celluloid filmmaking and in digital video have been providing visual/auditory training in appreciating the experience of an immersion within natural processes. If we cannot halt the ongoing transformation of the natural environment (or of particular modes of cinema and cinema spectatorship), these moving-image artists seem to say, we can certainly use cinema to honor those dimensions of what is disappearing that we *would* preserve if we could, and we can hope that by valuing and conserving what seems on the verge of utter demise we can hold onto some vestiges of it, and the continuities it represents, longer than may currently seem possible.

After all, given the embrace of popular cinema, and only popular cinema, by most modern movie-goers and television watchers, the very existence of such films and videos as Andrej Zdravič's *Riverglass: A River Ballet in Four Seasons* (1997), Peter Hutton's *Study of a River* (1996) and *Time and Tide* (2000), James Benning's *Deseret* (1995), *Sogobi* (2001), and *13 Lakes* (2004), J. P. Sniadecki's *Songhua* (2007), and Sharon Lockhart's *Double Tide* (2010) is something of a miracle. I see these, and other related works, as instances of an "ecocinema," primarily because each offers audiences a depiction of the natural world within a cinematic experience that models patience and mindfulness—qualities of consciousness crucial for a deep appreciation of and an ongoing commitment to the natural environment. These films and videos are the inverse of the fundamentally hysterical approach of commercial media, and advertising in particular, where consumption of the maximum number of images per minute models unbridled consumption of products and the unrestrained industrial exploitation of the environment within which these

products are produced and consumed. As I see it, the fundamental job of an ecocinema is not to produce pro-environmental narratives shot in a conventional Hollywood manner (that is, in a manner that implicitly promotes consumption) or even in a conventional documentary manner (although, of course, documentaries can alert us to environmental issues). The job of an ecocinema is to provide *new kinds of film experience* that demonstrate an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship and help to nurture a more environmentally progressive mindset.

andrej zdravič's *riverglass: a river ballet in four seasons*

For some years it has been a cliché in film studies that beautiful imagery is an easy way out for a filmmaker: anyone can aim a camera at something beautiful and expose a shot. One can only wonder why, if beauty *is* so easy, there's not more of it. Perhaps the real objection has always had more to do with audiences than with filmmakers: presenting beautiful imagery to audiences may have seemed too non-confrontational. For filmmakers interested in using cinema to do political work, beautiful films—especially in the more traditional, conventional senses of "beauty"—may seem to create complacency in audiences and to reconfirm conventional assumptions. Obviously, conventionally beautiful imagery *can* be used, not only to confirm the status quo but to promote activities that do long-term damage to places that many of us recognize as worth preserving because of their beauty. We see this all the time in television advertising—indeed, it often seems to be one of the central strategies of Madison Avenue. But beautiful imagery of beautiful places can also be a confrontation of convention, and particularly of the media status quo: it can model fundamental changes in perception not only in terms of what we see in movie theaters, on television, or online, but in how we function in the "real world." And it can do so without announcing any polemical goal.

A noteworthy instance is a video by the Slovenian Andrej Zdravič: *Riverglass: A River Ballet in Four Seasons*. Finished in 1997, *Riverglass* was begun ten years earlier, when Zdravič had the idea "to make a film with the camera submerged in the magic clarity of the river SoËa." The original concept evolved—after a period of experimenting with underwater shooting, first in film and subsequently in Hi-8 video (PAL)—into an installation, *Skrivnosh SoËa* ("Secrets of SoËa"), and subsequently, into a 41-minute video. *Riverglass* takes viewers into the waters of the upper SoËa, which flows from the Julian Alps in Slovenia to the Gulf of Venice in the Adriatic Sea, revealing just enough of the surrounding mountainous terrain to make clear that the film begins in winter and moves through the four seasons back to winter—a fitting temporal structure, of course, since snowmelt determines the water-level of the river. The visuals are edited so as to confirm the river's flow, and are accompanied by a soundtrack recorded underwater in the SoËa.

What allows the consistently gorgeous imagery of *Riverglass* to do more than confirm the status quo—what gives all the films discussed in this essay their edge—is extended duration. In conventional, commercial film and television, whatever beautiful imagery we do see is onscreen briefly, and as background to the "more important" melodramatic activities in the foreground. Viewers are implicitly trained to see the beauties of landscape and place as ephemeral and comparatively insignificant, *not* something deserving of sustained attention or commitment. In *Riverglass*, Zdravič quickly makes it evident that his video is going nowhere except into and along the river, and his ability to continue to provide engaging dimensions of image and sound, and to maintain not only the flow of the river but the viewer's attention to it, models the attitude that this place *is* worthy of our sustained attention.

The title of *Riverglass* suggests a self-reflexivity that has a subtle polemical edge. Of course, the waters of the SoËa are as clear as glass, but the "glass" in Zdravič's title also refers to the process of his filming. During those moments when the camera surfaces to reveal both the river and the landscape along the river, the glass barrier between the water and the video camera becomes momentarily visible: water flows off those portions of glass above the surface of the river. This has the effect of resolving the mystery of how Zdravič made the video—a mystery most viewers will be intrigued by: clearly the camera is inside some sort of glass box. That is, like Larry Gottheim's classic *Fog Line* (1971), one of the originators of this kind of ecocinema, *Riverglass* is not simply an unalloyed depiction of a natural phenomenon, but represents a (literal) collision of natural process and industrial technology. This collision, however, suggests an unusually healthy relationship between technological development and the natural world. *This* technological intervention into a pristine natural environment echoes the distinctive aspect of the SoËa itself: its clarity. And the finished video confirms this echo, both because Zdravič's editing confirms the river's movement from one space to another, and because the video, like the river, is unalloyed: it is as simple and direct in its intention as is the SoËa in its journey out of the mountains—clear as glass.

peter hutton's *study of a river* and *time and tide*

Within the last decade a number of major television advertising campaigns—for four-wheel-drive vehicles, for pick-up trucks, for beer—have worked at subverting the respect a good many Americans still have for those vestiges of relatively untrammeled nature that remain within the grid of high-tech systems that span the continent and the globe. In these ads there is an emphasis on the outdoors, on *being* outdoors, but the relative scale of the natural and the technological in these ads (many of which focus on landscapes of the American West) is precisely the opposite of what we see in the Hudson River paintings of Thomas Cole and the grand Western

landscape paintings of Thomas Moran. *There* humans are dwarfed by the sublime expanses and architectures of the landscapes they inhabit. In the ads, giant four-wheelers dominate mountainous terrain. In these ads the important thing is the human presence in, and technological utilization of, the landscape—in whatever high-tech form this takes. Any sense of respect for the landscape itself is overwhelmed by the guiltless high spirits of the beer drinkers and their four-wheelers—"high spirits" that are also encoded within the formal dexterity of the ads, particularly their seamless uniting of two different scales of visual representation. Increasing technological control of the natural world itself, and of representations of it, is presented as the wave of the future.

Of course, these ads provoke a contemporary version of what has been an essential American debate for two centuries. It's the question posed by the question-mark-shaped Connecticut River in Thomas Cole's *The Oxbow* (1838): How much of the wilderness on the left should be developed into the Connecticut River Valley farmland we see on the right—is original nature or domesticated land closer to the divine? Cole's positioning himself in the lower foreground of the painting on the wilderness side makes clear where Cole stands *as a painter*, but his parasol, which perforates the boundary between the foreground wilderness and background development, reminds us that Cole is *visiting* the wild and that most of his life was spent in New York City and the highly developed Hudson Valley. The same ambiguity is evident in two recent films by Peter Hutton. Hutton uses extended (30-, 40-, 50-second) shots of relatively still imagery as a way of asking that viewers slow down and explore what they're seeing (Hutton's shots tend to feel even longer than they are because of his decision to present the imagery in silence).

Basically, Hutton's method (consciously) evokes and extends the approach utilized by the Lumière Brothers at the dawn of cinema. Each Lumière film was exactly 50 seconds long, shot in black-and-white with a camera mounted on a tripod, and a set of Lumière films would be shown during a particular public presentation. For nearly 30 years Hutton's films were shot in black-and-white, and while each film is composed of several rigorously framed images, the shots are usually separated from one another by moments of darkness so that they seem like mini films. To return to the issues raised by recent television advertising, Hutton means for his films to work against not only the unbridled exploitation of the land and the landscape, but the obsession with technology so characteristic of commercials, by returning to an earlier, more serene, more rewarding experience of seeing and considering where we live.

In recent years, Hutton has articulated his ambivalence about the ongoing exploitation of the Hudson Valley, where he lives and works (at Bard College, about 15 miles from Cole's home in Catskill) in a series of films focusing on the Hudson. A premonition of this development was provided by a sequence in *In Titan's Goblet* (1991), a film made in honor of Thomas Cole. *In Titan's Goblet*

is named to evoke Cole's strange painting, *The Titan's Goblet* (1833), which is strange in its surreal handling of scale: a giant goblet set within a mountainous landscape holds a lake surrounded by greenery; sailboats move across the lake. Like Cole, Hutton asks that viewers look at his depictions of landscape with a meditative eye, and like Cole—at least the Cole of *The Titan's Goblet*—he plays with scale in a way that, in the end, is disconcerting. Early in the film, a sequence of shots reveals several vehicles—dump trucks, bulldozers—at a considerable distance. At first, the serenity and careful composition of these shots reads as beautiful: the trucks seem to move through an early morning mist; but in fact the sequence documents a tire fire that had burned out of control. The reality of the imagery thus undercuts the beauty of the film, so that by the time we reach the long final sequence of *In Titan's Goblet*—shots of the moon seen through moving clouds—the idea of the serenity and beauty of the Hudson Valley landscape is troubled.

In *Study of a River* (1997) Hutton's focus is on the Hudson as an artery for travel and trade. Hutton has always been fascinated with boat travel. Indeed, for a number of years he worked as a merchant seaman, and this experience continues to inform his filmmaking:

> One of my great moments in traveling by sea happened one night going across the Indian Ocean en route to the Persian Gulf and encountering a storm I did not anticipate. I was up on the bow of the ship late at night, probably about three in the morning. It was completely dark: the sky was clouded up so there were no stars or moon to illuminate anything. All of a sudden I felt the temperature change. I was getting colder and colder, and then I realized it was getting even darker. It was like going into an inkwell, and I had this revelation that there were all these declensions of darkness that I hadn't been aware of. Pretty soon it started to rain and the seas kicked up rather dramatically and the mate on the bridge shined a light down and told me to come up. As I was turning around, a big wave dipped over the bow. It could have washed me over. I scurried up to the bridge and continued to observe the storm from up there. We punched through the storm and it started getting warmer, and the rain stopped, and it got lighter and lighter. It was an extraordinary experience, and so visually interesting—but too subtle to record with a movie camera. Being on the ship forced me to slow down, and allowed me to take time to look.[1]

While Hutton couldn't have captured his experience of the storm in the dark with his 16 mm camera, *Study of a River*—like so many of his films—does work with "declensions of darkness."

Study of a River is set in winter and shot, in black-and-white, at times of limited light. The opening 39-second shot, for example, reveals a winterscape at dusk that could almost be a still photograph, except for a subtle change that reveals, then obscures, a circular reflection of light around the sun. The body of *Study of a River* intercuts between shots made from the prow of boats moving up or down the Hudson, often breaking through sheets of ice, and shots made from the shore of the river of tugs, barges, and other boats navigating the river (there are also shots of streets, houses, and bridges in the river's surround). In *Study of a River* the focus is not on environmental damage. Rather, Hutton seems fascinated with the drama of the boats using the river, with the smooth beauty of their movement and with their slow, relentless battles with current and ice. Even the industrial structures visible—the dock of a cement company, a railroad bridge over the Hudson at Poughkeepsie—are presented not as problems, but as interesting landmarks and, sometimes, sources of inventive visual experiences. For example, we see the railroad bridge from a distance in one shot, then watch from the bridge as ice on the river flows past one of the bridge supports: Hutton's framing causes a bridge support to seem to move through the water and ice, like a ship (recently, this bridge has become the Walkway Over the Hudson New York State Park, located in Poughkeepsie, New York).

Hutton grew up during the 1950s, when the resurgence of American industry during and after World War II seemed wonderful, even beautiful, to a generation that had experienced the Great Depression, and to their children. *Study of a River* captures this mood, although its serene pace provides an evocation of the industrial that seems nearly as pastoral as Thomas Cole's *River in the Catskills* (1843) where even the locomotive in the distance seems to harmonize with its natural surroundings. Hutton's use of black-and-white confirms this nearly pastoral detachment by evoking earlier cinema and an earlier era. As he has said:

> There's also a fairly obvious quality to black and white . . . it tends to take us back in time rather than project us forward. That can also be a bit of a reprieve for an audience, like being taken out of time and suspended in a space where there is no overt reference to daily experience.[2]

Hutton's second Hudson River film, *Time and Tide* (2000), made four years after *Study of a River*, includes both black-and-white and color imagery.

The decision to return to color seems to have been a complex one for Hutton—among other things, color brings additional laboratory difficulties—but, on at least one level, the choice of color is paradoxical and quite relevant for this discussion. In the popular mind color imagery is seen as, almost by definition, more beautiful than black-and-white imagery. Hutton's long resistance to color was reflective of his defiance of easy pleasure—as well as his recognition of the immense subtlety and evocativeness

Figure 1.1 The Statue of Liberty through the window of a boat, from Peter Hutton's *Time and Tide* (2000). Courtesy Peter Hutton.

Peter Hutton

25
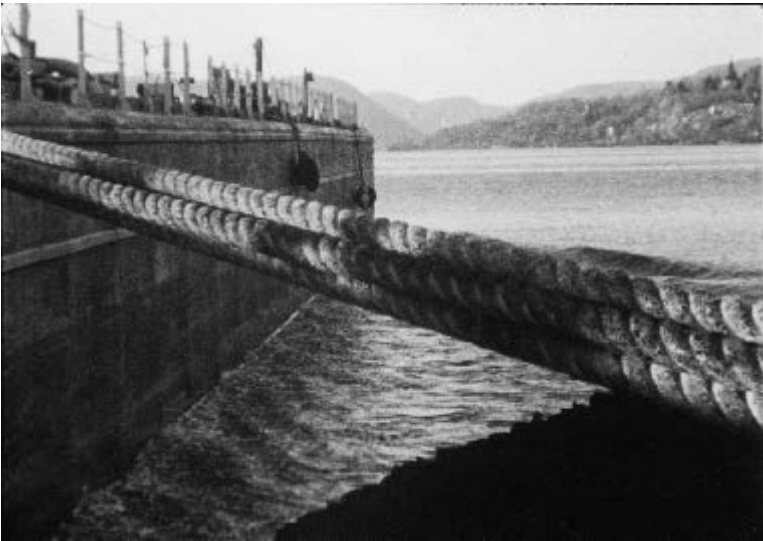
Figure 1.2 A barge nearing the Hudson Highlands, from Peter Hutton's *Time and Tide* (2000). Courtesy Peter Hutton.

Peter Hutton

of black-and-white. His decision to use color in *Time and Tide* had as much to do with a desire to demystify the Hudson as with the idea of making the river more beautiful.

Hutton's decision to include *Down the River*, a two-minute black-and-white film produced in 1903 by the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, as a preface to *Time and Tide*, creates an historical context for his own imagery. *Down the River* reveals its age not only in its overt subject matter, but in the damage that time has done to the paper print from which the 16 mm print Hutton used was struck (for years, prints of all films produced by American filmmakers were sent to the Library of Congress for copyright purposes, where they were archived on a paper base, as paper was safer than the immensely flammable nitrate stock of that era). Since *Down the River* (which in fact records what we would call a voyage *up* the Hudson from Haverstraw to Newberg) was filmed in time-lapse, the boat trip is experienced at high speed (though at various velocities: at first, we're moving very quickly, then the pace slows a bit, then accelerates again, then slows once more as the boat reaches Haverstraw).

The focus of *Down the River* is the excitement of new technology: both the film technology and the busy boat traffic and train traffic on and along the river. When Hutton's own imagery begins, with three extended shots (67, 48, and 70 seconds, respectively) of boats breaking through late winter ice—picking up where *Study of a River* leaves off—the temporal jump from the turn of the last century to the arrival of the new millennium causes our cinematic experience to *slow down*. Hutton's pace remains quite serene throughout *Time and Tide*, and his characteristic use of moments of darkness to separate one shot from the next retards the flow of the film ever further.

It is its unusually serene pace that allows for a reading of *Time and Tide* that one can call environmentalist. Hutton's gaze is not relentlessly polemical, *except* in its duration (and in the solemnity, or at least seriousness, conferred upon the imagery by Hutton's use of a tripod and his refusal of camera movement other than that provided by the barges, tugs, and tankers he films from). Asking us to look at something for sometimes ten or 12 times longer than we look at any single image on television or in a conventional movie (it is estimated that the average length of a shot on television or in commercial film is about seven seconds) is a way of arguing for the comparative *importance* of what we're seeing, and of the manner in which we're seeing it. Hutton's extended gaze at the Hudson is analogous to Mary Austin's study of the California desert in *Land of Little Rain* (1903), which is memorable and impressive because of what it tells us about Austin's persistence and fascination as an observer, or to Thoreau's study of Walden Pond, or to Susan Fenimore Cooper's study of Cooperstown, New York and environs in *Rural Hours* (1848). Like Austin, Thoreau, and Cooper, Hutton wants to refine our way of seeing particular dimensions of nature and of the interweaving of nature and machine.

Like *Study of a River*, *Time and Tide* reveals Hutton's fascination with industry, especially as embodied by the vessels on which he travels up and down the Hudson and by the many industrial structures that measure his trip down the river into New York harbor, then up the river as far as the Albany area, then back down toward the Hudson highlands not far from where the film begins. The movement of the various vessels on which Hutton rides the river is generally as serene as Hutton's pacing, and it allows for frequently impressive views of the landscape and industry-scape that slide by (only two images are clearly filmed from land). Even more fully than in *Study of a River*, the many factories, power plants, bridges, and ships Hutton passes are impressive and sometimes spectacular. Indeed, the shots recorded in New York harbor are a paean to the shipping industry, and provide just the kind of pleasure I remember feeling as a child when my parents and I rode the Staten Island Ferry in the early 1950s.

Of course, the very serenity of Hutton's pacing—and the frequent beauty of his imagery—also makes his documentation of the many industrial enterprises that line the river a continual demonstration of how fully the twentieth century continued the exploitation of the Hudson so evident in *Down the River*. While there are shots that reveal no industrial exploitation (other than the always implicit presence of Hutton filming), such shots are the exception rather than the rule—exceptions that periodically remind us of the natural magnificence of this waterway. And for those viewers who are familiar with recent environmental battles along the Hudson, two of them within the area of Hutton's home, some of the industrial imagery has particular, contemporary relevance.

The still-ongoing debate between the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and General Electric (GE) about the proposed cleanup of a layer of polychlorinated biphenyl (PCBs) in the river bed of the upper Hudson was much on the minds of many who lived near the river, including Hutton, during the time he was shooting *Time and Tide*. GE has contended that the river is fine as it is, and that to dredge the Hudson to remove the buried PCBs will recontaminate the river. Those who support the cleanup are not content to allow the buried PCBs to continue to move through the river's food chain and believe that, while dredging the river will release PCBs currently buried, in the long run the river can only return to full health once the PCBs are gone. Hutton's inclusion of a 55-second shot of a GE light-sign near Schenectady that lights up, goes dark, lights up, goes dark, is a conscious reference to this controversy. Indeed, the fact that this image is the only one of 46 shots *not* filmed along the Hudson (the Schenectady GE plant is several miles to the west of the Hudson, on its tributary, the Mohawk River), and one of the two not filmed from a vessel, suggests how important the GE reference is to Hutton.

A second controversy, this one focusing on plans for an immense new cement plant, was also much in the news in the upper Hudson area during

the period when Hutton was filming. The countryside along the Hudson has long been a producer of cement, and the film includes several images of cement facilities along the river. The plan for the proposed new facility includes a smokestack so tall that it would interrupt views from Olana, Frederic Church's home above the river across from Catskill, New York, and a state historical site. Some locals (including Hutton, who suffers from asthma) fear the new plant will create enough dust pollution to be a health concern. Obviously, it could be argued that without specific references within the film to these current controversies, few viewers would be likely to understand these implications. But in the annals of American avant-garde film, particular films are frequently presented with the filmmakers present, and when Hutton *does* present *Time and Tide* these environmental controversies are never far from conversation about the film.

During the final minutes of *Time and Tide*, Hutton prepares the viewer for the end of the film in several ways, beginning with a 26-second shot made from a bluff high above the river, which is followed by a triad of shots taken at dusk on the river near the Hudson Highlands, the first two of which include end-of-roll flares to red (the first of these flare-out shots is the shortest shot in *Time and Tide*: three seconds). The inclusion of end-of-roll flares is not unusual in American avant-garde film. During the 1960s and early 1970s it was a frequent self-reflexive gesture meant to demystify the filmmaking process. The flares in *Time and Tide* do have this impact, but they also signal that the viewer's cinematic "voyage" is coming to an end. The coda of four shots that follows the two flares, however, adds a final, ambiguous note. After a long (71 seconds) third shot of the narrows near Bear Mountain State Park, we see the nuclear power plant on the east bank of the Hudson just below Bear Mountain, then two final shots filmed through a porthole, one of a large vessel powering along the river, and a final, darker shot, during which a factory slides past the porthole, smoke spewing from its smokestack. These images conclude *Time and Tide* with reminders of the ongoing exploitation of the river that continues to threaten its future health.

Hutton is clear about his own participation in processes that threaten the Hudson. Like most all of us, he is grateful for many of the things produced by those who exploit the river and, as a filmmaker, he knows he takes part in a particularly dirty industry (though not one that is located near the Hudson): the processing of film releases a variety of toxic chemicals into the environment. Like most of Hutton's work, *Time and Tide* functions as a kind of Trojan horse. Hutton uses the chemical process of cinematography— carefully and with restraint: he wastes little, compared to industrial filmmaking and he makes relatively brief films (at 35 minutes, *Time and Tide* was by far Hutton's longest film to that date)—in films that model patient, thoughtful consumption and a respect for both the viewer and the environment outside the screening room. He is—to use the name of a ship that

passes by a porthole early in the film—a "Chemical Pioneer," who uses a mechanical/chemical medium against the flow of commercial media and commercial life in general.

james benning's *deseret, sogobi,* and *13 lakes*

Few American filmmakers have spent more time exploring American landscape and cityscape than James Benning. Early on—in such films as *11 x 14* (1976) and *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977)—Benning made a name for himself as a *Midwestern* filmmaker, by using Chicago and Milwaukee, and the landscapes from northern Illinois to South Dakota, as backgrounds for a variety of investigations of cinematic space and time. Benning's 1970s films remain distinctive in their combination of photographic realism (often evocative of 1930s photography) and subtly surreal uses of composition and sound. They were also seen as significant contributions to what were then two new trends in avant-garde filmmaking. *One Way Boogie Woogie*, made up of 60 carefully composed, one-minute shots, each taken from a camera mounted on a tripod, reflected Benning's interest in the rigorous forms of organization that were characteristic of what had come to be called "structural film." *11 x 14*, in which a set of narrative threads seem to be interconnecting at the beginning of the film and then disperse, never to intersect again, reflected Benning's interest in critiquing conventional narrative film and its commitment to the inevitable resolution of any conflict developed in the plot.

Benning's move from New York (where he had moved from Chicago in 1980) to California in 1987 to take a teaching job at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, just north of Los Angeles, instigated an increasing fascination with the American West. Indeed, the series of feature films that began with *North on Evers* (1991) and continued with *Deseret* (1995), *Four Corners* (1997), *Utopia* (1998), and the California Trilogy—*El Valley Centro* (2000), *Los* (2001), and *Sogobi* (2002)—represent, so far as I am aware, the most sustained exploration of the American West in the annals of American independent cinema, and with John Ford's Westerns the most distinguished and memorable in American cinema in general. Benning has used the Western landscape as a means of engaging a variety of personal and social issues. A concern for the environment itself has been an important theme in several of these films, and is a primary focus in *Deseret* and in the California Trilogy.

Deseret (the title is the Jaredite word for "honeybee" in the *Book of Mormon*) focuses on the history and geography of Utah. On the soundtrack a narrator reads a series of *New York Times* stories about Utah, beginning in 1852 and ending in 1992, accompanied by image sequences of a wide variety of Utah locations, edited so that each shot corresponds to a single sentence in the *New York Times* stories. Each cluster of shots (and narrated sentences) is separated from the next by a single shot not accompanied by voice-over.

There is ambient sound all through the film. The environmental focus of *Deseret* grows increasingly obvious as the film proceeds. Early on, the *Times* stories focus on Mormon life and on the struggle between the United States government and the Mormons, but once Utah becomes a state, about halfway through the film (an event marked by a change from black-and-white imagery to color), the focus on the natural environment of Utah expands, and by the conclusion of the film our sense of what we're seeing has changed dramatically.

For example, our perception of the snowscapes later in the film is colored by learning that an above ground nerve-gas test conducted at Dugway Proving Grounds, 90 miles west of Salt Lake City, killed 6,400 sheep and that this dangerous agent can be "isolated in snow, water, sheep blood, sheep liver tissue, and in the grass taken from sheep's stomachs" (Benning presents a lovely snowscape just at the moment when the narrator says "snow"). In fact, by the conclusion of *Deseret*, the *Times* stories of environmental damage have become so pervasive that Benning's consistently stunning images of Utah landscapes have been rendered as problematic as they are beautiful. Further, Benning's decision to gradually shorten the shot that separates the clusters of shots that accompany the *Times* stories, combined with the increasing terseness of *Times* journalese—both the stories, and the sentences that convey them, are increasingly brief—cause *Deseret* to accelerate, so that during the final half-hour of the film our chance to contemplate these lovely landscapes is more and more constricted, an implicit warning of how little time we have left to reverse the downward spiral of environmental damage.

Benning's California Trilogy numbers among his most impressive achievements. Each of the three California films focuses on a different dimension of California—*El Valley Centro*, on the great central valley between the Sierra Nevada and the Coastal Range, which supplies Americans with a considerable percentage of their food; *Los*, on the Los Angeles area; and *Sogobi*, on what remains of wilderness California—but uses precisely the same structure: 35 two-and-a-half-minute shots are framed by the opening title and the rolling end-credits that identify the specific locations depicted. Each of the shots is filmed with a camera mounted on a tripod, much of it in sync sound.

Each individual film can stand on its own—though the shots in the three films are arranged so that a loose network of interconnections between them becomes evident as the Trilogy proceeds. For example, the Trilogy begins and ends at the same location—a circular spillway in Lake Berryessa, just to the north of the Bay Area—and particular kinds of shots are included in all three films. A billboard available from Outdoor Systems is the subject of shot 30 in *El Valley Centro*, shot two of *Los*, and shot 13 of *Sogobi*, and ocean-going ships are the subject of shots 27, six, and 15 of the respective films. The three films are also of a piece in reflecting Benning's environmental

awareness. In *Deseret* the issue of the environment has primarily to do with the use of Utah as a weapons-testing location and a dumping ground for toxic materials. The environmental focus of the California Trilogy is water.

Throughout all three films, water imagery is ubiquitous. *El Valley Centro* begins with the shot of the spillway, *Los* with a shot of a cascade on the Los Angeles Aqueduct, and *Sogobi* with a shot of the California Sea Otter Refuge on the coast at Point Sur. *El Valley Centro* ends at the Teerink Pumping Station on the California Aqueduct at Wheeler Ridge, *Los* at Puerco Beach in Malibu, and *Sogobi* at the Lake Berryessa spillway. Within the identical tripartite structure and Benning's focus on water, a further overall structural trajectory makes itself felt: each film "sets up" the film that follows, and the Trilogy as a whole implies a poignant environmental warning that culminates in *Sogobi*, the title of which means "earth" in Shoshone.

Coming on the heels of *Los*, *Sogobi* begins with a reprieve from the level of technological development and environmental exploitation that characterizes the first two sections of the Trilogy. During the opening half-hour of the film, Benning's focus on wilderness feels nearly devoid of interruption. In shot seven we do see several tufa towers in Mono Lake, visible—as many viewers will know—only because the lake's water level has been lowered by the ongoing diversion of water into Los Angeles. In shot eight, of a lovely section of hillside in the Tejon Pass, what we first hear as wind becomes gradually recognizable as distant offscreen traffic, and in shot ten, of the Truckee River, a helicopter collecting water for fighting a forest fire enters the image, fills its bucket, and flies off, the sound of the river gradually reasserting itself.

But the other nine images—the Pacific Ocean off Point Sur (1), live oaks in the Coastal State Reserve (2), flooded salt pans in Badwater Basin (3), some burnt land in the Pechanga Indian Reservation (4), rapids in Kings River in the Monarch Wilderness (5), mountain dogwood trees covered with snow in the Donner Pass (6), giant sequoias in Crescent Meadow of the Sequoia National Forest (9), desert wildflowers in Wonder Valley (11), and a distant shot of Bridalveil Falls from Wauma Vista in Yosemite (12, this shot echoes famous photographs by Eadweard Muybridge and Ansel Adams)—reveal the natural world seemingly without human intervention. Of course, at the conclusion of the film, when Benning identifies the locations of the shots, we realize that almost all of them are protected spaces, part of the state and the nation's attempt to save *something* of California from full-scale development.

Benning's two-and-a-half-minute shots throughout the Trilogy create a consistent meditative pace throughout all three films. The choice of this particular duration was a function of Benning's decision to use 100-foot rolls of film, a standard length for 16 mm film. One hundred feet of film lasts about two minutes and 50 seconds: the two-and-a-half-minute duration gave Benning some leeway in editing the shots. Because of the lack of

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human or technological movement during the early shots of *Sogobi*, this meditative dimension of the experience is all the more obvious, and is confirmed by Benning's soundtrack. Often, the change from one shot to the next is at least as powerful in an auditory sense as it is visually. The pounding waves in shot one, for example, are followed by the sudden, comparative silence of the shot of the live oaks. While the surf sound of shot one is consistent throughout the shot, the two-and-a-half-minute duration of shot two allows us to become aware of a continually changing chorus of bird sounds. In fact, the auditory intricacy of the bird sounds seems perfectly fitting for the visual intricacy of the live oaks, and *this* complexity of sound/image is dramatically interrupted by the sudden cut to shot three, which is one of the quietest shots in *Sogobi*. Throughout the film, Benning's careful attention to visual composition—both within each shot and within successive shots—is matched by his careful attention to the particulars of sound.

The middle third of *Sogobi* reveals somewhat more, and more obvious, engagement with the large-scale exploitation of what remains of California's wilderness. Shot 13 is an empty billboard in the Mojave Desert, shot 15 was filmed looking down from the Golden Gate Bridge—its shadow just barely visible in the water below—as an immense container ship, fully loaded, slices through the image (this shot echoes several shots in Hutton's *Study of a River*: Benning and Hutton are friends, and admirers of each others' work), shot 19 is a military convoy moving along a dirt road in Twenty-nine Palms, and shot 23 reveals a barren road near Bristol Lake. The shot of the container ship is particularly dramatic, partly because of the immensity of the vessel and its cargo and partly because this shot shatters any momentary illusion of the safety of the less-developed areas of California that may have been evoked by the first third of *Sogobi*: the movement of such an immense cargo suggests that, unless there is resistance to it, the exploitation of global natural resources is not likely to spare any area of the state. The interruption of the film by this shot is powerfully confirmed, four shots later, by the military convoy speedily moving into the landscape, presumably to protect and defend the economic growth of the nation.

During the final third of *Sogobi*, Benning's focus is the exploitation of wilderness in a wide variety of ways by a range of individuals and groups. In fact, shots without obvious exploitation of the landscape (except by Benning himself) are few and far between. Shot 25 reveals a huge log derrick at work, shot 27 a large cement quarry, shot 28 a cattle ranch, shot 29 a freight train speeding through the Tehachopi Mountains, shot 32 a salt evaporator at work in Amboy, shot 33 the San Andreas Fault visible across heavily travelled Highway 14, in Palmdale, and shot 35 the Lake Berryessa spillway. Even shots that are visually focused on undeveloped wilderness betray various forms of development in their sound: a stunning image of boulders in the Alabama Hills (shot 30), for example, is regularly interrupted by offscreen gunshots.

Finally, of the four shots in the final third of *Sogobi* that do focus on wilderness without obvious interruption, one (shot 31) is of a forest fire in the Martis Valley.

The overall structure of *Sogobi* suggests what we all know, what we've known for generations—as is obvious in Faulkner's depiction of the post-Civil War South in *The Bear* and as far back as Thomas Cole's attempts to remind the American public of what the Hudson Valley looked like before full-scale industrialization: that our access to something like wilderness continues to shrink and to be threatened by the forces of industrial development. Benning's use of an unusually slow-paced structure for the Trilogy allows for another kind of focus on this issue. The very stillness of so much of Benning's imagery of nature causes the details of the projection situation in which we watch the film to move, however subtly, into the foreground of the experience of *Sogobi*. At times, during a particularly serene shot, we can sense the slight movement of the projected image itself, an inevitable, but usually invisible vestige of the particular mechanical technology Benning is using.

This subtle motion is doubly suggestive: first, of the fact that cinema is a late product of the mechanical technologies that produced the Industrial Revolution, and second, that despite cinema being a technologically advanced product itself and, throughout its history, one of the chief polemical supports for technological development, it simply cannot match natural process itself for smooth efficiency and for temporal transcendence. We know that were we to stay out of what remains of American wilderness, these spaces could sustain themselves in all their complexity for virtually infinite durations (as Faulkner puts it in the final section of *The Bear*, in the wilderness, "dissolution itself was a seething turmoil of ejaculation tumescence conception and birth, and death did not even exist"). The subtle motion of Benning's imagery is caused by the friction that, slowly but surely, must ultimately destroy his cameras and the 16 mm projectors that show his films, and the films themselves. The best Benning, and we, can do is to allow the apparatus of cinema a moment to stand before nature and before us, in awe of nature's potential for transcendence.

As he completed each of the first two sections of California Trilogy, Benning screened the films at various venues as discrete works, but as he was finishing *Sogobi* he became increasingly convinced that the Trilogy should be shown in its entirety as a single meta-event. There seem at least two reasons for this. The first is Benning's commitment to providing a visual/auditory "mapping" of California, a set of 105 shots that together are his reading of the Golden State. Of course, no set of shots can "cover" California, but the triad of films functions as a balancing of the agricultural, the urban, and the wild that reflects Benning's experience of his adopted home.

The other reason for insisting that the entire Trilogy be shown as a single event—usually on a single day, so that *El Valley Centro* is followed by a

15-minute break, then by *Los*, which is followed by another break, then by *Sogobi*—has to do with an implicit environmental message. I believe that Benning means to model the idea that there are times when we must rearrange our lives in order to deal with a pressing issue. In a number of instances—Claude Lanzmann's nine-and-a-half-hour Holocaust epic, *Shoah* (1985) is one; Peter Watkins' *The Journey* (1987), a 14-and-a-half-hour examination of modern media's handling of crucial world issues (war, hunger, gender, ethnicity), another—major independent films have made a redistribution of viewers' time an intrinsic dimension of the film-going experience. The California Trilogy, while less demanding than either of those films, does much the same thing. If we are to seriously consider the nation's most populous (and cinematically most influential) state and the environmental issues it encapsulates, Benning's Trilogy suggests, we'll need more commitment than we usually bring to the movies. And if we are to conserve something of the natural beauty of this remarkably diverse geography, we'll need to develop a persistence and patience for which the experience of Benning's films, like the experiences of the other films discussed in this essay, is not only emblem but, in a small way, training.

The ideas explored in Benning's California Trilogy are reconfirmed in his *13 Lakes* (2004), which presents a series of 13 ten-minute shots of 13 American lakes, each shot composed so that the surface of the lake bisects the film frame, and each image separated from the one that follows by several seconds of darkness.

The lakes were chosen as a way of roughly mapping the United States: in order, we see Jackson Lake, Wyoming; Moosehead Lake, Maine; the Salton Sea in southern California; Lake Superior in northern Minnesota; Lake Winnebago in Wisconsin; Lake Okeechobee, Florida; Lower Red Lake, Minnesota; Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana; the Great Salt Lake, Utah; Lake Iliamna in Alaska; Lake Powell, Arizona/Utah; Crater Lake, Oregon; and Oneida Lake, New York. The choice and order of this particular set of lakes seems to have something to do with the considerable differences between them—the move from Jackson Lake to Moosehead Lake to the Salton Sea at the beginning of the film, for example, jumps the viewer from one geographic region to another, from one kind of terrain to another, and from one kind of lake to another (Jackson Lake and Moosehead Lake were created by geological forces; the Salton Sea was man-made accidentally by a faulty irrigation system and subsequently by irrigation run-off from the Imperial Valley in southern California).

Benning's choice of lakes also seems to be related to his personal history, at least to the degree that some lakes seem chosen in part because of Benning's psychic investment in certain geographic regions: his Milwaukee origins are evident in the fact that three of the thirteen of the lakes are in the upper Midwest, his choice of Oneida Lake in New York State has something to do with his frequent visits with close friends in this area, and for

Figure 1.3 Jackson Lake, Wyoming in James Benning's *13 Lakes* (2004). Courtesy James Benning.

James Benning

Figure 1.4 Moosehead Lake, Maine in James Benning's *13 Lakes* (2004). Courtesy James Benning.

James Benning

years he has been regularly drawn to both the Salton Sea and to the Great Salt Lake. The Great Salt Lake, especially Robert Smithson's earthwork sculpture *Spiral Jetty* (1970), is an important location in *North on Evers* and *Deseret*, as well as in *13 Lakes*, and it is the subject of Benning's *Casting a Glance* (2007). But the most important principle at work in the choice and arrangement of the lakes seems to be the creation of a certain variety in the kinds of perceptual experiences Benning can provide in these different locales.

These perceptual experiences echo each other, while also revealing a subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, range of distinctions. Indeed, during the opening minutes of some shots, viewers may find themselves wondering how the shot *is* a useful addition to what has been experienced so far, only to realize, slowly but surely, that the new shot does in fact add considerably to what has gone before. As the depictions of the lakes continue to accumulate, Benning creates a new form of cinematic suspense: as we grow more and more aware of the lake we're looking at, and remember the panoply of lakes we've already seen, we cannot *not* wonder how the next lake will be different from the one in front of us and what it will add to the ever more complex panorama provided by the film.

j. p. sniadecki's *songhua*

J. P. Sniadecki studied filmmaking at Harvard University's Sensory Ethnography Lab, instigated and run by Lucien Castaing-Taylor. The graduate students who study with Castaing-Taylor—co-maker, with Ilisa Barbash, of the wonderful *Sweetgrass* (2009), a depiction of the final years of sheepherding in Montana's Absaroka-Beartooth Mountains—learn to combine a fascination with other cultures and subcultures and a commitment to methods of filmmaking that create the feeling of being present within these cultures.

Among the most accomplished of the veterans of the Sensory Ethnography Lab program is J. P. Sniadecki, who developed his filmmaking chops working in China, sometimes filming in complex urban spaces where the "New China" threatens the natural environment. *Songhua* (2007), named after the Songhua River, which flows from the Changbai Mountains through Manchuria, joining the Amur River to form a natural boundary with Russia, is Sniadecki's most obviously environmentalist film. *Songhua* is shot entirely within that portion of the river that flows through the city of Harbin, with skyscrapers visible in the background of some shots. The Songhua is described in one of the several visual texts that conclude the video as "the main water source for Harbin's four million people."

Like Zdravič, Hutton, and Benning, Sniadecki relies on extended shots— the first three shots of *Songhua* are one minute 33 seconds, two minutes 12 seconds, and 59 seconds, and this general pace is maintained throughout the film (*Songhua* is 28 minutes long). During each shot, Sniadecki maintains

a focus on specific activities within an extended field of vision. In the first shot, for example, we see three men using a net to catch small fish in the river. Sniadecki walks with the men as they work, panning his hand-held camera to keep their activities center-screen, while at the same time framing the men so that we can see their larger context: an impressive railroad bridge crossing the Songhua is visible in the background of the first half of the shot. *Songhua's* second shot focuses on a ramp leading onto a dock, as people walk onto or off of the dock, crossing the screen from right to left and left to right. A man grilling meat is visible on the other side of the ramp. In this shot, the emphasis is even more fully on the various layers of activity revealed by Sniadecki's framing: the ramp is closest to the camera, the griller and his smoky grill a bit further away, and once again the railroad bridge is visible in the background, this time a little further away. About halfway through the shot, a train crosses the bridge from right to left.

As *Songhua* continues, Sniadecki creates a network of cross references, like the railroad bridge in the first two shots, that allow us to understand more fully how each new visual perspective relates to the larger scene. In shot three, we are looking at a dock from which boats depart for various attractions along the river (a woman on a loudspeaker promotes the use of the boats). Part way through the shot a man wheels a bicycle into the foreground of the image from the left, unloads a heavy white bag onto a pile of similar bags, and wheels his bicycle offscreen in the direction from which he arrived. In the film's eighth shot we see this man again, as he unloads another white bag onto the pile: this time, the camera is positioned so that we see the man pushing his bicycle toward the camera and the pile of white bags. Down river, in the distance, a tramway across the Songhua is visible, which becomes a further point of reference in subsequent shots. Still later, we see the man filling a bag with sand.

Throughout *Songhua*, image and sound are roughly equal partners. Even when Sniadecki's camera is focused on the visual details of a particular activity, we are hearing sounds that evoke the wide range of activity that is taking place on and around the river, particular dimensions of which we come to recognize. Once we've heard the woman on the loud speaker in the second shot, we recognize her voice as part of the background of other shots. The image and sound of each new shot add to our understanding of this place, and our coming to know where we are, both in this landscape and within Sniadecki's video, is part of the pleasure of *Songhua*. Further, our familiarity with individuals and particular sights and sounds solves little mysteries and allows for the development of mini-narratives, including a wide range of interactions between Sniadecki's filmmaking and the people he records.

In many instances, Sniadecki is merely a witness to activities taking place around him, and sometimes to conversations that have nothing to do with him. Other situations do involve him. The man grilling kabobs in the

background of the second shot is the focus of the twelfth shot. The griller talks to a second man working with him and to a customer, both of whom look to the left of the frame, presumably at Sniadecki, audibly amused by "the American's" presence. In the seventeenth shot, Sniadecki initiates a conversation with a man walking toward him that brings a new dimension to the film:

> Sniadecki: "You're not afraid of the Songhua River water?"
> Man: "I'm not afraid."
> Sniadecki: "There's no pollution?"
> Man: "No."
> Sniadecki: "Really?"
> Man: "Really."
> Sniadecki: "I heard there was pollution."

It's not as if we haven't wondered about this issue during the film. In the eleventh shot a boy plays in the sand at the edge of the Songhua and at one point bends down to drink from the river—creating a knee-jerk response for anyone familiar with the history of river pollution. However, Sniadecki's raising of the issue with this man reveals a dimension of his interest in this public space that is not clearly evident until this point, an interest that Sniadecki foregrounds at the conclusion of *Songhua* with the third of three visual texts, a quote from the *China Environmental News Digest*, dated September 11, 2006:

> China's Songhua River, the site of a massive chemical spill last year that halted water supplies to tens of millions of people, has been hit by more than 130 water pollution accidents in the past 11 months, state media said Monday.

For Sniadecki, the Songhua River, as it flows through Harbin, is a fascinating and engaging public space where a considerable range of people are involved with the river in a wide variety of ways. It is also an instance of an increasingly worldwide problem that affects rivers and the people who use them. By the time the environmental politics of *Songhua* are made explicit, we have come to "know" this place and we have met or at least observed a number of the individuals who work and play in and around the river. Our experience of *Songhua* has momentarily made us a part of this scene, and so our discovery of the considerable danger within this otherwise engaging environment feels a bit like a personal affront—reminding us perhaps of our own evasions of potential environmental dangers.

sharon lockhart's *double tide*

The advances of digital technology have generally been instigated by the need, in a world increasingly crowded by humanity, for increased speed and

efficiency in handling information and in getting services and products to citizens and consumers in the shortest possible time. Within the film, television, and digital gaming industries, especially in the United States, the possibilities of digital imaging have generally confirmed what has always been a tendency toward extravagance: the popular cinema, for example, seems addicted to ever faster and more explosive action. But digital film-making also offers a very different set of possibilities. Within traditional 35 mm celluloid-based filmmaking, the nature of the cinematic apparatus restricts the duration of shots, and the same is true of 16 mm filmmaking, although 16 mm allows for longer durations than 35 mm. In digital film-making there are virtually no limits to the length of shots, and this has allowed some film artists to provide experiences of the natural world that were impossible until very recently.

For years, filmmaker/photographer Sharon Lockhart has exploited shots of extended duration, first in 16 mm (it was her use of a series of ten-minute shots in her 1997 film *Goshogaoka* that inspired the structure of James Benning's *13 Lakes*) and more recently in high-definition digital. Her *Double Tide* is, in a sense, a transitional film: it was shot in 16 mm, and then trans-ferred to digital. *Double Tide* is made up of what seem to be two continuous shots, each exactly 45 minutes long, of a woman (Jen Casad) clamming in Seal Cove, Maine (in fact, each of these two images was composed of multiple 16 mm shots of Casad, but the transitions between one shot and the next are virtually invisible). The first shot was filmed in the morning, the second in the evening, on one of those rare days when there are two low tides. Both images were recorded by a tripod-mounted camera, from slightly different positions within Seal Cove.

Even the ten-minute shots in Benning's *13 Lakes* are a considerable (if ultimately rewarding) challenge for most viewers. *Double Tide* takes the cinematic stretching of patience to an entirely new level—and creates a new kind of feature-film. Indeed, the experience of *Double Tide* is less like attending a movie, than like looking carefully at a painting. In fact, *Double Tide* is particularly evocative of nineteenth-century American landscape paint-ing—the Hudson River School and the Luminists and Tonalists, and in particular, the work of Martin Johnson Heade, John Frederick Kensett, and Winslow Homer.

By any conventional measure, little happens in *Double Tide*. In the morn-ing Casad arrives onscreen from the left foreground, pulling a small boat in which she keeps her gear. She gradually works from the foreground of the image into the background. Five seconds of darkness divides the morning from the evening, when Casad arrives, again from the left foreground, pulling the boat, and works into the distance, then back to the foreground. The considerable stamina necessary for walking in the deep mud of the cove and reaching into the mud to collect the clams is obvious throughout *Double Tide*. Indeed, on one level the film is a paean to a woman working at a

traditional form of labor, a hands-on form of labor that, so far as I am aware, does no damage to the coastal environment.

Casad is also a performer. It is increasingly evident, as *Double Tide* develops, that her movements are defined by the space revealed by the unmoving film frame and that this constriction of her movement can only have been arranged in advance. In this sense, *Double Tide* evokes Yvonne Rainer, whose fascination with the choreography of labor and of everyday activities has informed her performance work and films. Further, Casad was miked, so that no matter how far from the camera she works, we are hearing the sounds of her labor in close-up. *Double Tide* was shot in-sync, although during post production Lockhart worked with several audio tracks in order to communicate not only the sounds made by Casad's clamming, but also the environmental soundscape created by various birds, by animals in the distant woods, and by nearby (though invisible) buoys and lobster boats.

As Casad gradually moves away from the camera during the morning and during the evening, the viewer's attention shifts from the particulars of her actions to other, more subtle changes in each of the two overall scenes. During the morning Seal Cove is misty, although the density of the mist subtly varies, revealing more and/or less of the cove itself and the forested hills that descend to the water in the left background of the image. Sometimes visibility is confined to the space in which Casad is working. At other times, people—perhaps other clammers—can be seen in the distance. Throughout the evening shot the air is clear and the sky, and its reflection in the cove, undergoes continual subtle changes. In the far distance on the right boats moving across the bay and other activities are just barely visible. During the latter minutes of the evening, what looks to be a heron walks into the image from the right and seems to watch Casad working.

At times during the evening, Casad takes a break from clamming to enjoy the scene in front of her, and at these moments *Double Tide* becomes a kind of cine-perceptual "nesting doll": along with the heron, we watch Casad from a distance, as *she* looks into the distance. It is as if Casad's—and the heron's—momentary break from the demands of life mirrors the viewer's experience of the film: for nearly anyone who has adjusted to the demands of *Double Tide*, the experience offers "a reprieve," to use Peter Hutton's phrase, from the business of our normal routine and the busyness of our consciousness. At the conclusion of the film, Casad moves back into the foreground, washes the mud off herself and her gear, and walks off-screen to the left, precisely where she entered, pulling her little boat. And, *our* "work" done, we gather our things together and exit the theater.

conclusion

Probably my description of *Double Tide*—perhaps this is true for each of the works I've discussed—suggests that the experience it provides would be

boring for most audiences. The irony is that in all cases when I've shown *Double Tide*—and the same is true for the other films and videos—audiences have adjusted to the novelty of its unusual durational structure and, after the screenings, claim to have enjoyed the contemplative/meditative experience Lockhart has offered them. Granted, these audiences have been self-selected groups who have either taken a college-level film course or who have chosen to attend a non-conventional film event. Nevertheless, this positive response has been consistent for a wide range of groups over several years.

Is it not possible that the expanded use of the films I've discussed, both in classes and as public film events, might play a small but useful role in helping viewers become more mindful of the implications of their more conventional cinematic experiences, and more patient not only in their engagements with the environment, but in their efforts to guide inevitable environmental change in directions that nurture a more healthy planet?

notes

1   Hutton in MacDonald. *A Critical Cinema 3.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998: 252.
2   Hutton interview: 244.

sources for the films

Presenting the films and videos discussed here brings with it the responsibility to be sure that they can be shown well. Visual subtleties tend to disappear in mediocre projection, and this can easily weaken, even destroy, the experience. 16 mm exhibition has become far less common than it once was, but most colleges and universities and many art museums still have the option of 16 mm projection—projectors should be cleaned before use. *Riverglass*, *Songhua*, and *Double Tide* require excellent digital projection.

VHS tapes of Zdravič's *Riverglass* are available for sale, and 16 mm prints of Peter Hutton's river films, James Benning's *Deseret*, and the California Trilogy can be rented from Canyon Cinema, Yosemite Place, 1777 Yosemite Ave., Suite 210, San Francisco, CA 94124; 415–626–2255: www.canyoncinema.com, films@canyoncinema.com. *13 Lakes* is available from Benning himself: jbenning@calarts.edu. *Songhua* is distributed by DER (Documentary Educational Resources) in Watertown, Massachusetts: der.org, docued@der.com, 617–926–0491. *Double Tide* is available in various digital formats from the Blum and Poe Gallery: www.blumandpoe.com, info@blumandpoe.com, 310–836–2062.

Often the filmmakers and videomakers whose work is discussed here are available for personal appearances with their work. Peter Hutton's email address is hutton@bard.edu, James Benning's is jbenning@calarts.edu, and J. P. Sniadecki's is jpsniadecki@gmail.com. Sharon Lockhart can be reached through Blum & Poe.

resources

Below are listed resources for further research. Additionally, the conversation continues online at Ecomedia Studies, **www.ecomediastudies.org**, where you can find blog posts, calls for papers, web links, and additional resources.

organizations and journals of interest

American Film Institute: www.afi.com
American Humane Society Film & TV Unit: www.americanhumane.org/animals/
   programs/no-animals-were-harmed
American Society for Environmental History: www.aseh.net
   Journal: *Environmental History*, www.historycooperative.org/ehindex.html
Association for Environmental Studies and Sciences: www.aess.info
   Journal: *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences (JESS),* www.springer.com/
   environment/journal/13412
Association for the Study of Literature and Environment: www.asle.org
   Affiliates in Australia/New Zealand, Canada, Europe, India, Japan, Korea, the
   UK, and the US. Journal: *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment,*
   http://isle.oxfordjournals.org

Center for Social Media: http://centerforsocialmedia.org
Center for the Study of Film and History: www.uwosh.edu/filmandhistory
    Journal: *Film & History*, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/film_and_history
The ClearVision Institute: http://clearvisioninst.org
Ecofem.org: www.ecofem.org
Environmental Media Association: www.ema-online.org
Film Quarterly: www.filmquarterly.org
Film-Philosophy: www.film-philosophy.com
Film Society of Lincoln Center: www.filmlinc.com
    Journal: *Film Comment*, www.filmlinc.com/fcm/fcm.htm
FlowTV: http://flowtv.org
The Harmony Institute: http://harmony-institute.org/
International Association for Environmental Communication:
    http://environmentalcomm.org/
    Journal: *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, www.informa
    world.com/smpp/title~content=t770239508~db=all
International Association for Environmental Philosophy: www.environmentalphilosophy.
    org
    Journal: *Environmental Philosophy*, http://ephilosophy.uoregon.edu/index.html
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