

14. IT'S ABOUT TIME: SLOW AESTHETICS IN EXPERIMENTAL ECOCINEMA AND NATURE CAM VIDEOS

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One of the challenges of environmental thought and environmental advocacy, in particular, is the ability to communicate and represent timescales that are outside human perception. Cultural habituation and the real physical limits of the human body's visual apparatus prevent us from seeing, and hence experiencing, certain environmental processes, both natural and human-made. The unfurling of a leaf, the eroding of a cliff face, the decomposition of a plastic bottle – these are processes that occur along timescales which are not immediately observable to the human eye; they are quite simply too slow to see. This chapter introduces what could be called a slow eco-aesthetics shared between a tradition of avant-garde film and nature cam videos that have the environment as a central subject. It explores how time-based media, such as film and video, can open up cinematic and virtual spaces for the observation of nature. I bring together two different phenomena: a tradition of slow ecocinema in the work of James Benning and Bill Viola, and a popular form of slow ecocinema in on-line live-streaming nature cams. No doubt these examples come out of different production and exhibition contexts and speak to dissimilar audiences but what they do share is a visual strategy that encourages an attentive mode of observation and the development of an ecologically oriented gaze.

A SLOW ECOCINEMA

Curiously, two emerging areas of scholarship in recent years, 'slow cinema' and 'ecocinema', seem to draw near but never meet. While there has been

stimulating work in each of these fields, they have for the most part evolved along separate trajectories. Both are areas of enquiry that converge in productive ways, however, and often share sets of questions concerning the experience of cinematic time and the experience of environmental change. Within the last decade or so, much has been written about slow cinema, frequently within the context of art-cinema and world-cinema traditions. Slow cinema has at once been exalted for providing a breathing space in an oversaturated and overstimulated media environment, and also dismissed as upholding certain pretensions about what an artful, 'good for you' cinema should look like. Certainly one can become mired in debates about slow cinema as a taste culture but that is to limit the conversation to disciplinary-specific concerns with genre, film style and national film histories.

Ecocinema is less defined by attention to a particular genre or tradition but is a rather flexible category that considers all moving-image media as appropriate subjects for environmental criticism. Despite diverse approaches and methodologies, what scholars working in this area share is a commitment to understanding how moving images, as part of a larger audiovisual culture, are actively involved in shaping and producing knowledge about the material world and the human place within it. Critical work in the field, so far, has tended to focus on narrative cinema or more obvious examples of environmental-issue documentaries (see Ingram, 2000). While mainstream narrative films and consciousness-raising documentaries can directly (and eliptically) speak to environmental issues, turning an eye towards media produced and exhibited through alternative networks can open up analysis of many more formal strategies, institutional histories, motivations and effects.

To this end, David Ingram asks one to look beyond the obvious environmental-activist film and towards a wider range of styles, genres and taste cultures that may promote ecological awareness (2013: 43). He reasons that films work along a number of different strategies and arguments, mixing cognitive and affective appeals to generate audience investment. Analysing the norms and aesthetic strategies of several different genres, including the 'slow eco-aesthetics' of the art film *sleep furiously* (2008), the 'moralist eco-aesthetics' of the popular *Sunshine State* (2002), and the 'eco-aesthetics and kitsch' of *Southland Tales* (2008), Ingram maps out a range of effects and relations that audiences may potentially have with the material. Idealising one strategy or genre over another may not be the most productive exercise for eco-film critics but does illustrate that the ecological film is, indeed, varied in construction and appeal. In the case of art or experimental cinema which emphasises slow and careful viewing, Ingram suggests that this structure may encourage an environmentally sensitive gaze, though he is careful to note that positive reception and impact depend on prior spectator training and disposition.

Scott MacDonald has written extensively on experimental ‘films about place’ that encourage a mindful form of spectatorship through the use of extended duration. In ‘The Ecocinema Experience’, he proposes that the goal of ecocinema is to provide ‘alternative film experiences that may help nurture an environmentally progressive mindset’ (2013: 20). By ‘alternative’, MacDonald has in mind an aesthetic that directly challenges the classic, industrially produced, action-centred, narrative-driven style of Hollywood cinema. Strategies include minimal camera movement, the favouring of direct sound over scored music, the decentring of human action and narrative, and, commonly, the use of extended takes and minimal editing. With reference to the specifically eco-centred films MacDonald cites, aesthetic estrangement also takes the form of temporal estrangement. Attentiveness to nature on-screen, he argues, can be a step towards retraining perception such that viewers may carry these experiences with them outwards into the world as more conscientious environmental stewards. Films falling within this tradition of experimental ecocinema include Larry Gottheim’s *Fog Line* (1970), Peter Hutton’s *Time and Tide* (2000), James Benning’s *13 Lakes* (2004), and Sharon Lockhart’s *Double Tide* (2009), among others.

Such films about place enable a form of cinematic dwelling by carving out a space and allowing a length of time wherein spectators may observe nature’s rhythms and patterns as they occur on screen. Adrian Ivakhiv notes that cinematic time can be a way of exploring ecological time. Ecology, he argues, ‘is about the enfoldment of objects or processes within other processes, all of which unfold according to their own durations’ (Ivakhiv, 2013: 305). To this end, time is an essential variable by which film can communicate processes that typically escape human attention. He writes:

to the extent that moving-image media can generate viscerally felt images of the *times of things* – things in production and in decay, in differentiation and synthesis, things making up the unfolding materiality of the world, of identity and of relationality (in all their narratively spun forms), and the swift, dark flow of their vanishing – to that extent cinema is a powerful tool for ecophilosophy. (2013: 307, original emphasis)

The ecophilosophy Ivakhiv constructs is partially indebted to a tradition of thought on film’s indexical relationship to the material world. As Siegfried Kracauer eagerly pointed out, in his early formulation of a ‘material aesthetic’, significantly it is the medium’s ability to capture change in time that produces forms of knowledge difficult to access (1997: 41).¹ To this end, the slow and the ecological can, and should, be thought together, especially given the emergence of new genres of film-making that emphasise deliberate, direct and sensuous engagements with nature on screen.² As more ‘eco’-themed imagery

is consumed via different platforms and within an array of environments and institutions, it becomes necessary to understand how moving images gain their power not only as symbols but also as mediums of affect and experience. Here the ‘affective turn’ in film theory can contribute much to the understanding of how moving images generate conceptual (and perceptual) knowledge of the environment.³

James Benning’s *13 Lakes*

Playing with the tension between stillness and motion, James Benning’s *13 Lakes* is a carefully crafted film that encourages a practice of simple looking. A landscape, for Benning, is ‘always changing in very subtle ways and sometimes in very dramatic ways . . . it has to be *experienced*’ (MacDonald, 2005: 5, original emphasis). For the film-maker, the long take is one way to mediate such an experience and to highlight the subtle changes that a given site undergoes. *13 Lakes* unfolds entirely through a series of still frames, each lasting ten minutes. There is a symmetry and minimalism in composition that allows spectators to notice the smallest changes. Each shot is framed such that the horizon falls more or less in the same position, producing a clear blocking between water and sky. The repetition in compositional arrangement provides the standard by which the spectator measures the minutest of changes: a bird flying through the frame, a cloud floating across the sky, its shadow doubled on the glass-like surface of water, the occasional ripple. On the audio track, there is also little happening: a few bird chirps, a chorus of frogs, the singular and distinct sound of a motorboat. Like animated postcards, the film cycles through each location: Jackson Lake, Wyoming; Moosehead Lake, Maine; the Salton Sea in southern California; Lake Superior in Wisconsin; and so on, producing a repeated series of views that invite comparison. Without narration or elaboration through text, Benning simply presents each scene for observation. If the changes occurring within a given frame seem more noticeable because of the lack of action, the cut that separates one frame from the next appears dramatic and unexpectedly exciting. One experiences an adjustment in expectation, perhaps impatience or boredom but also an amplified interest in noticing details.

For MacDonald, reading the film against what he identifies as a ‘culture of distraction’, *13 Lakes* serves as a kind of palate cleanser for the mind. The film, he argues,

can function as a form of therapy, as a way of helping us learn to make space for careful perception and for sustained contemplation: that is as a form of resistance to the relentless distraction around us, distraction that in modern culture is emblemised by the movies and television (2007: 231).

In this sense, MacDonald adamantly celebrates a film like *13 Lakes* as a counter-cinema of sorts, evidence of how a technology so central in producing a visual culture of distraction and quick consumption can be ‘re-directed in the interest of the environmental, psychic and spiritual health of modern societies’ (2007: 231). Beyond functioning as an alternative to entertainment media which reflects a culture of speed and immediate gratification, the film provides an opportunity to dwell with an image of nature in an immediate, prolonged and sensuous way.

Bill Viola’s *Chott-el Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)*

Reaching further back into the history of experimental film and video, one also sees the beginnings of a preoccupation with time and environmental consciousness in the work of Bill Viola. Before his commitment to large-scale installation pieces, the artist worked specifically with lo-definition video. Where others saw the medium as a cheap, consumer-grade technology, Viola was particularly interested in video’s unique image quality as well as its ability to record much lengthier expanses of time relative to the 8 and 16 mm formats in film. Out of his prolific body of work, an early video piece, *Chott-el Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)* (1979), stands out for its treatment of physical landscapes. Lasting nearly half an hour and composed of mostly long takes with minimal camera movement, the video allows ample time for the viewer to observe processes of slow environmental change as they occur across a series of landscapes. *Chott-el Djerid* is as much about place as it is about weather. The piece captures atmospheric shifts in locations ranging from the Sahara desert in Tunisia to the prairie expanses of Illinois and Saskatchewan. Mirages and snowstorms obstruct and abstract the image so that viewers become both estranged from what they are seeing while remaining highly attuned to alterations in light, atmosphere and the passing of time. The audio component is equally distorted, the synced sound capturing only blowing wind and white noise. Viola’s later works, which employ extensive use of slow-motion cinematography shot on high-end digital video, deal more explicitly with human faces, physiognomies, art historical references and interior states of mind. *Chott-el Djerid*, in contrast, stands apart because of its intense focus on the material world as subject matter, the nature out there in all its physicality. Rarely do humans appear in any of the scenes and, when they do, they are merely travelling through the landscape as just another element. Along with the relative absence of camera movement and the exploitation of real-time recording capabilities, the piece is meant to produce a highly charged and emotive experience of landscape.

In line with the work of Marshall McLuhan (1994) and Gene Youngblood (1970) who, writing in the mid 1960s and early 1970s, saw media as an extension of the body’s perceptual capabilities, Viola likewise pondered video’s



Figure 14.1 Atmosphere and landscape in *Chott-el Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)* (1979).

relation to the human sensorium.⁴ Reflecting on the rationale behind his own work, he proposes that spectatorship is a distinctly embodied and psychically charged practice. ‘Perception is the input channel to the mind’, Viola writes, ‘and with new technologies, the call is first to the body, then the mind will follow’ (1995: 253). Significantly, for the artist, video’s distinction from the other arts lay in its special relationship to time:

It is not the monitor, or the camera, or the tape, that is the basic material of video, but time itself. Once you begin to work with time as an elemental material, then you have entered the domain of conceptual space . . . Awareness of time brings you into a world of process, into moving images that embody the movement of human consciousness itself. If light is the basic material of the painter or photographer, then duration is the material prima [*sic*] of the time-based arts of cinema and video. (1995: 173)

Similar to the way in which Benning uses the ‘material prima’ of duration to build a slow, patient and sensuous viewing experience, Viola makes the temporal and haptic dimension of video integral to the work. *Chott-el Djerid* is as much an audiovisual study of landscape as it is an invitation to reflect on

the experience of perception itself. The grainy image and the equally ‘grainy’ soundtrack make it difficult to forget the mechanics of the apparatus. While the sheer beauty of desert scenes and snow-covered fields would seem to invite an immersive form of engagement, the humble production context and mode of exhibition – via the television monitor for the historic viewer or probably the computer screen for the contemporary viewer – effectively gets in the way of an easy viewing. The resolution is ‘poor’ but this lack of image quality is integral to the experience of, and appreciation for, processual changes in the environment and the materiality of video itself. Technological and weather-based interruptions prevent clarity of image and sound, radically altering the expectations and habits of the viewer.

Both Benning’s and Viola’s work, as represented in *13 Lakes* and *Chott-el Djerid*, invite a framing of screened nature as therapeutic experience set at a remove from the ebbs and flows of mainstream television, film and most of today’s on-line environments. One might critique these pieces as reproducing a romanticised perception of nature as reprieve from culture, as eternal or timeless, or as impervious to human influence. Yet the pieces are more than time-based forms of nature worship. The imagery is hardly spectacular and is, in fact, quite ordinary: stationary views of urban water in the case of Benning, semi-rural landscapes and deserts in the case of Viola. Rather, in both cases, it is the element of time that frames these sites as significant, as scenes worth looking at and attending to. The dialectic between attentive and distracted modes of media consumption, which MacDonald reads into Benning’s work and which Viola has articulated in his own writing, also appears in discussions of slow cinema. Similarly, attentiveness and distraction are also the terms by which proponents of various slow social movements couch their critiques and hopes for alternative relationships to consumption, work and the environment. ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ temporalities become a measure by which to diagnose critically a culture according to ideal standards of personal, societal and environmental health. Unspoken within these diagnoses is some understanding of what the proper relationship between human and nature ought to be, and to what extent and how technologies, including audiovisual ones, can or should be used to mediate between the two. A slow ecocinema built around long duration offers an invitation to reconnect with a practice of ordinary looking.

NATURE CAMS AS SLOW ECO-MEDIA

Crossing over into the realm of popular moving-image media, one notes the curious explosion and appeal of nature cam videos that have a surprisingly similar look and feel to certain examples of a slow experimental ecocinema, including the works described above. Many of these nature cam videos are hosted by conservation organisations that frame them as opportunities for

virtual contact with a disappearing nature. Sir David Attenborough, in his endorsement for World Land Trust, an international conservation charity which protects biologically threatened habitats, articulates this position succinctly on the group's website:

As human beings we are more urbanised than ever before, and we are out of touch with the natural world. Yet we are 100% dependent on its resources. World Land Trust's rainforest webcam is an extraordinary lifeline and communication with the natural world. (Attenborough, World Land Trust)

Famous for high-end BBC nature programmes, such as *The Life of Mammals* (2002–03) and *Planet Earth* (2006), the British naturalist and film-maker lends his support to the humble webcam as a technology that provides a transparent and direct link to the natural world. World Land Trust is just one of many conservation organisations that have incorporated webcam technologies as part of their visual lexicon. Viewers and supporters can log on to the organisation's website and see direct, live-streaming images of remote nature. Locations include the Buenaventura Cloud Forest in Ecuador and the Ornithos Atlantic Rainforest in Brazil. In a similar fashion, the United States's National Park Service provides a 24/7 live feed of the Old Faithful Geyser in Yellowstone National Park. Countless other web cameras have been mounted in relatively remote landscapes, ranging from Mount Washington in New Hampshire to Kruger National Park in South Africa. In these instances, this relatively low-tech device allows visitors access to virtual views of national parks and nature reserves at all hours of the day.

As slow-moving versions of nature photography, nature cam videos fulfil a cultural desire for contact with wild and remote spaces. They are a twenty-first-century visual strategy by which conservation groups reach out to a broad public to encourage an aesthetic appreciation of nature. With the interesting added dimension of time, it is also possible to regard them as an eclectic form of slow eco-media. Unlike slow cinema, which is often discussed and valued within the domain of art cinema, national cinema, or experimental cinema, nature cam videos exist within entirely different networks of production and circulation and are not granted much aesthetic value. There are productive ways, though, to put the two in conversation. Most obviously, such as *13 Lakes* or *Chott-el Djerid*, nature cams build time-intensive connections between remote viewers and specific natural sites. They encourage a form of attentive viewing and place attachment, with the aim of inciting feelings of intimacy with, and sensuous knowledge of, a given locale. Without overlooking the more insidious histories of webcam technologies and the unequal distribution of power that their visuality produces, one might also see how they can

promote a viewing practice based less on a desire to dominate than a desire to care for.⁵

Notably, though, live feeds of remote nature are quite dissimilar end products relative to the images produced by Benning and Viola. First, nature cam views are significantly more ephemeral in that they are meant to be accessed and circulated in a very flexible manner; they exist on a web interface and are directed towards a user or viewer who may be logging on via laptop or handheld device. Image quality can also vary widely, and feeds frequently experience signal interruptions. Second, they are produced and distributed by organisations with a variety of agendas, funding schemes and audiences. Many of them are conservation groups, such as the World Land Trust, but also television networks, such as the Discovery Channel. Their modes of production, intentions, platforms, viewing environments, and imagined audiences, then, put them at quite a remove from the culture of experimental ecocinema.

Yet the intersection between nature cams and a slow experimental ecocinema is too fascinating to overlook. Through the use of minimal movement, together with the absence of editing and usually sound, the nature cam presents radically de-dramatised views of nature in real time. When camera movements occur, they appear obviously mechanical and resemble the work of a structural film.⁶ The format also takes long duration to its most radical extreme. Views are ideally available at all hours, and at all times of the day, uninterrupted unless by some technical failure or seasonal constraint. Ike Kamphof suggests that nature cams can incite feelings of care and interest on the part of spectators specifically because they demand patient viewing. While her analysis is primarily geared towards cams that focus on animal subjects, one can extend her broader argument towards cams whose sole purpose is to transmit live streaming views of nature reserves. As she suggests, they do more than show events in another physical location. Rather, they ground the viewer in the place depicted, and provide a point of contact between the virtual and the real (Kamphof, 2010: 261). Or in Attenborough's words, they provide a 'lifeline and communication' with the natural world.

In using this technology, conservation websites are trying to encourage viewers to bond with the specific sites that appear on-screen. The real-time connection sensitises users to environmental changes as they unfold, connecting them on the same temporal plane. Visitors are encouraged to dwell on the image for as long as they please, and to share their experiences with other users on the site. Many viewers post comments in adjacent forums describing experiences of wonder and appreciation, and, if an animal happens to wander by, gratitude at having been patient and present at the right moment. Like the bird that flies across the frame in Benning's *13 Lakes*, contingency and chance encounters serve as the dramatic fulcrum that hooks and rewards a viewer in an otherwise uneventful scene.

While nature cams no doubt rely on a complex network of cameras, satellites, servers and microchips to deliver nature instantly and 'on demand', once the image reaches the screen, it opens up the possibility of durational viewing that even the longest film cannot produce. Liveness, as well as slowness, are built into the experience of watching. Thomas Campenalla suggests that webcams are a form of tele-present media and, as such, they allow for remote, yet no less real, connections to distant places. Rather than seeing the entirety of cyberspace as a seduction away from the physical world, he suggests that one might also recognise how webcams 'open digital windows onto real scenes within the far-flung geography of the internet' (2000: 27). In this sense webcams serve as 'agents of geography and place' by bringing remote real environments into intimate virtual proximity. Displayed on the user's screen, the specificity of these views counters feelings of the Internet as a placeless entity (2000: 42). To this assessment, I would add that, in these instances, it is actually the temporality of nature cam videos – that is, the slowness in addition to the liveness – that allows for intimacy with, and knowledge of, these remote spaces.

That said, on the side of reception, it is difficult to determine exactly how users may be interacting with these views. There is no guarantee that people engage with nature cams in the same focused and deliberate way that spectators do when watching a Benning film as a discrete screening. Perhaps users may have a nature cam video (or multiple videos) streaming while attending to a variety of tasks both offline and online. In this instance, valorising nature cams as uncomplicated 'good', slow formats would not make much sense. The larger point, though, is that this kind of slow eco-media does exist online and, counter to the bits and bytes one typically finds on the Internet, they afford an alternative kind of temporality. If a user so chooses, he or she can, in fact, reproduce the kind of viewing situation and activate the kind of attention demanded of films such as *13 Lakes* or *Chott-el Djerid*. In contrast to the highly composed and structured encounter with nature on screen which one finds in the experimental tradition of slow ecocinema, nature cams produce a parallel kind of possibility. One has the freedom to determine whether or not to treat these views as ambient background or to attend to them as worthwhile in their own right. There is nothing inherently radical in either an experimental ecocinema or nature cam videos but, when viewed in the light of broader slow cultural movements, one can see how this kind of eco-aesthetic might at least inspire an alternative set of values. It is interesting to imagine how people may be using nature cam videos to redirect their attention, to actively retrain, in a sense, their own perception of what it means to be online and to rediscover, however mediated, some connection to nature out there. Further, if one regards nature cams as a slow format, one that exists as an antithesis to something like Vine or GIF, one would also need to acknowledge that there are

layered temporalities that people navigate in their media usage.⁷ This would help bring nuance to an easy binary between good-as-slow and bad-as-fast forms of media, as many advocates of conventional slow cinema do.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, experimental slow ecocinema and nature cam videos share little in common, especially in the light of the different ways in which they are produced, circulated, and consumed. Situated within a tradition of American experimental film and video, the works by Benning and Viola speak to a relatively small, self-selecting audience and, more commonly than not, can be seen only within the institutional setting of a university film programme, gallery or cinematheque. They are also formally self-aware experiments by individual authors. Nature cam videos, by contrast, are ubiquitous, authorless, and belong to another set of histories and cultures. One might situate them, for instance, with reference to conservation movements and their visual culture. An intriguing account could also be written of how such media fit within an emerging field of environmental surveillance technologies and programmes. Putting these two phenomena side by side, though, allows one to see how a slow eco-aesthetics might respond to, and fulfil, a desire for more immediate and extended visual contact with nature. With an eye to anxieties around environmental crisis, speed, modernisation, and digitisation, one might see how this kind of visual strategy provides opportunities to observe the material world along different temporal scales and to recover, however mediated, a utopian relationship to time. A slow aesthetic is ecological but, more than that, it is ethical. Without the ability to experience environmental change as a temporal condition, and to recognise nature as concrete, present, and all around us, it will be difficult to find ways or reasons to step out of habitual modes of seeing the world at a remove.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Kracauer's chapter, 'The Establishment of Physical Reality', in Kracauer, 1997.
2. See, for example, projects coming out of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Laboratory. Notable films include Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel's *Leviathan* (2012) and Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez's *Manakamana* (2013).
3. The 'affective turn' in film theory, while varied in approach, is primarily concerned with understanding the pre-personal- and precognitive-level effects of film and other moving-image media. More specifically, for ecocinema, see Weik von Mossner, 2004.
4. See, for instance, McLuhan, 1994 and Youngblood, 1970.
5. Concerns about civil liberties come into effect when states, businesses, and employers use webcams to monitor and control targeted populations.
6. Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), for instance, constructs a whole cinematic experience around an apparent zoom-in to a photograph of ocean waves. Nature cam

- videos, which are authorless and whose movements are dictated by remote operation, similarly create the experience of a mechanical eye.
7. Vine is a short-form mobile video-sharing service owned by the microblogging site Twitter. It allows users to record and edit looping video clips that last six seconds or less. The GIF, short for Graphics Interchange Format, is a popular single-file bitmap image format that appears as a small, looping animated image.

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