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Figuring Landscapes | The Scrumpling Ecologies of a Film and its Audience

In an era in which our global ecology is increasingly seen as in crisis, writer **David Berridge** looks at the films showcased in *Figuring Landscape* and asks whether artists are changing the way they depict our relationship with our natural surroundings.

The history of experimental film contains a rich, if somewhat fraught legacy of engagement with the natural world. Such film-makers, aware how their methods and technologies mediate the world around them, are often suspicious of films whose definiteness of character, plot and setting give too sure a picture of the physical world. But the history of artists' films is also littered with film-makers relating in diverse ways to John Cage's desire to "imitate nature in her manner of operation."

Three suggestive examples of this later group would include:

Michael Snow (in *La Région Centrale*, 1969) places a specially designed remote-controlled camera on a mountaintop. Attached to a robotic arm, the camera whirls around for three hours in never repeating patterns of movement, abolishing any gravity-defined senses of up and down, left and right.

Chris Welsby (*Anemometer*, 1974) hung a 16mm camera from a tree in London's Euston Square. With the camera's motor driven by an anemometer, filming speed varied with wind speed. No wind meant no images were recorded. Shooting lasted until the reel of film had reached its wind-determined end.

David Gatten (*What The Water Said*, 2007) stuck films in lobster pots and hurled them into the North Carolina sea. The next day three were retrieved, but one required his father to go to the beach daily until it turned up some weeks later. The projected film shows the sea in a variety of moods, from near-Zen to, erm, very angry.

Three film-makers there, of course, from different generations, whose broader output gives different emphasis to "nature" and "landscape." Film-makers, too, part of a history of experimental film making -

from the [New American Cinema](#) of the 1950s to the present - which also parallels the development of the modern environmental movement.

If one looks across a century of experimental films is there a discernible change in the representation of the natural world, and human relationships within it? How did awareness of environmental issues become part of these films? Did film makers incorporate or remain oblivious? Is there an affinity between such film makers search for new methods and ways of seeing and the environmental movement's own calls for new paradigms of looking and thinking?

One opportunity to explore these questions is the film programme *Figuring Landscapes: artists' moving image from Australia and the UK*, devised by [Catherine Elwes](#) and [Steven Ball](#), currently touring the UK and Australia. Not that the show engaged these questions directly. "Environmental issues remained in the background during the selection process" Ball told me, whilst Elwes' introduction to the catalogue emphasizes a focus on artists somewhat distanced from the specifics of environmental issues, who instead:

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As an artist, are you aware of the impact your own practice has on the environment?

- Yes, and I consider that when choosing processes and materials.
- Yes, but it's better to think of the art first, and the materials and processes second.
- No, it's not a consideration when I make my art.

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are variously representing landscape as a place of memory and the imagination, as contested territory, as a testing ground for humanity, and as nature under threat.

Nonetheless, watching *Figuring* at Tate Modern recently, I felt certain films proposed a particular type of image of use in thinking about environmental issues. It is this image - what it means for the film maker, the audience, the environment, and the relationships between them all - which this essay will explore. Three films from the first night's *Encounter* programme provide a useful starting point:

THE GREAT MAJORITY OF ARTISTS OF THE PAST FEW DECADES HAVE APPROACHED GLOBAL ECOLOGY IN TERMS OF AN EQUILIBRIUM BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE, FAILING TO INTERROGATE THE UNIVERSAL "WE" WHOSE SURVIVAL IS PURPORTEDLY AT STAKE

Yates McKee

1. **Emily Richardson's** *Petrolia* (2004) [above right] depicts the refineries and oil rigs of the West Coast of Scotland. Time lapse and long exposure chronicle long lines of rigs, toed into the estuary for repair, lighting up the night. Rigs become, Richardson observes, "suggestive of inner worlds or states of mind."



But what strikes me most about *Petrolia* is a double movement whereby such manipulated imagery suggests the history of experimental film as well as the present and future of the Scottish oil and gas industry.

2. **Dalziel and Scullion's** *Another Place* (2000) [right and main picture] comprises a series of video portraits. Like **Warhol's** *Screen Tests* the sitters sat looking straight at the camera. Unlike Warhol, the backdrop to the sitters was footage of their home village of St. Comb's on the Aberdeenshire coast.



But like Warhol this footage is slowed down, articulating a place and its inhabitants by a subtle play of person and landscape within the medium specificity of video.

3. The image of **Mathew Murdoch's** *Being There* (2006) was a slow zoom out that revealed a section of Hadrian's Wall. If this evoked such celebrated avant-garde films as **Michael Snow's** *Wavelength*, Murdoch used his soundtrack to complicate such simplistic filmic references.

This comprised a phone conversation between the artist and his father organising their trip to watch Scotland play England at Rugby. The artist explained how he wanted to stop off to film the image we are looking at. His father agrees, provided they leave home in good time and it doesn't take too long.

In all three of these films then, a formal and experimental rigor is fused with the domestic, vernacular, and geographical. It was a quality of combination present in different ways in a number of films. **Semiconductor's** *All the Time in the World* (2005) [right], for example, used data of local seismic disturbances on the Northumbrian coast to create a digital animation of the landscape in formation. In a Q&A session, Ruth Jarman of Semiconductor spoke of using digital processes to go "beyond the visible into the imperceptible," creating an image that is a recognizable landscape but whose very visibility is "beyond perceptive capabilities." Rather than making a theoretical framework too soon, here are two other details from *Figuring Landscapes* collage of voices and landscapes:



1. **Lyndal Jones** had an established practice making large scale installations that fed into projects organized into ten year cycles. A desire, she said, to respond to climate change and what it means on a personal level, prompted her to stop mid-cycle, and

- conflict?
- Bittern population is booming at last
- Opponents fight on with petition challenge
- Download the Guardian Environment app
- The great South Georgia rat crisis
- Vintage ketch sets sail to launch slow cargo movement
- Warnings over proposed merger of UK's nuclear police forces

shift her practice and life from an urban to a rural setting, trying to identify “what constitutes another way of addressing the landscape.”

Importantly, this was not a critique of the artificiality of image production itself, for as Jones observed of landscape: “it’s only mediated.” Instead, it was a shift that seemed to be working through issues of scale, location, and context.

2. **Mike Marshall’s** film *Days Like These* (2003) [above right] focussed on a sprinkler in a garden. Marshall talked of first encountering the garden lit so that it appeared flat and compressed like a stage set. The sprinkler, through its arc of movement, created a sense of depth.



Such shifting between flatness and depth seems a useful working tension for the framework I am identifying here. As Marshall highlighted, such movements could be conceptual as well as physical, drawing past and future into the present of the image.

One popular strategy that recurred throughout the *Figuring Landscapes* program was performance. For these artists, conceiving and performing an idea was a laboratory for acting out contradictory tensions in the history and experience of landscape itself. Viewed from an ecological perspective, such temporary labs also emphasized the physical limits and inevitable failure of the human body.

A lucid example of this was **Dan Shippersides’** *Coir a’Ghrunnda 360* (2007), one of a series of works where Shippersides attaches his camera to an 8-metre leash. Stood in the landscape, he swings it around his head, creating an image of the landscape where motion replaces any fixed coordinates of position. Whereas Welsby’s wind-camera had its duration determined by the length of a reel of 16mm film, here the length is determined by whether, as the filmmaker arms tire, he stops or risks smashing the camera on the rocks.



Often, as here, performances involved a quirky sense of humour. But the moment of laughter was very brief, quickly choked back, in **Bronwyn Platten’s** *Meeting Nude Woman Walking on Balls* (after Hans Baldung Grien, 1514) (2006) [above right]. Platten recreated Baldung’s image, her pale, white and naked body walking awkwardly on balls in a harsh Australian desert scape.

She spoke afterwards of the performance as dramatising the disjunction, in her own biography and (art) education, between Europe and Australia, idea and experience of landscape. Baldung’s image was of a witch being punished, Platten’s an ordeal self-chosen to actualize and expunge a sense of shame.

A different rhythm informed **Roz Cran’s** *Stone* (2008) [right]. Here there was much comedy to Cran appearing in the landscape and climbing into her rock costume: a grey tarpaulin dabbed in white paint to suggest lichen. Once inside she crouches down and, totally still, becomes a rock amongst a hillside of rocks. It is unclear how long the film will last - maybe a week - but the space Cran creates actively works through conflicts and contrasts: the home-made, tacky costume becomes a credible mimicry; uncertain stasis replaces forward moving narrative action.



Cran’s rock-impersonation was also a link between the performance based films and those more engaged with more meditative and contemplative relationships to landscape, such as **Sofia Dahlgren’s** *Winter Light* (2005) [below right]. Dahlgren’s landscapes took the slow-down of Dalziel and Scullion to where the moving image seemed to lose its name, questioning perceptive capabilities whilst indulging aesthetic beauty. That this tradition, too, of course, is a performance was beautifully demonstrated by **Sarah Dobai’s** *Nettlecombe* (2007).



Dobai took the landscaped gardens of Nettlecombe Court in Somerset, extending the landscaping to the climatic conditions of a place through her use of off-screen wind machines. So what is the environmental ethics all these films propose? In the weekend’s concluding discussion, the Melbourne based film-maker **Dominic Redfern** related his own desire for images with “no horizon at all” to **Miwon Kwon’s** notion of “reparticularizing the landscape” (in *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*). **Anna Cady**, furthermore, talked of moving “away from the vista” to a focus on “our own place.” Such descriptions were redolent of green discourse that often focusses on the local, the particular, and - in more philosophically inclined debates - Heidegger’s notions of dwelling.

The films themselves made a different proposition. The particulars of Redfern and Cady’s film’s weren’t entirely a tangible, local place. Nor were they particularly particular. In Cady’s *Farms of Innocence* (2007) [right], for example, rapid-fire sequences of still images reveal a toy farm constantly built and destroyed, manipulated, constructed, destroyed once more. Far

from being an alternative, many of these films actually exploited the landscape as a “non-place”, with affinities rather than differences to airports, shopping malls and office foyers.

Take Genevieve Staines' *Ruins in Reverse* (2005), which used digital editing as a form of virtual ecological restoration. Modern cityscapes, and other obvious traces of human presence, slowly vanished from the image until it comprised only river and forest. Viewed as a literal narrative it was perhaps overly simplistic. It was better viewed as another example of Semiconductor's “beyond perceptive capacities.” A literal but impossible image, whose present moves into both past and future in search of a primal nature only possible through the Final Cut Pro installed on the filmmakers laptop.

“I am trying to find a new way of talking about the emotions around environmental issues” writes Anna Cady. This too is a part of this aesthetic of the environment. *Destiny Deacon's Over d-Fence* (2004) [right] adopts the framework of TV soap operas such as *Neighbours* to explore Aboriginal communities, seeing “beyond the cultivated zone. Beyond the law of genre” as *John Conomos*, another contributor to the weekend, notes of his own films. *George Barber's River Sky* (2002) [below right] suspends its twentysomething subjects upside down in a motor boat heading along the Thames. The disorientation opens a fresh space for the subjects to discuss their lives.

How is a viewer to respond to such images? The catalogue for *Figuring Landscapes* has

some familiar sounding responses. *Stan Frankland* writes of *Esther Johnson's Hinterland* (2002): “This story of erosion is a story of our own impermanence and the fragility of our existence.” *Catherine Elwes*, meanwhile, writes of *Scott Morrison's Ocean Echoes* (2007) - a rapid, musically cut sequence of stems of corn - that it acquires the “ominous character of a frantic warning”

I've made similar statements above, but such responses risk ignoring what characterizes these images and their particular style of mediating the natural world. A film of a crumbling cliff isn't there to be related to the fragility of our experience.

Rather, its image is opaque and resistant to such a response. It combines past, present, future; the visual and the imperceptible, precisely to counter such simplistic translation. In these films too much has become part of the image itself for a traditional critical response to be anything other than superfluous.

Several filmmakers, of course, talked reassuringly of “leaving room for the audience” but the work itself was more contrary and inflexible. The viewers task instead becomes to test such opaque configurations against our own mental and physical models for navigating a temporally and spatially complex environment. This evokes the geographer *Doreen Massey*, who asks that the movement from local to global not be seen as a shift from “real” to “abstract.” Massey challenges us to hold to physical space, no matter how multi-scaled and contradictory, because it “is the dimension of the social: it presents us with the existence of others.” So do these films.

This, of course, is but one path through *Figuring Landscapes* rich, finger-satisfying loam of material. Shift the particular films under consideration, and this framework, too, adjusts. So *Eugenia Lim's Young American* (2005) more directly foregrounds popular culture and feminism, highlighting *Valie Export* and *Pipilotti Rist* as useful precursors for an ecologically informed filmmaking. *Merilyn Fairskye's Connected* (2003) and *Hollington & Kyprianou CCTV Monitor 1* (2003), meanwhile, connect an experimental film traditions poetics of *looking* and *attention* to CCTV monitoring and surveillance.

The contrasting attitudes of UK and Australian filmmakers is central to understanding *Figuring Landscapes*. Experimental artists in Australia, *John Gillies* observed, until recently avoided working with a landscape so often seeming the image-preserve of the Australian tourist board; whilst Aboriginal land rights, Gillies pointed out, extend to the image of a place as well as its physicality. If the shifting sense of scale and environmental conditions seemed evident to a London audience, Gillies used the Q&A to clarify imagery in several Australian films, highlighting the hemorrhaging of historical and political meaning when films are shown beyond their original time and place.

In conclusion, then, I haven't systematically answered any of those questions at the beginning of this essay about the environmental movement and experimental film. But what

emerged from watching these films was a certain kind of image that seems apposite of our contemporary situation. What are the characteristics of this image? What does it ask of those who look at it? The answers outlined above show an image coming to terms with its own impossibility. In doing so it makes an invitation not to read the image but to measure ourselves against it. As environmental ethics go, both strategies seem apt.



One final example places *Figuring Landscapes* more directly within current debates on contemporary art and ecological politics. Writing about *Democracy in America: The National Campaign* (2008) - a project by the New York based arts organization Creative Time - Yates McKee notes how:

“the great majority of artists of the past few decades... have approached global ecology in terms of an ideal equilibrium between man and nature, failing to interrogate the universal ‘we’ whose survival is purportedly at stake.”

Focussing on projects by [Allora and Calzadilla](#) and the [Center for Urban Pedagogy](#) - and drawing on the theoretical work of [Carrie Lambert-Beatty](#) - McKee outlines a different attitude that productively relates to the variety of image this essay has identified:

"Deconstructing the distinctions between nature, technology, and society along the lines of [Bruno Latour](#)'s model of democratic political ecology, such practices exemplify the negotiation between... a traditional art of protest to an interrogative “art of policy”... [which] looks to the aesthetic as a space of neither revolutionary opposition nor technocratic consensus but rather a site of productively uncertain literacy, debate, and advocacy concerning the rights of the governed via-à-vis corporate and governmental agencies."

Figuring Landscapes premiered at [ArtSway](#) in the New Forest from 25 - 30 November 2008. It was at [Tate Modern, London](#), 6 - 8 February; and will tour to:

[Dundee Contemporary Arts](#), 23 - 27 February;

[FACT, Liverpool](#), 23 - 25 Feb & 2 - 4 March;

[Vivid, Birmingham](#), 25 - 28 February;

[Showroom Sheffield](#), 30 March - 2 April,

[Glimmer, The 7th Hull International Short Film](#), 21 - 26 April.

Other UK dates and venues to be announced. It can also be seen in Australia at [Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney](#), 2 April - 2 May, with other Australian dates and venues forthcoming.

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www.newalbion.com/artists/cagej/autobiog.html

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Yates McKee, “Contemporary Art and the Legacies of Democracy” in Nato Thompson, ed. *A Guide to Democracy in America* (Creative Time Books, New York, 2008).

Doreen Massey, “Is the world getting larger or smaller”, online at www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-vision_reflections/world_small_4354.jsp. The title for this essay is partly derived from Massey’s observation here that “There’s been a kind of crumpling, a topological scrumpling, of space.”

The best introduction to the traditions of film-making explored in this essay is A.L.Rees, *A History of Experimental Film & Video* (BFI Publishing, London, 1999).

For online articles, films, and links to other resources see Luxonline at www.luxonline.org.uk
IMAGES: From top; *Another Place* by Dalziel + Scullion, 2000; *Petrolia* by Emily Richardson, 2005; *Another Place* by Dalziel + Scullion, 2000; *All The Time In The World* by Semiconductor, 2005; *All the Time in the World* by Semiconductor 2005; *Days Like These* by Mike Marshall, 2003; *Meeting Nude Woman Walking on Balls (after Hans Baldung Grien, 1514)* by Bronwyn Platten, 2006; *Stone* by Roz Cran, 2008; *Winter Light* by Sofia Dahlgren, 2005; *Farms of Innocence* by Anna Cady, 2005; *Over d-Fence* by Destiny Deacon, 2004; *River Sky* by George Barber, 2004; *Lake George (after Mark Rothko)* by John Conomos, 2008.

David Berridge writes about contemporary art and film-making in his blog [More Milk Yvette](#). He recently wrote an essay about [Fluxus](#) for *RSA Arts & Ecology* and contributed to the feature [Best of 2008](#)

[Visit the RSA Arts and Ecology blog.](#)



Comments

Plinius - 06 Mar 2009 5:01pm

Thanks for alerting me to this article. I only saw a fifth of the films so can't really comment on the series as a whole. However, I agree that those I saw tended to be 'opaque configurations' which didn't necessarily foreground ecology in an obvious way. Thought this was an interesting article that made me rather regret not seeing more of the series.

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