

EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA AND EMBODIMENT IN NATURE-BASED  
VIDEO INSTALLATIONS

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION ..... 1

2. SLOW CINEMA ..... 3

3. ACTIVE VIEWERS, EMBODIMENT, AND HAPTIC VISUALITY ..... 6

4. STYLISTICALLY INFLUENTIAL EXPERIMENTAL FILMMAKERS ..... 9

    James Benning ..... 9

    Peter Hutton ..... 12

5. BIRDING BLIND..... 15

6. CONCLUSION..... 19

REFERENCES CITED..... 21

## ABSTRACT

Nonfiction filmmakers have a variety of different approaches they can take to produce science and nature based documentaries. In my paper, I focus on a slow, experimental style of filming and editing. I stress that by using these techniques when it comes to films with the environment or animals as subject matter, filmmakers can stimulate the senses within the audience to garner a greater intellectual connection between viewer and film. I analyze *13 Lakes* (2004) by James Benning and *Landscape (for Manon)* (1987) by Peter Hutton to illuminate specific slow, experimental techniques that also appear in my thesis film *Birding Blind* (2017), a three-channel video installation.

## INTRODUCTION

One fine morning I awoke to discover that, during the night, I had learned to understand the language of birds. I have listened to them ever since. They say: 'Look at me!' or: 'Get out of here!' or: 'Let's fuck!' or: 'Help!' or: 'Hurrah!' or: 'I found a worm!' and that's *all* they say. And that, when you boil it down, is about all we say (Frampton 66).

I too listen to the language of birds, but I do not claim to have ever come to fully understand their vocalizations' meanings or its personal appeal to me. There must be something less simplistic about what is found within the birds' calls to have attracted millions of listeners worldwide. These listeners are better known as birders and birdwatchers, and they contribute to national economies across the globe through avitourism, ecotourism inspired by personally viewing and spotting new species of birds (Chambers "60 Million American Birdwatchers Chase Ever-Shrinking Quarry"). Not only do birders benefit the economy through travel, lodging, and equipment purchases, they also influence data collection efforts concerning species population trends through reporting their count lists and sightings on websites such as eBird ("eBird.org").

For my thesis film, I aimed to visually explore the reasons for birding's widespread allure, so I created *Birding Blind* (2017), an immersive, non-narrative, three-channel color video installation. Each channel's video is meant to cover an adjacent, separate wall, creating a space where the viewers are semi-surrounded by larger-than-life birds. By submerging the audience in imagery of birds in nature, the installation intends to simulate a concentrated experience of birding for an audience of birders and non-birders alike in order to inspire them to consider the extensive attraction of the hobby themselves in a calming, meditative space.

Since *Birding Blind* is classifiable as alternative nonfiction and experimental cinema, this paper will primarily focus on experimental cinema and the benefits of its use as an outlet for natural history filmmaking. More specifically, it will explore the varied techniques and effects of slow cinema, a branch of experimental cinema that gives the audience an excess amount of time to consume a single shot thereby allowing them to find the importance of the intentionally long shots within themselves as they search the frame for movement and meaning.

I will use *13 Lakes* (2004) by James Benning and *Landscape (for Manon)* (1987) by Peter Hutton as examples of slow, experimental cinema. The techniques employed within these two films are very similar to the ones I relied upon to create my thesis film. Also, the themes found within them deeply resonate with the ones I hoped to project from my video installation. Overall, by creating works of slow, experimental cinema concerning wildlife and nature, filmmakers can stimulate more than just the sense of sight and sound within the audience to garner a greater intellectual connection between viewer and film.

## SLOW CINEMA

Works of ruminative, slow cinema give the audience the opportunity to be mindful. The phrase “cinema of slowness” was first described in 2003 by French film critic Michel Ciment and has gained popularity in usage since then (Luca 24). Slow films and videos are embodied by stillness, static camera positions, long takes, silence, and gaps in visuals. They are frequently described in opposition to the Hollywood, Euro-American style of filmmaking characterized by quick cuts, roaming cameras, and sensationalized content (Beckman 126). A typical shot length in the Euro-American style of filmmaking spans between two to five seconds, whereas shots in works of slow cinema frequently last much longer than ten seconds (Sandhu “Slow Cinema Fights Back Against Bourne’s Supremacy”).

Slow cinema has been dismissed as pretentious, and indeed the excess time required for watching each shot within such a film can be a challenge to those of us prepared for standard Hollywood style editing and coverage. The faster paced mainstream cinema exists in direct contrast to the patience required to sit through a ten-minute shot of a lightly changing image (Luca 25). Slow cinema is not for everyone, but the longer takes stimulate a deep intellectual connection between the viewers, the author of the film, and the subject matter represented within the film that cannot be denied. As the piece of slow cinema develops and unfolds on the screen and, over time, within the viewer, these individually-based bonds created between the viewer and the slow film linger and go beyond the more emotionally based evocations derived from the average Hollywood style film.

The stimulation of the formation of multifaceted intellectual bonds between the audience and works of slow cinema has beneficially fostered slow cinema's association with heightening the artistic gaze. Cognizant of the atypically long time spent watching a single shot, the audience is invited to scan the static frame for movement and find meaning where their own eyes land. Viewers can no longer passively watch the narrative develop through quick cuts, wherein an ellipsis of time may be utilized or emotional associations are built through shot and image juxtaposition. Instead they become the artist, constructing and developing a uniquely personal narrative concerning the film. This habit of internal reflection required and acquired through viewing films categorized as slow cinema remains with viewers long after watching the experimental piece (Romney 2). Viewers begin, or perhaps continue, to interact with the world around them more reflexively in their everyday life, slowing down a bit in our fast-paced society of constant notifications and expectations for immediate response.

I believe slow cinema stands to contribute positively to the natural history genre and ecological filmmaking. Just as slowness in other experimental films encourages their audiences to consciously decipher what is occurring on screen, slowness in nature-based experimental films goads their viewers to also become more perceptive of the ecological and environmental subjects on screen. Stephanie Lam reminds her readers:

It is the element of time that frames [the natural world] as significant, as scenes worth looking at and attending to... A slow ecocinema built around long duration offers an invitation to reconnect with a practice of ordinary looking (213).

The slowness and perhaps abstract qualities of slow nature-centered filmmaking differ from most direct environmental-activist nature documentaries. Both methods of



environmental filmmaking are interesting and attract viewership, but the construction and appeal are very different. Whether or not someone enjoys and respects the slow form of natural history filmmaking depends on if the viewer has ever been exposed to slow forms of cinema or has the patience to watch something so atypical in relation to mainstream media (Lam 208), but, in relation to viewers who do prefer and appreciate the slower style of cinema, utilizing its techniques within natural history filmmaking can provide a means to reach a different audience than the typical people who consume nature documentaries, possibly increasing the viewership of the natural history genre. By creating and sharing this slower form of media, natural history filmmakers give their audience the opportunity to really look deeply at something in nature that the authors find important and to look deeply within themselves when relating to the film as they search the frame and film in its entirety for meaning.

## ACTIVE VIEWERS, EMBODIMENT, AND HAPTIC VISUALITY

The aforementioned searching of the frame summoned by slow cinema can be considered active viewership. When examining the slow, experimental film frames, the audience has to search within their own minds as well, to personally discern what is important on the screen. By slowly scanning a shot for meaning, the viewers' eyes almost *touch* the film as if their eyes are gently tapping the film on its shoulder asking what it wants them to see. As the film triggers their senses, the viewers become embodied. They become a part of the film as it becomes a part of them, a receiver and transmitter, instead of being thoughtlessly absorbed into the film and spat out as the credits roll due to illusionistic editing techniques identifiable with mainstream narrative filmmaking (Stephens 536).

This form of visual interaction is known as haptic visuality. It stands in opposition to optic visuality where opinions are formed by keeping the viewed object at a physical and mental distance, separate from the viewer.

In haptic seeing, all of our self rushes up to the surface to interact with another surface [...] We cannot help but be changed in the process of interacting. We give up believing that meaning is formed after the fact, in our minds, and attribute power to create meaning to the interaction itself (Marks 80).

Laura Marks' form of haptic criticism developed in response to the concept of smooth space described by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1998). Deleuze and Guattari distinguished between smooth and striated space. In smooth space, there is no grand separation between people and their surroundings causing the formation of intimate connections between the people

and their environment. In striated space, people view themselves as completely separate and distinguished from their environment and the objects they view around them, allowing them to reign control over their surroundings. These two spaces, smooth and striated, respectively correlate with haptic and optical visibility (Marks 81).

Scholars have attempted to designate cinematographic techniques most likely to form haptic imagery. Some techniques, like montages and quick cuts, have been noted to disengage the viewer's thought process in a way that separates her from the film. On the contrary, long takes tend to keep the viewer engaged as she searches for the meaning of the relatively long hold on the image and in doing so finds herself in a state of "distracted thinking." In this state the distance between the viewer and film collapses, and the viewer's eyes achieve the caressing effect on the surface of the screen that was mentioned before through a form of haptic comprehension (Ghahramani et al. 59). Although this is not the only way to create a haptic imagery in a film, it does align with my argument of slow cinema creating an active, thoughtful, embodied viewer.

To extend the delineation of methods for the creation of haptic imagery in films, scholars can draw from the term film theorist André Bazin conceptualized - image-facts. Image-facts are visuals found in films created without conspicuous cinematic effects. These pieces are usually shot in natural light, on location, and with subtle or no camera movements. Typically, they are edited with long takes and do not have professional actors. They create an illusion of reality that culminates in a world within the film to which an audience can easily relate. This illusion of reality allows viewers to *feel* the true length of occurrences unfolding within the frame in order to consider what is happening

(McHugh 840). By staying with subjects longer through common events, filmmakers can, once again, decrease the distance between the subjects in their films and their viewers as the makers shape relatable spaces within the films for the audience. Therefore, through watching the everyday portrayed on screen, viewers identify with the film and are allowed to interact with the subject and develop deeper meaning. “Seeing an image of life itself is a dramatic event; it need not be manipulated into something greater than itself,” and through this lack of manipulation, haptic visuals are formed (Kolker 55).

## STYLISTICALLY INFLUENTIAL CINEMA ARTISTS

Two well-known filmmakers crafting haptic visuals by creating slow cinema works with nature-based undertones are James Benning and Peter Hutton. James Benning (born in 1942) is an American, independent filmmaker and professor at the California Institute of the Arts, and Peter Hutton (1944-2016) was also an American independent filmmaker and professor at Bard College. Both artists started in film but have made digital videos in recent years as their work has exhibited more frequently in gallery settings. Benning has been shooting entirely in digital since 2009, and Hutton began transferring his 16 mm films to digital formats for screenings. *Tulare Road* (2012) by Benning and *Three Landscapes* (2013) by Hutton can only be viewed digitally. Furthermore, work by both filmmakers played together in the exhibit *Nature as a Discipline* at Miguel Abreu Gallery in New York in early 2015 (Ortega “Nature as a Discipline: James Benning and Peter Hutton”).

James Benning

James Benning has made multiple purely natural history films, but not in a traditional manner. In 2004, he released *13 Lakes* and *TEN SKIES* as companion pieces, and by 2014, *13 Lakes* was inducted into our National Film Registry. Both films are strictly observational of their subjects and exist without camera movements within their long takes, and they are described as examples of slow or minimalist cinema with haptic imagery. I will explore Benning’s methods and techniques used in *13 Lakes* to illuminate

his approach to creating slow cinema that invokes a haptic visuality from his viewers.

Scott MacDonald has praised the film 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 emblemized by the movies and television. (qtd. in "It's About Time: Slow Aesthetics In Experimental Ecocinema And Nature Cam Videos" 210)

Within the 135-minute feature film, thirteen lakes in the United States of America are displayed for ten minutes each with diegetic sounds, including moments where boats, cars and trains pass through the frame. Between each long take of a lake, the video goes to black to show separation in location and build anticipation for the next shot. Each shot is meticulously composed to show half lake and half land or sky. The piece does not use plot, narration, or a conspicuous call to action supporting environmentalism. This minimalistic approach reveals the beauty of the natural world without verbally describing it through voice over narration or interviews with experts.

Benning's depictions of lakes can be described as "tableaux," a term used by film theorist Roland Barthes. Barthes denotes a scene as tableaux when it appears as if it were figuratively laid out on a table. The image represents a moment in time scooped out of reality and placed as is on the screen. The subsequent image is both concrete and abstract at the same time thereby coaxing astute attention and scrutiny from an audience (Moore 36). By traveling to and filming thirteen real lakes and using strict, specific treatments of length and composition, Benning creates thirteen tableaux that teeter between the concrete representation of lakes and an abstraction of nature translocated onto our screens. Furthermore, the repetitive structure of the tableaux and lack of obvious action reduce the variables the audience has to digest and allows viewers the opportunity to

notice the slight differences within each shot, such as the sound of a boat, the flight of a bird, and the change in light.

Benning's goal is to help viewers become artists. Through watching the long shots in this piece of slow cinema, viewers are able, if not forced, to perceive small changes in the natural scenes. This coincides with the desired outcome of a class Benning teaches, *Looking and Listening*. In the course, he strives to teach filmmakers to become artists by heightening their senses to the world around them (Chan "Nudging the Mind: James Benning's *13 Lakes*"). Benning describes his own approach in an interview with Nick Bradshaw in *Sight and Sound*.

I always believe that any learning comes through concentration and patience, and that you have to train yourself to have that patience and to perceive. [...] It may be slow in the movement of things, but it isn't slow in the stuff that's going on in your mind when you watch something for a long time and you see very minimal changes. You start to learn from that, so time is a function of becoming more intelligent I think. You need to take time (Bradshaw 48).

By depicting views of lakes anyone could see, viewers can relate to his images, his film. Anyone could stand on any of these lakeshores and see the captured vista, but by displaying the images of each lake consecutively in the film, they appear in concentrated form, amplifying their importance and in a way "falsifying" their concrete nature. The lakes become abstract beings used to call forth the action of simply looking at and analyzing simple changes in the landscape.

Benning's film connects intellectually and sensuously with its viewers. They feel as if they could actually be by the lake and feel the slight breeze. The multiple long takes and minimal camera movements give Benning's audience the distracted concentration fostered by haptic imagery needed in order for them to see and be seen by the film, touch

and be touched by the subject as their eyes and mind wander over each frame. In the end, by encouraging a practice of intently gazing upon our surroundings, watching thirteen lakes for ten minutes each, viewers will either flee from boredom or, hopefully, begin to appreciate the beauty exhibited in the well-composed frames and in nature.

### Peter Hutton

Peter Hutton is another influential experimental filmmaker whose work *Study of a River* (1995), was inducted into the National Film Registry in 2011. He is best known for his portraits of cities and landscapes. He, like Benning, uses little camera movement when displaying the natural environment or objects, such as ships, moving through it, but he does tend to hold his shots for much less time and create films with less rigorous structural rules, making them a bit more palatable for some viewers. Furthermore, all of his films are silent, and most lack a wide range of colors due to his partial color blindness. Hutton describes his films in the following manner:

They appeal primarily to people who enjoy looking at nature, or who enjoy having a moment to study something that's not fraught with information. The experience of my films is a little like daydreaming. It's about taking the time to just sit down and look at things [...] For the most part, people don't allow themselves the time or the circumstances to get into a relationship with the world that provides freedom to actually look at things. There's always an overriding design or mission behind their negotiation with life. I think when you have the occasion to step away from agendas, whether it's through circumstance or out of some kind of emotional necessity, then you're often struck by the incredible epiphanies of nature. (qtd. in "Peter Hutton: The Filmmaker as Luminist" 73)

Scholars have compared his filmography to the Luminist American landscape painters of the mid to late 1800s. These artists, mostly associated with the Hudson River School, painted calm, meditative landscapes with great attention to detail, concealing



brushstrokes, and most importantly, light's effect on the scene. Many scholars consider these paintings of the sublime. Stylistically, their paintings appear as "a resonant, light-suffused atmosphere [that] melds topographic divisions into a visually seamless whole" (Miller 243). Just as the painters created meditative works with definite marks of the maker and without obvious stroke lines from their brushes, Hutton has produced very distinctive films that lack the obvious trickery common in cinematography and editing, using nothing but composition, framing, and time to give his audience a greater awareness of the world around them.

*Landscape (for Manon)* (1987) is an 18-minute silent, ethereal film by Hutton depicting both awe-inspiring and everyday images of the landscape. Through long takes on a static camera, Hutton captures images of a train over the landscape, wind in trees, light and rain patterns from clouds, clouds in the sky, smoke from the earth, his child's sleeping visage, and light playing with shadow on the ground and displays them for just enough time for the viewer to truly notice what is in his frame.

All shots are sensuous in this meditative, slow film. Their dark and grainy quality creates a thick, moody atmosphere within the piece that mesmerizes the audience into feeling as if they too are in the dream inside the child's head seen at the close of the film. Nothing is jarring. Each shot is separated by a careful fade to black that gently rocks the viewers like a lullaby and in turn allows viewers to digest what they just saw and mentally prepare for the next image.

Hutton's frames are full of relatable scenes of the general outdoors, such as wind blowing through the leaves of a tree, but he intersperses them with grandiose, sublime

scenes, such as light peeking through the clouds to pass over a large expanse of rolling land. By creating a conglomerate of the commonplace and the magnificent, Hutton pushes his viewers into an even deeper trancelike state that is exacerbated by the lack of sound projected from the screen. In this silent daze, Hutton's viewers are strung along and captivated by the simple act of looking, looking at the things they might not typically take long enough to observe.

The haptic qualities of this film arise, once again, from the long take, but they also stem from the dimly lit subject within each frame. As the audience actively watches the film, searching for the drama, they begin to actually feel the film take shape. Just as they accept a shot for still, they realize it is gradually moving. The clouds are rolling across the sky, and the shadows are moving across the terrestrial plane. They can envision themselves physically outside watching the scene develop. The darkness of the frames adds an abstract quality that the audience can in turn flesh out internally in order to not only cultivate their own meanings and associations with the piece, but also form their view of the imagery within the film, making it even more personal and emotionally evocative. By letting each scene of the natural world unfold, abstracted in his frame, "Hutton allows a revelation of the motion of the world to speak directly to the viewer's senses, mind, and spirit" ("Peter Hutton: The Filmmaker as Luminist" 78).

## BIRDING BLIND

*Birding Blind* (2017), a three-channel video installation, aims to initiate contemplation and mindfulness in its viewers. The goal of the project is to create a meditative space where the audience can view birds as a bird watcher and not just the viewer of a film. All shots are held for no less than thirty seconds and exist with very little camera movement. The long takes are meant to enliven the same haptic qualities and embodied effects as the long takes in Benning's and Hutton's works, but by placing the film on three different screens running simultaneously in an open space, I hope to give my viewers more opportunity to adjust to the time given to each of the static shots. They can become more comfortable than if they were sitting watching a single screen work of slow cinema since they have the ability to walk around and choose where to stand or which screen to give their focus.

The birds in the shots are common birds. Anyone could see them by stepping outside and looking at their surroundings in Bozeman, Montana, in the fall. By presenting the mundane, the audience has more of an opportunity to relate with the images, to feel as if they were outside seeing the birds themselves.

All natural scenes are displayed with no extreme color treatments. A majority do play in slow motion, but this effect is not sensational since birds tend to move very quickly. If anything, it enhances the subliminal introspective qualities of the piece. In the end, the visuals represent the image-fact described by Barthes since they align themselves compositionally with reality.

The film is not silent, but its soundscape is mixed at low levels to ensure that it is unobtrusive to the viewers. It is comprised mostly of ambient noises and birdcalls, natural and distorted, coupled with the slowed sound of a wind chime, whose stretched ring increases in volume throughout the film. Overall, the mellow chime is meant to enhance the soundtrack as it elicits a contemplative gaze from the audience.

Four wooden-framed, tan screens hang from the ceiling near the projections. These screens call attention to the act of looking at nature and how we frame it. They implicate a separation from nature, exacerbating the “otherness” quality of the birds that we typically assign to animals on screen. The screens, alongside the fact that the projections display the birds as larger than life giving them an overstated visual significance, also intensify the feeling that we are always separate from nature but long to see it and live within it. Ultimately, the low opacity of the screens condones the idea that nature and humanity exist together, always commingling with one another.

The final conceptual idea expressed by the screens deals with the schism in thought process that occurs throughout the day of bird watching. As the day progresses, the birder finds her thoughts turned inward, away from the birds. The onlooker becomes transfixed on larger existential questions. Although the questions of the day started out with the identity of the bird, they may end on the identity of the watcher. This aspect is also indicated visually within the film by the wording in the title cards.

The two title cards in the piece are meant to stimulate and guide critical analysis within viewers, but at the same time, the cards do not reign over the audience’s entire thought process like the component of narration might. The first title card comes after the

opening shot of red-winged blackbirds. It is a quote from Wallace Stevens' poem

“Thirteen ways of Looking at a Blackbird.”

I do not know which to prefer,

The beauty of inflections

Or the beauty of innuendoes,

The blackbird whistling

Or just after.

This quote represents the more specific thoughts concerned with the identity of birds being watched, but it also hints to the more introspective quality associated with bird watching and the main theme of the film - why do people watch birds. No explanation is offered as to the importance of the quote, but the audience is invited to ruminate on it until the end of the film where the final title card appears.

Only after something has flown just out of reach do we fully absorb the meaning of what we just saw.

Again, no explanation is offered to explain the suggested meaning of the quote, and the audience is once again invited to consider the meaning of the text and how it relates to all the birds they just saw and the hobby in its entirety as the film loops.

Although my film is not located in nature, it can be noted as the tableaux described by Barthes. The images of the birds are extracted from nature and placed on three screens in a very specific arrangement according to the habitat in which they were filmed. The structure of the film moves forward from the ground up to the sky. Birds are displayed on land at the start of the film, but they progress towards the clouds in the final

shot of birds superimposed on each other flying through the atmosphere. Overall, the piece attempts to identify why so many people watch birds, and by experiencing the voyeuristic act themselves through the three-screen installation, the audience of *Birding Blind* can determine their own ideas as for the reasons for such a hobby.

## CONCLUSION

Over the last century, experimental film has become a medium that can present and expose alternative narratives, personal stories, and visual metaphors while at the same time providing an alternative for the sameness orchestrated by mainstream media. Both experimental films - *13 Lakes* and *Landscape (for Manon)*- use long takes of images of naturally occurring landscapes without cluttering them with facts and narration, slowly inspiring self-examination in viewers concerning the natural world and their relation to it. They pull the viewer into their world without completely distracting them, encouraging them to be present in the viewing of their films and to think deeper about what they see. They nurture and encourage the act of simply looking at what surrounds us during the films and after.

As described before, haptic imagery found in the films of Benning and Hutton already sparks the development of a deeper intellectual relationship between the audience, the film, and its meanings, yet installation-based video art and experimental film makes the viewing process a mentally and literally physically embodied experience. The film becomes more of an experience as an installation, and through haptic imagery, the actual room of the installation becomes the smooth space through which the audience passes, and it in turn passes through the audience. *Birding Blind* hopes to create this space and “[replace the] disembodied gaze with the embodied economies of looking” (Hawkins 327).

By creating slow, haptic pieces, natural history filmmakers can stimulate thought processes in viewers that make them more likely to feel something about the images we

present as they watch our films and retain how they felt because they arrived at their feelings through sifting through their own experiences and associations with the images in the frame. Through producing science- and nature-based videos by means different than the all too common talking head, lower thirds, male presenter led, voice of god narration, and anthropomorphized animals, science and natural history filmmakers can communicate effectively with an audience that might not already be inclined to care for science and natural history movies. This audience may not already dwell on global warming, loss of critical habitat for species through human induced means, or the positive benefits of high species diversity, but by seeing it in a different way, they may gain a new appreciation for simply looking at nature that they take with them after the last fade to black.



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