

Through a Glass, Clearly

by Paula Willoquet-Maricondi

A couple years ago, I attended a screening of *Riverglass: A River Ballet in Four Seasons*, made by Slovenian video artist Andrej Zdravic. This video, I thought, was the perfect one with which to open my course on environmental justice in film. Confounding expectations, *Riverglass* is not an activist, polemical, or political film. It does not deal with “issues.” It’s not about injustices. It has no human characters, no dialogue, no story. As one student commented in his journal, “I was really confused about why the teacher would show us this film, besides to see how long our attention span lasted.”

Well, yes, that was part of the point of the exercise. I wanted to begin the course with a viewing experience that was far removed from most other cinema experiences they had had, and had learned to expect, want, and enjoy. I wanted to challenge my students’ conditioning in order to bring their awareness to the ways in which all our experiences, and particularly our experiences of nature, are culturally condi-

tioned. I wanted them to become sensitive to how the media, more specifically film, teaches us how to see and feel about nature, and what to expect from nature. I wanted to shake up their assumptions about the ways the natural world should be represented. I wanted to turn their expectations inside out regarding narrative construction, character development, and satisfying resolutions.

Riverglass is a 41-minute video that visually immerses viewers into the emerald waters of the Stocha River in Slovenia. The demands that the video’s length and approach ask of viewers transform our awareness and experience of the natural world. *Riverglass* opens up a space in which we might meditate on our relationship to the natural world and how that world has come to function in representation, and in reality. Film critic Scott MacDonald wrote about eco-cinema in a recent essay, for *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, that viewers are conditioned to experience beautiful landscapes in film as something that does not deserve our sustained attention. *Riverglass* challenges this conditioning by offering nothing else on which to focus except for the flow of the river—from within the river—through the span of the four seasons. In these 41 minutes, either the river comes to matter or it does not. *Riverglass* compels us to make that choice, and to acknowledge it as a choice.

At the same time, Zdravic does not allow us to forget that we are watching a recorded, manufactured image of the river. A glass box that houses the camera is revealed whenever the water level of the river changes; we see the water sliding down the transparent walls of the box. At times, we see both the inside of the river and the river’s surroundings (in a split-screen effect), giving us an opportunity to re-establish our bearing temporally and spatially.

Riverglass transforms our conditioned relationship to time by demanding patience and appreciation of something to which we rarely lend our attention. It asks us to see the river in its own terms, not in ours; to experience the river for itself, not for what it can provide us. It challenges our conditioned relationship to space as well by making us uncomfortably aware of the darkness of the screening situation, the hardness of the chairs, the noisiness of the audience. But, we are also captivated by the space represented in the film—the river in all its energy, vitality, and vibrancy.

With *Riverglass*, Zdravic creates the conditions for an exploration of a different kind of relation to the non-human world—what Aldo Leopold, one of the founders of the Wilderness Society, defined as a relationship founded on a land ethic that enlarges the boundaries of the community to include the land, in the broadest sense. This land ethic, says Leopold, “changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it.” *Riverglass* does this subtly and indirectly, by slowing down time; by demanding that we notice the “insignificant” details of the river; by suggesting to us, through

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its self-reflexive elements, that no dichotomy can be drawn between the river as “object” and the human as “subject”; by proposing that our experience of the river in the film is an expression of “being-in-nature.” The video is a metaphorical expression of the symbiotic relationship of people and land, a relationship that need not be exploitative or invasive of nature in a damaging way, suggesting instead the possibility of a healthy exchange between the natural and the human-made world.

As with any experience that shifts our perceptions, expectations, and values, *Riverglass* “worked” differently for each viewer. For one student, *Riverglass* triggered her own personal experiences in nature. She related in her journal, “It was as though I could smell the smells of nature while watching the film. You can smell a nice spring day, when the grass and pollen are blowing in the air; you can smell the wetness of



***Riverglass* by Andrej Zdravic insists that viewers see the river as a river, not as mere backdrop.**

the air when it rains.” For another student, the river became “fascinating.” The student continued, noting, “What the film was able to do well was make me see the river as a character. At different points you see the river as having a changing personality, having life-like qualities.” While these responses reflected the sentiments of most students in the class, for one or two students, the river never came to matter. One found the film “murky” and the camera “stagnant,” stating, “I arrived at the end of the film unaffected and disappointed.”

As teachers, we invite our students into new experiences, we must also be prepared to welcome all types of responses, keeping in mind that the first response is not necessarily the last response. “Immediately after watching the film,” said another student, “I thought it was too long to possibly be interesting the whole time. But now, a day later, I’m struck by the constant changes in landscape, so subtle that they are hard to appreciate at first.” Like the changes in the river, our impact on our students may also be subtle, so subtle that they are hard to appreciate at first.

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