

Toward an Eco-Cinema

*Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that
is not my soul.*

*Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn.*

—Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, no. 3.

If we have generally understood that a work of literature or a painting, music, even film, is Art to the extent that it defies time and decay, providing essentially the same experience to readers (viewers, listeners) across generations and despite the flux of life, many of us who have come to love the cinema have come to see the Art it provides as especially poignant, not simply because the artistry of the greatest films *can* endure from generation to generation, *but also* because of the intrinsic physical fragility of the medium. While many generations of literary artists, visual artists, composers have seen their job as expressing the *continuity* of spirit/soul, some filmmakers see the Art of cinema as increasingly informed by predictions of its seemingly inevitable, even imminent, demise (or at best, its transformation into another, digital form). Those of us who watch and try to chronicle this process have learned to admire the decisions of some film artists to dedicate their resources, their very lives, to an Art that, as far as we can tell at this juncture, has no guarantee of surviving beyond another generation, despite its aesthetic, intellectual, psychological, and spiritual accomplishments. We are learning to respect not only what *does* seem beyond the ravages of time, *but also* what is given to us to experience perhaps only in this fragile moment.

The filmstrip embodies the struggle between permanence and transience in a way that is remarkable: 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 see the series of fixed images along the celluloid

strip is causing them to fade, and further, that the formal presentation of *this* Art accelerates its inevitable destruction. The idea that availing ourselves of what we love helps to destroy it is, of course, only one instance of a much larger reality, itself a function of 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 circumscribed and infiltrated. This pattern causes the natural world, in all its myriad variety to seem increasingly poignant for us, and even 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—reveals just how quickly such places can slip away from us.

A tradition of filmmaking that encapsulates this pattern—that uses technology to create the illusion of preserving “Nature,” or more precisely, that provides an evocation of the experience of being immersed in the natural world—has evolved during recent decades. That it has found difficulty attracting substantial audiences is to be expected, given the distractions of contemporary life. The fact remains, however, that filmmakers (and video-makers) in many locales continue to sing the value of the particularities of the physical world in works that can provide forms of visual/auditory training in appreciating the transitory. If we cannot halt the decay and transformation of the natural world or of cinema, we can certainly honor those dimensions of what is disappearing around us that we *would* preserve if we could, and we can hope that by valuing what seems on the verge of utter demise, we can hold onto it longer than may seem possible. After all, given the fragility of both Cinema and Nature, and the widespread undervaluing of both original Nature and of noncommercial cinema, logically there shouldn’t even *be* such films and videos as Diane Kitchen’s *Wot the Ancient Sod* (2001), Andrej Zdravic’s *Riverglass: A River Ballet in Four Seasons* (1997), Peter Hutton’s *Study of a River* (1996) and *Time and Tide* (2000), and James Benning’s *Sogobi* (2001). But, astonishingly, they do exist—at least for awhile.

I. Wot the Ancient Sod

Throughout its history, cinema has been generally understood as an inexpensive distraction from the demands of workaday life. But in recent decades, the “escape” from “reality” provided by the movies, has become more and more paradoxical. We often think of distractions as a slowing down, a release from the demands of our busy sched-

ules, but going to the movies (and watching television) increasingly means an acceleration in our rates of consumption: both the implicit consumption of more and more images and sounds per minute and the literal consumption of amounts of food and drink that in other sectors of our lives would seem ridiculously over-indulgent. And, of course, much of what we're looking at and hearing is little more than an on-going, implicit/explicit polemic for still more extravagant levels of consumption. Obviously, the ever-higher levels of consumption polemicized by popular media place our natural resources, and what remains of something like original nature, in ever-greater jeopardy. As a result, I see the fundamental job of an ecocinema as a retraining of perception, as a way of offering an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship, or to put it in terms I've explored in detail elsewhere, as a way of providing something like a *garden*—an “Edenic” respite from conventional consumerism—within the *machine* of modern life, as modern life is embodied by the apparatus of media.

There is a considerable and distinguished tradition of films and videos that offer such “gardens,” and a noteworthy contribution to this tradition is Milwaukee filmmaker, Diane Kitchen's recent film, *Wot the Ancient Sod*. The subject of *Wot the Ancient Sod* is the transition from early to late autumn, as this transition is “documented” by the changes in the color and texture of leaves, from the bright greens, reds and yellows of early fall to the desiccated, dryer, less vibrantly colored leaves later on. Using a hand-held camera, Kitchen explores individual leaves and clusters of leaves, mostly in extreme close-up, as they are revealed by the varieties of autumn light, and as they move in and out of focus. In one instant we may see a particular leaf in sharp focus; in the next moment, the screen may be awash with a



Abstraction on autumn leaves, in Diane Kitchen's Wot the Ancient Sod (2001).

single color—though most of the time precise representation and color abstraction define each other within individual images.

Kitchen's use of a hand-held camera confirms the transitory quality of the season she represents and of any particular moment within this general transition:

I found the magical interactions between light and leaves to be fleeting.... When moving into particular moments very close up, spotting something good, the speed with which it arrived and departed was amazing. I became much more aware of the constant (unrelenting) motion of all the forces in transition all the time—the light keeps moving, the earth on its rotation, the forces of the wind, clouds that may come (and perhaps remain for the rest of the day), etc. An effect is there and then it's gone. Flickering moments. It became a matter of chance encounters, of moments of light. (Kitchen in unpublished interview with the author in June, 2002)

For the viewer, the experience of *Wot the Ancient Sod* is one of trying to maintain a focus on the film despite its lack of nearly all the elements we usually go to the movies for, including sound. We can see that Kitchen's imagery is beautiful, but can we maintain our concentration on the beauty? How much of it can we take in? And can we allow ourselves to recognize and enjoy the particular pleasures of transition, of decay, itself? As the film moves through the fall, the beauties Kitchen records and presents become less obvious, more subtle. But then this is always our struggle, to maintain awareness through the slippage of time and the inevitable tendency to take the world around us—especially the natural processes that condition our lives—for granted.

For years, I taught modern American fiction, and as I read and re-read the classic novels for my classes, I discovered that different authors spoke from and to different moments of the life cycle. As a youth and as a young professor, no writer seemed more relevant and useful for understanding my experience than F. Scott Fitzgerald. But as I moved through my thirties and into my forties, Fitzgerald became, no less readable and teachable, but far less useful in my life: for Fitzgerald, a good life after thirty seemed nearly inconceivable. After I turned forty five, I re-discovered Willa Cather. If Fitzgerald came to seem the writer for morning, for beginnings, for youth, Cather became for me, the writer for evening, for culminations, for maturity and aging. Her novels were useful training in growing older. Kitchen, and *Wot the Ancient Sod*, can function in much the same way. While most moviegoing is about, and for, youth, Kitchen's lovely film is a training in seeing, and enjoying, the transitions in the second half of life, and in recognizing the particular pleasures of nature within an already domesticated landscape.

Kitchen's title confirms this idea. "Wot" is an archaic word meaning "to know," and, as she explains, *sod* "refers to the earth and the build-up of organic material that becomes soil or humus (and coincidentally, *sod* . . . also refers to "drunken" or "fermented"—which comes to mind as I watch my compost pile at home work from a tall pile of leaves, orange peels, coffee grounds, etc., down to the beautiful clean humus I use to prime the vegetable garden)." Kitchen's use of a title that places a process that is part of her everyday surround, here and now, into a meta-historical context confirms her commitment to a way of seeing the world and of using media that is virtually the opposite of what we have grown accustomed to. *Wot the Ancient Sod* allows us an opportunity to use spectatorship as a way of expanding our attention span, refining our perceptions of natural process, and making deeper contact with dimensions of existence that have always sustained us.

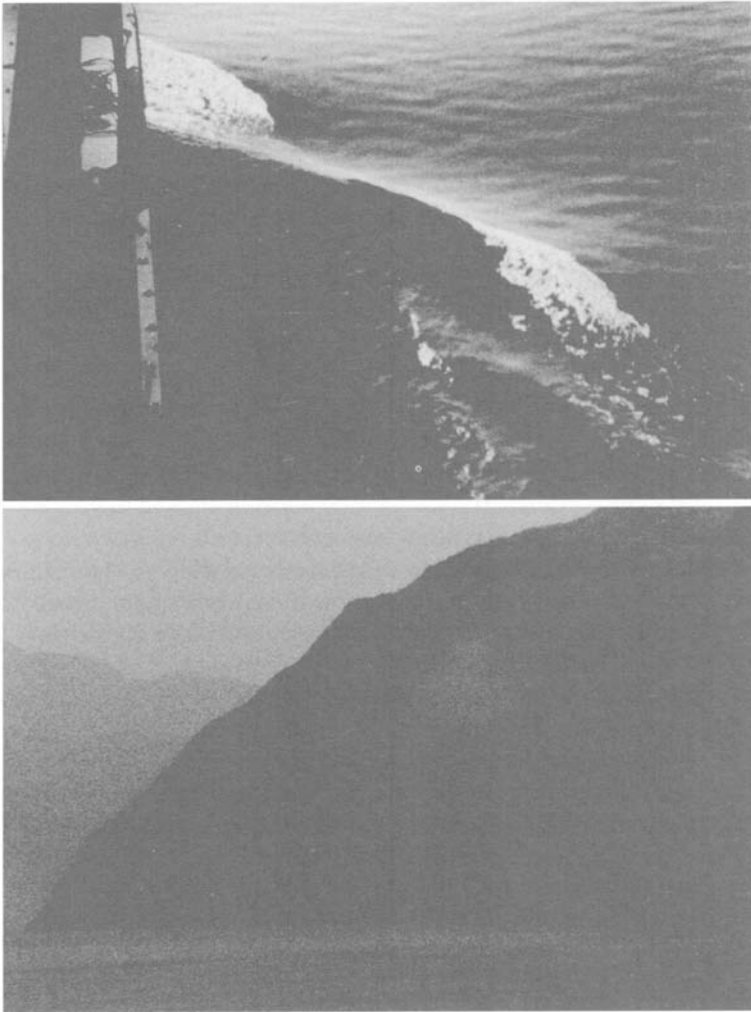
II. *Riverglass: A River Ballet in Four Seasons*

For some years it was a cliché in film studies that beautiful imagery was an easy way out for a filmmaker: anyone could aim a camera at something beautiful and expose a shot. One can only wonder why, if cinematic 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 have seemed to reconfirm the complacency of the audience and to reconfirm the status quo. Of course, this continues to seem true to many with a serious interest in moving-image art, as Leighton Pierce suggested in my recent (as yet unpublished) interview with him:

I've often felt the need to apologize for liking to make beautiful things. Some of my students say, "You know, you should never admit that you're trying to make a beautiful film, because beauty robs you of thought" A film *can* seem unpolitical because it's beautiful, to be just about wallowing in "Beauty" and escaping real life, which *is*, sometimes, part of my goal—to make a space where you can really transform and go somewhere else—but hopefully there's a lingering effect that's not just escapism and that in the long run has a political impact.

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 a good many of us recognize as worth preserving. We see this all the time in television advertising; indeed, it seems to be

one of the central strategies of Madison Avenue. But beautiful imagery of beautiful places can also be a confrontation of the status quo, 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



The SoEa River in Andrej Zdravic's Riverglass: A River Ballet in Four Seasons (1997).

television, or on-line, but how we function in the “real world.” And it can do so without announcing any polemical goal.

A particularly noteworthy instance is a relatively recent video by Slovenian film/video maker, Andrej Zdravc: *Riverglass: A River Ballet in Four Seasons*. Finished in 1997, *Riverglass* was begun ten years earlier, when Zdravc had the idea “to make a film with the camera submerged in the magic clarity of the river SoĖa” (email to the author, Marach, 2002). 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 SoĖa* (“Secrets of SoĖa”), and subsequently, into the forty-one-minute video. *Riverglass* takes viewers into the waters of the upper SoĖa, 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 snow melt 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 SoĖa.

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 on-screen briefly, and as background to the “more important” melodramatic activities in the foreground. Viewers are implicitly trained to see whatever beauties of landscape, and place in general, are evident, as ephemeral and comparatively insignificant, *not* something deserving of sustained attention or commitment. In *Riverglass*, Zdravc makes it quickly 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, to maintain not only the flow of the river, but the viewer’s attention to it, models the opposite attitude: that there *is* more than immediately meets the eye and ear in this little river, that this place is worthy of our sustained attention.

The title of *Riverglass* suggests an implicit self-reflexivity that has a subtle polemical edge. Of course, the waters of the SoĖa are as clear as glass, but the “glass” in Zdravc’s title also refers to the process of his filming. During those moments when the camera surfaces so as to reveal both the depths of the river and the landscape along the river, the glass barrier between the water and the video camera becomes momentarily visible as water flows off the glass above the surface of the river. This has the effect of resolving the mystery of how Zdravc 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), *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, not only does no damage to the environment, it 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 SoĒa itself: its clarity. And the finished video confirms this echo, both because Zdravis's editing confirms the river's movement from one space to another, and because the video,



Thomas Cole's The Oxbow (1836) also known as View from Mount Holyoke, Northhampton Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow.

like the river, is unalloyed: it is as simple and direct in its intention as is the SoĒa in its journey out of the mountains—clear as glass.

III. Peter Hutton's River Films

In recent years 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 untrammelled nature that remain within the grid of high-tech systems that span the continent. 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 grand Western landscape paintings of Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt): *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 the new generation of television 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 the owners of the four-wheelers, “high spirits” that are also encoded within the formal dexterity of the ads, their remarkably seamless uniting of two different scales of visual representation. Increasing technological control of nature, within the natural world itself and within representations of it, is seen 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; and 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 wilderness in the foreground and the agricultural development in the background, reminds us that Cole is *visiting* the wild, that most of his life was spent in New York City and in the highly developed Hudson Valley. The same ambiguity is evident in two recent films by Peter Hutton. Hutton uses extended (thirty-, forty-, fifty-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 silent).

Basically, Hutton's method (consciously) evokes and extends the approach utilized by the Lumiere Brothers at the dawn of cinema. Each Lumiere film was exactly fifty seconds long, shot in black and white with a camera mounted on a tripod; a set of Lumiere films would be shown during a particular public presentation. Hutton's films have nearly always been shot in black and white, from tripod-mounted cameras, and while each film is composed of several shots, the shots are usually separated from one another by moments of darkness so that

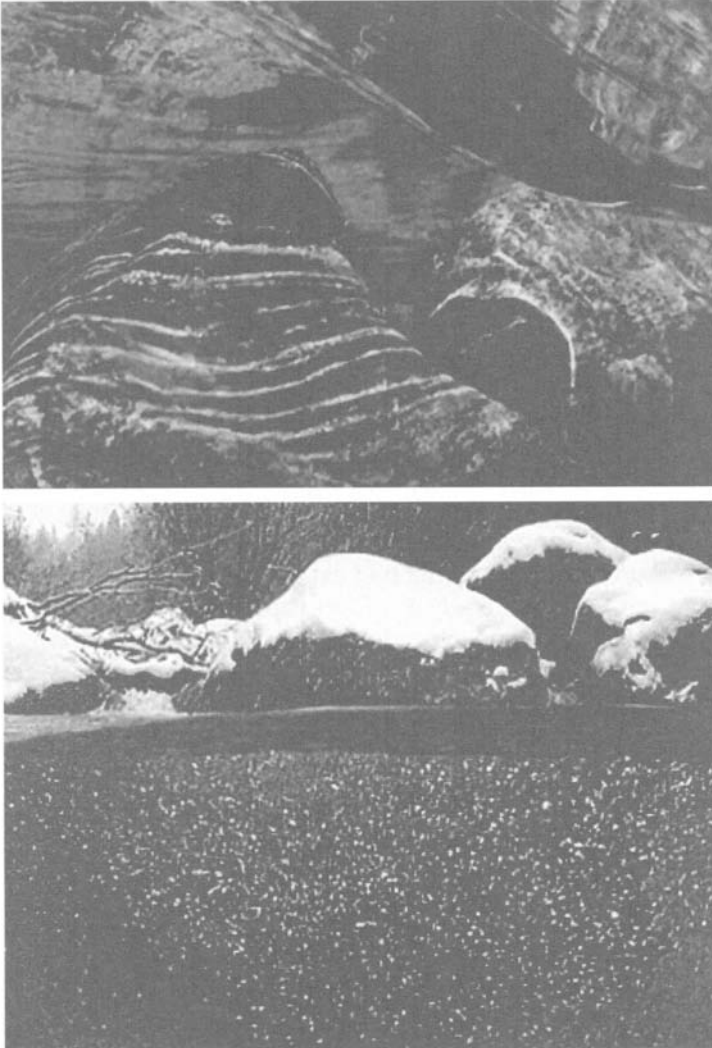
each seems like a mini-film. Or to return to the issues raised by recent television advertising, Hutton means for his films to work against the unbridled exploitation of the land and the landscape, by modeling a more serene, more rewarding experience of seeing and considering where we live.

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 fifteen miles from Cole's home in Catskill). 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)—strange in its surreal handling of scale: a giant goblet set within a mountainous landscape holds a lake surrounded by green growth and various structures; 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 *In Titan's Goblet*, a sequence of shots reveals several dump trucks 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 rubber 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 through moving clouds—the idea of the serenity and beauty of the Hudson Valley landscape is troubled. This ambivalence about the beauty of landscape informs, to an increasing degree, Hutton's *Study of a River* and *Time and Tide*.

In *Study of a River* 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 his experiences resulted both in a film, *Images of Asian Music* (1974), and in an approach to experience that 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. (Hutton in Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 3* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998], 252)



The Soja River in Andrej Zdravi's Riverglass: A River Ballet in Four Seasons

While Hutton couldn't capture his experience of the storm in the dark with his 16mm 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. During the body of *Study of a River* we divide our time 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, 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 along the river 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 the ice on the river flow past the bridge: in one instance, Hutton's framing causes a bridge support to seem to move through water and ice, like a ship.

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, though 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 surround. 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” (Hutton interview, 244).

Hutton's second Hudson River film, *Time and Tide*, made four years after *Study of a River*, was the first of his films to include color imagery, and his first to incorporate imagery from another film. The decision to use color imagery 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 relevant for

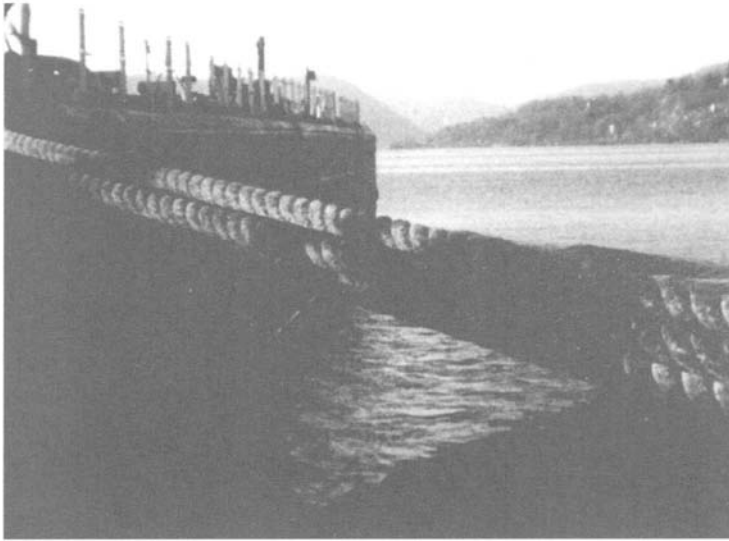
this discussion. In the popular mind color imagery is seen as, almost by definition, more beautiful than black-and-white imagery. Hutton's longtime resistance to color and his general commitment to black and white, reflects a filmmaker's defiance of easy pleasure—as well as his recognition of the immense subtlety and evocativeness of black and white. His decision to make *Time and Tide* in color had more to do with a desire to demystify the Hudson than with the idea of making the river more beautiful.

Hutton's decision to include *Down the River*, a 2-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. After we've seen *Down the River*, which reveals its age not only in its overt subject matter, but in the damage time has done to the paper print from which the 16mm print Hutton used was struck (for years, prints of all films produced by American filmmakers were sent to the Library of Congress, where they were archived on a paper base [paper was safer than the immensely flammable nitrate stock of that era]; those interested in early film can still buy 16mm prints from this paper print collection), the Hutton imagery that follows seems much more modern. As a result, while *Study of a River* feels relatively timeless, as if it could have been made fifty years ago as well as in 1996-1997, *Time and Tide* feels much more of our moment, even when particular shots might also evoke an earlier time.

Down the River creates a context for *Time and Tide* that surprises our usual expectations. Ironically, *Down the River* (which in fact records a voyage up the Hudson from Haverstraw to Newberg) can seem, at first, more of our era than the Hutton imagery that follows. Since *Down the River* is 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 seem 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 (these durations of darkness vary from two to four seconds) 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 serious-

ness, 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 twelve times longer than we look at any single image in a conventional film (some have estimated that the average length of



Barge on the Hudson, in Peter Hutton's Time and Tide (2000).

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 (and, as I'll discuss later, James Benning's) extended gaze, at the Hudson in particular, 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, and to Thoreau's study of Walden Pond, and 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. The assumption seems to be that our recognition of these places and spaces in this way will not only interest and teach us, but will model a reorientation of our priorities that will, at least in the long run, have on-going political implications.

Like *Study of a River*, *Time and Tide* reveals both Hutton's concern for the river *and* his fascination with industry, especially as embodied by the vessels on which he travels up and down the Hudson, and by

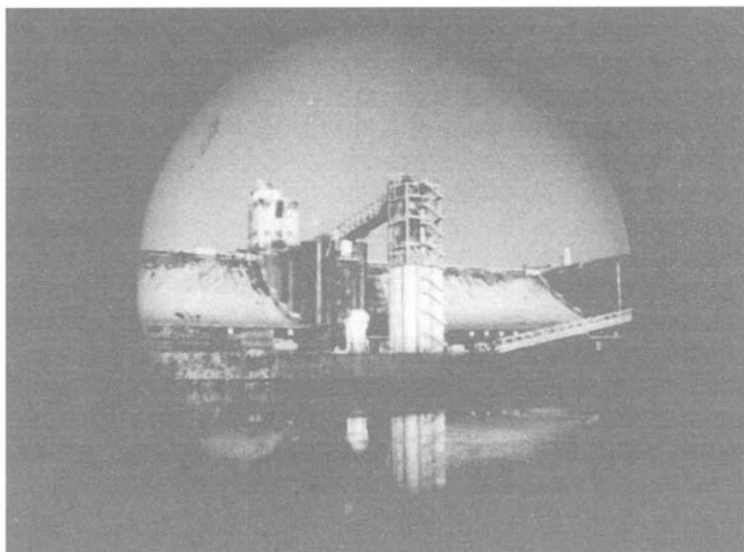
the many industrial structures that measure his trip down the river into New York harbor, then up the river as far as the Albany area, then back down through the Hudson highlands, not far from where the film begins. The movement of the various vessels on which Hutton rides the river is generally as serene as Hutton's pacing, and it allows for frequently impressive views of the landscape that slide by (only two images in *Time and Tide* are clearly filmed from land). Even more fully than in *Study of a River*, the many factories, power plants, and bridges Hutton passes are impressive and sometimes spectacular, as are some of the ships that pass. 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 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, usually from a large commercial vessel), 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-on-going debate between the E.P.A. and General Electric about the proposed clean-up of a layer of PCBs in the river bed of the upper Hudson has been on the minds of many who live near the river, including Hutton. GE has contended that the river is fine as it is and that to dredge the Hudson to remove the buried PCBs will re-contaminate the river; those who support the clean-up 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, that in the long run the river can only return to full health once the PCBs are gone. Hutton's inclusion of a fifty-five-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 forty-six shots *not* filmed along the Hudson (the Schenectady GE plant is several miles to the west of the Hudson, on the Mohawk River), and one of the two not filmed from a vessel, suggests the importance of the GE reference for Hutton.

A second controversy, this one focusing on plans for an immense new cement plant, has also been much in the news in the upper Hud-

son area; indeed, as one drives to Bard College along the river, signs of "Support the plant" and "No to the plant" are ubiquitous. The countryside along the Hudson has long been a producer of cement. *Time and Tide* includes several images of cement facilities along the river. The plan for the proposed new facility includes a smokestack so tall that it may interrupt views from Olana, Frederic Church's home above the river across from Catskill, New York, a state historical site;



Factory through porthole in Peter Hutton's Time and Tide (2000).

and some locals 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, only viewers from the Hudson Valley would be likely to get these references; but in the annals of American avant-garde cinema, particular films have often, even usually, been presented with the film-makers present, and when Hutton is present 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. In fact, the first of these flare-out shots is the shortest shot in *Time and Tide* (3 seconds), and the second, the third shortest (12 seconds). The inclusion of end-of-roll flares is not unusual in American avant-garde film; during the Sixties and early Seventies 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 (ten shots in the film were made through portholes), one of a large vessel powering along the river; and a final, darker shot in which a factory with a smokestack slides past the porthole, smoke spewing from the smokestack. These images conclude *Time and Tide* with reminders of the on-going exploitation of the river—exploitation that continues to threaten the river's 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 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. *Time and Tide*, like most of Hutton's work functions as a kind of Trojan Horse. Hutton uses the chemical process of cinema—carefully and with restraint: he wastes little, compared to industrial filmmaking; and he makes relatively brief films (at 35 minutes, *Time and Tide* is by far Hutton's longest film to date)—as a means of slowing consumption and providing a model of a mindset that might take better care of the world outside the screening room. He is, at worst—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 grain of commercial film and commercial life in general.

IV. *Sogobi*

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....

—Faulkner, from paragraph 3 of *The Bear*

Few American filmmakers have spent more time exploring the 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 early films remain distinctive in their combination of photographic realism (sometimes evocative of Thirties photography) and subtly surreal uses of composition and sound (reminiscent sometimes of the Italian painter DeChirico, and of Edward Hopper). 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 sixty one-minute shots, each taken from a camera mounted on a tripod, reflected Benning's commitment to "structural film." P. Adams Sitney coined the term "structural film" to refer to films in which "the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which is the primal impression of the film" (see *Visionary Film* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1974], 407). *11 x 14*, in which a set of narrative threads interconnect at the beginning of the film and then disperse, never to intersect again, reflected Benning's commitment to a new form of narrative film in which sound is crucial but used unconventionally (what we do hear characters say is not useful for making sense of the narrative; and in many instance images are accompanied by "fictional" sound—sound that feels as if it was shot in synch, but was not, and sounds off-screen, the sources of which we never see ...). Many of the landmark experimental films of the Sixties had been silent, or at most, had used music; in fact, many independent filmmakers had rebelled against the considerable expense of making sound films, and had come to see the absence of dialogue as a commitment to film independence). Benning's *11 x 14* and *Grand Opera* (1978) were instances of what was termed, in a widely circulated issue of the journal, *October* (No. 17 [Summer 1981]), "The New Talkies."

In all three films Benning foregrounded geographic aspects of the American scene not usually included in alternative cinema of the time, which was focused on New York and San Francisco. He used midwestern scenes, as Hollywood sometimes did (Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, for example), as *background* for a variety of inventive, often wryly amusing games with visual and auditory space and time. In retrospect, Benning's chronicling of the decaying industrial district of Milwaukee (in *One Way Boogie Woogie*), of the roadsides between Chicago and Mount Rushmore (in *11 x 14*), and of Oklahoma landscapes (in *Grand Opera*) seems at least as notable as the fact that the films exemplify two trends of that moment.

During the 1980s Benning's interest in landscape/cityscape became somewhat more direct, especially in *Landscape Suicide* (1986), which uses a mirror-like structure in order to compare/contrast two murders: Ed Gein's murder of Bernice Worden in rural Wisconsin in 1957, and Bernadette Protti's murder of Kristen Costas in Marin County in 1984. Both were high profile murders. Gein became the prototype for Norman Bates, the small-town killer in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and, to a degree, for the "artist"-murderers in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974, directed by Tobe Hooper). Protti, a teenager who killed a school classmate, became known as the "cheerleader murderer." Benning's interest in holding these murders next to one another (each section of his depiction of one murder echoes a comparable section in his depiction of the other), as his title suggests, has to do with his interest in how the landscape in which a violent crime takes place—both the natural and social landscape—relates to the crime itself. Benning draws no conclusions, but *Landscape Suicide* provides an engaging rumination on this issue.

It was not until Benning moved from New York (where he had moved from Chicago in 1980) to California in 1987 to take a job at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, just north of Los Angeles, that his interest in landscape/cityscape, and especially landscape, came



Desert in southern Utah, in James Benning's Desert (1995).

to the foreground. Indeed, the series of features (Benning's recent films are all eighty to ninety minutes long) that began with *North on Evers* (1991) and continued with *Deseret* (1995), *Four Corners* (1997), *Utopia* (1998), and the recent California Trilogy—*El Valley Centro* (2000), *Los* (2001), and *Sogobi* (2002)—represent, so far as I know, 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 the American cinema I'm aware of. 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 the 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 we hear a narrator read a series of *New York Times* stories about Utah, beginning in 1852 and ending in 1992; and we see imagery of a wide variety of Utah locations, edited so that each image 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. 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 half-way 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. Especially after we learn that an above ground nerve-gas test conducted at Dugway Proving Grounds, ninety miles west of Salt Lake City, killed 6,400 sheep and that this dangerous agent can be "isolated in snow [Benning presents a lovely snowscape just at the moment when the narrator says, "snow"], water, sheep blood, sheep liver tissue, and in the grass taken from sheep's stomachs" (in a *Times* story from March 24, 1968), our perception of subsequent snowscapes is colored by this information. In fact, by the conclusion of *Deseret* the *Times* stories of environmental damage in Utah 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.

While Benning has been at his best in his films about the West—*North on Evers*, *Deseret*, and *Four Corners* number among his most accomplished films—the California Trilogy is his most impressive achievement. 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; *Sogobi*, on what remains of wilderness California—but uses precisely the same structure: thirty-five 2 1/2-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, and with synch sound (these are Benning's first entirely synch-sound films).

Each individual film can stand on its own, but Benning is committed to showing the entire trilogy as a single, extended film event. 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;



Sequoias in Crescent Meadow in Sequoia National Forest, California, in James Benning's Sogobi (2001).

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 2 of *Los*, and shot 13 of *Sogobi*; and ocean-going ships are the subject of shots 27, 6, 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, in a very wide variety of forms, is ubiquitous. *El Valley Centro* begins with a 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 *Sogobi*, Benning's focus on wilderness feels nearly devoid of interruption. In shot 7, 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 on-going diversion of water into Los Angeles. In shot 8, of a lovely section of hillside in the Tejon Pass, what we first hear as wind is gradually recognizable as distant off-screen traffic; and in shot 10, 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 Ansel Adams's famous photograph)—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 most 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 decision to use only 2 1/2-minute shots throughout the Trilogy creates a meditative pace. The choice of 2 1/2-minutes in particular was a function of Benning's decision to use one-hundred-foot rolls of film. A standard length for 16mm film, a hundred feet of film lasts about two minutes and fifty seconds: the 2 1/2-minute duration gave Benning just a bit of leeway in editing the shots. Because of the lack of human or technological movement during the early shots of *Sogobi*, this meditative dimension of the experience is all the more obvious. It also adds a powerful dimension to 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 sound of the pounding waves in shot 1, for example, is followed by the sudden, comparative silence of the shot of the live oaks. While the surf sound of shot 1 is consistent throughout the shot, the 2 1/2-minute duration of shot 2 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 3, 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 his auditory imagery.

The middle third of *Sogobi* reveals somewhat more, and more obvious, engagement with the large-scale exploitation of what remains of California 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 the immensity of the vessel and its cargo suggests what David E. Nye has called the "technological sublime" (Nye's *American Technological Sublime* [Boston: MIT Press, 1996] begins, "If any man-made object can be called sublime, surely the Golden Gate Bridge can"), 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 into and out of California 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 and its impact on wilderness California.

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 Tehachapi 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 problem, one that shares with Hutton's river films a sense of complicity: in this case, complicity embedded in our experience of *Sogobi*. 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 (Hollis Frampton, one of Benning's filmic gurus, argued that cinema was "the last machine" [in *Circles of Confusion* (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1983), 113]), and second, that despite cinema's 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” [312]). The subtle motion of Benning’s imagery is caused by the friction that, slowly but surely, must ultimately destroy his cameras and the 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, 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; if a venue cannot show all three films, Benning won’t show any part of the Trilogy. 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 one hundred and five shots that together are his reading of the Golden State. To show only a single part of the Trilogy, even if that film might hold up as a meditation on one major aspect of California’s geography and history, would be to provide an incomplete reading of the 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 fifteen-minute break, then by *Los*, which is followed by another break, then by *Sogobi*—has to do with Benning’s 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 9 1/2-hour Holocaust epic, *Shoah* (1985) is one; Peter Watkins’ *The Journey* (1987), a 14 1/2-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. Benning’s 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 most influential?—state and the environmental challenges it poses, 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 film is, in a small way, training.

Sources for the films: *Wot the Ancient Sod*, Peter Hutton's films, and James Benning's films are available from Canyon Cinema, 149 Ninth Street, Suite 260, San Francisco, CA 94103; 415-626-2255; films@canyoncinema.com; www.canyoncinema.com. VHS tapes of *Riverglass* are available for sale from Canyon, and in rental formats suitable for projection, from Andrej Zdravic, andrej.zdravic@guest.arnes.si.