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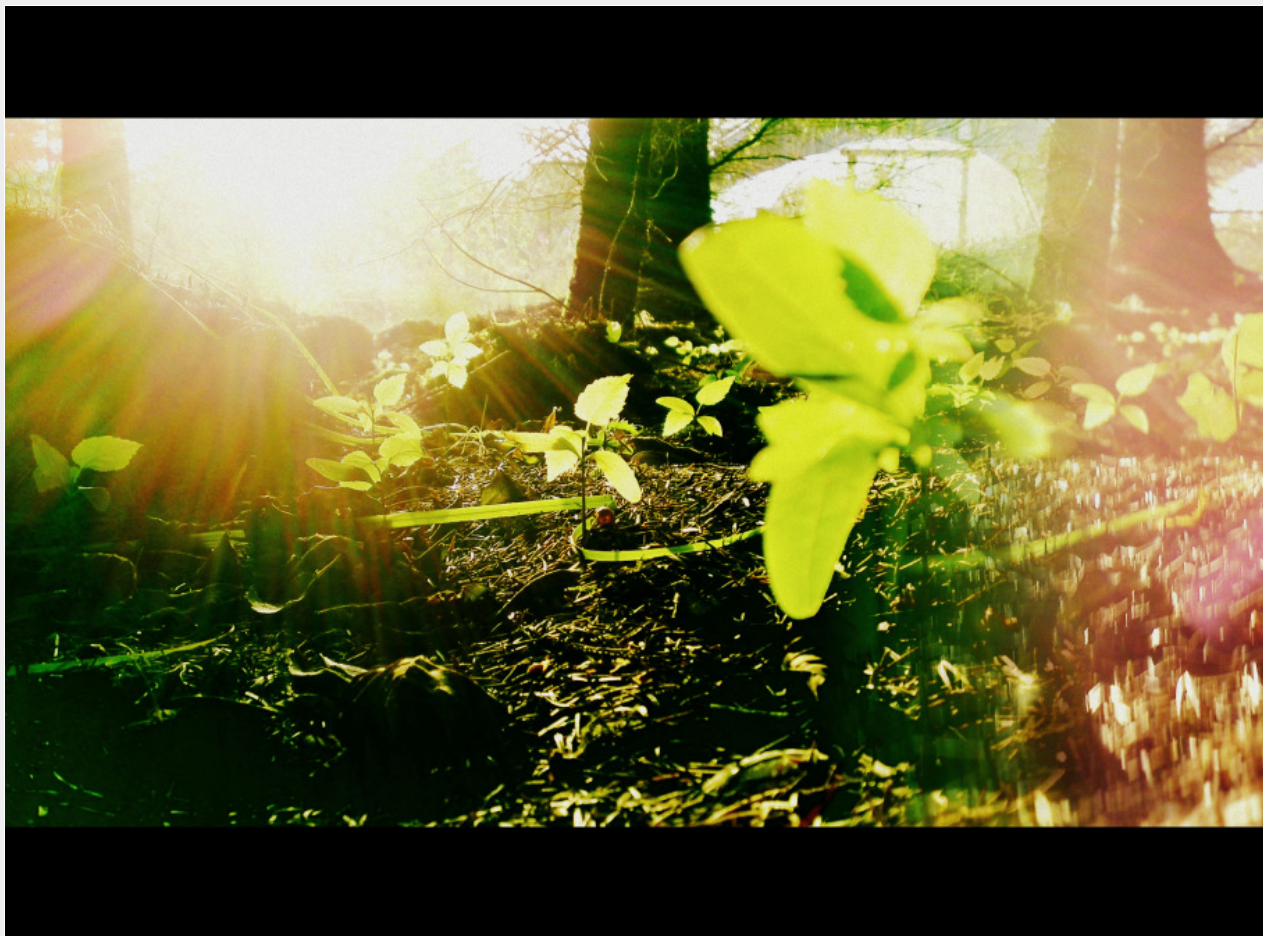
THE CULTURE OF NATURE

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The Dilemma of Filming Beauty: a guest post by Cathy Fitzgerald

September 2, 2013 by [Cat](#) [3 Comments](#)

Cathy Fitzgerald is a practice-thesis PhD candidate in Visual Culture at the National College of Art & Design, Dublin, Ireland. Her current transdisciplinary eco art inquiry* is focused around her involvement with transforming Hollywood, the small forest where she lives in South-East Ireland, from clear-fell conifer plantation to mixed continuous cover forest. In this post she talks about the film-making element of her creative practice. For more about Cathy's work, see www.ecoartfilm.com



The new 'neighbours' – tiny Ash trees amongst the conifers in Hollywood

(still from *The Hollywood Diaries 2008-12* experimental film by Cathy Fitzgerald)

'As I see it, the fundamental job of an ecocinema is not to produce pro-environmental narratives shot in a conventional Hollywood manner (that is, in a manner that implicitly promotes consumption) or even in a conventional documentary manner (although, of course, documentaries can alert us to environmental issues). The job of ecocinema is to provide *new kinds of film experience* that demonstrate an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship and help to nurture a more environmentally progressive mindset.'

Scott MacDonald 'The ecocinema experience' in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (2012)

The tiny two and a half acre forest in which I live in South-East Ireland is beautiful. It's a forest undergoing change; it is being transformed from

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monoculture conifer plantation to a permanent mixed species, mixed age forest using "Close-to-Nature" continuous cover forestry methods that are new to Ireland and Great Britain. This entails the forest being selectively thinned by professional foresters every three years to allow native trees to regenerate in the shelter of the 30 year old conifers. Over time the forest (we've named it 'Hollywood') will become increasingly beautiful and resilient; it will be increasingly biodiverse and any timbers taken from it will be increasingly valuable over the long term.

I often think of Hollywood as 'the little wood that could', as this small forest is providing valuable knowledge in several areas. Hollywood, along with approximately 300 other forests in Ireland that are being managed by these new forestry methods (others are larger commercial or private forests) is contributing long-term information to a new Irish Forest Council research project and database on non-clearfell forestry (the COFORD LISS project). My work with transforming Hollywood and my involvement with a leading "Close-to-Nature" continuous cover forest organisation (prosilvireland.org) has also given me the impetus to successfully present this type of non clearfell forestry management as the key point of the new Irish Green Party Forest policy (2012). And this small forest offers something else too, an important place to contemplate how we perceive and hence relate to the non-human world. I explore this through my interest in experimental film-making.

Primarily I'm a visual artist-experimental filmmaker with a former background in biological research. Somehow, since I came to Ireland 19 years ago, I've always been involved with sustainable forest organisations, and forests have often been the focus of my film experiments and creative work. I think it has something to do with missing the magnificent forests in New Zealand which I knew as a child. While a little unusual, I combine different strands in my artistic practice alongside my film-making: ecology, sustainable forest practices, environmental philosophy, Green politics, and informal writing through my blog, as I have long been interested in the potential of transdisciplinary eco art practices to envision social change toward our environments.

Five years ago I began, with the help of professional foresters, to transform Hollywood; through film-making and writing (mainly blogging on my website) I have reflected, documented and shared happenings at Hollywood with online audiences. My short films, however, are not environmental essays on sustainable forestry, rather they are audiovisual poetic explorations that question how we 'see' a forest. For me there is a dilemma in how we perceive and represent the non-human world, a cultural crisis that affects our understanding of the web of ecological communities that we are part of. Perceptions, I believe, are at the centre of how we interact, for better or worse, with the non-human world.

For me, film-making allows me to slow down, to really see and hear the forest and appreciate its overwhelming diversity and sensitive cycles of life, growth and change. Often the act of filming, audio recording, even the editing, are more important to me than the finished film works. In my early working life in biological research I used to look down microscopes and wonder at the beauty, the universes of complexity. It is the same now, except the camera lens shows different perspectives and sounds.

However, filming the beauty of nature has long troubled me. As industrial culture's population and consumption have exponentially grown over the last century, the accumulating destruction and degradation of earth's living systems has likewise grown, even though we have produced more visual culture of the natural world than in any other age. So when I returned to art college in 2010 with my art-film-writing-forestry project, one of my central questions was to find out whether our visual culture works of nature have somehow 'blinded' us to the extent of the damage we are causing to the earth; to the more-than-human world and to non-industrial communities. I turned first to film criticism to see what others had thought. Surprisingly I found hardly any in-depth reference in film analysis to ecological concerns – somehow nature in films has been long relegated merely as a 'backdrop' to humanity's activities. Missing too was any significant analysis of nature documentaries – only a couple of books on the topic since 2000! Surely others have thought that industrial society's visual culture, and particularly our most popular visual form, film, is somehow connected to and perhaps complicit with our ecological destruction, the ecocide that threads through our everyday lives?

I was looking in the wrong place. I discovered that academic analysis of the ecological aspects of cultural works has been taking place, chiefly in a new field in Literary Theory (which follows lines of inquiry that have developed since the Romantic period). Over the last 20 years, particularly in the US but now across the world, researchers in 'ecocriticism' are turning their attention to the written word and in very recent years to film and media culture (see www.ecomediastudies.org). It is still a small area of inquiry but it is growing. Ecocriticism has been defined by leading literary ecocritic Cheryll Glotfelty as

'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment... Ecocritics encourage others to think seriously about the relationship of humans to nature, about the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis, and about how language and literature (and also other cultural media) transmit values with profound ecological implications' (Glotfelty, 2013)

Reading about ecocriticism, along with ecofeminism and environmental philosophy theories, has made me reflect on my own film-making practices. Just before I returned to art college I was very fortunate to meet a leading exponent of experimental nature-related cinema, [Andrej Zdravič](#). In my view, Zdravič's film works and multi-screen film installations created over the last 40 years presciently embody an informed ecocritical perspective. Through his '*sound-vision*' works he has explored the potential of film to convey above all an *experience* of the energies of nature, one that excludes human commentary whilst further developing his own language and form of cinema. The conventions of most commercial nature film-making implicitly convey to us our species' superiority, and celebrate our 'advanced' scientific understanding of the non-human world. Human (often celebrity) voices dominate, explaining and categorising nature. In contrast, the importance of some experimental nature-related film-making, such as much of Zdravič's work, lies in bringing sharply into focus the limitations of most mainstream nature documentaries, which in turn reveal the narrow human-centred perspective of much of our film culture. The majority of popular nature documentaries are large commercial enterprises, designed to engage mass audiences and generate profits over presenting the eco-socio-political realities of earth's fast degrading biosphere. Although technically brilliant and aesthetically alluring, the HD-3D framing of most mainstream nature cinema masks the ecocide perpetuated by our industrial growth society. This is what I call the 'anthropocentric gaze', and it reveals much about our limited ecological understanding in general.

In his film works of natural phenomena, by contrast, Zdravič's sensitive camera work catches moments from nature that we habitually take for granted and can make us 'see' anew. His unadorned visual editing style (no editing filters, transitions or visual overlays) are worked in energetic compositions together with collected ambient and sympathetically designed aural rhythms and sounds. With a distinctive clarity of audio-vision, Zdravič's cinematic work

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deep studies of place and foreground nature as an endless and ever-moving movement of energy, rather than as separate and distinct forms. Conceptually these concerns are similar to ideas developed by anthropologist Tim Ingold in his book *Perception of the Environment*, that nature and human beings are more 'verb' than subject, and should be perceived as such. For an upcoming lecture, Ingold has written of how humanity's perception of itself as a separate individual species is a self-limiting impasse in how humanity relates to the world. To overcome this he argues that

'the first step ... is to think of humans, and indeed of creatures of all kinds, not as discrete and pre-formed entities but as trajectories of movement and growth – that is, not as beings but as becomings' (Ingold, 2013).

Zdravič's experimental nature cinema stands in an area of film-making that has been little explored by filmmakers in general and reveals that cinematic forms may have much potential and value in exploring how we represent and relate to the natural world.

In my own way I've been trying to explore a few of these ideas in my film work. *The Hollywood Diaries 2008-12* is a collection of short films that loosely reflect on my forest transformation project over the last five years. In my earlier short films in this work, you'll hear my voice, as in the short film *'burning bright'*. However, even before returning to art college I noticed the most interesting moments in this film were when I stopped talking – if you listen closely you'll hear a cuckoo that I could have so easily talked over. In later films I stepped back further. While it is not possible to create a truly ecocentric (ecologically centred) film, as I'll always be in charge of creating the work, I try to attend carefully to the forest 'neighbours' I live with, and to share this sensitive attention with my followers. It is work that will contribute only in a small way towards changing the world but, I hope, will provide a space for experiencing and reflecting on how we might re-view our perceptions of forest communities (and other non-human communities besides).

With regard to creating space for reflecting on nature, it is interesting that writer and Professor of Literature Jonathan Bate, in his book *The Song of the Earth* (2001) writes of ecopoetry being important, as at times it creates a space that is 'pre-political' and 'peculiar because it is experiential, not descriptive' (p.266). I identified strongly when Bate wrote of Ted Hughes' nature poetry that it 'heightens the notion that harmonious dwelling with the earth is a matter of *staying put* and *listening in*, whereas the rapacious drive of 'progress' is towards *travelling out* and *making claims* – the claims of knowledge, of conquest and possession' (p. 29). Much mainstream documentary work focuses on the exotic and far away, meaning we perceive less our relations to own environments (a similar problem occurs at times with artists striving for overseas short-term residencies rather than attending deeply to their own environments). While Bate writes deeply about ecopoetics, and when I found few books to think about nature film-making, I wondered if poetic forms of cinema could also achieve this. I wondered for instance when Bate wrote

'that ecopoetry does not exist for the benefit of cabinetmakers and agricultural labourers; it exists, at the expense of wood, for those of us who do not know wood',

whether a poetic 'ecocinema' of a forest might be important for those who do not know a forest? Coincidentally, Andrej Zdravič has created a new permanent film installation for the Triglav National Park Information Centre (Slovenia), *The Forest-Time Triptych* (2011), based on filming in high mountain forests of Slovenia (a country that has prohibited clear-felling of its forests since 1947).

Filming the natural world can be unsettling too; one is often humbled and confounded when encountering the beauty, the overwhelming complexity of any environment. The act of looking deeply and thinking ecologically can trouble knowledge of our own species, challenge long held perceptions of the world and our actions toward it. Co-founder of *PLaCE* England, educator, writer and artist Iain Biggs, argues that we examine raw beauty. He writes of a need for:

'personally attending to a raw beauty that invites *constructive uncertainty* – combining pleasurable surprise with an uncanny disrupting or destabilising of received presuppositions and values. This allows me to see the world as if for the first time – or rather, to see it other than as it is currently categorized on the basis of a privileged disciplinarity based on the old adage: "divide and rule"'.

Biggs argues further for a 'politics of contingency' that 'is refreshed by attending to raw beauty'; this he presents is 'the ethical, aesthetic and political position of empathetic imagination – the imagination that is the indispensable basis of any political praxis that listens to and acts hospitably towards others' (Biggs, 2010). Understanding film and other cultural works that go beyond the conventions and assumptions of our 'anthropocentric gaze' will be important if we are to embrace ecological understandings: the necessary empathy and ethics that we need to develop toward the non-human world that we are part of and depend upon. This renewed attention to beauty among contemporary eco art practices stands in contrast to the anti-aesthetic stance of many 20th century modern art movements, from cubism, futurism and Dada through to pop, minimalism, conceptual art, arte povera, happenings and land art, which tended to reflect the values of industrialism and machine culture against the natural world.

Film-making comes and goes in my creative work, especially now as I'm furthering a transdisciplinary practice-thesis PhD inquiry. I will continue to be interested in ecocriticism, to examine cultural works to understand how and why they negate the truth of our ecological realities and why they fail to represent a more ecological worldview. Also, while theories and new sustainable forest practices and policies are important, if all species, including our own, are to survive and thrive, there is also a crucial need to create spaces set apart from the rational worlds of science and academia. Spaces for people increasingly living in urban areas *to 'experience' a forest*. As Bate concludes, 'works of art can themselves be imaginary states of nature, imaginary ideal ecosystems, and by reading (or looking) at them, by inhabiting them, we can start to imagine what it might be like to live differently upon the earth (Bate, p.250).

* Transdisciplinary 'eco art' practices have been developing on the margins of contemporary art practice since the 1960s. Today such practices are proliferating. A comprehensive overview of the diversity of such practices, exemplary artists projects and the further potential of this area, can be found in a new book *'To Life!: Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet'* (2012) by Linda Weintraub, California University Press.

Works cited

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Comments

Cathy Fitzgerald says:

September 3, 2013 at 9:35 am

Reblogged this on [beyond ecocide toward deep sustainability: stories from a small Irish forest](#) and commented:

I've been so very fortunate that my eco art 'Hollywood' forest project is online – former film lecturer, Dr. Cat Lupton of the UK based Earthlines review, saw my project from afar and has since commissioned me to write an article on the film element of my eco art practice (see below). Cat too has found the film world difficult to engage in, in regards to ecological concerns (it is the reason she had to leave it) so I feel very honoured that she picked my work to share with others. The Earthlines Review is part of the relatively new Earthlines magazine <http://www.earthlines.org.uk/> and online networks (also on facebook/twitter), filled with fantastic writings and views on how we are relating to the Earth.

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Debra says:

October 17, 2013 at 12:59 pm

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complex phenomena.

Yesterday I spent an hour discussing with a friend whose academic background in classical Greece is way beyond me. She reminded me of things I learned in school that I promptly put into a suitcase and stored away, rather than putting them to use to understand my world. (But maybe that is what school is for ??)

In the 16th century, Ronsard and Du Bellay put together a Defense and Illustration of the French language whose goal was to weaken Latin as the language of the clerics, and the intellectuals, and to strengthen vernacular French in order to be able to theorize, and to create abstract concepts. We are still resorting to the Renaissance strategy of going back to Greek and Latin etymons to create new SCIENTIFIC words.

But... just how.. new are they ? Are they truly separate from the cultures/civilizations that produced what we now call DEAD languages ?

What about the word “ecocide” ? Is it.. an English word ?

What kind of word is it ? What language is it ?

True... since most educated people who know Greek and Latin etymons can analyze the word by separating it into two distinct parts, they can immediately guess what it means.

But... what about the “dead” civilizations behind those words ?

Since I am passionately interested in words, and language, I believe that our classical civilizations are still present in our “new” words, which are not new at all. Unfortunately, we know very little about our classical roots right now. Most of us. And we are not particularly curious about them either...

So.. I would like to get back to where vernacular French was before we imported the Latin and Greek to “improve” it.

If we have new stories to tell, I believe we need to go back to other sources than our Greek and Latin heritage. If this is possible, that is.

Because our ancestors’ culture was probably much more oral than ours is.

And going back to another heritage means not just telling the stories of our ancestors as “content” or “meaning”, but resurrecting their words, too.

On truly creating something that would be totally new ? I was trained as a psychoanalyst. I don’t believe that it is possible. Maybe it is better to be able to gracefully acknowledge that repetition of human experience is the name of the game ?

Reply



Cathy Fitzgerald says:
August 15, 2014 at 1:54 pm

Thanks Debra for your very useful comments.

In regards to the word ‘ecocide’ – it is a relatively new word. It was ‘created’ during the Vietnam war. I write about this word in an article ‘Eradicating Ecocide in Ireland to make sustainability legal’ that discusses its military, political past and how its now being used to highlight crimes in non-War times against ecosystems here <http://issuu.com/cathyart/docs/endecocide>

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