

John Woodman's early landscape films

Reviewed by Jeffrey Langille

DVD: *Landscape Films 1977–1982* by John Woodman (2012) London: LUX.¹ Booklet Text: John Woodman/Malcolm Le Grice, Price: £20.00

We have no interest in listening to the uninterrupted humming of life's depths. And yet, that is where real duration is. (Henri Bergson)²

Landscape as a genre was inherited by film-makers from painting, and it is painting's invitation to unhurried contemplation that can be found in John Woodman's work. In this collection of nine of his early films, Woodman uses the genre's traditional elements such as weather conditions, seasonal change and an attention to the quality of light to pose questions about perception. Like many of his contemporaries, he has medium-specific interests in film's capacity to foreground the passage of time, to offer a viewer the opportunity to experience attention to both subtle changes in landscape and to their own experiences of time unfolding while watching a film. Works such as Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971) and Chris Welsby's *Seven Days* (1974) explored time as a subject intrinsic to landscape, and time as articulated by rigorously controlled camera movements. Woodman addresses the illusionistic capacity of film through

similar means, yet more subtly – through a static camera, extended shots, and silence.³

Landscape film-makers in the 1970s most often placed material concerns front and centre, including that of the apparatus and post-production mediations. Chris Welsby's interventions into landscape involved direct and innovative manipulations of the camera, as in *Stream Line* (1976), where the camera tracks a stream bed while suspended from overhead cables, or *Wind Vane* (1972), where two cameras are directed by the force of the wind acting on small sails attached to the devices. Also in 1972, Welsby and William Raban completed *River Yôr*, a two-screen installation that involved labour-intensive manipulations of time: single-frame shooting for extended periods on the Isle of Wight, on two separate occasions. In *Whitchurch Down (Duration)* (1972), Malcolm Le Grice employed intense non-naturalistic colour filters and a looping structure to create a highly reflexive structural film. The three indistinct landscape images he used included a broad open field dotted with shrubs and two human figures that are visible but not prominent. Pictorial elements were given equal prominence to the abstraction of colour and the dynamics of the repeating loops.

Woodman's reflexive strategy is mobilized softly and gradually in contrast to

1. Clips of recent film and video work can be seen at <http://www.johnwoodman.net>. Accessed 10 April 2015.

2. Quoted in Schwaner (2005: 18).

3. In the context of Woodman's work in the 1970s, it is interesting to note the relatively recent trend of 'slow' or contemplative cinema by film-makers such as Tsai Ming-liang and James Benning.



John Woodman, *Bridge* (1980), film, 14 min. Courtesy of the artist.

much of the landscape work of the same period. In this DVD survey, *Landscape Films 1977-1982*, the camera is quietly present, and its structuring functions leave a light footprint. Woodman's camera establishes a theatre for light to gradually transform landscapes and surfaces, and he uses the long take to show that change will happen if we are willing to wait for it. Light will transform surfaces and this process cannot be hurried. Duration in Woodman's films nudges viewers out of the habitual time of daily distractions, into the slower time of earthly processes: clouds passing over the sun, seasonal change, streams flowing to the sea. The films are 'contemplative' in the sense that they are concerned with moment-to-moment attention, where the extraneous drops away.

The viewer's attention is drawn to the ways in which the films articulate time and how their subtle reflexivity is based on two tendencies: a particular and consistent deployment of duration, and an attention to surfaces: water, sand and pebbles, foliage, all-over frame-filling expanses. How then does duration function in Woodman's films, and to what end? And what is the role of silence in all nine films?

Observational Series (1977) was shot on Super-8, and consists of a series of six static-camera shots separated by black leader; it includes ambient images of the sky, flowing water, and grasses in the wind. At the time of viewing, I wrote a close description of the work in order to examine its affective dimensions, and because it seemed to be a key film in terms of how it engaged a viewer's attention partly through extended duration.

Close-up. The surface of a black stream swirls in eddies with the momentum of spring-flow and reflections of the sun in sparkling patterns. The image is essentially flat, yet conveys a sense that the water is deep and cold. I become aware of the incessant progress of the filmstrip: the stream moves in the same direction as the film in the projector's gate.

Soft clouds traverse a blue sky, but I find myself believing that it is in this shot only that the camera itself moves slowly and steadily across the sky.

The movement of a stream disturbs the reflection of a tree branch. There is empty white sky behind the branch, deep water below its reflection. Orange leaves pass just under the surface of the water. It is autumn. I feel the cold. Sometimes the film shifts the colour of the water to a pale greenish hue.

The frame is filled by the green blur of tall grasses in motion, right-leaning in a gusty wind. The all-over blur resists attempts to see into its depth. I don't hear the wind but I hear the seed-rattle of the grass.

Again, the camera looks down at a rippled surface of water, a surface that offers glimpses of riverbed and the warm tones of stones, glimpses of wind-blown trees high above. Competing surfaces at the mercy of the wind. Grey sky becomes grey skin of the stream.

A water surface is activated by raindrops. Concentric ripples obliterate what this mirror struggles to offer: a view upwards to sky and a pattern of foliage. Rings of water transform reflection into perpetual motion. Dirt speckles the surface of the film. The film runs out.

Each of Woodman's observations in this film is of an on-going natural process, one that continues after the camera has moved on, after the viewer's attention has moved to the next shot. The rain shower will cease, but the water cycle in evidence here will continue. Clouds will form, leaves will fall, and grass will die. Woodman invites the viewer to attend

to the
extensi
larger

Das
linked
ophy c
that is
someth
a prop
ing wt
of Zen
tion ce
a succ
success
what it
tively s
progre
is dura
from th
Durati
of char
but ratl
within
man's
six m
concom
the use
functio
of dura
for the
that en
film, in
totality
speaks
the illu
sound
the im

Sho
twin-st
time at
edge o
11-min
left scr
adjacca
footage
provid
camers
is again
first im
describ
liquid l
the pal
screens

blue sky, but
g that it is
the camera
nd steadily

stream dis-
of a tree
pty white
t, deep wa-
n. Orange
r the sur-
autumn. I
es the film
water to a

the green
n motion,
wind. The
tempts to
it hear the
xl-rattle of

s down at
ter, a sur-
s of rivet-
s of stones,
own trees
g surfaces
l. Grey sky
e stream.

ivated by
: ripples
ror strug-
pwards to
age. Rings
ction into
: speckles
The film

ations in this
ural process,
: camera has
er's attention
ot. The rain
eter cycle in
. Clouds will
ress will die.
er to attend

to these portions of duration and, by extension enables the recognition of a larger whole.

Duration in a moving image can be linked to the premise in process philosophy of a creative universe, of a future that is open, where the appearance of something new is possible. Duration is a property of an encompassing, changing whole. In Henri Bergson's solution of Zeno's paradox, he argues that duration cannot be understood in terms of a succession of fixed instants; such a succession substitutes a spatial 'path' for what is a temporal 'journey' and effectively spatializes time - makes it a linear progression of slices. Time, for Bergson, is duration (*durée*), which is inseparable from the movement of a changing whole. Duration cannot be understood in terms of changes in *position* of a moving object, but rather as qualitative, incessant change within an encompassing whole.⁴ Woodman's *Observational Series* presents six moments that participate in this encompassing whole. I would argue that the use of silence in most of the nine films functions to support a Bergsonian sense of duration. Silence is a kind of substrate for the individual portions of duration that emerge with each shot, and with each film, linking them to one another and the totality to which they belong. Silence speaks of wholeness. Silence also reduces the illusion of deep space that naturalistic sound enhances, allowing the flatness of the image to be maintained.

Shot in the same year, *Time Flow* is a twin-screen observation of the passage of time and the movement of water at the edge of the River Stour in Suffolk. An 11-minute continuous take unfolds on the left screen, a single 400-foot roll; on the adjacent screen, slowed and time-lapse footage of the same piece of riverbank provides an alternative to 'real time'. Both cameras are close to the water and the view is again concentrated and minimalist. The first impression of the work can best be described as an inhalation of colour: the liquid blue of sky reflected in water and the pale green of lily pads. Paired, the two screens present a near-continuous image,

although where they meet, the colour discrepancy resulting from the slight differences in light, angle, and film stock becomes apparent. This vertical seam between the images is an interruption, a bisecting line indicating that the receding horizontal plane of the water's surface is in fact illusory. Perhaps this explains the allure of the lily pads at the top of the image with their shiny green flatness insisting on the perspectival depth of the image, and the bits of debris and plant material floating away that echo the dust on the film itself. Woodman is here presenting a subtle interplay of surface and depth, motion and stasis. The slow waving of underwater plants is given equal weight to the reflection of deep sky above, passing clouds and trees. This oscillation between surface and depth is consistent with Woodman's phenomenological approach, his privileging of what is known through the senses rather than what is deduced through reason. This is evident in *Bridge* (1980), where ripples on water gradually obliterate a reflected image, calling into question the solidity of any objects of vision.

Time-lapse is used in *Time Flow* as counterpoint. On the right screen, following an initial roll shot in slow motion, each successive 100-foot shot brings an increase in tempo because fewer frames per second have been exposed. Reflected trees vibrate. Clouds speed by. End-of-roll flares and flash frames punctuate the river's swift current. In the third reel, scratches on the emulsion are another index of a flow of time and the material history of that particular print. The eye lingers on the scratches. Meanwhile, on the left screen, the river maintains a constant speed. Woodman's work constitutes a reminder that the flow of the filmed river is the flow of film frames, and that the viewer's perception of the flow of time - the experience of duration - is somehow more substantial than 'real time'.

The concept of real time is often theorized as the one-to-one correspondence between the duration of a profilmic event and the duration of its screening (Gidal

4. See Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 1* (1985: 19).

1976), and is also used to refer to a live feed in broadcasting, webcasting, or closed-circuit video presentation. The left screen of *Time Flow* could be said to be in real time, where the duration of the event is equivalent to the time required for projection of that event. However, to this must be added the variable temporalities of spectatorship. A viewer's affective responses lead to experiences of time that are richer than that suggested by the term 'real time' (Rassas 2005: 35–36). Peter Gidal identifies 'relativistic time' with 'no absolute value other than that of the interaction of film moment and viewer. This relativistic time may but does not necessarily connect with "real time"' (Gidal 1976). The temporality of viewing time can ebb and flow in a fluid relation to an image's forward progression. Emotional and conceptual responses to an image shape the experience of time's passage while viewing the work. Reverie or conversely a deep engagement with a film can lead to different experiences of time accelerating or decelerating.

It must be noted that a computer screen is inadequate to the task of presenting Woodman's Super-8 and 16mm works. To compensate, the viewer may imagine watching *Time Flow* in a dark theatre on a large screen (with dual projection), being subject to its flicker, rich colour, and its complex engagements with duration. The material differences between film and digital processes are significant (not to mention conversion issues involving digital compression), especially for work that is concerned with time as a material.

In *Bridge* (1980) water again fills the frame, and the camera is immobile throughout the film's fourteen minutes. As in *Time Flow*, the spectator is made aware of surfaces and reflections, however, this time humans and a wooden bridge play prominent roles, while duration takes on a lesser role. The near-vertical black stripes of the reflected bridge's railing form a bold graphic pattern on the blue surface of the water and echo the borders of the frame. They ripple and shimmer like the op art paintings of Bridget Riley. As the wave motion accelerates, seeing

becomes a retinal experience. The undulating patterns generated by the movement of the water's surface present infinite variations, as if generated electronically. Concentric ripples from pebbles dropping into the water add another level of interference. At times the image of the railing becomes so agitated that it dissolves into abstraction, slips away, and the film brings us back to the contemplation of ordinary ripples. Sustained attention leads to recognition of the reciprocal relationship between viewer and object seen, and of the variability of perception.⁵ As in *Time Flow* and *Observational Series*, reflective water surfaces in *Bridge* are also used to both reveal and deny the space in which they are situated. The stripes affirm pictorial flatness (as do parallel vertical scratches on the print), yet the illusory bridge establishes architectonic space. This leads, perhaps, to a confusion of the viewer's body position relative to the bridge. I experienced vertigo as I attempted to orient myself to either the water's surface or the off-screen bridge. The film allows a tentative, provisional embodiment.

The two-dimensional graphic, pushed-to-the-surface quality of *Bridge* exists in tension with the ghostly appearance of pedestrians crossing the bridge. Seen reflected in the water, these apparitions seem drawn from distant memories or some forgotten family photo album. A boy pushes a bicycle with a missing front wheel, parents steer baby buggies, dog walkers hurry by, children peer through the rails. *Bridge* appears as two films, one of sheer optical dazzle, the other, a collection of narrative fragments. The film's dual nature prevents it from clearly articulating meaning only through duration. Its graphic beauty needs to unfold in time, but time itself is not the main concern in *Bridge*.

In Woodman's *Pear Tree* (1977–1981), a modest pear tree in a backyard assumes the bearing of a Tree of Life as it marks the passage of time over several seasons. Bordered by neighbour's fences and a row of apartments behind, the tree takes centre stage. Each shot – a view from a

window
static
four
for
wan
photog
myster
haiku-
a straig
ognizit
At the
wonde
is gone
several
fill the
perhap
to a br
later sl
branch
passed
Son
arguab
(1979)
attemp
the cer
is abse
never
unartic
opmer
(1971),
his ou
centre
the vi
me w
shakin
pseud
investe
larly, I
works
and gr
impat
ance a
result:
the su
in-car
with i
produ
ing. W
interio
a pehl
again
togeth
on a
natura

5. Jonathan Crary's observation about photographer Uta Barth is relevant to Woodman's reflective water images: 'She has learned firsthand how the act of paying attention to any object or area of interest leads not to a fixing or clarifying of what is seen, but to a disturbance of its solidity and legibility' (2002: 350).

window - is framed identically with a static camera and lasts approximately four seconds, giving the film a steady, forward momentum, like a succession of photographic slides. It lacks the peculiar mystery of time-lapse, instead offering a haiku-like simplicity of documentation, a straightforward aesthetic of simply recognizing that this tree exists here, now. At the same time, there are moments of wonder: snow arrives unexpectedly then is gone, wind is dramatic at times, and in several shots, spring blossoms completely fill the frame. Small events are registered perhaps accidentally. Two balloons tied to a branch early in the film appear in later shots, deflated, still attached to the branch, a reminder of a party that has passed like a season.

Some films in the collection are, arguably, less successful. In *Spider* (1979) a hand-held camera persistently attempts to maintain a spider's web in the centre of the frame; the spider itself is absent. *Spider* promises an actor that never appears, but the waiting seems unarticulated, without change or development. It recalls Vito Acconci's *Centers* (1971), where the artist strives to keep his outstretched finger pointed at the centre of a video monitor (and thus at the viewer). Yet where *Centers* keeps me wondering when Acconci - arm shaking - is going to fall during his pseudo-Sisyphean task, it is hard to feel invested in the empty spider web. Similarly, *Reflections on my Shadow* (1980) works out its inner logic with precision and grace, yet I found myself becoming impatient. Woodman filmed the appearance and disappearance of his shadow resulting from cloud movements past the sun, and preceded these events with in-camera fade-ins, and followed them with in-camera fade-outs. The film was produced without post-production editing. Woodman's shadow is seen against interior and exterior surfaces, on walls, a pebbled beach, a muddy road and against foliage. His shadow also appears together with his reflection on water and on a mirror. Woodman's play between natural light effects and camera effects

seemed to me to be a comparison of mild interest. In this instance my experience of waiting felt empty and without direction.

Dawn and Dusk (1977), however, is a beautiful, spare, time lapse work spanning 31 brief days. The film has a haunting simplicity. Each day offers an expanse of sky framed by treetops and linked to the earth by the triangular peak of a roof that juts into the bottom of the frame. Unlike *Pear Tree*, change here is atmospheric, not seasonal. As the title suggests, each day fades in from the black of night; a rapidly changing sky follows, and then fades back to black. This is time as seen by a machine, the temporality of the camera, a non-human accelerated time that reveals the rhythms of nature, the diurnal rhythms we live by but rarely consider. Each of the 31 time-lapse 'days' is a moment in the passage of a month, which itself is cut from the whole, from the deeper current of duration that flows unceasing.

Filmic duration, and other experiences of waiting, can reveal the presence of this grounding duration. In his famous sugared water illustration, Henri Bergson describes the experience of waiting for sugar to dissolve in order to reveal the connection between duration (*durée*) and ongoing change in an open universe. Gilles Deleuze writes of this waiting:

But why does this spiritual duration bear witness, not only for me who waits, but for a whole which changes? According to Bergson the whole is neither given nor giveable [...] if the whole is not giveable, it is because it is the Open, and because its nature is to change constantly, or to give rise to something new, in short, to endure. [...] So that each time we find ourselves confronted with a duration, or in a duration, we may conclude that there exists somewhere a whole which is changing, and which is open somewhere. (1986: 9-10)

The best of Woodman's films confront the viewer with this sense that duration can be a connective tissue. It is not duration for duration's sake, or duration simply to provide quiet time for contemplation. A meaningful experience of duration – of sustained attention to the passage of time – can provide access to awareness that 'there exists somewhere a whole which is changing.' Words are often inadequate to the subtleties of our experiences of time, whereas film can provide these experiences directly. Our experiences of time are sophisticated and subtle, and perhaps layered or multiple. I enter the temporality of a film while maintaining a grounding sense of being situated in time, here, *Pear Tree* offers an incessant temporality of seasonal progression. *Time Flow* and *Observational Series* speak of natural rhythms that endure. *Dawn and Dusk* opens onto mysteries of duration.

I watch these films in my Vancouver apartment late at night on a computer screen. It is quiet. The ever-present traffic outside my window is reduced and faint, strangely similar to the sound of waves. All nine of the films in this collection are without sound, and I recall silent films I have watched in public, and how public screenings are never silent. Silence is only perceptible against a ground of near-silence: a ticking clock, muffled voices from the next room, the soft flow of air through the ducts of a building. I imagine a large bright projection of *Observational Series* in a dark theatre. With each new landscape that appears on the screen, the absence of sound is reaffirmed. The water is silent. The clouds

are silent. Reflected sunlight is silent. Yet silence here is paradoxically active – it becomes a kind of tonal support for the movement of leaves in the river; silence enables duration to flow into and out of the film. Watching these films at 2 a.m. in the quiet of an apartment, the faint indistinct sound of a city at night becomes the silence supporting Woodman's meditations on time.

REFERENCES

- Crary, Jonathan (2012), 'The singularity of the everyday', in Jonathan Crary, Russell Ferguson and Holly Myers, *Unsustainable: The Long Now*. New York: Gregory R. Miller, pp. 347–73.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1986), *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gidal, Peter (1976), *Structural Film Anthology*. London: BFI Publishing, [http://www.lusanline.org.uk/articles/theory_and_definition\(2\).html](http://www.lusanline.org.uk/articles/theory_and_definition(2).html). Accessed 1 March 2015.
- Russo, Elie (2015), *Everyday narratives: Reconsidering filmic temporality and spectatorial affect through the quotidian*, Ph.D. thesis, Sydney: University of New South Wales, http://www.unsw.edu.au/palms_library/fhweb/action/display.do?vid=UNSWORKS8&docId=unsworks_1017. Accessed 24 December 2014.
- Schneier, Harold (2008), *On Writing*. New York: Routledge.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jeffrey Langille is an artist who lives in Vancouver, Canada. He recently completed an MFA at Simon Fraser University.
Contact: 308-1121 Harvard Street, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6E 1R9.
E-mail: jeffreylangille@gmail.com

MOVING IMAGE REVIEW & ART JOURNAL

145-147 Editorial

Articles

- 150-161 *The poetic reactivation of historical time: Eija-Liisa Ahtila's Where is Where?*
MARIA WALSH
- 162-176 *Between canvas and celluloid: Painted films and filmed paintings*
GREGORY ZINMAN
- 178-192 *The automaton is all of us: GIFs, cinemagraphs and the films of Martin Arnold*
DAVID RERING-PORTER
- 194-207 *Threshold faces: The physiognomy of *Convulse**
DAVID FOSTER
- 208-221 *Cinema-in-the-round: Doug Aitken's *SONG I* (2012), the Hirshhorn Museum and the pleasures of cinematic projection*
ANNIE DELLARIA

Features

- 224-235 *James MacKay in conversation with Stuart Comer: Derek Jarman's Super 8 films*
JAMES MACKAY AND STUART COMER
- 236-247 *Roundtable discussion: London Film-makers' Co-op - the second generation*
NINA DANINO, JAMES MACKAY, MICHAEL MAZÈRE, VICKY SMITH AND WILLIAM FOWLER
- 248-257 *Exercise (Dybbou), 2012, John Gerrard in conversation with Paul Bonaventura*
JOHN GERRARD AND PAUL BONAVENTURA
- 258-271 *Ben Rivers in conversation with Stuart Comer*
BEN RIVERS AND STUART COMER

Review Articles

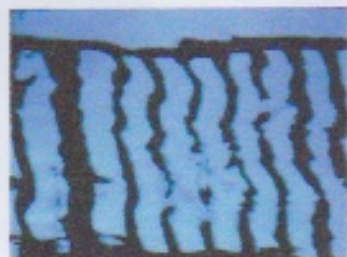
- 274-280 *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-Garde Film, Ara Osterweil (2014)*
JAMES BOADEN
- 282-290 *TV Museum: Contemporary Art and the Age of Television, Marie Connolly (2014)*
CATHERINE ELWES
- 292-299 *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art, Erika Balsani (2013)*
STEVEN JACOBS
- 300-306 *John Woodman's early landscape films*
JEFFREY LANGILLE

Obituary

- 308-314 *David Hall (1937-2014)*
STEVEN BALL AND CATHERINE ELWES
- 317 Index



Eija-Liisa Ahtila, *Where is Where? - Missed on Missed?* (2008), 6-channel protected high definition installation with 9-channel sound. 53:45 min. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Copyright Crystal Eye, 2008.



John Woodman, *Bridge* (1980), 16mm, 14 min. Courtesy of the artist.



Derek Jarman, *Studio Backside*, (1972), colour & b/w Super 8. Courtesy & © LUMA Foundation.



Ben Rivers, *This Is My Land* (2006), 14 min, 16 mm. Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry Gallery.