

John Woodman – Early Landscape Films

In 1976 Deke Dusinbere published an essay in *Afterimage* number six entitled 'St George in the Forest'. Here he tried to marry together the concept of 'structural film' with an English tradition of landscape art. His major focus at the time was on the films of William Raban and Chris Welsby, artists each with their independent interest in landscape and ideas of film structure often using 16mm time-lapse film, but who also collaborated on large scale film projects like 'River Yar'. Sadly Dusinbere was writing just a few months too soon to include his thoughts on the landscape films of John Woodman. However, fortunately for us, Woodman has resurrected his collection of Super8 and 16mm films made between 1977 and 1982. At that time I was most aware of his exceptional serial photography that, in a different way, explored a similar set of issues, concepts or problems. But using this kind of language is misleading. Whilst Woodman was theoretical and analytical about his work during the period, with an interest in Merleau Ponty and Husserl, or more surprisingly for the time, in John Ruskin, stressing theory and concept masks the intuitive sensuality of his approach. Like with Ruskin, the idea of nature was crucial to Woodman, and this was embodied in – symbolised in – the idea of 'landscape' – a romantic residue that allowed an emotional relationship beyond control and structure. Landscape suited Woodman despite the fact, or perhaps because of the fact, that the English landscape was far from an ideal of untouched nature having already for centuries carried the traces of human intervention and manipulation. Trees, clouds and water, with little or no representation of people, none-the-less provided Woodman with a 'subject' that represented a world outside his control – an 'other' of nature that he could only 'effect' through choices of what and how to film. So despite the traces of human occupation like the footpath between the trees in 'Light Movements' he worked not with nature but an image *standing* for nature continuing a tradition from artists like Constable, Cotman, Crome or the early Turner. Mostly in Woodman's films, and the stunningly beautiful recent high definition video 'November Morning' (2010) is a good example, the touch of the human is not in the represented image but is there only in the *act* of mediation of artist/observer and the photo/chemical, photo/mechanical (or later digital) technology of cinema. Woodman does not foreground this intervention of artist and medium with overt cinematic devices forcing awareness of the camera as a mechanism as Welsby did, for example devising ways in which wind may control of camera speed or direction. Instead the relationship of medium to image is gentler - contemplative. But Woodman's quasi-photographic static camera shot – no pan – no movement – no zoom, equally reveals itself as an artifice. In Woodman's films, as in his photographs, there is a reverence for the *found* conditions of effects in nature. In these early films I find this most successful and fascinating in the images of water – in patterns made by rainwater on the surface of a pond, or the broken patterns of reflection in a moving stream. 'Beach Fragments', though edited - probably in camera, and if not it does not matter - does foreground the cinematic mediation, but like the water close-ups of 'Observational Series', is an abstracted component element of landscape without the

perspective depth of landscape - dispensing with an horizon. By filling the screen from top to bottom, as total fore-ground the image becomes an abstracted, meditative, texture of ripples and breeze. The strongest artistic relationship of these films is with the analytical drawings of water movements by Leonardo da Vinci. Whilst certain themes run through his work, Woodman is not dominated by one idea. He does not have a single direction. These early films show him exploring - not narrowly experimenting, but exploring – trying different directions without the domination of a mechanistic pre-determined system. The form is not a *style* – the works are a product of a process. Woodman follows strategies that are a dialogue between his camera observation and the visual effects in the scene. In ‘Spider’, there is a kind of dramatic anticipation, a little expectation of ‘narrative’, but the primary concern remains with the visual reverie of a long unbroken stare. Woodman’s films are about duration, about an experience of the passage of time. The static camera, photographic approach to film helps create this condition of duration but, oddly, it does not work in reverse. A cinematic approach to photography – the photographic series - may analyse or reflect on time but is not able to create a durational experience. This problematic space between the photographic and the cinematic is explored when he uses time-lapse, as in ‘Dawn and Dusk’, or measured segments like the four second shots in ‘Pear Tree’. Here he sets up a dialogue between the actual passage of time in viewing and a much larger time-scale of the events recorded and we have a sense that he is seeking a language that can give him and us a way of grasping the longer durations of days and seasons as an *experience* not an *idea*.

John Woodman has gone on to produce an exceptional body of work – photographic series like the beautiful photographic study ‘Ruskin’s Pond’, published in a book with the same title in 2010, or photo-collages and installations often in collaboration with Roger Polley – a collaboration that began in the 1970’s. Another publication, ‘In Search of the Sacred’ from 2003 the result of joint photographic work with Polley, demonstrates their fine integration of creative image with analysis of the subject – a process that reinforces my proposed parallel with the studies made by da Vinci. Perhaps the key relationship for Woodman is not between nature and structuralism but between natural phenomena and analytical observation – an art science in the British empirical tradition. Whatever critical concept I might suggest, this DVD serves well as a prelude to a distinguished body of sensitive, creative work.

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