

***And the night was kind.***

By Ciara Healy

An essay on *Ruskin's Ponds*, New Filmworks by John Woodman.

*Faint in the pale high solitudes,  
And washed with rain and veiled by night,  
Silver and blue and green were showing.  
And the dark woods grew darker still;  
And birds were hushed; and peace was growing;  
And quietness crept up the hill;  
And no wind was blowing  
And I knew  
That this was the hour of knowing.*

Extract from *The Voice* by Rupert Brooke, 1909

In most coastal villages, houses that boast a view of the sunset are prohibitively more expensive and more desirable than buildings on streets nearby. The commodification and control of such a natural, daily phenomenon is, perhaps, an appropriate metaphor for our impending, and possibly inevitable decline. A premonitory elegy for the darkness yet to come.

Like the two very different perspectives in Rupert Brooke's poem *The Voice*, two paradoxically separate relationships with Nature have developed in the West since the Industrial Revolution began its relentless clatter: one of co-existence and one of control. These opposing approaches are connected to the pendulum swing between rationalistic and romantic viewpoints, an inevitable consequence of the dialectic movement of Western history. However, over the last century this fluctuation has begun to solidify into the notion that there is a place for nature and a place for culture. Perhaps, as people's lives became irreparably more urban, the lens of nostalgia increasingly idealised nature, making culture its binary opposite. Forever confined to the rolling hills of ladybird books and biscuit tin lids, nature lost its companion culture to the choking smoggy sprawl of the city.

Throughout history, philosophers, artists and writers have attempted to straddle this separation in order to show that neither we, nor the world around us is opposed or, for that matter is disenchanted. In occupying a liminal space between the camera and the landscape, Woodman's meditative, sensual perception is part of an interwoven trio of technology, nature and culture. Operating together, he is continuing a critical discourse that began with the poetry of John Clare. His real-time films engender and provoke a sense of wonder, becoming the *here* and the *now* as opposed to a 'representation' of reality. They are a concrete experience in their own right, as credible an equivalent for the events that unfold in front of and inside of the rolling camera. The camera being the machine that absorbs images at the same speed as perception, as well as, perhaps, our own consciousness.

*On Ruskin's Ponds* is a series of film works that revive the aesthetic and theoretical interests Woodman held in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A period of time, like now, of economic instability, social discontent and a burgeoning frustration that social and environmental issues were of little relevance to political agendas. Whilst Woodman's work is not political, the fact that his early films are gaining a renewed recognition amongst new audiences is a hopeful indication that the relationship between nature, culture and machine has become a philosophical and creative concern once more.

Woodman spent many months between 2008 - 2012 recording the effects of light and changing seasons on Ruskin's ponds in Dulwich and at Brantwood using a fixed frame and hand held camera. Compositionally, these film works reference Palmer, Turner, Constable and Impressionists such as Cezanne, Pissarro and Monet. All of whom engaged in some way with the relationship between light, water and perception. Their aesthetic is almost impossible to erase from the consciousness of the contemporary Western artist. The ways in which they represented and depicted spaces using paint is echoed in Woodman's camera framing. Contextualised in the now by the sound of airplanes overhead, the brakes of a bus, school children, sirens and distant church bells, these visual and aural glimpses are far from mundane. Yet their long continuous duration requires patience and contemplation. Over time, they become more beautiful and mystical than one could initially have imagined them to be. This is because the viewer observes not only what is occurring on screen but also what is taking place within themselves. Light moving slowly across the surface of water can induce a change in one's breathing, a momentary transcendental state of acute awareness, a form of enchantment.

The impression of enchantment has many manifestations. The sense of wonder Woodman's work invokes bears a close relationship to the writings of Paracelsus, who cultivated a form of perception that involved meticulous attentiveness to the singular specificity of things, and, in doing so, opened up the possibility of seeing one thing mirrored in another. He marvelled, for example, at how the light of the stars could be repeated in the twinkle of the eyes of those we might love.

"Just as the sun shines through a glass, so the stars penetrate one another in the body. For the sun and the moon and all planets, as well as all the stars and the whole chaos, are in man." [1]

This idea is particularly evident in *Brantwood: March 2011*, which depicts the reflection of the moon on the surface of the pond at Brantwood, framed by bare black branches. Whilst sublime, the Palmeresque beauty of this film is also unsettling because of the disorientation it induces. It is difficult to tell if we are looking at the sky or the surface of the water. Both the image, its reflection and the artist tread what Robert Macfarlane describes as a 'visionary threshold' [2] – an uncertain space where separation is ambiguous. This uncanny sensation occurs again between the water and the frozen grass at the edge of the pond in *Denmark Hill: February 2011*. It is clear here that the landscape is in transition. It is on the precipice of spring, but the muffled dissonance of winter sounds reverberate on the edges of the film frame, in the frozen grass, in the rain on frozen snow.

For Deleuze, enchantment takes place when things overlap, when wondrous marvels of metamorphoses happen between animal, human and machine. The textures of sound, light, reflection and water in Woodman's films traverse such liminal spaces. His films suggest that natural magic is, and always has been, all around us, even in our cities. He captures its elusivity in the rain-soaked corners of small suburban gardens, amongst the leaves of a pear tree in the breeze, on the surface of a frozen pond. The mundanity of these sites belie their transformative powers. They become what filmmaker Margaret Tait once described as *film poems*.

Virginia Woolf wrote about the experience of 'seeing' as if for the first time in her 1919 diaries. Defined by Heidegger as *Dasein* Woolf describes a momentary transcendental state of connectedness when she encountered a hare in a clearing in woodland:

*I remember lying on the side of a hollow, waiting for L[eonard] to come & mushroom, & seeing a red hare loping up the side & thinking suddenly 'This is Earth Life.' I seemed to see how earthy it all was, & I myself an evolved kind of hare; as if a moon-visitor saw me. [4]*

This notion is evident in *Brantwood August 2010 (2)* where water boatmen skim the surface of the pond, their tiny feet never breaking the fragile membrane of the water's surface. Beneath them the dark gathering of last winter's rotting leaves, above them the passing clouds. They converge on invisible pathways and walk the flesh transparent.

Viewing these pockets of the world from such a vantage point, Woodman focuses not only on visual transformation, change and transience in light and time-space, but also the concept of 'loosing' himself, and us, his audience, during that experience. This is especially true of *Brantwood January 2011 (1)* and *(2)* where the stillness of the frozen woods half reflected in the ice amplifies the meditative presence of Woodman's own breathing in the cold air. Yet again the orientation of our perception is forced to shift, as it almost seems that we are beneath the surface of the frozen pond looking up at the light of the sky between the trees. We are forced to locate ourselves relentlessly with every passing minute of this film. Like the distinctive brushwork of Monet, the barely visible rhythmic sway of Woodman's camera, in these two films especially, echoes the secret pulse of the trees in winter, the pulse of an ancient place, a beating heart.

Film works like this have a long history, the most seminal of which being *Wavelength* (1967) by the Canadian filmmaker Michael Snow whose long take single shot films have been described by Annette Snow as 'analogous to consciousness,' an approach to perception which continues to remain central to Woodman's practice. But structural filmmakers like Snow draw their inspiration from much earlier thinking. Like Woolf, Deleuze and Paracelsus, Ruskin recognized that the material advances of mankind would irrevocably threaten the fields, forests, riverbeds and coastal paths that fuelled his imagination. As John Clare's poem *Decay* (1832) points out, nature needs protection from the onslaught of modern civilization.

*Mere withered stalks and fading trees,  
And pastures spread with hills and rushes,  
Are all my fading vision sees;  
Gone, gone are rapture's flooding gushes!*

But this doesn't mean it has to be encircled within a stonewall; separate from us, where it would inevitably wither. For Ruskin, nature needed to be protected *by* culture. In other words, its salvation would be through education, through writing, through art, through *looking*. It needed to be re-enchanted. Ostensibly one of the first ecologists, Ruskin would often make his students stand knee deep in water during his classes so that they could really grasp the extent to which nature is integral to everyday life, how it is a part of culture.

Gentle and contemplative, *On Ruskin's Ponds* offers a glimpse of a world which becomes more than we would ordinarily see at night and twilight, in the midday sun, at dawn. The shifting shadows Woodman captures hint at a dynamic system far greater in complexity and beauty than we would otherwise normally see at a glance. This real-

time process of truly looking, reveals the world not so much as it should be, but the world as it already is.

Bibliography:

*References:*

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4. Michelson, Annette (1978) *Toward Snow* (cited in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney New York: Anthology Film Archives).

*Additional Reading:*

- Mac Donald, Scott (2002) *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films About Place*, California: University of California Press.
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