



TEN SKIES, 13 LAKES, 15 POOLS – STRUCTURE, IMMANENCE AND ECO-AESTHETICS IN *THE SWIMMER* AND JAMES BENNING’S LAND FILMS

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The following chapter develops the notion of eco-aesthetics with respect to moving images and argues that the connections between the world and the image – including the land and the landscape – are what make the documentaries of the experimental filmmaker James Benning eco-aesthetical. Focusing on a shot in Benning’s digital video *Ruhr* (2009), this chapter examines the film and video subgenre of planes-behind-leaves-in-the-wind and asks who or what moves leaves in the wind in moving images. André Bazin, who endorses a transcendent continuity between the world and the cinematographic image (1967: 14), I suggest, sees film as part of nature while ultimately separating humans from nature *and* from the image. Whereas with Bazin, transcendence rules out immanence, the leaves in the wind in *Ruhr* are imperceptibly moved by the airplane moved by humans and there is no transcendence. This chapter argues that immanence is vital for an eco-aesthetics that links the plane of the world (ecology) with that of the image (aesthetics) and that neither a Bazinian cinema nor eco-cinema is necessarily eco-aesthetical.¹ In contrast to the readings of Benning as a filmmaker of the perceptible, this text proposes that his films bring out the *imperceptible*, and that eco-aesthetics are about what cannot be directly perceived.

Benning is generally seen to be making structural films of landscapes, because he follows a predetermined structure, such as that the duration of a shot is the length of a reel of film. *Ten Skies* (2004), for example, consists of ten shots of ten skies for ten minutes and *13 Lakes* (2004) of thirteen shots of thirteen lakes also for ten minutes. His films adhere to the conditions of structural film in that they have ‘a fixed camera position’ (Sitney 1969: 1), a ‘minimalisation of the central action’ (ibid.: 4) and a ‘structural monotone’ (ibid.: 4). By contrast, this chapter argues that Benning’s films differ fundamentally from the pure aesthetics of structural cinema as well as from the structuralism in the

Hollywood movie *The Swimmer* (Perry and Pollack, 1968), which I shall term a structuralist film. Instead, I suggest that Benning's films are post-structural, that he makes impure rather than pure films and that they are not of landscapes, but of land.

The Dehumanised Nature of Human Consciousness

In 1967, Gilles Deleuze observed that, in structuralism, it is space itself which is structural: 'places in a purely structural space are primary in relation to the things and real beings which come to occupy them' (2004: 174). While linguistic structuralism differs from visually determined structural film, the fact that space dictates relations through structures – and that the structure of these relations is spatial – also applies to structural films of nature. Experimental films of landscapes such as those by the Canadian Michael Snow or the British filmmaker Chris Welsby explore the parameters of space through decentred camera movement in multiple directions on self-constructed tripods. This is a nature devoid of humans. Deleuze mentions structural film briefly and writes about Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971), filmed in the mountains of North Quebec: 'Snow films a "dehumanised landscape", without any human presence, and puts the camera under the control of an automatic apparatus which continually varies its movements and angles. He thus frees the eye from the condition of relative immobility and of dependence on coordinates' (Deleuze 1992: 230). This vision 'remains that of one eye only, but it is an empty, hyper-mobile eye'.² P. Adams Sitney, who defined the term 'structural film', extends this eye to the mind: 'It is cinema of the mind rather than the eye' (Sitney 2002: 348). These structural films of landscape have severed their connections with humans. But the 'dehumanised camera' (ibid.: 359) without an operator serves only human consciousness. Sitney writes about *La Région Centrale* that, 'the film-maker elaborated on the metaphor of the moving camera as an imitation of consciousness' (ibid.: 356). When Sitney states that 'the persistent viewer would [consciously] alter his experience before the sameness of the cinematic image' (ibid.: 351), specificity is read as 'sameness' without any acknowledgement of the diverse material relations between the medium, the machine, the depicted and the filmmaker. In what has been called 'pure film' (James 1989: 236), first, the material relations of what is in front of the camera are reduced to those of the cinematic image, and second, what is in the image to our conscious and rational viewing. The only material that is included in Sitney's consideration is cinematic material (ibid.:

359). Consequently, it does not matter what the film shows, be that nature in *La Région Centrale* or a room in *Wavelength* (Snow, 1967): ‘The specific content of both films is empty space’ (Sitney 2002: 356). The eye is linked to the brain with no material connections between them and what is being looked at. Nature is merely a backdrop for human consciousness without any materiality and life of its own.

Structuralist Pools

‘God, look at that water. And look at that sky!’ Neddy Merryl (Burt Lancaster) enthuses in *The Swimmer* (Figure 2.1), looking offscreen down at the pool and then up at the sky. If Neddy could look at the water in *13 Lakes* and the sky in *Ten Skies*, their material existence would be apparent. But as a character in a structuralist fiction film, Neddy desires a nature from which he is disconnected. In the film adaptation and John Cheever’s short story (1964), Neddy swims home through an eight-mile long string of pools with only mediated access to nature in his suburban neighbourhood. In *The Swimmer*, nature is thoroughly stratified. The water in one of the pools has been filtered so much that when offered clear alcohol in a glass, Neddy jokes that he just wants a bit of the pool water. The fluids he puts inside him are as clean as the ones he swims in. Nature is partitioned into ‘the lawns, the gardens, the woods, the fields’ (Cheever 1985: 722) – and, of course, pools. ‘Pool by pool, they form a river, all the way to our house’, gushes Neddy, calling



Figure 2.1 Neddy Merryl (Burt Lancaster) looks at the sky in *The Swimmer* (Perry and Pollack, 1968)

the 'stream' of pools after his wife, 'the Lucinda River'. Neddy maps out his route home through a list of names of pool owners.

In structuralism, relations are not material, but symbolic. The structures that run through human and nonhuman nature and culture are the same. 'Father, mother, etc. are first of all sites in a structure', observes Deleuze (2004: 174), also citing the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan: they 'model their very being on the moment of the signifying chain which traverses them' (ibid.). In *The Swimmer*, nature belongs to couples. Individual psychology is 'determined by a transcendental topology' (ibid.). The 'subjects' of structuralism 'are above all the places in a topological and structural space defined by relations of production' (ibid.). Because 'the sites prevail over whatever occupies them' (ibid.), structuralism is transcendental. The structures the swimmer passes through are already in place, and are merely repeated through him. For structuralists like Lacan, 'structure is incarnated in realities and images according to determinable series' (ibid.: 172). A discontinuation threatens the whole series, or as Cheever notes when the swimmer happens upon an empty pool: 'This breach in the chain of water disappointed him absurdly' (Cheever 1985: 717).

When the swimmer finally arrives at his home, it is overgrown with nature. The tennis courts where he had imagined his daughters playing are desolate and covered in leaves. Water is not contained in pools anymore, but has turned into a thunderstorm pouring down onto him. Exhausted, freezing and seeking solace, he limps barefoot in his trunks to the door of his home and finds it locked. While Neddy desperately bangs on the closed door, the camera pans through a broken window into the house that is deserted, without his wife and daughters. The home is as empty and inaccessible as the subject. 'Structuralism is not at all a thought that eliminates the subject, but a thought that shatters it and systematically distributes it', writes James Williams (2009: 53). In *The Swimmer*, the subject is shattered, both physically and metaphorically. The swimmer pursues a quest for an origin that turns out to be empty, in a structuralist film with a grid of pools and an empty centre.

The Swimmer has a signifying chain, but no story. In the film adaptation, it is as if Hollywood is trying to counter the fact that the original does not have a narrative arc but a geographical line with a hysteric casting of nature as the incompatible object of desire: not a femme fatale, but a *nature fatale*. This anxiety of the human being overwhelmed by nature is present only in the film version. Its default realist image is more vulnerable to the impact of nature than literature because of the environment's indexical imprint on the celluloid; because the materiality of film is more part of the environment than the semiotics of language.

The fear that the structure might not hold up against materiality (that it might not be everything) materialises only in the film. Nature as nature does not feature in Cheever's story. The short story revolves around the emptiness of only existing in language. In Cheever's original, no nature has taken over what used to be Neddy's home, only his car has a rusty door handle and his house a loose rain gutter. The incompatibility of man and nature, which is first idolised and then becomes life threatening, is only developed in the screenplay where it is integral to the film's *dénouement*. Ageing is not as threatening in language as it is for a character in a Hollywood film. In the film, nature denotes decay and is set against the human subject who is not a part of it. While at the beginning of Neddy's journey, nature signifies life, at the end of it, nature means aging and death. The closer the swimmer gets to nature, the more he is separated from other humans and physically worn out. Nature is not compatible with human structures. In *The Swimmer*, nature is what Lacan would have called the Real and inaccessible.

There is a gap between what Neddy had imagined and what is actually there. He starts his day vigorous and fit for his age and nearly drowns in one of the pools by the end of it. The day could have lasted months or years. Leaves are falling in what seemed to be summer. The line of pools is not only spatial but also temporal, or as it has been described at the time: 'Neddy is swimming through his past to the nameless horror of an unrefracted present' (Canby 1968). The unrefractedness in this structuralist film is the empty space the human subject finds when it looks for its origin and is faced only with unstratified nature. The empty home the swimmer returns to – revealed through the square of a broken window – is like the empty object at the centre of structuralism: its lack of identity is what enables the structure (Deleuze 2004: 188). Only because of this unoccupied space can structures proliferate: 'There is no structure without the empty square, which makes everything function' (Deleuze 1990: 51). The subject is constructed in its subjection: 'The subject is precisely the agency which follows the empty place: as Lacan says, "less subject than subjected – subjected to the empty square"' (Deleuze 2004: 190). The structures are humanly determined, also in nature. The swimmer is the nomadic subject of structuralism, incapable of achieving completion, and separate from any materiality.

Post-structural Skies

For the structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, although structures develop differently in different environments, these are

‘integrated into ideological systems’ (1985: 110). Even the sky is populated by humans and their stories: ‘in the sky, the hero meets two old women’ (ibid.: 111). Lévi-Strauss looks at the sky as part of a myth that is cast as an apparently ‘objective’ structure, rather than an underlying origin. In structuralism, elements determine each other and themselves in symbolic relations (Deleuze 2004: 176). Structure incarnates itself in its own series (ibid.: 172). Structuralism translates difference in negative opposition and ‘when difference is read as opposition it is deprived of the peculiar thickness in which its positivity is affirmed’ (Deleuze 1997: 205).

Deleuze suggests a new structural space that coincides more with Benning’s films than with structural or structuralist films. Benning’s films are not merely about a structure of, in themselves, negative and empty elements that only acquire signification in combination. The films positively affirm the material presence of a lake or a sky. While the swimmer swims through empty signifying chains, Benning’s *13 Lakes* bring out the thick materiality of difference and the minimalist images fill up with our thoughts. But each lake also becomes more singular as part of a series than it would merely as an individual lake, or even just a still image: ‘structure has a value of its own’ (Williams 2009: 47). The structure of Benning’s films generates a new space, which can neither be abstracted nor repeated.

While in structural and structuralist film the subject of the structure is structure (Deleuze 2004: 178), Benning’s films go beyond the structures they employ. They are not about the structure of something and are merely structured according to a principle, but they generate something new. The structures of Benning’s films do not repeat questions that ‘always find the answer that they deserve as a function of the symbolic field in which they are posed’ (ibid.: 182). By moving beyond a symbolic structure that produces the original they are able to discover material economies, for instance that of water in the California Trilogy. Benning’s skies and lakes are not structured through a grid of singular points that pervade the whole film. Because the structure of Benning’s films – like the length of a film reel, or the time a train takes to pass through the frame or a cigarette takes to be smoked – is external and not combinatory, it allows the films to be open.

Parodying structural filmmaking, Peter Greenaway’s *Vertical Features Remake* (1978) lists arbitrary tree trunks and wooden posts in nature in quick succession. Since the trunks are only there to signify a vertical feature, they merely repeat the structuring element. While new thought unravels when watching a Benning film, thinking does not move beyond recognising already existing structures in *Vertical Features*

Remake. As a parody of a structural film, it remains structural. By contrast, the external structure of Benning's films and the long duration of shots allows for an opening up from the inside. Félix Guattari would call this the 'praxic opening-out which constitutes the essence of "eco-art"' (2005: 35). Benning describes his structural framing as 'a container that allows a freedom'.³ Using the same metaphor, Claire Colebrook finds that in structuralism there are no external containers: space is 'the effect of a synthesis of points, not a container or ground' (2006: 195). But in Benning's films, new relations can be thought in each shot. There is no latent structure incarnated, no inherent skyness or lakeness in an abstract structural relation. The sky or the lake is not structured, only the film. While the shots of *Ten Skies* might all be of the same length and of the sky, they are no generalities abstracted from particular examples. They do not tell us that all skies are the same, or that it all comes down to the same sky. The structuring elements differ qualitatively from what they generate. Not only is each sky and each lake different, but in one shot the cloud, the smoke and the steam continue to change or the same object changes over several shots.

The ephemeral clouds in *Ten Skies* could have been isolated as an aesthetic event, or dramatised like in a nature programme on turbulent weather that presents nature as a spectacle, but for Benning, 'there is no need at all to call on a transcendence' (Deleuze 1994: 17); instead, the singularity of the mundane is appreciated. Often the cause for what we see in the image remains offscreen, such as what produces the steam or the smoke in the skies of *Ten Skies*. What looks beautiful could be pollution, problematising the deceptiveness of an isolated aesthetics in an eco-aesthetical move. By not tracing an image, subject or an object back to their original source, the films focus on the singularities of what we see and hear.

Water, sky and wind are collective forces of moving materials (unlike human or nonhuman animal nature, there is not one individual wind or sky). A sky can be framed, but one sky cannot be separated from another in terms of its matter, only arbitrarily in a frame or by a set point in time (or by seeing symbolic structures in it). Already in the mid-nineteenth century, the art critic John Ruskin criticised 'the old masters' for separating the cloud from the sky and the fact that 'no kind of connection is ever hinted at' (1913: 219). His topics in *Modern Painters*, such as the skies and water, are like those of Benning's films of the same elements. Benning shares Ruskin's appreciation of changeability and mutability. Even if painters have to freeze change, it was already clear that nature is 'never the same for two moments together' (ibid.: 217). Something that is changing while keeping the connection

between the different elements thus reveals what Deleuze would call its consistency. What happens in the frame is ‘an opening into consistency’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2003: 334). The plane of consistency cuts across ‘chaotic variability’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2009: 208) and ‘concretely ties together the heterogeneous, disparate elements’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2003: 558) in a consolidation of multiplicities. It is opposed to that of structuration with lines of selection ‘that reduce production to representation’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2000: 310) and is united under a ‘plane of organisation’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2003: 558). The plane of consistency is also called the plane of immanence.

Eco-aesthetics and Imperceptibility

The term ‘eco-aesthetics’ brings together two separate planes, that of ecological materiality and that of the image. We cannot make images of a burning nuclear reactor from nearby without being affected by its radioactivity. Documentary images are not separated from what is depicted in them; they are part of the world. The immanence of the world to the work and the artist is an ethical and ecological issue. Images are not just visual. The image and the filmmaker are parts of ‘the environment’ that is not only around us, but goes through us. In their emphasis on the materiality of only the medium and on medium specificity, experimental and avant-garde film and video have often not been eco-aesthetical. Pure film assumes a position separate from the relations of the world. In the legacy of the avant-garde, the artist is separated from the world and the work from its environment. For an eco-aesthetics, we have to leave the avant-garde’s aesthetics of disconnectedness as well as the phenomenological stance of the artist as recording mere impressions. The filmmaker or artist, the work and the ‘context’ or the ‘environment’, all belong to the same plane of immanence. Images cannot merely be about pure aesthetics anymore. Images and their makers (or takers) are part of the world. Film and video needs to leave pure aesthetics. Images can only be impure.

It is also necessary to distinguish eco-aesthetics in moving images from an ecocinema that is driven by human argument and content. Ecocinema is said to be built on ‘the capacity to choose consciously’, which ‘is uniquely human’ (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010: 45). This emphasis on conscious choice makes ecocinema a Cartesian endeavour that separates humans from the rest of nature, exactly the reason why there is the need for an ecocinema in the first place. ‘Cognitive estrangement’ – conscious distancing – is regarded as a premises for ‘environmental

awareness' (Ingram 2012: 45). Like structural film, this ecocinema too is very much a rational cinema. The ecocinema of Hollywood fiction films and eco-documentaries in which eco-logical connections are made only at the level of content cancels out eco-aesthetics. Narrative cinema – including ecocinema – is not eco-aesthetical because it over-codes through human subjectivity and argument. A film can also be eco-aesthetical without images of nature. A one-hour shot of the steam of a coke-plant chimney in *Ruhr* (2009) might not show nature, but if a film would only be eco-aesthetical if it portrayed nature, then ecocinema would be in danger of using contemplative images of nature to recycle the picturesque. Benning's films do not represent an ecological subject matter. They are eco-aesthetical precisely *because* they do not represent subjects or a subject matter as separate and closed systems. Eco-aesthetics operate through forces rather than conscious actions. Benning's documentaries do not impose, but generate passive creation: 'contemplating is creating, the mystery of passive creation' (Deleuze and Guattari 2009: 212). Contemplation becomes a subject that 'fills itself with what it contemplates' (ibid.). All things are contemplations, 'not only people and animals, but plants, the earth and rocks' (ibid.).

But the difference between ecocinema and eco-aesthetics is not just one between content and form, or a repetition of the two avant-gardes of the 1920s (such as Eisenstein vs. Léger) and the 1960s (such as Godard vs. Brakhage) (Wollen 1982). Both are modernist avant-gardes distanced from the world; one in historical materialism and through alienation, the other through a materialism of the materiality of the medium, as in Greenbergian modernism or pure cinema, 'an art of pure signifier detached from meaning as much as from reference' (ibid.: 95). Neither connects the image to the world in a new materialism of eco-aesthetics.⁴

Appreciations of moving images of nature are often rooted in phenomenological experience. Scott MacDonald, for example, defines ecocinema as providing 'an evocation of the experience of being immersed in the natural world' (MacDonald 2004: 108). Instead, I would say that our materiality and that of our images are part of the environment, which is why we cannot be immersed in them. We cannot be immersed in immanence. Post-environmentalists convincingly point out that 'if humans are part of the environment then the concept of environment is meaningless' (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2006: 198). We are part of the environment, or perhaps rather, 'we are the environment'⁵ and the environment is us, or in other words: 'We are vital materiality and we are surrounded by it' (Bennett 2010: 14). We are all organisms. Benning's films do not manifest an environmentalist view of a nature separated from humans.

Benning's films have been claimed for structural as well as phenomenological readings despite the fact that these are built on opposing philosophies. The cinema of apperception – structural film – where 'apperceptive strategies come to the fore' (Sitney 2002: 348) should be unreadable in phenomenological terms of perception. Phenomenology asks us to look and listen without any references. But Benning's emphasis on looking and listening is only the first step of an artist generating a work. It follows a rejection of a pre-given individual subjectivity. In his classes, he famously asks his students to forget their personal narratives and any attempts of dramatisation and to merely experience what is happening for a long time in a not very eventful place. Unlike phenomenology, for Benning, looking and listening is vital for forging new perceptions and connections rather than repeating previous ones or memories of experiences. In the resulting film, the sounds and images are framed and composed and often sounds from different sources are added. When we watch the product of this process, we see different assemblages to those perceived at the time by the filmmaker. Thought is produced in the process of generating these images. The eco-aesthetic connections of Benning's films become apparent from what we cannot, or what we cannot *immediately* perceive.

Planes in the Plane of Immanence

After several shots of things reassuringly moving, Benning's first digital video *Ruhr* shows foliage not in movement. If this were shot on celluloid, the film grain would still be moving, or the projection would make little jolts, even if nothing moved in front of the camera, but because the images are in high definition, we cannot see anything moving.⁶ Since there is also no perceptible sound and this stillness continues for nearly two minutes, a fear that not only the movement *in* the images, but that the movement *of* the images has stopped became palpable at the premiere of the video at the Duisburg Documentary Film Festival in the Ruhr area of Germany, where it was shot. After a couple of long minutes of stillness, a plane flies behind the foliage and we hear its sound. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief. The leaves remain static, though, and stay like this again for a while after the plane has gone. After half a minute, the wind picks up and leaves fall, then dies down again and stillness returns. Then another plane flies behind the foliage and, again, only after a while do the leaves move. At this point, we recognise it is the plane that makes the wind move and the leaves fall, only that the wind arrives much later than we see



Figure 2.2 Leaves and plane in *Ruhr* (Benning, 2009)

and hear the plane. This process repeats itself several times during the eighteen minutes long take which makes us aware how we cannot immediately see the way things affect one another and that we understand the impact of an action only later. In what could be a description of the time between the moment of the plane flying and the waiting for the wind moving the leaves and the image, Deleuze (2001: 29) writes: 'This indefinite life [of the plane of immanence] does not itself have moments, close as they may be one to another, but only between-times, between-moments; it doesn't just come about or come after but offers the immensity of an empty time where one sees the event yet to come and already happened'.

Today, the exceptionality of foliage moving in the first Lumière cinematograph screenings has changed to the exceptionality of foliage *not* moving in high definition. We think moving images should be seen to move, even if the objects depicted in them are momentarily still. The temporary suspension of movement makes us aware of an anxiety that the movement could stop, as if the ceasing of movement in a film means the end of our life that is so determined by images. Deleuze wrote about the celluloid image: 'At the point where the cinematographic image most directly confronts the photo, it also becomes the most radically

distinct from it' (1994: 17). Stillness is even more approximated in this digital long take. While one might think that because of its material properties, celluloid manifests eco-aesthetical connections better than the abstract digital image, the ontological stasis of the digital (which in action cinema ironically excels in generating an excess of artificial movement) captures the stillness before the plane's impact much better than celluloid and allows the ecological issues at stake to become perceptible. 'What we must do is reach the photographic or cinematic threshold' Deleuze and Guattari (2003: 281) called for. This shot in *Ruhr* reaches the threshold of high-definition video. In contrast to computer-generated images, the indexical link of digital documentary images to what they depict enables us to make the connection between the plane and the wind. The plane generates its own ecosystem, which the movement in the moving images is part of. 'Abstraction' writes Franco Berardi, 'reaches its perfection in the digital era. The labour of physical transformation of matter has become so abstract that it is now useless: machines can replace it completely' (2009: 61). Benning's first high-definition video *Ruhr* brings the material labour of the nonhuman protagonists to the fore through the abstract labour of digital video. In what could be called 'impure video' – and unlike in much experimental, 'pure' cinema – the materiality of the medium does not prevent contemplating the material connections of the world it depicts, but instead brings out the imperceptible.

Leaves in the Wind

Leaves moving in the wind have been a recurring subject since the earliest cinema. To seeing the first cinematographic images of leaves rustling in Lumière's *Repas de bébé/Baby's Dinner* (1895), the audience, who was used to the motionless proscenium arch, reacted with amazement, even if their motion was only in the background of the human action. But it was not the case that *any* movement was seen as exceptional to an audience that had not seen moving images before. The viewers accepted the movements of the human subjects at the dinner table, 'because they were perceived as part of the performance' (Vaughan 1999: 5), even if those were apparently natural acts like feeding a baby. But that objects without consciousness should move undirected by humans on the screen – that was astonishing, even if it was regarded as normal that leaves move without human help in life. The shock was that plant nature seemed to suddenly have come to life on screen, when leaves were not supposed to move without human direction. So in the

reaction to the first moving images of moving nature, there was immediately a separation between what were regarded as natural objects and conscious human agency.

By the end of the 1940s, D.W. Griffith, known for non-leaf related human epics, complained that what is lacking in film are more images of wind in trees. But at the same time, 'after fifty years of cinematic realism' (Bazin 1997: 108) dominated by the legacy of Griffith's narrative tradition, André Bazin insists on a neorealism that shows much more than wind in trees: 'The cinema has come a long way since the heroic days when crowds were satisfied with the rough rendition of a branch quivering in the wind!' (ibid.). He believed that cinema should show humans in their environment, which is far more than merely a branch in the wind. To show a character's environment 'in a given place at a given time' (Bazin 1967: 50) was essential. But are we only looking at an environment in the image, or is the image regarded as part of the environment?

The question of what force is moving the leaves defines the relation between human, nature and the supernatural and decides if that between humans, nature and the moving image is one of transcendence or immanence. Wind in leaves is often cast as supernatural in the movies. In a fiction film, where humans arguably attempt to direct everything, botanical nature must be seen to be directed too. It cannot be that nature moves by itself, it must be moved by something supernatural. The difference of these documentary cutaways to leaves in the wind is legitimised, within the reasoning of the fiction film, by the otherness of the supernatural. Nature is either moved by a transcending higher consciousness or is itself the transcending entity. Nature can only turn against humans, because it is regarded as separate from them. Wind in trees in fiction films often announces either a good or a bad supernatural force. In *The Holiday* (2006), leaves in the wind denote the magic of romance. In the case of nonhuman, botanical nature fighting back against humans in *The Happening* (2008), nature itself is the transcending force and wind – mostly noticed when in trees – is the way plants transmit neurotoxins which make humans eradicate themselves. In the *Final Destination* franchise, wind in trees (and wind generally) announces the presence of death. Here nature is merely a conduit that is transcended by the supernatural.

The Catholic Bazin believed in the continuation between the world in front of the camera and that of the cinema, through the long take and the long shot, as a transcending act of spiritual oneness between humans, their environment and God. He would have opposed the casting of nature in service of a story, objecting that 'the sheep wore around

their necks the imaginary ribbon of the plot' (1997: 107) – even for a story that tells of transcendence. Bazin praised the cinematographic image for a 'natural automatism' (Wollen 1982: 118) that is devoid of human subjectivity – unlike painting which involves the human hand – and 'affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake' (Bazin 1967: 13). For Bazin, the image is natural because it is automatically generated without human agency. But by saying that there is no subjectivity in nature and in the photographic image, and that only humans express subjectivity, Bazin separates humans from nature as well as from the image. While the character in the image is part of 'the natural image of the world' (ibid.: 15), Bazin's vision of a natural image excludes man from its production. Peter Wollen describes Bazin's ontology as such: 'the work of art is returned to an integral objecthood of nature, existing as a pure being' (1982: 193). Thereby, 'the being of the pro-filmic event (the objects within the camera's field of vision) was transferred to the being of the film itself' (ibid.: 189). So while Bazin would have rejected 'pure film' for its emphasis on form, he endorsed 'pure being' and this depends on the separation of the film, as part of nature, from its human creator.

Therefore, a Bazinian cinema is not necessarily eco-aesthetical (and neither is the long take *per se*; the highly stylized opening tracking shot of the fiction film *Touch of Evil* [1958], for example, might be a long take, which Bazin praises [1967: 34], but it is not eco-aesthetical). Bazin appreciates a neorealist cinema of recognition that is based on identity: 'a reality that everyone . . . personally recognises' (1997: 108). Since one can only recognise what one knew before, Bazin values film for being a repetition of a reality, an 'ontological identity between the object and its photographic image' (1971: 98). But this identity relies upon a separation of life in the image from that outside of it, a separation of the naturalness of the image from the subjectivity of its human producer. This is why for Bazin, it was reasonable that the documentary quality of images, which he valued, was contained in a fiction film where what is in front of the camera is a world that is treated differently to the one behind and around it. In a documentary context of image generation, the 'ontological identity' might have been too mutable: 'Meaning resided in the pro-filmic event' (Wollen 1982: 205), in the event as a copy unaltered by human agency. This 'cinema whose essence was elsewhere, in the pro-filmic event' (ibid.: 191) only accounts for what is in front of the camera, not for the camera's exo-filmic environment, which encompasses the camera and its human operator as part of its environment. The separation between the pro-filmic world and that around the camera and outside the frame is based on the identity of the image and

the model. It occludes the immanence of the human outside the image to the film, the video or the file, and the filmed material. Despite his rejection of scientific fragmentation, Bazin sees and seeks a reality that is unaffected by who is looking at it and filming it and centres only on the visible to the exclusion of imperceptible material relations. There is no immanence in this ontology.

In contrast to Bazin's cinema of recognition, Benning's films make us aware of what we cannot perceive, and generate thoughts we cannot recognise. By excluding his personal subjectivity and by looking at the world, however, Benning's documentaries do reveal something of reality in the Bazinian sense. His long takes, which allow the complexity and multiplicity of relations to grow in thought, can also be regarded as Bazinian, since they are 'based on a respect for the continuity of dramatic space and, of course, its duration' (Bazin 1967: 34). But Benning takes the Bazinian long take forward into eco-aesthetics through the immanence of video to the world and that of relations outside of the frame to the image. Only if we think that we are part of the generation of the image can we think of moving images eco-aesthetically and ecologically. In eco-aesthetics, moving images are part of the world and its material processes. In the plane of immanence, there is no 'pro-filmic'.

There is a subsection of artists' films of planes filmed through leaves in the wind. Guy Sherwin's *Filter Beds* (1990–1998) features impressions of long grass and branches with planes flying in the distance. But through self-conscious play with the focus and editing that fragments the space, the images all point back to the artist as the one whose subjective impressions they are. They are predominantly about the aesthetics of reading an environment through film. The artist here is not part of the environment which serves as his material. If we follow Bazin's assertion that the image is the model, then this kind of experimental cinema cuts up the world.

Conversely, while the cuts of Helga Fanderl's three-minute-long Super 8 film *Airplanes II* (2006) follow in quick succession, making the film appear more fragmented, the images as well as their human operator are firmly planted in the ground. Each shot trails a plane as it flies behind the foliage, shot from the same position. Because the film is edited in the camera, there is a connection between the film and what is being filmed, and we are aware that each plane flying behind the trees is a different plane and that these are not copies of the same shot duplicated in postproduction. Because the camera follows the planes in the background, the trees in the foreground get blurred and the images assume a dramatic and painterly viscosity, but they are still connected with what is filmed. Since Fanderl traces the planes from directly below,

they go downwards from the top to the bottom of the image in the brief period they are captured. Therefore we repeatedly see a plane going down in the image, even though it continues to fly upwards. Fanderl's position is that of a human as part of the environment, struggling to see and understand it. The stuttering images, the many edits of what looks the same, but actually is a different plane, are like repeated attempts to get looking at the world right. Fanderl's decision to edit in the camera and not to leave her spot shows a determined insistence on the site and on the relation of the human to her environment as a location she (and we) cannot escape. Rather than cutting up life through film, her films transform, as she writes, 'fragments of real life into a cinematic form of existence' (2010: 18).

The appreciation of leaf action predates film as well as video. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: 'The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise and yet is unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right' (1836: 13–14). Just when we thought we were doing right with watching boughs wave on celluloid, we have to admit that they stop moving better in high definition. Contrary to Griffith's desire for more wind in more trees – 'What the modern movie lacks is beauty, the beauty of the moving wind in the trees', because 'we have lost beauty' (Goodman 1961: 11) – the wind in Benning's trees is not merely about aesthetic beauty. Contrary to fiction films, the leaves are not moved by a supernatural force. Unlike Bazin's claim that the cinematographic image contributes to 'natural creation' (1967: 15), documentary eco-aesthetics problematise what is natural in what is created. *Ruhr* reveals the wind as the result of human action. It is humans who are (indirectly) moving the leaves. The airplane in the plane of immanence offers no line of flight (what Deleuze calls a way out). Nothing is transcended.

Impure Landscape in Impure Film

Perhaps because landscapes have been the subject of paintings for longer than they have of moving images, art history has so far advanced a more complex take on them than film studies. Art distinguishes between pure landscape (figurative, but without human figures) and pure painting (which is abstract). (Benning's documentaries of land are what in painting would be called figurative and in film realist.) Since what is pure about painting is abstract, and what is pure about landscape is figurative, there cannot be a pure landscape painting. But

the automatic realism of the indexical moving image makes pure landscape film possible. This might be the reason why, whereas art history has moved beyond the idea of pure landscape painting, film scholarship still invokes these purist modes. In *Landscape and Film*, referring to Kenneth Clark's *Landscape into Art* from 1949, Martin Lefebvre repeats the notion of a pure, 'autonomous landscape' (Lefebvre 2006: 23) separated from humans and their narratives. In order to uphold this autonomous space in cinema, not only are landscape aesthetics disconnected from land materiality, but also space from time: 'time itself (the film, the story) is arrested in order to deliver to our view a space' (ibid.: 52). Developed in response to fiction film, time is equated with narrative, and narrative with story. Presuming that if there is no story nothing happens, landscape in film is marked as 'a space freed from eventhood' (ibid.: 22) that excludes organic and inorganic material events. Without the predetermined narrative of the film, time is cast as frozen in *temps mort*. In the opposition between watching either pure landscape in order 'to contemplate the filmic spectacle' (ibid.: 29), or anthropocentric narratives, contemplation is likened to spectacle, as though the extraordinary explosions of an action movie are like nothing happening on an ordinary lake for ten minutes in a documentary. This binary approach is obviously in contrast to Benning's, whose non-narrative films of land allow for the self-generation of narratives and who determines that there is no difference between narrative and contemplation: we cannot escape generating narratives even if we just look at the sky.⁷ To cast landscape as an 'extra-diegetic space lacking narrative function' (ibid.: 33, 44), conceals the narratives that are already taking place in constructing the land.

What Lefebvre reads as dead, Deleuze sees as the condition of modern cinema: 'the pure and direct images of time', an 'unaltered form filled by change' (1994: 17). Benning finds that 'You can't show nothing by looking at something for five seconds'.⁸ You have to show nothing for longer. The sameness in the structure of Benning's films makes sure that the images start off with the same chance, such as in one shot length for all. When asked if the pared-down aesthetics and structural simplicity of his films match the low income economics they depict,⁹ Benning does not see the conditions of poverty merely as a lack but decisively registers minor environments that are usually not looked at for any length of time. Poverty is not a term that applies to nature. There is no poor nature, or as Ruskin wrote: 'The sky is for all' (1913: 217).

Pure landscape depends on the separation from its human environment. While the land is owned, the landscape is not. Landscape is

the view of the land. In 1836, Emerson, like the swimmer, observed how land is private property: 'Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond, but none of them owns the landscape' (1836: 11). For Emerson, looking at the view of the land, finding his 'head bathed in air' (ibid.: 13) – not water – was enough. Instead of traversing the land defined by structures, like the swimmer over a century later, Emerson sought the totality of an overview through a part of himself: 'I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all' (ibid.). Unlike the dehumanised reduction of the human to an eye in structural film – as in Snow's camera machine in *La Région Centrale* – and much of film scholarship's association of landscape with emotional detachment (Lefebvre 2006) as well as the visual distance of the long shot, Emerson's relationship to nature does not rely on spiritual distance, but – like that of Bazin – on a metaphysical harmony between man, nature and God: 'The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God' (1836: 13). What circulates through man, though, cannot have been shaped by him, states Emerson. For all the circulation, there is no immanence. Only the supernatural creates nature. This circulation only goes in one direction; there is no accounting for mutuality. What 'distinguishes the stick of timber of the woodcutter from the tree of the poet' (ibid.: 10) is that the wooden stick is a natural object that has lost its poetic integrity by having been worked on by man for man. Only nature not worked upon inspires artistic work: 'you cannot freely admire a noble landscape, if labourers are digging in the field hard by' (ibid.: 81). An image of the land is especially not a landscape, if someone works in it (Mitchell 1994: 14). Emerson wrote that 'the greatest delights which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable . . . They nod to me and I to them' (1836: 13), vegetable at the time being a synonym for plants. W.J.T. Mitchell explains: "'Landscape" must represent itself, then, as the antithesis of "land," as an "ideal estate," quite independent of "real estate"' (Mitchell 1994: 15). Therefore, the land is not depicted in a landscape. While Benning is said to make landscape films, they are, in fact, films of land.

In eco-aesthetics, the image cannot be separated from its material connections to the world, nor the workers' activities from the image of the land they maintain. Benning's films are post-structural and materialist documentaries not in terms of the materiality of the film or of a historical materialist reading, but with an emphasis on the immanence of referential diversity that goes beyond the self-reflexive explorations of experimental landscape film that are often a record of their own making. Benning's impure moving images allow connections to emerge

that are not merely aesthetical. In contrast to eco-documentaries that show us what we usually do not see, Benning's documentaries show us that we cannot see everything and that not everything can be seen. They are eco-aesthetical because they are not simply about the here and now of centred perception, and because they play with how we do not see where something comes from, where it goes and even what it is that we are seeing.

Land Film

How can a work be a part of the world, create a world (Massumi 2002: 173) and be a document of both? I would suggest that a work can only be in the world and generate a world *because* it is a document; because it does not repress its own singularities by repeating an original referent, be that as fiction or art. Perhaps we can apply Deleuze's suggestion of a description to Benning's documentary images: 'We recognise here the very specific genre of *description* which, . . . instead of being concerned with a supposedly distinct object constantly both absorbs and creates its own object' (1994: 68). Documentaries are most profound, in my view, when they are like this crystalline description.

Before Deleuze conceived of the crystal image of time in 1985, the land artist Robert Smithson saw the crystal as an image of frozen time and made the earth work *Spiral Jetty* (1970) in the Great Salt Lake of Utah. The jetty is covered in salt crystals and changes with its surroundings over time. Sometimes the land art becomes invisible as it is completely covered by the lake. The spiral shape of the whole jetty is supposed to mimic the structure of a crystal (Smithson 1996: 147). Smithson saw film itself as a spiral made up of frames (*ibid.*: 148). So, one would think that a durational film of the crystals of the jetty changing over time would be the ideal crystal image of time. However, these might be images of crystals in time, but they are not crystal images. *Casting a Glance* (2007) – Benning's film of Smithson's land art – is merely representing crystallisation by subordinating it to the identity of the concept in art. Whereas when looking at the lakes in *13 Lakes*, 'the actual image becomes virtual' (Deleuze 1994: 70); when looking at the lake that contains land art in *Casting a Glance*, the 'perpetual exchange between the virtual and the actual', which defines a crystal (Deleuze and Parnet 2007: 150), is ossified and the virtual has been frozen with the art concept.

Benning has been influenced by Smithson's emphasis on entropy, that is, an object in nature is declared a piece of art and then left to its

own devices. This is followed by nature taking its course and humans negotiating the boundaries of the artwork. However, this comparison only allows for the one relation – that between art and nature – to be thematised. When we see the surface of a lake in *13 Lakes*, we are free to explore our thoughts in response to the images and sounds, but, even if we also only see the surface of a lake in *Casting a Glance*, they are tied down by the art that lies underneath despite us not seeing it. In the film, the jetty becomes ossified as art, and both film and art cease to be immanent. Deleuze describes how a still life with its presence and composition of objects ‘which are wrapped up in themselves’ (1994: 16) differs from an empty landscape without content. In *Casting a Glance*, the presence of land art turns moving images of land into a still life.

Because the concept is the only thing that distinguishes conceptual art from everything else, it is based on a repetition of the identical. In contrast to conceptual art, Deleuzian concepts are not about the identity of the concept. Following Deleuze and Guattari’s rejection of conceptual art in *What is Philosophy?* and Deleuze’s critique of the concept as a repetition of the same in *Difference and Repetition*, Smithson’s land art has a confining effect in Benning’s film of it, and Benning’s other land films chime much more with Deleuze’s cinema and Guattari’s eco-sophy. In that sense, the concept of land art in its representation in film works against eco-aesthetics. *Casting a Glance* submits to the art it depicts by being about it. Land film therefore seems best when it films land and not land art – the lake and not the jetty.

Notes

- 1 The term ‘eco-aesthetics’ has been used by Rasheed Araeen in his manifesto ‘Eco-aesthetics. A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century’, in which he opposes the ‘transformation of land into art’ (2009: 682) by the self-centred artist and suggests that ‘art become part of living processes of productivity of the land itself as well as its inhabitants’ (ibid: 682): art as part of the world rather than objects in institutions. This chapter develops the notion of ‘eco-aesthetics’ with respect to documentary film and video in the trajectory of the ecological philosophy of Félix Guattari who used the terms ‘eco-logic’ and ‘eco-sophy’ (2000), with the latter also being employed in a different manner by the deep ecologist Arne Naess.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze cites Marie-Christine Questerbert, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 296, January 1979 (Deleuze 1992: 230, fn. 21).
- 3 James Benning in the interview in chapter 3 of this volume (p. 66).
- 4 This was the gist of my response to Chris Darke’s question following my paper ‘Planes in the Plane of Immanence, or: Who or What Moves the

- Leaves?’ at the symposium *Screening Nature: Flora, Fauna and the Moving Image*, Queen Mary, University of London, 18 May 2013.
- 5 David Suzuki says this in *Force of Nature* (Sturla Gunnarsson, Canada 2010).
 - 6 Benning discusses the stasis of movement of the digital video image in the interview in chapter 3 of this volume (p. 61).
 - 7 James Benning in the interview in chapter 3 of this volume.
 - 8 Benning maintains that the viewer always creates narratives, in the interview in chapter 3 of this volume (p. 61).
 - 9 Benning’s answer to my question at the Q and A to his multimedia presentation ‘Milwaukee to Lincoln, MT’ at the *Visible Evidence XVI* conference, University of Southern California, 15 August 2009.

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