

STRANGE SEEING

Re-viewing Nature in the Films of Rose Lowder

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In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag (1978: 68–69) complains that the ‘true modernism is not austerity but a garbage-strewn plenitude’. This plenitude is the domain, according to Sontag, of photography and film.¹ Sontag concludes that reality – or more precisely, our experience of it – is being depleted by an overconsumption (through an overproduction) of images of that reality. She (*ibid.*: 180) thus calls for ‘an ecology not only of real things but of images as well’.

The photographic representation of nature features prominently in Sontag’s argument. She (*ibid.*: 97) asserts, ‘the habit of photographic seeing – of looking at reality as an array of potential photographs – creates estrangement from, rather than union with, nature’. Elaborating on this argument, Sontag goes on to claim that, ‘[k]nowing a great deal about what is in the world (. . . the beauties of nature) through photographic images, people are frequently disappointed, surprised, unmoved when they see the real thing. For photographic images tend to subtract feeling from something we experience at first hand and the feelings they do arouse are, largely, not those we have in real life’ (*ibid.*: 168).

Sontag is not ultimately making a case for a production and consumption of texts that will change our material relationship to our environment, for a genuinely ecological politics of cultural production and consumption. Indeed her argument reveals little faith – or interest – in the idea that the production of visual texts by conscious agents is a socially and culturally constitutive act and can therefore contribute to any form of transformative politics. Indeed Sontag focuses on the ethical problem of picking up a camera rather than taking a political course of action without reflecting on the fact that picking up a camera may be a form of activism.

In some respects, Sontag’s argument has overlaps with Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the destruction of ‘aura’ through technology in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’. Benjamin

(1999: 216) defines aura as ‘the unique phenomenon of a distance’. Using examples from the natural world to illustrate this term, he (ibid.) writes, ‘while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch’. Unlike the observation of nature with what Benjamin (ibid.: 217) refers to as the ‘unarmed eye’ however, the reproduction of a natural object in film and photography pries it ‘from its shell’, dislocating it from context and discarding the scale of that object.

Ultimately Benjamin finds two potential outcomes in photographic and filmic reproduction. When the means of production is appropriated by capitalism and the state, he argues in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, ‘The Author as Producer’ and ‘A Small History of Photography’, photography will only produce ‘reified dream images’ of the democratic promise held by technology (Buck-Morss 1991: 143). Aesthetics are valorised over content and context.² Alternatively, photographic and filmic production has revolutionary potential. Although Benjamin’s focus is rarely nature, he does provide an example of what we could call revolutionary seeing in ‘A Small History of Photography’. Reflecting on the revelation of architectural and artistic forms in Karl Blossfeldt’s magnifications of plants in his 1931 volume of botanic photography *Urformen der Kunst/Prototypes of Art*, Benjamin argues that rather than dominating nature, photography can ‘take off the “veil” that our “laziness” has thrown over the old nature’ (ibid.: 158). Blossfeldt’s magnifications change our perspective on the plants by disclosing, in Benjamin’s words (1978: 20), ‘an unsuspected wealth of forms and analogies which we never imagined existed in the plant world’. Benjamin (ibid.: 20–21) argues that these photographs provoke a new way of thinking about and viewing nature.

In this chapter I aim to explore how image production and consumption has the potential to change our engagement with the nonhuman. Here I am not interested in the sort of rhetorical work that we see for instance in films like Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, where the environmentalist message is conveyed largely in expository form.³ I intend instead to investigate how the relationship between form and content in the filmic reproduction of nature, following on from Benjamin’s observations on the photographic reproduction of nature, can be utilised in support of an environmentalist politics.⁴

The work of French experimental filmmaker Rose Lowder is particularly appropriate for my project.⁵ Lowder has been making films that centre on the nonhuman since the 1970s. Film scholar Scott MacDonald (2001: 82) has described Lowder’s work as an ecological cinema and this

is evidenced on many levels of her filmmaking practice. Lowder's work is informed by an ecological ethic involving a production practice that has a low impact on the environment, and her meticulously crafted, almost structuralist films, involve a minimum of waste. Formally, these films would seem to have the potential to alienate the audience from her subject. Yet Lowder's method is consciously and politically embodied and her work involves a sensitivity to nature that draws the viewer in to unconventional ways of seeing and experiencing the nonhuman world.

Lowder's highly formal and structured filmmaking practice reflects a concern with both literal waste, in terms of the squandering of film stock, and metaphorical waste, in terms of the effusion of images. In interviews and at screenings, the filmmaker has protested about the extent of waste produced by commercial filmmaking. As a consequence, she maintains a one-to-one shooting ratio – unlike in most commercial filmmaking where the footage shot is invariably far greater than the material in the final cut.⁶ Indeed in thirty-five years Lowder has only shot twenty-three hours of footage.⁷ She composes all of her films in-camera and often exposes only a single frame at a time. One example of this practice is her 1979 film *Rue des Teinturiers*, of which the Canyon Cinema catalogue contains the following description:

[T]he focus of each image, recorded frame by frame in the camera, is adjusted so that graphic features of items in the street that gives its name to the film are extracted and inscribed onto the film strip in a way which allows their characteristics to be seen, when projected in succession on the screen, as parts of a spatiotemporal situation stretching from a position on a balcony over a canalized river to the road. The film is composed of twelve reels, each filmed on a different day throughout a six-month period, joined together in a slightly nonchronological order so as to avoid accentuating anecdotal [*sic*] aspects of the scene. (Canyon Cinema 2011c)

Lowder's extremely formal description here indicates the challenge of viewing this thirty-one-minute silent film. Yet her practice of changing the focus on her one subject – the balcony garden and street beyond – with the exposure of each frame has the effect of embedding the viewer in the scene, inviting one to contemplate it in all its intricate detail.

Lowder draws her audience into the image in at least two ways. On the one hand the viewer is embedded in the scene through Lowder's frame-by-frame refocusing which creates an expanded field of perception beyond the experience of stereoscopic vision. As Lowder explains, by continually changing focus points the viewer can:

see around the corners of things just a bit. In certain scenes in *Rue des Teinturiers*, you'll notice that at some points you can actually see through the flowering laurel tree trunk in the middle of the balcony. You are seeing *behind* it as well as *it*, because one of the focus points is giving you what is behind the laurel's trunk and another focus point is the trunk itself, and still another is in front of the trunk. (MacDonald 1997)

The viewer is also embedded in the text in a much more abstract sense. With only a limited amount of the image ever in focus and only a limited amount of material in frame, we are drawn to the more non-representational elements of the work such as light, texture, movement, shape and the diversity of colours created by light exposure in a variety of weather conditions, times of day and seasons. What starts as a jarring and alienating viewing experience transforms over time into a meditation on the nonfigurative.⁸

Although Lowder's description of her approach makes her films sound sterile, she clearly remains deeply responsive to the environment around her. This sensitivity to place is essential to her work. She states: 'I go to the place, then I look at it, walk around it, sometimes have visited it many times, at different dates or even every hour of the day, looking at the position of the sun, the light, etc.'⁹ Lowder (1997: 57) emphasises that she films in places she likes to be, in the 'outdoors, with my feet on natural ground, preferably in the shade on a sunny day' and that she seeks 'a more human physical home' (Canyon Cinema 2011b). She (1997: 57) contrasts these environments with the 'polluted air, mass competition and the economical goals and interests of our society', implicitly the qualities of the urban landscape which, she finds, becomes 'more and more uninhabitable' (Canyon Cinema 2011b).

The thirty films of Lowder's *Bouquets* series (1994 to 2009) are examples of what the filmmaker characterises as 'a more human physical home', and they indicate the significance and function of place and the environment in her work. Her (2011: 26) description of *Bouquets 21 to 30* is applicable to all thirty *Bouquets*: 'one minute films composed in the camera by weaving the characteristics of different environments with the activities there at the time'. Lowder's account here of the *Bouquets* suggests that she is not concerned with expunging the mark of culture from the image. On the contrary, culture and nature interpenetrate in her films. For example, and as the quote above indicates, each text in the *Bouquets* series is an assemblage of the nonhuman and the human in the locations Lowder shoots.¹⁰

The 'arrangements' of the *Bouquets* series often suggest the complementarity of culture and nature in place. At times however, they

problematise the relationship between human and nonhuman. *Bouquet 9* for example includes a car tyre and the rubbish left behind by day trippers in a field of buttercups. Environmentalist concerns find perhaps their most eloquent expression in Lowder's work in her 1992 film *Quiproquo*. The film sets up a dialectic of tableaux of the social-industrial world – traffic, power plants, factories, rubbish and trains – and the natural world – flowers, blossom trees, a river, the sea, birds and the sky. Humans themselves only appear twice in the film. At one point we see someone removing rubbish, albeit the rubbish that humanity itself generates. The film is also book-ended by a man wading in the sea.¹¹ The social-industrial and natural worlds are sometimes shown separately with no obvious commentary on the relationship between the two. At other times, however, they appear in a simultaneity or juxtaposition that invites the viewer to reflect on the impact of human culture on nonhuman nature. These images largely intimate that the human relationship to the nonhuman is at best indifferent and at worst malevolent. Towards the end of the film, for instance, shots of flying birds are interposed with a shot of an industrial chimney belching fire. Lowder does not necessarily imply that the two exist in the same spatiotemporal location, but this is irrelevant anyway as the counterpoint of images strongly suggests the damage caused by pollution to habitat.

Yet *Quiproquo* does appear to stop short of a full condemnation of humanity's relationship to the nonhuman. Humans are after all shown attempting to deal with their waste and there are moments of a strangely peaceful coexistence of the human and the nonhuman. In fact, the penultimate sequence of the film has an upbeat and bucolic quality as the camera tilts down from birds, sunlight and, strikingly, powerlines to the landscape below, enmeshing the industrial and the pastoral.¹²

Despite its environmentalist concerns, Lowder's work evades both schematic formulations of ecocinema as well as the conventions of other nature genres. Her approach does not correspond to the ways in which we have come to expect to see nature on film. On the level of content alone, she challenges our expectations of nature photography and film by depicting the beautiful and the picturesque and yet not excising the unsightly or unforeseen technical, natural and social events that occur during filming. So, returning again to the *Bouquets*, Lowder incorporates elements that we do not necessarily anticipate viewing in the series' pastoral settings. In *Bouquet 4*, for example, daisies appear delicately in front of an old wooden fence covered in peeling paint. Another example can be found in Lowder's film *Impromptu* from 1989. Here the filmmaker is observed while filming by a group of people who arrive unexpectedly in a van.

It is at a formal level however, in the fact that we are consistently made aware that the nonhuman is being mediated through human technology, that our expectations of the representation of nature on film are most conspicuously disrupted. In *Quiproquo*, the form of each nature scene – and indeed of the social-industrial tableaux – varies, and Lowder uses approaches ranging from long takes to flash editing.¹³ In her précis of *Quiproquo*, Lowder indicates the integration in the film of her critique of our instrumentalising attitude to nature with an expanded approach to visualising the environment:

Quiproquo is a dialogue on the balance to be found between nature and social-industrial technology. As the film refers to the economy of the means involved in relation to what is expressed, it is both a reflection on the potentialities of the medium and an enquiry concerning the implications of the reality portrayed. It is a question of limits and possibilities, the beauty and tragedy of the world, with a critique of contemporary society's dominant choices constantly in the background. (Canyon Cinema 2011a)

Lowder's work can be understood as involving a dialogic relationship between the artist and the material world. She finds an analogy for the way in which production and care are inextricably intertwined in her filmmaking in the relationship of the organic farmer to the land and his work (MacDonald 1997). Nature is neither associated with the sphere of abject necessity nor is it infinitely exploitable. For the artist neither the human nature nor the nonhuman nature she films is merely inert raw material to be consumed. As I have already argued, Lowder's low-impact production practices limit such consumption in a literal sense. But even on a symbolic level, Lowder avoids converting her subject matter into a form with mere exchange or use value in the lens of her camera, and here nature plays a role by resisting full determination during the process of technological reproduction. As Lowder observes of her approach, 'the photographic procedure . . . allows one to handle the content and the form of the material while the process inscribes automatically some of the traces and characteristics of the reality being recorded' (Canyon Cinema 2011b). While the artist uses filmmaking technology to control the structure of the text, the apparatus itself becomes a sort of passive receptor of 'traces' of the world. Lowder's description of the role of the camera here is reminiscent of André Bazin's argument in 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image'. According to Bazin (2005: 13), in taking the photograph the photographer becomes absent, that in photography, 'between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent'. Bazin (ibid.: 15) goes on to argue that:

Only the impassive lens, stripping its objects of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love. By the power of photography, the natural image of a world that we neither know nor can see, nature at last does more than imitate art: she imitates the artist.

The world thus reveals itself in the photograph to a large degree independently of the intentions of the photographer.¹⁴

In contrast to Bazin's argued absent photographer however, Lowder's films contain an excess of the human in their form and structure. We might consider her work on *Les Tournesols* (1982) as an example:

The film presents a field of sunflowers. The focus is adjusted frame by frame in succession according to a series of patterns on particular plants situated in different parts of the field. The diverse configurations placed on separate frames of the film strip appear, when projected successively, simultaneously on the screen. Thus, filmed one after another at different focal lengths, the sunflowers combine during projection to form one spatiotemporal image. (Canyon Cinema 2011d)

Rather than receding into the background, the apparatus is foregrounded to an extent that the viewer is always conscious of it and therefore constantly aware that they are viewing artifice. Even so, the process of filming and the form of the completed work is a response to the play of the elements on the field of sunflowers. The frame-by-frame refocusing highlights changes in the natural environment and in this way the dynamism of the field of sunflowers is emphasised in the finished product.

The dismantling of received ways of viewing the world, and in particular nonhuman nature, is achieved in Lowder's work not by a purported lack of artifice or by the absence of an ideologically driven subject behind the camera, by an 'impassive lens'. On the contrary, Lowder draws the viewer's attention to the device – to both the film-making apparatus and the filmmaking process – in a disruption of conventional representations of the nonhuman. And it is thereby that we might have a new encounter with nature.

Kate Rigby's work on Heidegger is pertinent here. Rigby (2004: 432) notes that in Heidegger's essay '... poetically man dwells ...', from 1951:

it becomes apparent that some form of exile or at least defamiliarization is intrinsic to dwelling. We must first encounter the absence or obscurity of a place before we can begin to attune ourselves to it in dwelling. The poet admits us into dwelling precisely to the extent that she allows even the most familiar things to appear in all their strangeness, as if

encountered for the first time. Only thus might things cease to be mere equipment.

In Lowder's own engagement with the natural world, she uses her tools to make nature strange to us. The impact of her stylistics on the spectator is arguably that one sees the nonhuman and place with fresh eyes, and such a 'defamiliarization' or 'exile' from our conventional encounters with nature hopefully provides, as Rigby's argues above, an opportunity for one to enter into a revised relationship with the natural environment where it ceases to be of mere instrumental value. Moreover, in drawing the viewer's attention to the filmmaking apparatus, Lowder's films declare themselves, 'carefully crafted works of poetic *techne* rather than spontaneous self-disclosures of *phusis*' (ibid.: 437). It is precisely in drawing attention to themselves as highly constructed representations of nature that Lowder's films disclose that they are not nature itself, and by acknowledging that it cannot speak as nature, Lowder's art does its ecological work:

How then does the work of art 'save' the earth by disclosing it as unsayable? It does so, I would suggest, precisely to the extent that it draws attention to its own status as text and hence as a mode of enframing. In this sense, the literary text saves the earth by disclosing the nonequation of word and thing, poem and place. It may do so in a variety of ways . . . Only to the extent that the work of art is self-canceling, acknowledging in some way its inevitable failure to adequately mediate the voice of nature, can it point us to that which lies beyond its own enframing. (Ibid.)

To some degree, Lowder's concerns reflect that which arguably unites the historically and generically diverse practices grouped under the variously termed *avant-garde*, experimental, independent and underground film: their self-conscious position as a critical alternative, or refutation even, of the commercialism of most feature filmmaking. However if, in Heideggerian terms, we understand commercial filmmaking to literally 'enframe' the world, transforming it through technology into standing reserve, 'mere raw material to be technologically manipulated, reconstructed, and commodified' (ibid.: 431), Lowder's work goes one step beyond the innate politics of much independent and experimental filmmaking. In her work, she circumnavigates the potential instrumental rationality of her camera by using it, and film form, to respond to what Rigby (ibid.: 438) refers to as 'the call of nature's self-disclosure'.¹⁵

Lowder's use of film form confounds one's normal experience of nature and place in the cinematic text. Indeed, even to a viewer well versed in experimental film, the relationship of form (intensely ordered,

complex structures involving often jarring editing) to content (images of predominantly serene and beautiful locations) can appear to be extremely disjunct in Lowder's work. The disruptive and abrupt structures of the films potentially prevent the viewer from engaging with the subject matter. Lowder appears to defy the Kantian notion of *Naturschöne*, which still structures western conceptions of nature: our anticipation – indeed our requirement – that the beautiful in nature is somehow harmonious.¹⁶ Nonetheless, as curator Mark Webber's (2002) programme notes on *Bouquets 21 to 24* indicate, Lowder's work engenders in the viewer a very intense engagement with her subject: 'The *Bouquets* are constructed frame-by-frame, in camera, by alternating single images of specific pastoral locations. The images are clusters of perception, which build into improvised portraits of the flowers and vegetation at each site. Condensed moments of time and space form visual bouquets, planted on our retinas, blooming with rich colour and vitality'. Webber's words, his evocation of 'visual bouquets' that are planted and bloom 'on our retinas', perfectly capture the fresh experience of nature provoked over time due to, but also in spite of, the vast amount of visual information in Lowder's films. Lowder's work however, as I have argued, is not just concerned with aesthetics and pleasure – although it is concerned with those things too.¹⁷ MacDonald (2007: 329) asserts that the visual effects created by Lowder's cinematic techniques form 'an implicit metaphor for her hope that the viewer will join her in foregrounding dimensions of her/our surround that in most filmmaking provide at best the background for melodramatic action and entertaining confirmations of the conspicuously consuming status quo'. I would argue that the effect of form in Lowder's work is more than a metaphor but is rather what MacDonald (2004: 109) has elsewhere called 'a retraining of perception'. It is an enactment of a defamiliarised view of nature that will, hopefully, enable the viewer to understand the nonhuman as a great deal more than the mere setting and 'equipment' of our lives.

Notes

- 1 Although Sontag (1978: 3) asserts that she is exclusively directing her critique at photographs, the distinction between film and photography becomes somewhat fluid as her argument develops. She uses many filmic examples – of particular note are *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) and *Peeping Tom* (1960) – which do not feature a still photographer but a cinematographer. Several times she extends her argument explicitly to film or extrapolates out from photography to film – for example her section on Antonioni's *Chung Kuo* (1972). Sontag (ibid.: 161) also argues that today

- real experiences have come to seem like the images ‘we are shown by cameras’, like movies.
- 2 See for instance Benjamin’s (1985: 254–55) criticism of the photographic work of Albert Renger-Patzsch in *Die Welt ist schön/The World is Beautiful*. Benjamin aligns these photographs with the images of advertising in their valorisation of surface aesthetics at the expense of context.
 - 3 See David Ingram on Gore’s film in chapter 14 of this volume.
 - 4 Paula Willoquet-Maricondi (2010) and Scott MacDonald (2004) also address the function of form in ecocinema.
 - 5 I would like to thank Rose Lowder for generously sending me materials to aid in my research and for responding in great detail to my many questions.
 - 6 Of course the concern with waste is not uncommon among experimental filmmakers whose work rarely generates much capital and who therefore cannot afford the kind of waste produced in commercial filmmaking. At the same time, the artisanal nature of Lowder’s work, her resistance to waste and her respect for her subject are arguably rooted in the ideological discourse of much independent filmmaking.
 - 7 From private correspondence with the author.
 - 8 As a viewer of *Rue des Teinturiers* proposed to me, the two rhythms of the film – one completely jarring in its visual violence, the other hypnotic, taking hold the longer one watches – could be understood as an existential metaphor: the former rhythm connotes the quotidian, the latter connotes the longer rhythms of life, of which one only gradually becomes aware.
 - 9 From private correspondence with the author.
 - 10 The idea of the bouquet here is not only extremely apposite in this sense of bringing together diverse elements of the human and the nonhuman, the cultural and the natural. The form of the films themselves are bouquets in that, unlike her earlier frame-by-frame refocusing, Lowder filmed frames for each film ‘on any part of the strip in any order, running the film through the camera as many times as needed’ (Lowder 2011: 26). The final film thus literally becomes an arrangement of frames.
 - 11 In private correspondence, Lowder has noted that this man is a hunter.
 - 12 The soundtrack is also extremely buoyant in this section of the film.
 - 13 Lowder’s footage of both the natural and the industrial world in *Quiproquo* is accompanied by the distinctly unnatural sounds of a complex electronic score by Katie O’Looney. As with Lowder’s use of form, rather than contributing to suturing the spectator into the text, the soundtrack – sometimes seemingly at odds with the subject matter of the film – demands our attention as much as the image, heightening the viewer’s conscious engagement with both sound and image.
 - 14 Jennifer Fay (2008) compares Bazin’s and Benjamin’s work on photography and film, highlighting how both suggest a posthuman form of perception in the technologically reproduced image.
 - 15 In ‘Toward an Eco-Cinema,’ MacDonald (2004) examines a number of other experimental filmmakers in whose work film form invites the viewer to a new awareness of nature.

- 16 At the ASLE-UK conference in July 2004, Richard Kerridge suggested that Lowder's work is subversive precisely in its anti-pastoral quality to which I am alluding here.
- 17 This is my contention not necessarily Lowder's who in response to MacDonald's (1997) question 'Does it matter to you if others find your films beautiful?' says: '[I]f you try to make something that looks good, you usually fail, because just looking good is not enough. Films which look good to me, look good because behind them is some very profound, essential reasoning. I never try to make a great artwork; I don't know how to do that. The kind of films I end up with, which in the end may or may not be pretty to look at, look that way because their internal structure is very complex'.

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