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LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land

The River Project: A poetics of Eco-Critical Film-Making

Paul Ritchard

ABSTRACT

There is a body of film that falls under the categories of eco-cinema, environmental cinema and landscape cinema. These films take the natural environment, place or landscape as their subject matter.

As we try to make meaning of the connections of our lives and world through film, Rust and Monani (2013) note that, 'cinema is a form of negotiation, a mediation that is itself ecologically placed as it consumes the entangled world around it, and in turn, is itself consumed.' This influence is evident in complex, poetic ways, and appears to revolve around the manner in which the films listen to the landscape, rather than seeking to impose themselves upon it – exhibiting a certain kind of humility.

As a child I was attracted to flowing water. In my early teens I experienced the fear and awe of canoeing down Australia's wild Snowy River. As an adult I find myself drawn to cross, swim, walk along, look into and film rivers. Not to narrate, or even describe the river, but to use film to find a nonfiction form that acknowledges the river, writes the river.

I'm making a series of films around the Snowy River that investigates the poetics of rivers. The first in that series, *A View from the Bank*, is a 40-minute experimental, structuralist film that documents parts of the Snowy from its source to its mouth. I will examine how this film does not seek to interpret the world as much as listen and bear witness to it. This is realised aesthetically by its use of stillness, long takes and unadulterated audio which has created a form that appears and is experienced as a counter to the deliberate rhetoric common to much documentary. I will show how my methods of production were guided by the river and the landscape around it. Further, in the Anthropocene, how can this film be an agent for environmental awareness without resorting to dogmatic imposition?

THE RIVER PROJECT A Poetics of Eco-Critical Film-Making

‘Despite its thousand faces, the river takes on its single destiny; its source takes both the responsibility and the credit for the river’s entire course. The imagination barely takes tributaries into consideration. The dreamer who sees a river flow by calls up the legendary origin of the river, the far-off source.’ Bachelard (1983, p151)

‘Sometimes, if you stand on the bottom rail of a bridge and lean over to watch the river slipping slowly away beneath you, you will suddenly know everything there is to be known.’ Winnie the Pooh, A.A. Milne (1995, 12)

As a child I was attracted to flowing water. In my early teens I experienced the fear and awe of canoeing down the Snowy River. As an adult I find myself drawn to cross, swim, walk along, look into and film rivers.

Not to narrate, or even describe the river, but to use film to find a nonfiction form that acknowledges the river, writes to the river.

This river project seeks to identify the problems, potential solutions and opportunities in the production of a series of films that seeks to document a river, seeks out how it makes meaning – investigate its poetics. It uses the Snowy River as its site.

My ecological standpoint on the Snowy (though this extends to all rivers) not only deals with it as just a river, it also considers it as a system. I see the river and my filmmaking as systems that are intertwined. As much as I’d like to be able to simplify and narrow my making to the river itself I can’t ignore the fact that I’m dealing with a river that has been transformed by man. There are parts of the river not accessible by people other than on the water, but these stretches of the river have been greatly impacted by introduced flora and fauna, weeds and pests. The river has also been dammed and diverted, its water flow reduced drastically.

I’m keen to raise awareness of the parlous state of the environment and show how my production practices can become more sustainable by lowering my carbon footprint and by raising consciousness of changing production methods to further

achieve that. As result of this, and in keeping with the spirit of it, my filmmaking, its process and form, has to reflect that ethos.

In order for the river to reveal itself it must be listened to, observed then represented, without rhetoric. The intention being that my work does not talk about the river in a dogmatic way, rather that it allows the river to talk for itself: to give the viewer an opportunity to know the place in their own way. It is a subtle inversion of the usual question that many documentary makers and textbooks recommend asking: 'What do I want to say?' to, 'What needs to be said?'

The first film in the river project: *A View from the Bank*.

My desire for the first film was not to interpret the river; it was not to say anything about it. It was to learn how to document a river and to see if I could get to know the place by just being there, then knowing it through the camera.

The second film: *Journey Downstream*

I will travel down the sections of the Snowy that are inaccessible except by canoe. The film could be a series of POVs, i.e. humanised, personal – the antithesis of the first film, or a POV of a canoeist or a swimmer or an OTS of a canoeist – could we see the canoe? These POVs could be used for the next film.

I will determine the method of filming once there.

The final film: *Swimming the River*

Inspired by Roger Deakin's book, *Waterlogged*; John Cheevers' book and Frank Perry's film, *The Swimmer*; and Jonathan Glazers' film, *Under the Skin*. I will swim the length of the Snowy, then out to sea from the mouth. A fiction piece (obviously) that will utilise the methodologies of the previous films.

In the making of the first film and the planning of the others certain questions have arisen:

How can I create a method of working in my filmmaking that is in simpatico with the subject matter that the film is discussing?

How can I tread lightly, both literally and figuratively, on the landscape in the production of this project?

How do I go about devising a new method of eco-aesthetic filmmaking?

As we try to make meaning of the connections of our lives and world through film, Rust and Monani (2013) note that, “cinema is a form of negotiation, a mediation that is itself ecologically placed as it consumes the entangled world around it, and in turn, is itself consumed.”

This cycle of influence is evident in complex, poetic ways, and appears to me to revolve around the manner in which some films listen to the landscape, rather than seeking to impose themselves upon it.

Eco-criticism analyses texts that deal with the subject of nature. Most agree that it is generally narrowed to those texts that deal with environmental concerns, environmental change or degradation.

An issue at play is the stark difference between the types of films that are considered in eco-film criticism – the polar opposites of Hollywood to the avant-garde. David Ingram, ‘What are the implications for the activist ambitions and aesthetic tastes of eco-film criticism if “bad” art inspires people just as much as, if not more than, the “good”?’ (2013 p53). This does raise the question of why most of the works considered as eco-films are more of an avant-garde nature. Paula Willoquet-Marcondi (2010) suggests that what should be considered eco-cinema is those films that engage with environmental issues and that promote action. Others tend to look more broadly. Sean Cubbit (2005 p1) counters this narrowness of what can be considered an eco-film – ‘Though many films are predictably bound to the common ideologies of the day, including ideologies of nature, many are far richer in contradictions and more ethically, emotionally, and intellectually satisfying than much of what passes for eco-politics.’

Ingram (2013 p44) points to the efficacy of the avant-garde and its 'cognitive estrangement' that suits the delivery of eco-aesthetics: the state of environmental awareness.

On Andrej Zdravics' *Riverglass: A River Ballet in Four Seasons* (1997), '[It] transforms our conditioned relationship to time by demanding that we be patient and appreciative of something to which we rarely lend our attention. It asks us to see the river in its own terms, not in ours; to experience the river for itself, not for what resources it can provide us.'

Then, on the potential double-headed function of eco-cinema; to produce work that is sustainable and does not harm the environment and work that creates a different way to view the world. 'These films and videos are the inverse of the fundamentally hysterical approach of commercial media and advertising in particular, where consumption of the maximum number of images per minute models unbridled consumption of products and the unrestrained industrial exploitation of the environment within which these products are produced and consumed. [...] The job of eco-cinema is to provide new kinds of film experiences that demonstrates an alternative to conventional media spectatorship and help to nurture a more environmentally progressive mindset'.

Pat Brereton (2013 p214), '[T]here remains much dispute around both the function, as well as the efficacy, of representations of landscape in film, and ecological scholars will have to take on such aesthetic debates in the future to help develop a more robust eco-aesthetic for film studies.'

I seek to minimise my impact on the environment, and in doing so not impose myself on the river. In order to achieve this I needed to depart from industrial methods of film production. This departure requires experimentation with process.

Traditional methods of making non-fiction and fiction films, of which the majority of productions adhere to, are built upon efficiencies and expediencies that are

synonymous with late capitalism and the Anthropocene. This is most apparent in pre-production as it sets the scene for the rest of the production.

I chose to do minimal planning – I went to the source of the Snowy and started shooting. It was a ‘come what may’ approach, the intention being to allow the place and my process to talk to one another.

I kept the way I wanted to document the river simple. A lot of territory had to be covered. Each place on the river that I’d pinpointed would take at least half an hour to get to, sometimes hours – as it could be some distance from car to river. Initially my objective was to get as many shots as possible of the river. Industrial filmmaking calls this coverage, getting ‘enough’ footage so you can edit the story together.

Via car, bike or foot I’m delivered to the scene I want to capture. The landscape is sized up, evaluated, often from afar. A series of shots is tabulated in my mind. The route I will navigate through the ‘location’ and the points within that, that I choose to capture. The ‘knowledge’ of that landscape is built up as I traverse it. The paths through it are mapped out. River levels are observed, wondering what it will be like in a different season or when more or less water is released. I observe the way the landscape meets the water, how the river sits in it, where the light is coming from. In developing this new way of working a conundrum has arisen.

How can I reconcile the claim that I’m allowing the river to speak for itself whilst I’m forcing that dialogue into a process that is determined by the act of filming, however flexible and organic it is?

After the first shoot I established a set of constraints to assist with this reconciliation. They helped refine my method of working and were the basis of my eco-aesthetic approach.

They were to define my method of working.

The constraints:

No. 1 The shot must be locked off, still

No. 2 The focal length must be close to the human perspective

No. 3 The length of the recording must be over 40 seconds.

No. 4 Every shot recorded appears in the film.

No. 5 No humans. No me, no others. Just the river.

No. 1 The shot must be locked off, still

When you turn your head, pan it or are moving through space the movement is smooth and you concentrate on what you want to see (or so the brain tells us). It's different when that movement is done with a camera. Video recording and its compression have a difficult time processing a moving image, it can judder or flicker, but most importantly the viewer's eye cannot wander around the frame at will. It is directed by the frame and the composition, which invariably does not tally with the viewer's gaze.

This static frame, this stillness, is crucial to what I do. Every shot is meant to be a tableau.

When I go through this process of searching for the right shot and all the setup involved I'm conscious of how a landscape painter might feel, or a birdwatcher. James Benning talking to Scott MacDonald (2007) – '[W]hen I'm finding a frame, no language is involved: the little voice in my head is quiet; it doesn't say, "No, no, more to the right; no, not that far." I find each frame in a purely visual way - considering symmetry, negative space, meaning, color, texture, balance. [...] By not using language, I can communicate with myself much more efficiently. It's not intuitive but rather, a kind of fast thinking, based on years of experience.'

No. 2 The focal length must be close to the human perspective

The focal length is the distance measured in mm from the front lens to the sensor.

The camera's focal length is set, except for a few shots, to 50mm that in combination

with the camera's super 35mm sensor approximates the field of view of the naked eye.

The camera is always placed to approximate the human viewpoint. I did not shoot from a helicopter, nor did I place the camera on the ground or at the level of the water. I also avoided objects that loomed large in the foreground like trees or rocks as this draws attention to the camera's existence – a weird trope from bad fiction.

No. 3 The length of the recording must be over 40 seconds.

The viewer needs time to absorb the shot – time to wander around the frame, time to absorb, time to listen.

In figuring out the prescribed length of shot I knew that 10 or even 20 seconds was too short. 30 was probably enough but I went with 40. Depending on varying factors, this length of time can seem quite short and at others seem like an eternity.

It is a whole other investigation looking at what effect the length of a shot has.

Suffice to say that the longer the shot, the more things can happen. Peter Hutton talking on his film *The Study of a River*, 'I require, no, ask that the audience look at the shots with a meditative eye.' (MacDonald 2007 p65) And, James Benning again, 'First, the act of filming in that way is somewhat political just by taking a film variable and extending it through a place that most people don't live, so they are a bit uncomfortable maybe with the duration. But they are also then forced to have new readings of what they're looking at. So at first it might be a totally aesthetic experience, but hopefully through duration, that breaks down and there are hints in the image that become political or social.' (Panse 2013 p65)

The time it took – to find the right spot; to set up the shot; then the recording, with multiple shots being taken in each site – accumulated quickly, to hours. I would be absorbed as I stared at the landscape, observing the ripples on the water, watching the clouds, listening to the sound of the wind and watching its effect on the foliage.

No. 4 Every shot recorded appears in the film.

Because I was shooting and editing on my own, and because of the first three constraints, I was able to edit in camera. The length of the shot in the film is

determined by how long the recording is. I didn't slate or mark the shots because I wasn't handing the footage over to an editor, but I kept a notebook listing shot location and other details.

I would come in at the end of a day's shoot and transfer the footage off the card onto the computer. Then I would drag it into a timeline in the order it was shot. As the shoots followed the flow, from the source of the river to the mouth, the shots would be in that same order. A section of the river, the film shot and edited in one day.

But... Audio

The recording, laying up and editing of sound was not constrained in the same way as the vision editing as I knew I would disobey it. In order to replicate what we hear, or what we think we hear, it is rare that the sound can be sourced from one recording, one track of 'sync' audio. The babbling of the water; birds; insects; and the wind in trees, through grass and around rocks comes together to form a rich soundscape that we hear with the naked ear and that can only be created by recording the specific sounds, which are then layered up and mixed.

No. 5 No humans. No me, no others. Just the river.

The first four constraints are intended to immerse the viewer in the film. Similarly the minimal amount of postproduction was intended to do the same, further distancing the viewer from the fact that the film was made. In this film I didn't want the viewer to be conscious of me, the filmmaker. I didn't want it to be mediated by others either. All was designed to give the viewer an opportunity to know the river as I did in the planning and shooting.

The constraints allowed me to immerse myself further in the shooting process by not having to think about it. It gave me the time and energy to concentrate on what it was like to be there, made me more alert to my surroundings, and most importantly it made what I set out to do achievable. In a way it turns me into a machine that shoots without having to worry about the technical.

James Benning's film *Spiral Jetty* is a key inspiration for the development of my practice. Panse, again '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. (2013 p44)

The next steps I need to take in this project are about getting it do some work – realising its potential as an agency for change, alerting others to the state of the Snowy, or any environment that I, or others, investigate using my methodology. It could be applied to a mountain, a reef in the sea, or a lake, just as much as it could be to a river. These are just other systems. My filmmaking is a system and the interaction of my methods and the place where I work, a system also. In my teaching I run classes utilising this methodology for both under graduate and postgraduate students with the intention of getting future filmmakers to work in this way.

Prompted by Maxwell & Miller's, *The Real Future of the Media*, which 'focuses on the environmental impact of the media—the myriad ways that media technology consumes, despoils, and wastes natural resources.' (Maxwell 2013), my making will be conscious of and analysed for its sustainability. I will be calculating the carbon tonnage produced by my three trips to the Snowy, totalling 5000k or so, and looking at offsetting it. Of more importance, though, is raising awareness of the impact of filmmaking so that we think twice about, for example, taking multiple cars and larger crews when we could make do with one vehicle and a smaller crew. All in an attempt to reduce our carbon footprint – to tread lightly, literally which is part of the cycle that is producing work that treads lightly, figuratively.

Hopefully the finished films that I make – although the word 'finished' is problematic in my methods – maintain the undogmatic and humble approach that was undertaken in their making.

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