

The nature of ostension

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The Nature of Ostension

The initiating comparison for this essay is between two images, or shots; one appears in Jessica Sarah Rinland's *Black Pond* (2018), and shows two people looking offscreen, surrounded by dense woodland; the other is reprinted and described in Bruno Latour's essay "Circulating Reference" (1999) and shows three scientists near a border between a savanna and a forest, looking and gesturing in different directions. Rinland and Latour share an ethnographic interest in the material and gestural minutiae of scientific engagement with the non-human world. This essay explores their common interest in pointing, and in ostension more generally, as it emerges in both case studies. Latour provides a rich and suggestive framework through which to understand *Black Pond*, particularly in its conception of natural-history study as a multi-stage process of mediation, made up of tools and gestures and inferences—rather than the momentary encountering or witnessing often associated with eco-film aesthetics.

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The initiating comparison for this essay is between two images, or shots; one appears approximately three quarters of the way into Jessica Sarah Rinland's *Black Pond* (2018), and shows two people looking offscreen, surrounded by dense woodland; the other is reprinted and described in Bruno Latour's essay "Circulating Reference" (1999) and shows three people near a border between a savanna and a forest, looking and gesturing in different directions. It is important to say at the outset that Rinland and Latour share an ethnographic interest in what might be called the minutiae of scientific engagement with the non-human world—the stationery and measuring tools used for a particular survey, say, or the bodily position someone might adopt to reach an awkwardly situated specimen, or to confer with a colleague—and how that minutiae functions in the circulation of knowledge.

The human figure pointing is, on one level, another example of this, a kind of gestural technique which can be understood not (only) as an individualized action, but also as a component in a system of instruction, demonstration and representation. However, the pointing finger is more than this. It is an especially rich and significant type of action or activity, crystallizing some of the complex issues at play when a visual work "about" nature posits a connection between signifier and signified; issues pertaining to, for example, intention, scale and semiotic register. As Latour himself has it, "the extension of the index finger always signals an access to reality" (1999, 65), and it is no surprise that he has much to say in his "photo-philosophical account" (26) about the various implications of (photographed) hands pointing to maps and diagrams, as well as to

the environmental surroundings in the aforementioned image. Before exploring these implications in greater detail, and asking how they are refracted differently in Rinland's work, it is useful to establish in a little more detail the context and character of the two images in question.

The shot in *Black Pond* lasts approximately twenty seconds, and shows a man and a woman (presumably members of Elmbridge Natural History Society, in Southern England, about and with whom *Black Pond* was made) standing next to one another, in one-quarter profile, wearing matching beige bucket hats (Fig. 1). The woman points with her left index finger, arm extended, to something beyond the right-hand side of the frame. Just as she lowers her hand, he raises a pair of binoculars to his eyes, though only looks through these for a second. She resumes pointing, this time to something lower, and nearer; his looking seems to follow her direction, but we can't be sure of this. *Black Pond* documents activities carried out at Esher Common, in Surrey, by the Elmbridge Natural History Society. It offers its viewers virtually no contextual information about the site or the work carried out there, except by way of audio conversations which were recorded subsequent to the filming, in which participants respond in real time to footage of themselves. The film occludes human faces, and attends closely to the physical tools of the surveying. The shot described here is quite characteristic of the film, both stylistically (in its restrictive framing) and rhetorically (by emphasizing the manual experience of the volunteers).

The photograph in "Circulating Reference," due to its scale, framing and image quality, is more difficult to confidently describe or evoke (or indeed to reprint in the context of this

piece), but appears in the essay with detailed explication by Latour, who took the photograph. To paraphrase some key features of his account of the photograph: this is the Brazilian Amazon; there is a visible border between dry savanna and lush forest; three human subjects (a local botanist, a French pedologist, and a Brazilian geomorphologist) are crowded together at the far left of the frame; the botanist is pointing, the pedologist smiles at what he is shown, the geomorphologist writes in a small notebook.

What follows is not an exhaustive or detailed analysis of the two images, but a comparative exploration of the works in which they are embedded—*Black Pond* and “Circulating Reference”—guided by their shared subject, pointing. Latour’s essay provides a rich and suggestive framework through which to understand *Black Pond*, particularly in its conception of natural-history study as a multi-stage process of mediation, made up of tools and gestures and inferences (rather than a momentary encountering or witnessing). But to consider these works alongside one another also reveals ways in which a film—even one apparently in concert with Latour’s un-Romantic environmental imagination—will almost always be non-instrumental, too. For all its interest in human gestures and mediation, *Black Pond* does not straightforwardly illustrate the “chain of transformations” from natural phenomena to knowledge described by Latour (1999, 70), and I will develop an account of the film which attends to its capacities as a moving-image work—capacities which complicate and extend Latour’s chain. My account is not primarily or ultimately concerned with semiotics, but it is helpful to begin with a reflection on indexicality, to better understand why “pointing at nature,” in and beyond film, warrants critical attention in the field of environmental media studies.

Pointing

I have suggested that the pointing finger brings an inherent conceptual density to a visual-media work, such as a film or photograph.¹ A good way to understand, or illustrate, that density is by way of an essay by Mary Ann Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity” (2007). Exploring the Piercean index, and its status in film theory, Doane considers the significant but often-overlooked distinction between two different types of index. The first, the index as trace or material consequence of the referent, is the one most familiar to film theory through Bazinian formulations of cinematic ontology, and to visual-art theory more generally through Roland Barthes’s writing (for example) on the present pastness of the photographic image. The second type of index, the deixis, is not like a footprint or a mercury thermometer; it is not a residue or an effect of the referent, but is rather something that compels our attention towards the referent. In language, the demonstrative adjectives “this” and “that” perform this role, words which Doane suggests are verbal equivalents of the pointing finger (136), by dint of how they “designat[e] something without describing it” (133). Martin Lefebvre also distinguishes between these *direct* and *indirect* indexical relations, and like Doane invokes the pointing figure as a privileged example of indirect indexicality (2007, 231). What is at stake for both writers is not the appearance or deployment of pointing in images, but rather the nature or quality of the signification mobilized by a pointing finger, a kind of sign which, as Doane explains, “exhausts itself in the moment of its implementation and is ineluctably linked to presence” (136).

But Doane goes on to explore the more particular relevance of this to



Fig. 1: *Black Pond* (Jessica Sarah Rinland, 2018).

moving images, noting the tendency for film scholars to describe and celebrate the direct indexicality of moving photographic images, recorded light as a trace of actuality. What, asks Doane, becomes of *indirect* indexicality in film? After all, “the mandatory emptiness of the signifier ‘this’ contrasts sharply with the abundance of the cinematic image, its perceptual plenitude, its seemingly inevitable iconicity, and hence would seem to be absolutely incompatible with cinematic signification” (2007, 136). It seems to be a linguistic maneuver with no cinematic equivalent. But, Doane demonstrates, this is not the case. As well as identifying rare but significant examples of filmmakers experimenting with indirect indexicality, such as Michael Snow’s *So Is This* (1982), she considers the film frame itself as a kind of indirect index: “The frame directs the spectator to look here, now, while the trace reconfirms that something exists to be looked at” (140).

That a film camera is *pointed* towards its object seems so simple as to be hardly worth reflecting on, until one considers (with Doane, Lefebvre and others) the complexity of pointing itself. Dudley Andrew (drawing on Charles F. Altman) famously summarized canonical film-theoretical approaches by distinguishing between film as framed image, film as window, and film as mirror (1984, 12–13). Doane’s approach helps to remind us that each of these film-spectatorial experiences or encounters has a heightened and inescapable pointedness by virtue of the frame. One might say that film images are not only haunted by pastness, but also a gestural instruction to *look at this*, as if the object of an image were not just on display, but being decisively shown to us—at the expense of other alternative objects, and at a given moment for a particular purpose. As if it were being pointed to.

I propose that this intriguing quality of film rhetoric takes on a particular character in the case of works addressing environmental and ecological objects and themes. While there is always a stimulating ambiguity about the “proper” subject of a shot (do we watch *what* Cary Grant does, *how* he does it, *that* he does it...?), this seems to become amplified when looking at non-human matter. It is not always clear at which scale we should be understanding such images (do we watch *this* animal or this *species* of animal, this *tree* or this *habitat*...?), and the absence or marginalization of human figures weakens many of the coordinates by which we would normally interpret a shot or sequence. So when a film we watch “points at” environmental subjects, so to speak, the effect can be quite different to when it points at a restaurant dinner or a car chase. It is not quite so self-evident what we are looking at; it is a little like being shown something to consider, rather than receiving the next link in causal chain of events.

Black Pond is, like other Rinland films, especially *Those That, at a Distance, Resemble Another* (2019), preoccupied with human hands, and their role in various types of communication, action and sociability—including, on a number of occasions, pointing. And it is, at a basic level, about nature, centering trees and plants and animals. But perhaps the most interesting quality of *Black Pond* is how these two approaches interact, and the uncertainty generated in the film about showing and being shown. On numerous occasions, the audience sees someone handle a tool or a specimen in such a way that *seems* to be for the benefit of a camera, but by the same token is what members of the Natural History Society presumably, normally do. Does the film document

people indicating natural objects to one another, or itself indicate those objects to the audience? While on the one hand offering its viewer plenty of pleasures and effects by way of the familiar realm of direct indexicality (natural light and color, unrehearsed human gestures born directly from profilmic actuality), *Black Pond* is also marked by a strong sense of indirect indexicality, and could be said to take as one of its subjects the act of pointing, literal and otherwise, through which representation is enacted. So when we see (in the shot described above) one person point to something offscreen, for the benefit of the person next to them, and the film does not show us the object of this pointing, it is not just intriguing in isolation, but as part of a broader pattern or logic across the work as a whole.

Latour's image likewise sits in the context of a larger work concerned with address, representation and non-human subjects, only here the ideas are unpacked through written argument and elucidation. "Circulating Reference" is a philosophical essay about scientific research, examining how evidence of or from the material world becomes text—not through a single-step translation from nature to language (described by Latour as a footbridge over a chasm), but through multiple stages and practices embedded in scientific methods. "Scientists master the world," writes Latour, "but only if the world comes to them in the form of two-dimensional, superposable, combinable inscriptions" (1999, 29). This is not for Latour a matter of regret or mistrust, but it is something of which to be mindful; extracting phenomena from the real world in order for it to be represented as data makes for an unavoidable trade off, between immediacy and universality, at each stage of the journey.

Why, in this context, is Latour interested in pointing? Coming at the start of his essay, the photograph I described above sits in a kind of originating or seminal position in the process he tracks. Scientists in the field identify, through distinction, a subject; "our friends were immersed in a world in which distinct features could be discerned only if pointed out with a finger" (1999, 29). Pointing subtly but significantly initiates a process, or chain, through which the complex world is focused and reduced. A short while later, Latour notices a tree labelled with a number, and realizes that he seems to be in a laboratory rather than a forest. Although he does not say so explicitly, this tree label could be understood as the next link in the chain after pointing. The tree has not yet been reduced to a sample in a university laboratory, but we are on this trajectory. To approach pointing as Latour does here is to treat it as something slightly different from a human gesture as it is often understood. Laura Mulvey, for example, writes that "gesture hovers on the brink of meaning, suggesting but resisting," expressing something "ineffable" (2015, 7). But the botanist is not (primarily) expressing herself through pointing, she is deploying her hand as a tool, and one which reconfigures the situation from "people by a forest" to "scientists on site."

The critical questions opened by Latour's image and accompanying writing are germane to *Black Pond*. More specifically, Rinland's film could be said to build on Latour's interest in pointing by offering a document of subtle variations on that gesture. In my reading of the film, I will pay attention to these variations—when something or someone onscreen seems to directing our attention, but without us confidently knowing the gesture's intentionality, or indeed how

its communicative function is informed by the fact that it is filmed. I will also address the question of how this engagement with ostensive gestures situates *Black Pond* in relation to other screen work about similar subjects.

Black Pond

Exploring the variations on pointing that are to be found in *Black Pond*, it is instructive to begin by returning to the shot which initiated the analysis underway here—that of the man and the woman pointing offscreen. To have people look beyond the frame so intently, and not show us the focus of their looking, might often in a film generate suspense or playfulness. But in *Black Pond*, as we have seen, there is a pattern of attention to people's modes of engaging their environment, such that pointing *in itself* is not so incongruous a subject for a shot. Rather than an invitation to align our view of the surroundings with that of a character or human subject, as might often be the case in a film, *Black Pond* here presents us with pointing as a mechanism—one of many itemized in the film—by which such surroundings become subject to attention and study. (As a thought experiment, it is telling to consider how this effect would be dampened by a point-of-view shot.)

Earlier in the film, there is another shot of explicit pointing, but with different implications. It comes during a sequence of the film documenting the group's work collecting moth specimens, and shows a crowded table (apparently outside, at night), adorned with specimen containers and moth guidebooks, harshly lit by a desk lamp. Someone's left hand holds a container with a specimen, and someone's right hand points to a particular diagram in one of the books (Fig. 2). It is almost beyond question that the bearer of this pointing is positing a connection between the

specimen and the diagram (probably “look, they align,” but possibly “no, see this discrepancy”), and once again it is a conspicuous mark of the film's approach that we remain oblivious to the connection. Unlike the shot previously discussed, this one *does* show us the object of the point (albeit a small and blurred image), but the knowledge or insight disclosed by this is partial to say the least. Not only is the meaning of the pointer's claim or assertion impossible to glean, but the image itself indexically refers, or points, to many other living beings, given its role as a representative illustration in a guidebook. For all its apparent assertiveness, this pointing finger sits in a chain or network, and does not answer the question “at what should we look?”

In these shots, the work of the Natural History Group involves pointing, and Rinland's camera documents it accordingly. There are many more shots in which there are no pointing gestures as such, but similar questions about address are nevertheless kept in play—questions, returning to Doane, about indirect indexicality, and about film's (often overlooked) capacity to foreground its demonstrative dimension. A good example of this tendency is in moments and actions involving some kind of measurement, given that the “results,” although possibly legible to the film viewer, are unlikely to be particularly valid or meaningful taken out of context. When we see a closely framed shot of a tree trunk, against which a pair of hands hold a measuring tape (Fig. 3), there is a significant gap between the profilmic action (a measurement of the tree's girth), and what viewers of *Black Pond* register—which I would describe as the camera's attention to this measuring activity. Precisely because the numbers are unreadable or even meaningless, we



Fig. 2: *Black Pond* (Jessica Sarah Rinland, 2018).

notice that the act of measurement is being pointed out to us.

The measuring tape is one of the clearest equivalents in *Black Pond* of the tree label noted by Latour, something which reconfigures a seemingly natural space or location into a laboratory. And I have suggested that, as viewers, we register the fact that we are being shown the tape as much as the tape itself. But how does all this affect how we see the tree, or whatever natural object is being studied in such shots? Another, earlier moment in *Black Pond* helps us tease out some these implications. A little over a minute into the film, we see two people standing at a green and mature shrub. Their faces are not properly visible, and we only see slithers of their bodies at either side of the frame, but it is clear straightaway that they are not casual passers-by, or stopping at this location arbitrarily. The figure on the left holds some kind of electronic measurement device, whilst the one on the right handles a branch with considerable precision and purpose, as if looking for evidence of something. Cut to a closer shot of a hand (apparently that of the same man, at more or less the same time) pinching a small branch, and moving it from left to right, up and down (Fig. 4). Even without the involvement of tools or pointing, the gesture brings the promise or suggestion of the foliage being linked to prior and subsequent stages of environmental enquiry.

Will the measuring device “translate” this specimen into some kind of data, for further dissemination and circulation? If so, and if this fate is the ostensible subject of the shot, then how do we look at the shrub itself? Is it for the viewer, too, now an object of study, something removed from its ecological embeddedness as a result of being singled out for examination? Or is the opposite the case, and we

actually become attuned to that in the natural object which eludes scrutiny (its poetry, one might even say)—appreciating its independence and otherness all the more because these qualities are being missed or misread through quantitative investigation? In considering this, we return to Doane’s description of “the abundance of the cinematic image, its perceptual plenitude,” qualities that are often treasured and celebrated in films attending to natural environments. (And as I explore below, these qualities re-emerge towards the end of the film.) *Black Pond* develops a rare, critically astute and carefully achieved tension between this kind of overflow—a moving image of the world shows us so *much*—and the effort to delimit and to delineate—look at *this*—for the sake of understanding and communication. Decidedly un-Romantic principles of control, measurement and containment are here treated as necessary currency for carefully understanding the non-human world. In his defense of the laboratory as a setting for natural-science research, Bruno Latour is skeptical about the ideal of immersion: “What would be the point of transporting the whole forest here? One would get lost in it” (1999, 36). (He also writes that “in losing the forest, we win knowledge of it.” [38]) Rinland likewise has little interest in disowning mediation, and films *Black Pond* accordingly—but does so knowing that moving images are fated to show more than “this” or “that.”

Natural history

By eschewing ideas of nature as transcendent or sublime, or by not investing in cinema’s potential to access that transcendence or sublimity, *Black Pond* has an affinity with British natural-history films of the 1920s and ‘30s, most notably *Secrets of Nature* (1919–1934). A popular and



Fig. 3: *Black Pond* (Jessica Sarah Rinland, 2018).



Fig. 4: *Black Pond* (Jessica Sarah Rinland, 2018).

influential series of public-education films, *Secrets of Nature* consisted of moving-image studies of subjects such as ants, birds, rivers, moths, flowers, fish and bees. The films focused on species likely to be broadly familiar to British audiences (though they also circulated globally through imperial distribution networks). The films were not *transportive* in the way we expect of much contemporary wildlife documentary, and Caroline Hovanec (2019) has argued that they are in fact best understood in the context of modernist theories and values of the period, particularly those relating to the medium of film. “Early natural history films,” she writes, “and the film culture that elevated them, made a space where even those who preferred the new, the artificial, and the abstract could find a way to appreciate plants, animals, crystals, and other natural objects” (246). This was a mode, in other words, that attended to the natural world without recourse to naiveite, pastoralism or nostalgia. And it posited the filmmaking artist less an author, and more as a “critic, collector or editor,” artistic roles of increasing significance and distinction in the modernist ‘20s and ‘30s.

Hovanec goes on to describe the critical context for *Secrets of Nature*:

Classical film theory is part of the modernist discourse that embraced the arts of ostension over those of production. It saw cinema, especially the natural history genre, as one such art, pointing to objects and creatures in the natural world and saying, “There!” without fixing or mastering them. (252)

The indirect indexicality of *Black Pond* can thus be understood in a longer film-historical context, in which ostension (or pointing) recurs as a critically motivated maneuver for engaging with the non-human. Hovanec quotes Oliver Gaycken on

the subject of ostensive intrusion in *Secrets of Nature* and similar films: “the defining image of the early popular science film is the human hand, which ‘consistently invades the image, poking, prodding, manipulating, breaking, dissecting,’ and thereby reminding viewers that this representation of ‘nature’ is in fact meticulously crafted” (254). This is a telling observation, but it is worth asking why the presence of a hand need necessarily constitutes an “invasion” of the image, and whether the hand can instead be understood as a subject inextricably bound up (in terms of signification) with the plants and animals to which it refers. This is, I suggest, what we find in *Black Pond*.

Returning to Latour’s photograph of the on-site researchers at the outskirts of a forest, with one member of the group pointing to vegetation—“little figures lost in the landscape, pushed off to the side as in a painting by Poussin” (Latour 1999, 25)—we could likewise note that the human presence is integral to the image, rather than a corrupting or invasive presence. But this is hardly a significant insight, given that the ostensible and intended subject of the photograph seems to have been the activities of scientific research. And for Latour, the meaningful or semiotic richness of the gesture really relies on its position in a chain or series of scientific techniques, tools and practices—which were tied to a specific research expedition, and which are photographically and discursively documented throughout the essay. *Black Pond* is much more circumspect in its relationship to specifics of time and place. No credits or aural information orient the viewer, and although Rinland overlays audio commentaries by Society volunteers describing and reflecting on the activities they performed on film (for example, capturing moth samples),

this hardly serves to “ground” the film or secure its geographical or temporal location. The absence of what we might conventionally read as establishing shots also makes it difficult to assume or presume much about the setting (for example, in which country this takes place). The effect is instead *unsettling* in the fullest sense of the word; filmed subjects lose some of their self-sufficiency, and become noticeably contingent on other information. While Latour traces a circular, reversible line connecting different staging posts in the process of scientific enquiry and representation, Rinland offers something more fragmentary. Ostensive gestures in *Black Pond* certainly point beyond the film, but from where and to where is far from clear.

One way to better understand how this mode of ecocritical engagement on the part of the film differs from that which we find in many films about nature, is by way of James Leo Cahill’s writing about natural history as a method of film study and interpretation. For Cahill, natural history is not so much a genre of screen media, but rather an approach one can consciously adopt, a deliberate alertness to the historicized conditions of filmed subjects:

As they age, all films—documentary or fiction—become potential natural history films in the Frankfurt and surrealist understanding of the term. Their environments become increasingly legible as historically contingent negotiations of the created and the found, of artificial and organic ecosystems, and of collective endeavors to manage or re-create them. Nature films, in their historical afterlives, offer a disquieting address to a present marked by ecological precarity. They become more visibly human, cultural, and

expressive of the filmmakers’ fantasies about animals, milieu, and the world beyond the human being, taking on the appearance of ecological ruins—but also ruins of a mentalité regarding animals and ecosystems—as their original referents retreat, become critically endangered, and disappear. (2019, 156)

Although it would certainly be rash and naïve to claim that *Black Pond* is free of fantasies about “animals, milieu, and the world beyond the human being,” I suggest that Rinland anticipates or pre-empts some of what Cahill describes here as the inadvertent fate of nature films. Partly because of its interest in and tracing of ostension, the film is *already* registering “negotiations of the created and the found, of artificial and organic ecosystems, and of collective endeavors to manage or re-create them.” It is particularly telling that Cahill describes the process in semiotic terms, as a retreat of the referents (understood to be the non-human subjects). Similarly, *Black Pond* makes no claims to refer to or document a nature beyond or outside human endeavor.

***Black Pond’s* coda**

I have so far characterized *Black Pond* in quite holistic, synoptic terms, as if its aesthetic and ecocritical methods are steady from start to finish. It is indeed a very coherent film, but with significant variety; moving, for example, between still and moving images, night and day, diegetic and non-diegetic (or post-diegetic) sound. One particularly conspicuous feature of the film’s structure is its final sequence—a series of 13 shots across four minutes, and by some distance the longest section of the film to feature no explicit or discernible human presence. This tally of 13

may well be arbitrary or accidental, but it nevertheless recalls James Benning's series of unpeopled shots in his *13 Lakes* (2004) (which in turn recalls Wallace Stevens's famous poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"). Throughout the sequence in *Black Pond*, the camera is almost entirely stationary, and there is (as in Benning's films) a compositional exactness to the images, particularly in their carefully arranged contrasts between light and shade across the trunks of felled, mature trees. But in many respects the coda to *Black Pond* differs quite significantly from Benning's method, or what Alison Butler (2017) describes as its *dispositif* (to take one important contrast, Rinland's shots vary significantly in duration). Most obviously, the sequence takes on a particularly meaningful potential by virtue of it appearing after many sequences of ostensive human gestures. It implicitly asks us to consider how one looks at, or sees, screened nature after having been gesturally or pointedly shown it. What is gained, lost or felt in that shift?

The sequence can certainly be said to shed some of the layers of indexical complexity which (I have argued) characterize much of the film; it is cognitively more straightforward, posing fewer questions for its spectator about where, and on what grounds, to direct attention. But while this may bring with it a degree of ease, there is on the other hand an uneasiness which comes with the absencing of the human, an effect not unlike that achieved in the famous coda of Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* (1962). Although *Black Pond* has been indirect and oblique in its figuration of people (isolated body parts, unidentified voices, etc.), it has nevertheless been a film about a human community, and—crucially—has invited its viewers to take up a relationship with the filmed environment which emulates

that community's own relationship to it; one of carefully directed inquisitiveness, repeatedly figured in the act of pointing. When the film, at its end, severs or digresses from this alignment with the Elmbridge Natural History Society, its address becomes more generalized. (To put it crudely, we seem to now be looking at "nature" rather than Esher Common and its inhabitants.) Of course, the camera still points at that which it faces, but the lack of visible human mediation or direction seems to shift the indexical parameters of the film. After 35 minutes of showing its viewers *this* and *that*, *Black Pond* closes with something more like a series of impressions, a key change in its mode of representation. What we register at the end (light, texture, movement, otherness) are direct-indexicality effects. The shots are beautiful, but the loosening of focus—or at least the change in mode—is palpable.

The stages of progressive abstraction described by Latour, in which natural phenomena become more knowable as the human position in relation to that phenomena becomes more distant, includes no such return to or emergence of affective connection. As we have seen, Latour posits the act of pointing as the initiating gesture—like the tipping of a first domino—in a chain of moves whereby scientific understanding is *amplified* as immediacy is *reduced* (Latour's terms). He writes:

Stage by stage, we lost locality, particularity, materiality, multiplicity and continuity, such that, in the end, there was scarcely anything left but a few leaves of paper [...] But at each stage we have not only reduced, we have also gained or regained, since, with the same work of representation, we have been able to obtain much greater compatibility, standardization, text calculation, circulation, and relative universality. (1999, 70)

In his evocative and provocative descriptions of these stages, as they played out in the Brazilian field trip about which he writes, Latour is particularly fascinated by the role of an object called the “pedocomparator,” a framed grid of small cardboard compartments which allows pedologists to survey and compare individual samples. For Latour, “in the regularity of its cubes, their disposition in columns and rows, their discrete character, and the possibility of freely substituting one column for another,” the pedocomparator is a physical means through which “the world of things may become a sign” (48). For those of us engaged in critical discussions about screen representations of the natural world, this tool will also bring to mind the opportunities and implications of montage. In both we find the deliberate arrangement of individual components, allowing for meaning and insight to emerge through comparison and counterpoint. Both grant a kind of supremacy, power and knowledge to a subject who is absent from the original, “real” locale. (In other words, the affordances of these modes are incompatible with embodied presence and immersion.) The coda of *Black Pond*, which is amongst other things a quietly striking episode of montage, offers us something which is unattainable at Esher Common. Like the pedocomparator and other scientific maneuvers detailed by Latour, it has selected and retrieved and deployed constituents of the world in such a way that its value can only come at a phenomenological cost. We are seeing the world *like this* precisely because we are not there, now.

But the pedocomparator obliges pointing, and the montage does

not. The arrangement of specimens is inert until someone selects and gestures towards them, prompting hypothesizing and enquiry and reflection. A film sequence, by contrast, has a self-sufficiency and an expressiveness because that selection and ordering has already happened; the pointing is implicit and contained within the arrangement, it is part of its “perceptual plenitude” (Doane 2007, 136). For much of *Black Pond*, selection and ordering and arrangement have been foregrounded and emphasized, and this closing passage is a distinct shift in tone and mode. At its finale, *Black Pond* starts to look more familiar (perhaps even generic) as an “eco film”—but, crucially, there remains the residue of a film which has framed our relationship with nature as one of reference, and not revelation.

Conclusion

In her Afterword to the recently published *Ecocinema Theory and Practice 2*, Jennifer Fay reflects on the field of ecocritical film studies, and on the disciplinary awakening to cinema’s particular relationship with nature:

It merits emphasizing both how true and how utterly strange it is that this technology, a product of the industrial revolution that is mechanical, synthetic, wholly unnatural, and devoid of so many of the other sensory outputs, can teach us to perceive something like “nature,” or our kinship with “animals” as these phenomena recede from everyday experience. (242–243)

I suggest that this strangeness is most stark or apparent with regard to films which position themselves as (or are understood as) media through which an audiovisual “meeting” with nature is negotiated. To return to an example already cited, James Benning’s *13 Lakes* could be said to

exemplify Fay's contradiction; it is a formal construction of absolute, unapologetic artificiality and fabrication, but also one from which viewers are likely to emerge with a genuinely enriched sensitivity to non-human otherness. Ilan Safit's celebration of the medium's capacity for this is, I think, indicative of quite broadly shared impulses in eco-film studies: "the cinematic image mediates the world, but at the same time brings us into immediate contact with a vision, with an image of the world" (2014, 213). *Black Pond* is, I contend, marked by a relative lack of immediacy. I have tried to demonstrate its qualities as a work of ostension, as a film in which ostensive gestures—most notably pointing—alter the coordinates by which we understand its ecocritical

project. It does not purport to achieve the directness or revelation conjured up in Safit's phrase, but to point at nature, and to therefore be just one of many human methods by which Esher Common becomes knowable.

For Latour, there is nothing "utterly strange" in the fact people use mechanical and synthetic tools in their efforts to perceive nature. It would do Rinland and *Black Pond* a disservice to claim that the film illustrates Latour's conception of ecological knowledge in any kind of direct way, but it certainly shares with "Circulating Reference" a conception of environmental representation as something always incomplete, and contingent on prior and subsequent stages of understanding. Pointing finds an important place, for both, in this representational process.

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1/ A recent exhibition at Barcelona's La Virreina Centre de la Imatge, *Ça-a-Été? Contra Barthes*, curated by Joan Fontcuberta, collected a number of photographs to demonstrate and explore this curious relationship between pointing and photography. I am grateful to Albert Elduque Busquets for bringing this to my attention.

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