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Making Pictures

Melissa Magnuson

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“Being” outside in the landscape, is an idea that has progressed from a necessity to pleasure seeking over the last centuries as humans transitioned from working the land as a source of sustenance and income to the industrialization of modernity. Small, family owned farms and ranches have been repurposed to commercial production or residential developments for the suburbs of cities. Holidays to remote areas are routinely scheduled by workers who spend their days providing services to their fellow city dwellers; banking, factory production, retail sales, mass transit operation, architectural design, electrical engineering, medical, rubbish collection, postal delivery, teaching, etc. Most of their labour does not include any time in what is perceived as a natural environment, unlike their human predecessors whose existence depended upon a commingling with all the elements of an outside world that did not suffer or benefit from the second nature world we live in today. The weather, animals, plants, ground, shelter, water and food sources were a daily consideration for the human ancestors of the engineer who now holidays in locations like the ice caves in Iceland or the doctor who travels to the wilderness of Katmai peninsula in Alaska with the specific intention of shooting photography of grizzly bears with Nikon D4s, secondary 810s and go-pros along with an assortment of “glass” accompanied by bear guides, photography tutors and every possible type of clothing to remain comfortable in the “natural environment”.

In Alaska for ten days, the photographer spends hours each day in a location by riverbank, observing the water teeming with wild salmon and waiting for fishing bears to wander by for a photo shoot. Waiting quietly on a folding tripod seat, sometimes standing to stretch, sometimes gazing at the mountains or the sky with a mosquito net over her head and coffee thermos in hand, camera gear unpacked and assembled in military precision so that when the moment comes she is ready to shoot. It is cold and raining, the wind blows, her fingers are numb and unable to change the lens as the bears come closer. She must remove the mosquito netting to look in the view finder, the tripod is not at the right height as the bears move very close, passing within two meters. She makes use of the other camera, fires off a dozen shots and the moment is over, the mother bear and cubs are down the river. These images will become the trophies of “wilderness” experience as she settles into her workspace existence for another year.

As they attempt to consume the wilderness landscape, much of the ten days were spent separating themselves from it by battling equipment, clothing and weather. Memories of the experience become confined to the brief moments captured digitally of encounters with bears, as a complete engagement with “being” on the Katmai Peninsula did not take place. Participating as photographers implicates them as observers, watching animals in their habitat. The weather is treated as an object and dealt with by using various gear and clothing, preventing immersion in the sound, sight and touch of the Alaskan landscape and creating distance from it.

In Martin Heidegger’s book *Being and Time*, he refers to human beings as inseparable from the world even though “being in the world” creates a difference.

What does being-in mean? We supplement the expression being-in right away with the phrase “in the world,” and are inclined to understand this being-in as “being in”. With this term the kind of being of a being is named which is “in” something else, as water is “in” the glass, the dress is “in” the closet. By this “in” we mean the relation of being that two beings extended “in space have to each other with regard to their location in that space. Water and glass, dress and closet, are both “in” space “at” a location in the same way. The relation of being can be

expanded; that is the bench in the lecture hall, the lecture hall in the university, the university in the city, and so on until the bench in “the cosmos”.¹

The short observational film titled *Making Pictures* produced in conjunction with this essay questions but also constructs layers of distance between the viewer, the protagonists and the landscape in the film as photographers are observed going about in remote locations engrossed in the mechanics of equipment and battling weather issues, intent upon capturing preconceived notions of images for their digital libraries.

Other films that challenge the practice of photography are *What I'm Looking For*, written, shot and edited by Shelly Silver in 2004 and Chris Marker's *Si j'avais 4 dromadaires* produced in 1966. In Silver's film, scenarios are constructed to photograph people in public by arrangements on social media, the viewers invited to observe the filmmaker meeting and shooting photography in accordance with the participants' wishes. The distance between the filmmaker/photographer in the video and the subjects is interrogated. Still photography is used in the film and questions develop regarding documentary and fiction, real versus imagined space.² In Marker's film, an amateur photographer and two friends look at still images that were made in worldwide locations; from Japan to Cuba via China, Russia, Sweden, Italy and France. The filmmaker reflects on art photography and ethical considerations regarding responsibility and socialism as images of streets, faces, landscapes and animals are discussed by voiceover, the protagonists never appearing on camera.³

In *Making Pictures*, the camera also becomes a protagonist in the film and a camera consciousness is developed as the making of the film itself is inserted in the narrative. The film producer asks questions about photography practice to those on the trips, and probes the expectations they have for the images and what the usage will be. The camera sees differently than the human eye, and that observation becomes an issue of subjective

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010): 54.

² “What I'm Looking For,” Electronic Arts Intermix, 2015, accessed 28 April 2015, <http://www.eai.org/title.htm?id=9876>.

³ “Si j'avais quatre dromadaires,” International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, 2014, accessed 30 April 2015, <http://www.idfa.nl/industry/tags/project.aspx?id=7c960200-f01c-40e8-898b-86763d329224>

truth in the film as the resulting images from the shooting location are edited, managed and compiled for the film in a similar way the subjects in the film edit, compile and manage photos from their experience. There was no intervention in the filmmaking process and the photographers were aware the film was being made, participating in photography, filming and audio recordings as the filmmaker's camera recorded situations and actions as they happened. As they were completely engaged with their own process of photography there was not an apparent indication that the presence of the filmmaker's camera affected the behavior of photographers in the film, although the question was raised by Bill Nichols in his book *Introduction to Documentary*.⁴

The degree to which people's behavior and personality change during the making of a film can introduce an element of fiction into the documentary process (the root meaning of fiction is to make or fabricate). Self-consciousness and modifications in behavior can become a form of misrepresentation, or distortion, in one sense, but they also document the ways in which the act of filmmaking alters the reality it sets out to represent.⁵

Observational techniques of time duration employed in the film convey a sense of real time to the viewer in the reality of a photographer's day, as they wait... and wait, for better light, better weather, the subject to appear, the unwanted elements to disappear. The landscape also becomes a protagonist in the film as the introduction of animals, insects, wind, rain, ice, mud and water have an impact on the photographers' ability to move about and work with the equipment. The sounds of weather and animals question the perspective and the filmmaker's participation in the landscape. There is a sense that the photographers are encroaching on the landscape, and questions arise regarding the relationship between animals and humans as well as the impact of humans to the environment in the age of the anthropocene. The theme of nature as a value concept is interrogated, as the human protagonists are revealed to be imprisoned by their constructed environments. Georg Lukacs comments on this in *History and Class Consciousness*,

⁴ Bill Nichols, "What types of documentary are there?," in *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001): 107

⁵ Bill Nichols, "What are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?," in *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001): 5.

Nature thereby acquires the meaning of what has grown organically, what was not created by man, in contrast to the artificial structures of human civilisation. But, at the same time, it can be understood as that aspect of human inwardness which has remained natural, or at least tends or longs to become natural once more.⁶

The animals in the wilderness of the Alaskan Katmai peninsula have become players in the spectator sport of outdoor photography, coinciding with the disappearance of animals living a natural existence in an urban, industrialized world. In the late 19th century, modern zoos were established and animals began touring for entertainment in circus productions, and “pets” became part of the family home. It is currently estimated that 70-80 million dogs and 74-96 million cats are owned in the United States. Approximately 37-47% of all households in the United States have a dog, and 30-37% have a cat.⁷ In *Why Look at Animals*, John Berger discussed the transitions that have taken place,

The marginalization of animals is today being followed by the marginalization and disposal of the only class who, throughout history, has remained familiar with animals and maintained the wisdom which accompanies that familiarity: the middle and small peasant.⁸

The Koyukon, native American people indigenous to western Alaska maintain an intimate relationship with the land and animals, explored in Richard Nelson’s study written as a result of living with the people in their environment for more than a year. The Koyukon believe the earth and all living beings were formed in an era called ‘Distant Time’, and a strict code of rules from that time lay the foundation for conduct that people are obligated to follow,

⁶ Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness* (Great Britain: The Merlin Press Ltd, 1971): 136

⁷ “Pet Statistics,” ASPCA, 2014, accessed 29 April 2015, <https://www.asPCA.org/about-us/faq/pet-statistics>

⁸ John Berger, *Why Look at Animals* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2009): 36.

the Koyukon must move with the forces of their surroundings, not attempting to control, master or fundamentally alter them.⁹

Nelson continues to describe places loaded with meaning at different levels for the Koyukons, some locations having a spiritual connection to the Distant Time of creation, others that were the scene of deaths and therefore avoided as long as the memory lingers, still others recognized for particular hunting experiences or encounters with animals, all bearing inscription to the landscape with history of humans and animals produced through co-existence. Nelson describes the “reality” of the Koyukons as a cultural relativism, as there is a discrepancy between the Koyukon’s relationship to their environment and his own ‘Euro-American’ background,

reality is not the world as it is perceived directly by the senses; reality is the world as it is perceived by the *mind* through the medium of the senses. Thus reality in nature is not just what we see, but what we have *learned* to see.¹⁰

It is all about watching and being watched. Familiarity with the world is about living in it, exploring it, being vigilantly alert to detect unfolding events. Learning to see is not a matter of establishing architecture for subjectively designing the environment but rather a honing of experience to directly engage with all components, human and non-human, animate and non-animate. In his book *Body and Image*, Christopher Tilley describes walking the landscape as an attempt to understand the landscape at a human scale.

The limits of this knowledge are thus essentially the limits of the body and the manner in which this body both limits and facilitates perception. The objective is to gain an insider’s knowledge of place and landscape, as opposed to a knowledge acquired by mediated representations which can only provide an outsider’s perspective. The vast majority of landscape research is thoroughly mediated by various representations and abstracted technologies...provided by texts, photographs, paintings, sketches, maps or the entire discursive panoply by which we normally inform ourselves about places and landscapes.

⁹ Richard Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986): 240.

¹⁰ Richard Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986): 239.

The Koyukon hunter observes changes in the environment and conditions that the Western observer does not acknowledge, not because the hunter has a unique construction for gathering sensory data, but because it is a requirement to keenly scrutinize significant landscape features as it is critical to the success of his endeavors. That data is not in the mind but in the outside environment, and its importance resides in the relational context of the hunter's engagement with the constituents of that world. Tim Ingold describes the Koyukon hunter as follows,

the more skilled the hunter, the more knowledgeable he becomes, for with a finely honed perceptual system, the world will appear to him in greater richness and profundity. New knowledge comes from creative acts of discovery rather than imagining, from attending more closely to the environment rather than reassembling one's picture of it along new conceptual lines.¹¹

The code of conduct from the Koyukon culture's "Distant Time" suggests humans are a small and somewhat insignificant part of the world and the appropriate role of humankind is to serve a dominant nature. The natural universe is cast as omnipotent and human beings can only ensure their future through respectful acts and reconciliation. The Koyukon believe they must move with the forces of their surroundings without attempting to alter or control them, yielding to nature rather than defying it.¹²

The attempt to alter the environment through perception also takes place in the studios of artists who produce work that records contemplative experiences while interrogating the viewers relation to the ecologies observed. Writer Oliver Lowenstein takes note of this juxtaposition in the work of Matthew Dalziel and Louise Scullion, who use photography and video to explore mankind's relationship with nature and interaction with the ecology of the earth. Lowenstein suggests that Dalziel and Scullion's use of natural forms and non-human creatures 'recalibrate the balance of estrangements from

¹¹ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment – Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 56.

¹² Richard Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986): 240.

nature with a relationship to the natural world'.¹³ Keith Hartley, the curator of Dalziel and Scullion's 2009 exhibit '*Home*', wrote that their work was informed by clean lines and rational analysis,

a complex and layered re-presentation through seemingly simple but always mediated visual means of the dynamic of alienation and empathy. Encounters with landscape are inflected, that is, by cumulative experiences and deductions, by cultural frameworks and by unexpected appearances.¹⁴

Confronting the natural environment and its manipulation by imitation, Dalziel and Scullion installed a 15 minute video entitled *Habitat*, depicting penguins as they occupy their manmade environment of concrete nests on a constructed seashore at Bergen Zoo. Dalziel and Scullion's video is projected in an artificially domesticated space with chairs and carpeted floors, establishing a tension between distance and engagement, with layers between photographic representation and authenticity.¹⁵

The photographers in *Making Pictures* create separation from the landscape they traveled great distances to experience, as the struggle with technology issues, environmental dynamics and isolation reveal they do not have a sense of place in the locations. There is a materialist approach to the image making, as the photographers discuss placing work on social media sites, editing, enlarging and framing for walls in their residential spaces, and hoarding in digital storage for years to come. From the Alaskan wilderness to the ice caves in Iceland, a curious enigma about motivations is developed and left unfulfilled in response to a sense of detachment between the individuals in relationship to each other as well as the landscape, and ultimately with the images they capture. The act of image gathering is observed and questioned as the viewer might conclude that the protagonists have preconceived notions of images as they wait for conditions to materialize.

In the age of the anthropocene, the protagonists in the film represent the biological agents that are responsible for an uncertain future of environmental destruction, as they

¹³ Oliver Lowenstein, 'The Re-enchantment of the Word' in Dalziel + Scullion, eds., *More Than Us*, (Edinburgh: Dundee, Dalziel + Scullion, 2009): 21.

¹⁴ Keith Hartley, 'Dalziel + Scullion' in Dalziel + Scullion, *Home* (exhibition catalogue), (Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, 2001): 7.

¹⁵ Malcolm Miles, *Eco-Aesthetics* (London & New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014): 127.

capture images of landscape that will eventually be lost as glaciers melt, and the habitat of animals being observed disappear.

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