



ADVENTURES OF PERCEPTION

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CINEMA AS EXPLORATION

ESSAYS / INTERVIEWS

vestites in Smith's film create an orgy of self-expression that is sometimes funny, sometimes frightening (it is a struggle to excuse the "gang rape" of the woman, however obvious its unreality). Like *Un chant d'amour*, *Flaming Creatures* exposes both men's and women's bodies in a manner far more open than conventional films of that era (or our era, for that matter). "Normal" assumptions about gender roles are turned upside down, and America's overseriousness about sex is burlesqued. Indeed, *Flaming Creatures* is less about sex than about playing dress-up; limp male genitals are jiggled from time to time, and a large woman's breast is diddled with a finger, but generally we are looking at men—grown-up children, really—playing women playing their favorite film roles.

During the decades since *Un chant d'amour* and *Flaming Creatures*, American avant-garde cinema has continued to produce films that have argued for the honest expression and acceptance of gay desire. Two of the most pivotal are *Damned If You Don't* (1987) by the New Yorker Su Friedrich and *Tongues Untied* (1989) by the late San Franciscan Marlon Riggs (Riggs died of AIDS in April 1994). Appearing during the same cultural moment, both films use a comparable combination of approaches to provide defiant responses to the relentless commercialization of desire and to the repression of gay desire and of its depiction in cinema. Each film has also been understood as a formal breakthrough in the genre with which it has usually been identified: *Damned If You Don't*, in avant-garde film; *Tongues Untied*, in documentary.

The film that established Friedrich's reputation was *Gently Down the Stream* (1981), in which poetic texts, adapted from a dream diary and scratched directly onto the filmstrip, express the filmmaker's angst-ridden attempt to reconcile her Roman Catholic upbringing with her lesbian desire.⁷³ At the time Friedrich arrived on the scene, feminist filmmaking, which had been an important component of avant-garde filmmaking and videomaking in the 1970s, had found itself in a cul-de-sac. The rebellion on the part of many feminists against the conventional exploitation of women's bodies had moved feminist filmmakers toward what Laura Mulvey called "scorched-earth" cinema: an approach to moving-image making that avoided all forms of conventional pleasure—both sensual imagery (including all female nudity) and, at its most extreme, the careful crafting of beautiful images of any kind.⁷⁴

73. For a thorough reading of *Gently Down the Stream*, see P. Adams Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 298–304.

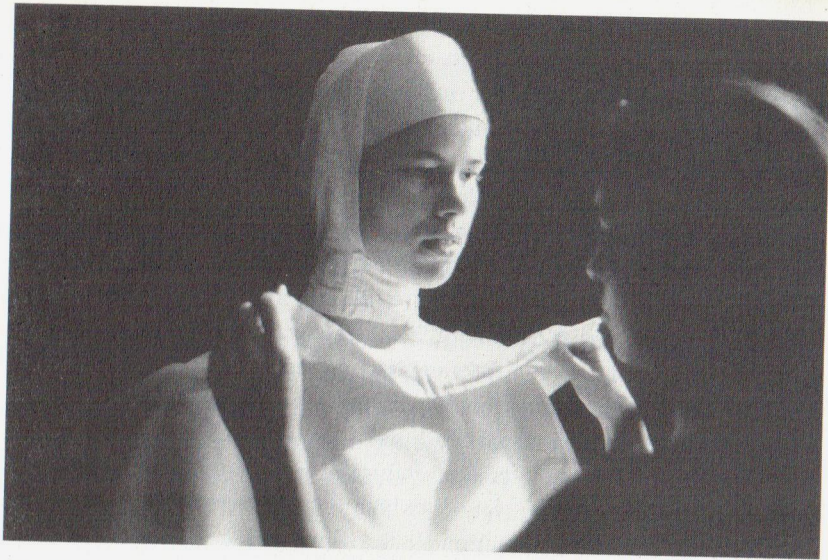
74. See Mulvey's comments in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 2, 334.

During the 1980s, Friedrich, who identified both as a feminist filmmaker and as an avant-garde filmmaker, began to rebel against the scorched-earth approach, which she had used in her earliest films, believing that to abjure sensuality and the production of beautiful imagery merely reconfirmed the conventional phallogocentric idea that men had something that women lacked. By the time Friedrich made *Damned If You Don't*, this rebellion was in full swing.

Damned If You Don't combines a variety of elements into a composite of documentary and poetic narrative. Friedrich focuses on Roman Catholic nuns, a formative influence on her early life, as a metaphor for the kinds of feminist filmmaking that *Damned If You Don't* was rebelling against. Early in the film, one of her two protagonists is seen watching the Michael Powell–Emeric Pressburger film *Black Narcissus* (1947) on a black-and-white television; we see a visual synopsis of the film, as Martina Siebert offers an often ironic voice-over, describing the action in *Black Narcissus* in a manner that suggests the ways in which the film represses the complex sexual implications of the situations in the film into a love triangle between the film's protagonist, the church, and Mr. Dean, who flaunts his anti-Catholicism and sees the nuns as sensual/sexual women-in-hiding. Later, Cathy Quinlan reads passages from Judith C. Brown's *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*.⁷⁵ Another form of information is supplied by an interview with (African American) Makea McDonald, who remembers early school experiences during which some nuns attempted to repress all sexual thoughts, while others subtly modeled the possibility of lesbian relationship. These three sources of information are supplemented with filmed images of nuns in public, here and abroad.

The documentary elements of *Damned If You Don't* provide a context for a silent, fictional, poetic narrative in which a sensuous woman (Ela Troyano), the one seen watching *Black Narcissus*, romantically pursues a nun (Peggy Healey), following her at times, planting a flower where the nun will find it, making a needlepoint of Christ—until, at the film's conclusion, the nun comes to the woman's apartment, where the two make love. Frequently, during the body of the film, the woman's pursuit of the nun is evoked by Friedrich's lovely, sensuous imagery of swans and albino whales and other creatures filmed at the New York City Aquarium (where the nun goes on her day off). This animal imagery implicitly argues that the desire felt by both pursuer and pursued is quite natural (and socially constricted). The lovemaking sequence, at the beginning of which the Troyano charac-

75. Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).



The nun (Peggy Healey) is undressed by her lover (Ela Troyano) in Su Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't* (1987). Courtesy Su Friedrich.

ter carefully undresses the nun, removing item after item of her habit until she is nude, defies not only the Catholic Church and Friedrich's upbringing but the feminist repressions of sensuality in scorched-earth filmmaking. From Friedrich's point of view, since a lesbian is damned by the church simply for recognizing her natural desires, she might as well express her true nature. Similarly, since scorched-earth filmmaking avoids all sensual pleasure, this approach can only damn the resulting films to invisibility (except perhaps for those interested in a form of sisterhood analogous to life in a convent). In other words, to quote a song Mr. Dean (David Farrar) sings in *Black Narcissus* (and that Friedrich herself sings during the film), Friedrich "cannot be a nun" for she is "too fond of pleasure"—the pleasures of love, the pleasures of cinema.

Overall, within the evolution of Friedrich's work, *Damned If You Don't* is not particularly surprising. It seems a logical extension of *Gently Down the Stream*: the frightening conflict embodied in the dreams in the earlier film is resolved in *Damned If You Don't*. However, I cannot imagine that anyone familiar with *Ethnic Notions*, the hour-long documentary Marlon Riggs finished in 1988, would not have been surprised by his *Tongues Untied*. *Ethnic Notions* is formally a thoroughly conventional documentary about the stereotyping of African Americans in nineteenth- and twentieth-

century pop culture. It relies on a set of talking heads (all of them college professors) to explain the development and implications of particular stereotypes (the mammy, the sambo, the coon, the savage, the uncle), illustrated by photographs, drawings, clips from film and television, and items from Jan Faulkner's collection of racist memorabilia (according to the end credits, this collection was the inspiration for the film). While *Ethnic Notions* is informative, but conventional as a film, Riggs's combination of a nonsense sexually political aggressiveness with formal experiment in *Tongues Untied* seems to me nearly unprecedented, not only within the history of Riggs's work, but within the history of cinema in general and within the histories of avant-garde cinema and African American cinema, in particular. And nearly twenty years later, it remains as surprising—and, for some viewers, as jarring—as it was on its release.

Like *Damned If You Don't*, *Tongues Untied* combines elements of documentary and fiction, in this case to offer a sense of the individual and collective struggles of black gay men coming of age during the era of Stonewall and the AIDS epidemic. Riggs uses a variety of sources, including, most important, readings of poems by several poets, including Essex Hemphill, whose physical presence is a central motif in the film.⁷⁶ The importance of poetry in *Tongues Untied* is suggested in the film's title, which implies not only a general rebellion of people who have been repressed but the practice of poetry as a way of freeing the spirit. Indeed, the centrality of poetry in *Tongues Untied* and the ingenuity with which poetry is presented make Riggs's film a landmark within the long and complex tradition in avant-garde cinema of incorporating poetry (see "Poetry and Film: Avant-Garde Cinema as Publication" in this collection). *Tongues Untied* also includes several group performances designed for the film (a choreographed demonstration by several "Snap Divas" of the techniques and meanings of finger-snapping; a similar demonstration of voguing by New York City gays; a black, gay doowop quartet, the Lavender Lovelights, singing music written for the film by Riggs and Alex Langford), and several gay pride marches and demonstrations in support of gay issues.

While Friedrich uses a dramatized narrative as the central thread of *Damned If You Don't*, the narrative thrust of *Tongues Untied* is achieved

76. Hemphill's poems "Without Comment," "Homocide," "In the Life," "Conditions," "Black Beans," and "Now We Think" are included in the film, along with poems by Reginald Jackson ("Initiation"); Craig Harris ("Classified," "The Least of My Brothers"); Steve Langley ("Confection," "Borrow Things from the Universe"); Alan Miller ("at the club"); and Donald Woods ("What Do I Do about You?"). Riggs himself supplied four "monologues": "Black Chat," "Three Pieces of I.D.," "Snap Rap," and "The Wages of Silence."

fear and danger. In the end, Anger fled to Europe, where he found a world more congenial to sexual variety—and where he expressed his excitement about this release from American repression in a companion piece to *Fireworks*: the gorgeous *Eaux d'artifice* (1954; Anger's title is a play on the French term for fireworks, *feux d'artifice*). Riggs refused to flee America and, indeed, could not have fled his disease. He came to see filmmaking as a way to celebrate the creative energies released by the pressures of mortality. Like *Damned If You Don't*, *Tongues Untied* is resonant with craft, full of sensual compositions and moments of tour de force editing; it can be thought of as a cinematic version of James Weldon Johnson's breakthrough anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*,⁷⁸ which introduced African American poetry to a much expanded readership during the Harlem Renaissance. Riggs means to introduce an accomplished new group of (gay) black poets to an expanded audience—within a new form of poetic cinema.

Tongues Untied created a firestorm upon its release. Riggs had received a small Western States Regional Media Arts Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts (the grant request was sponsored by the Rocky Mountain Film Center in Denver), and while a substantial number of public television stations refused to show the film, it was part of the 1991 "P.O.V." series, which itself had received federal support. This government involvement with *Tongues Untied* was met with outrage by Senator Jesse Helms and others, who claimed that the NEA's support of Riggs's film was tantamount to taxpayer support of pornography. The reaction against the film was widespread enough, as was support for the film by those who understood its cinematic accomplishments, that Riggs could say, "The general desire to suppress any realistic acknowledgment or exploration of homosexuality in America has spawned the ultimate postmodern [political] coalition!"⁷⁹ *Tongues Untied* and *Damned If You Don't* can be understood as landmark contributions to the evolution of several film histories: *Damned If You Don't*, to avant-garde cinema, women's cinema, and Queer Cinema; *Tongues Untied*, to documentary, Queer Cinema, and to both avant-garde and African American cinema.⁸⁰

78. James Weldon Johnson, ed., *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, 1922).

79. From Marlon Riggs's "Tongues Re-tied?" reprinted from *Current*, August 12, 1991, and available on the *Current* website: www.current.org/prog/prog114g.html.

For details on the *Tongues Untied* controversy, see Jack C. Ellis and Betsy A. McLane, *A New History of Documentary Film* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 285–87.

80. Friedrich's *Hide and Seek* (1996) also caused consternation by suggesting (as does *Tongues Untied*) that young people are often aware of being gay earlier in their lives than much of conventional society is usually willing to admit.

TEXT AND IMAGE; JAMES BENNING / TONY COKES

As alternative cinemas have evolved, their histories have come to resemble the history of commercial cinema in certain ways. Most obviously, perhaps, within any particular countercinema, specific approaches develop and, as they are used over and over, sometimes become genres. During the 1970s and 1980s, UCLA became a nexus for the development of an independent black filmmaking movement, which often expressed the everyday lives of African Americans in a distinctive form of neorealism: fictional melodramatic family dramas focusing on disenfranchised blacks in Los Angeles enacted within real locations and often with the involvement of local non-actors, in such landmark independent films as Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1974), Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977), and Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984). During the same period, many filmmakers identified with avant-garde structural filmmaking created what might be called the text/image film: that is, films in which the uses of visual text were expanded and explored. Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* (1970) and *Poetic Justice* (1972), much of Yvonne Rainer's work, Patrick Clancy in *Películas* (1979), Su Friedrich's *Gently Down the Stream* (1982) and *The Ties That Bind* (1984), Michael Snow's *So Is This* (1983), Peter Rose's *Secondary Currents* (1983) and *SpiritMatters* (1984), Morgan Fisher's *Standard Gauge* (1984), and James Benning's *American Dreams (lost and found)* reveal ways of foregrounding the use of visual text as a means of providing a new kind of viewer engagement with film and new forms of cinematic engagement with a wide range of issues. Of filmmakers involved with the American avant-garde, James Benning has been most engaged with the issue of race, and his *American Dreams* can serve as a particularly useful instance. Further, Benning's work with image and text in *American Dreams* is interesting to consider along with the videos Tony Cokes has made during the past ten years.

American Dreams is a fifty-eight-minute film with a highly formal organization that tracks several narrative developments. One of these is Hank Aaron's pursuit of Babe Ruth's home run record, from his entry into the white major leagues in 1954 through his capturing the home run record in 1976. Benning, a Milwaukee native who grew up idolizing Aaron, details Aaron's career by using items from his collection of Aaron memorabilia—baseball cards, bottle caps, and the like—one item per year, shown from the front and from the back. A second narrative element is added through a handwritten text that scrolls across the bottom of the frame from right to left: at first, viewers may assume they are reading excerpts from Benning's

of the incredible isolation that printed and narrated poetry had suffered. Too many poets mumbled and bungled a good poem through a poor reading. Those who remained active poets tended to become self-centered, morose and bitter, not simply in reaction to the karma of human existence, but because of their failure to communicate their feelings and thoughts to their fellow mortals. Those who were published were often infected with delusions of self-importance through incestuous bonds with other "recognized" poets and a small snobbish public. It occurred to me that it was too easy to abide with and re-enforce the sick and very romantic tradition of the poor struggling and troubled poet. The popular image of the poet had become far more masochist than that of the composer, the painter or the filmmaker.

I made a very personal decision to change that state of affairs. The medium itself must become better "show business," more interesting "theatrically." New forms of presentation must be found for talented poets. Why not publish in film form rather than in esoteric quarterlies?²⁵

The Poetry-Film Festival was a fixture in the Bay Area for seventeen years.

Poetry continues to be a significant influence on avant-garde film. Quite recently I learned during interviews with Nathaniel Dorsky, Abigail Child, and Phil Solomon that all three see the work of John Ashbery as inspira-

25. Berlandt's essay is reprinted in Scott MacDonald, *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 231. I never attended the Poetry-Film Festival, but Berlandt is certainly a subject for further research. His commitment to using film as a means of "publishing" poetry and of developing a more public community around poetry now seems, on one hand, a means of carrying on the oral tradition of poetry (a late manifestation of the Beats, perhaps) and, on the other hand, prescient of such recent developments as rap and poetry raves.

In a flyer designed for the Poetry-Film Festival Workshop, held in conjunction with the twelfth Poetry-Film Festival in December 1987, Berlandt lists the "Three Basic Elements in Poetry-Films": "I. POETRY: lettered or spoken"; "II: IMAGES: stills, moving or animated, abstract or recognizable"; and "III: SOUNDS: music, environmental sounds (nature, street, machinery), deliberate beats for special emphasis or rhythms." This listing would seem to accommodate nearly all of what is called avant-garde film.

In "Words and Images in the Poetry-Film," included in Dorland and Wees, eds., *Words and Moving Images*, William C. Wees quotes another Berlandt statement about the poetry-film: a poetry-film must incorporate "a verbal poetic statement in narrated or captioned form," and defines four types of poetry-film: the first is "the poem 'as seen by' the filmmaker. In other words, the poem already exists, and in addition to providing the words for the film's soundtrack, was the originating idea for the film, a kind of 'first treatment,' that may also become the film's scenario and even its 'shooting script.'" The second type "reverses that relationship: the film comes first—in conception and perhaps even in execution—and then the filmmaker finds a poem that suits the film's images." Wees considers *Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)* an instance of this second type. The third type "is one in which the film—either completed or in preparation—leads to the writing of a poem which is then incorporated into the film" (Wees uses Hancox's *Beach Events* as an instance, along with *The River, Le sang d'un poète*, and *Geography of the Body*). See Wees, "Words and Images in the Poetry-Film," 11.



Word scratched into the emulsion in Su Friedrich's *Gently Down the Stream* (1981). Courtesy Su Friedrich.

tional and some of their own films as closely related to his poetry.²⁶ Each of these filmmakers seems to take somewhat different things from Ashbery, though all share an approach to editing that often results in sequences during which successive shots are not related by any apparent narrative logic but accumulate impact through subtle, mysterious, surprising changes in subject and tone, a quality common in Ashbery's work. And there continue to be instances where filmmakers use their own poetic texts or the poetic texts of others as central dimensions of films. Noteworthy examples are *Gently Down the Stream* (1981) by Su Friedrich, *Tongues Untied* (1989) by Marlon Riggs, and David Gatten in his *Secret History of the Dividing Line* project.

26. See Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 5, 94–95, 210–11. Child remarked on her admiration for Ashbery in conversation with me. Child has been a practicing poet for years and uses analogous strategies for organizing her poems and her films. And she thinks of poets as a primary audience for her work: "Poets—people who are used to speed, density, complication, ambiguity—they've always been an enthusiastic and comprehending audience." See my interview with Child in Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 4, 221. Child's poetry collections include *A Motive for Mayhem* (Hartford, CT: Potes and Poets, 1989), *Mob* (Oakland, CA: O Press, 1994), and *Scatter Matrix* (New York: Roof Books, 1996). See also Child, *This Is Called Moving: A Critical Poetics of Film* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005).

For *Gently Down the Stream*, the film that, as P. Adams Sitney has said, marked "her maturity as a filmmaker," Friedrich scratched a series of texts—edited versions of dreams recorded in a dream diary—word by word into the film emulsion so that the texts themselves become the visual foreground and the photographed imagery the background of a psychodrama that expresses the filmmaker's internal struggle with the conflict between her Roman Catholic background and her lesbianism.²⁷ I say Friedrich's words are the "foreground," since words have particular power in film, especially words represented visually. If a particular shot in a film includes both photographic imagery and visual text, the tendency is to read the text first; as Hollis Frampton once said, "Once we can read, and a word is put before us, we cannot not read it."²⁸ Friedrich's texts are arranged within *Gently Down the Stream* with considerable attention to their visual spacing and temporal rhythm; it is difficult not to see the texts as a poem.²⁹ The experience of watching *Gently Down the Stream* has something of the impact of a public reading, though in this instance, we do the "listening" and the reading.

In *Tongues Untied*, Marlon Riggs was determined to reveal "all the poetry that was coming out by black gay men"³⁰ as a crucial component of his aggressive response to the history of the repression and suppression of African American homosexuality within American society. Riggs's controversial film gives voice to a range of openly gay black men in a performance-oriented, confrontational form that is full of visual and auditory performances of poetic texts (see section 6 of "Desegregating Film History: Avant-Garde Film and Race at the Robert Flaherty Seminar, and Beyond" in this collection, for a more substantial discussion of Riggs's film).³¹

Finally, David Gatten takes the final section of the poet Susan Howe's *Frame Structures* (1996), "Secret History of the Dividing Line" (1978), as a structural model for a cycle of films focusing on the life, writings, and personal life of William Byrd II of colonial Virginia. Byrd's *History of the Dividing Line* (1841), which chronicles his experiences drawing the boundary line between Virginia and North Carolina, is considered one of the forma-

27. Sitney provides a thorough reading of *Gently Down the Stream* in *Eyes Upside Down*, 298–304.

See note 70 in "Desegregating Film History" in this collection for a definition of psychodrama.

28. Frampton, in Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema*, 49.

29. A small, hand-made book called *Gently Down the Stream* that presents the texts, arranged as poetry and illustrated with stills from the film, was self-published by Friedrich in 1982.

30. Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage, "Interview with Marlon Riggs: Listening to the Heartbeat," *Jump Cut* 36 (1991): 119.

31. When *Tongues Untied* was broadcast on television in 1991, it created considerable controversy. See p. 68 for details.

tive American nature writings. (For details about Gatten's project, see the interview with Gatten in this collection.)

While the intersection of poetry and cinema could (and should!) sustain a book-length exploration, the particular focus of this essay is three underappreciated, relatively recent films, which are distinct from most all the combinations of poetry and film I have described (except for several of the Broughton films). Each makes available to an audience a previously published poem or set of poems in a new, cinematic form; and each makes the presentation of the poems, which are included in their entirety, the foreground of the film experience: that is, these films do not *adapt* the poems (revise them for use in a new context), they deliver the original words in their original senses, as precisely as possible, to new audiences through a different medium. They are, in other words, closer to new *editions* than to adaptations.³² *Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)* (1982) by the Canadian Rick Hancox and *nebel* (2000) by the German Matthias Müller make available to viewers poems by recognized poets: specifically, Wallace Stevens's "A Clear Day and No Memories" and Ernst Jandl's *gedichte an die kindheit* ("Poems to Childhood"). Canadian Clive Holden's *Trains of Winnipeg—14 Film Poems* recycles Holden's own poems. The "Trains of Winnipeg" project began as a website, then produced a CD of Holden reading his poetry, followed by a book of thirty-eight poems, *Trains of Winnipeg*;³³ by the 35mm feature film *Trains of Winnipeg—14 Film Poems*; and, finally, by a DVD of the film.

The idea of using cinema as a means of providing poetry with a new form of public life still seems unusual enough, and these recent films engaging enough, to deserve more detailed discussion. My goal here is not to provide anything like an exhaustive exploration of the films discussed, or to deal with the many theoretical issues raised by the translation of a work of literature into a work of cinema.³⁴ Rather, I hope to alert readers to three particularly accomplished contributions to the recent history of avant-garde film, in the

32. I do not mean to split hairs here. Cinema has a long history of adapting literary texts to its own uses and, by doing so, creating endless debate about whether this or that film was true to the original story or novel adapted by the filmmaker. Certainly, the three films I discuss provide new contexts for the poems they "republish," and these new contexts may create somewhat different readings of the poems for readers/viewers—any change in context tends to do this. But there seems a firm commitment on the part of all three filmmakers to the original poetic texts, which are used not as raw material but as finished works, each with its own integrity. In this sense, I see the films as closer to new editions of the poems than as adaptations of them.

33. Clive Holden, *Trains of Winnipeg* (Montreal: DC Books, 2002).

34. For a discussion of the history of attempts to understand the practice of adapting literature to the screen and for a remarkable new approach to the issue of adaptation, see Kamilla Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

lives: the filmic interpretations of many of the actions of the animals and insects in the Disney films are clearly projections of stereotypical middle-class American family experiences; and many of the events in *Sonoran Desert* reflect conventional stereotypes of the brutality of the exotic animal and insect life depicted.

A different sensibility is evident at many moments in the Painlevé films and throughout *Microcosmos*. Painlevé often allows the creatures he records to “speak for themselves”: for example, we are allowed to watch the acera dance without continual textual comment intervening; their dance is seen as fundamentally similar in function to the dances we do—though the acera are more graceful than most of us. In *Microcosmos*, the activities of the insects are seen not as exotic and implicitly inferior to human activities. Rather, the activities of these generally familiar creatures are magnified and mythologized, and we come to understand their lives as different, effective, fully evolved strategies for living in the real world.³⁶ Nuridsany and Pérennou remind us that human life needs insect life more than insect life needs us. Who knows, they imply, what the remarkable adaptive strategies we can see around us every day might teach us during coming decades as we confront our growing environmental crisis and new challenges to *our* adaptability?

A few final conjectures. In her video *The Head of a Pin* (2003), Su Friedrich intercuts between long and medium shots documenting a vacation near the Delaware River in northern New Jersey (Friedrich and several others live in a small cabin and walk to the river to enjoy swimming and picnicking) and in-close shots of a spider subduing and wrapping a wasp or a mayfly that has gotten caught in its web.³⁷ During the shots of the spider and its prey, the vacationers discuss the strange, grisly spectacle and at one point admit to each other that “what we know about nature” would fit “on the head of a pin.” Near the end of the video, the final in-close shot of the spider and its now wrapped and stored prey concludes when the camera pulls back and up, and we realize that this tiny saga of predation has been occurring

36. Sucksdorff's view seems more ambivalent. He does suggest that our world is divided between a fallen creation and a human realm to some degree secure from the brutalities of nature as a result of a spiritual connection with God—and yet, in *A Divided World*, both realms seem equally real and unreal. The natural world seems sensually more beautiful than the human world, just as the colonial world often seems more sensual than the “more civilized” colonizing world—and yet, at least in *A Divided World*, the human realm seems comparatively empty.

37. I have not been able to determine whether the insect is a wasp (Braconidae or Ichneumonidae) or a stem sawfly (Cephididae). Thanks to Dr. William H. Gotwald Jr., professor of biology at Utica College, for his assistance in narrowing the possibilities.



Cathy Quinlan identifying flower in Su Friedrich's *The Head of a Pin* (2004). Courtesy Su Friedrich.

underneath the kitchen table in the cabin. As in *A Divided World*, we see that what can seem to be two different worlds are simply two aspects of the same space; but whereas Sucksdorff emphasizes the differences between two mysterious realms, Friedrich's concluding gesture suggests the relationship between what is going on below the table and what normally occurs on top of it: both spiders and humans live by means of periodic exploitation of other life forms, and intelligence lies in recognizing the intricate relationships between what may at first seem separate worlds.

In the present context, *The Head of a Pin* can serve as a metaphor for the gap that has formed between the humanities and the sciences in the current American academic environment. Although educators generally recognize that anything like a sensible liberal arts education requires experiences with both the sciences and the humanities, the tendency for many faculty and students is to see one of these areas as primary and the other as, for all practical purposes, a strange, hidden world. This gap has produced one of the more remarkable paradoxes of modern intellectual life: the seemingly contradictory nature of crucial recent conclusions and discoveries in the humanities and in the sciences.

The primary conclusion of many scholars working across the humanities during recent decades has been that the categories that earlier generations assumed were biological givens—gender, race, sexual preference, even individual identity itself—are in fact social constructions, that our ways of understanding the world around us and of coming to terms with each other are not biologically intrinsic to us, not *essential* dimensions of us, but the social fabrications of postmodern capitalism. On the other hand, among the most remarkable conclusions of many scholars working across the sciences during recent decades is that our physical being is mapped, from the moment of conception, by our DNA, and that this mapping is so distinct for each of us that anyone with the tools to read it can distinguish each human individual from every other, and various classes of humans from each other, on the basis of even the tiniest molecule of the human body, living or dead. In other words, however much our socialization constructs predictable, conventional, often-problematic patterns of action and thought, there is an essential identity within each of us.

Of course, I recognize that I am oversimplifying very complex issues, but I cannot help but wonder whether the tendency on the part of the first generation of academic film teachers and scholars to ignore the history of nature film might be, at least in part, a reflection of a repressed fear of confronting those dimensions of the physical world around us that might frustrate our desire for an unambiguous, stable political consciousness, and for definitive theoretical solutions to complex social questions. Obviously, the humanities and the sciences need each other more than they sometimes realize, and the wide world of cinema, including the long history of films devoted to depictions of the natural world, remains one of those dimensions of culture that may yet help us come to terms with this need.

In any case, I hope it is evident that bringing nature film, and science film in general, into the mainstream of film-historical thinking and teaching has a variety of potential benefits. Most obviously, of course, it would help us become more aware of the full range of cinematic accomplishment. Certainly, the best nature films—of course, we need to develop definitions of what “best” means in this genre—should be recognized alongside the best dramatic narratives, the best animations, the best avant-garde films, the best films of any kind. And we can learn from, and enjoy, the ongoing evolution of this genre. Just as the modern histories of the horror genre and film noir can help us think about the developing power of women to deal with their societal marginalization, the evolution of the nature film can help us think about our relationship to other species and to the environment we all share and perhaps, as suggested earlier, can help us consider the complex, puzzling relationship

between our biological nature as individual instances of a species and our psychological and sociological development as members of particular societies.

At its best, the evolution of the nature film—and here there can be no better example than *March of the Penguins*—reveals, at least as fully as any other strand in the weave of film history, an astonishing level of filmmaking courage and persistence, as well as commitment not only to the audience but to a species other than *Homo sapiens* and to ways of living that may have things to teach us. Luc Jacquet’s feature has received generally grudging accolades from serious film critics, many of whom are understandably put off by the film’s overuse of sentimental music and narration—and perhaps by the Disney-like marketing of *March of the Penguins* in the United States, where it was touted as *the* family film of the summer of 2005. Of course, *March* is a family film, but as much in the Painlevé sense as in the Disney sense (once the emperor penguins mate, they are monogamous, and focused on producing an egg and raising a chick—but only for one year; for nearly every emperor penguin couple, each year brings a new monogamous relationship).

The advertising for *March*, and many of the critiques of it, also ignore the film’s implicit environmentalist politic. Jacquet and his collaborators create considerable empathy for one of many forms of life placed in danger by global warming (the film’s official website—<http://wip.warnerbros.com/marchofthepenguins>—makes the danger of global warming to emperor penguins explicit). But the reticent critics and the sentimental advertising campaign do not entirely obscure what I expect is evident to most viewers—especially those who watch the film’s final credits. Throughout the body of the film, the filmmakers are resolutely invisible, entirely in service to the emperor penguins and to the viewers who will see the finished film. But during the final credits, we see imagery of the filmmakers and their utterly unimposing equipment and realize that, like these penguins, the filmmakers have created something fascinating and memorable with very humble means. It is a realization that has any number of ideological implications.³⁸

38. As yet, I have not been able to find out exactly what equipment was used to film the penguins. Presumably, the Dumont d’Urville base in Antarctica is well equipped and made its facilities available to Jacquet and his colleagues, but the emphasis in the imagery we do see of the filmmakers during the credits is on the simplicity of what they were working with.

Of course, for us to be able to see the imagery and sound of the emperor penguins in local theaters, the filmmakers needed to create alliances with marketing entities that have considerable resources. But the various steps in the distribution of *March of the Penguins* should not obscure the core of the experience: the filmmaking that Jacquet and his collaborators did in Antarctica and subsequently, in composing the story of these remarkable birds.

I am grateful to my Hamilton College colleague Patricia O’Neill for reminding me of how similar *March of the Penguins* is to Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*.