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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15664/fcj.v22.i0.2994>



Frames Cinema Journal

ISSN 2053-8812

Issue 22 (2025)

<http://www.framescinemajournal.com>



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Arboreal: Multispecies Industries of Forest Ecology and Documentary Filmmaking as Art of Attunement

By Jenny Holt



FIGURE 1—Film still from *Arboreal*

Introduction

It's November, three in the afternoon, a violet gloaming prematurely hovering around the edges of the day. Within a copse of birch trees, I'm looking through the lens of a camera, aware of the rumble of a nearby burn, a stray bird-call. Peering more closely at intricate patterns of lichen embroidering the skin of a tree, I reframe, refocus, dial aperture, shift myself and the camera in response to the image and shifting light. Using a macro lens in the low light, it takes time to find focus on a frilled edge of lichen crusting a tiny birch twig, caught wildly in an almost imperceptible breath of wind. Suddenly, I catch it: a microscopic spider the size of a birch seed, and its diaphanous threads of gossamer hidden among the frills

of lichen. Watching and filming the spider and its tiny movements on an inch of twig – hiding, waiting, preying – absorbed me until late autumn’s early darkness crept in.

A stone’s throw from the birch copse, on the other side of a high deer fence, a young woman, a nursery worker, is mixing compost inside a polytunnel. It’s a still day in the middle of August, and the air is thick with midges, so she wears a meshed hat with sewn-in sunglasses as she works. An industrial cement mixer rumbles as she sieves soil, nails engrained with earth. Switching off the mixer, she empties its barrel of fresh compost into a large wheelbarrow. She makes a path across a sea of fledgling forest trees to a merry white marquee, from which muffled laughter of nursery workers busy potting young seedlings can be heard. Watching from its wavering perch atop an infant pine tree, an iridescent green-black beetle springs open its wings and flies away.



FIGURE 2—Film still from *Arboreal*

These filmic moments form part of the opening sequences of *Arboreal* (2024), a practice-as-research short documentary, filmed at rewilding charity Trees for Life's pioneering tree nursery and forest estate in the Highlands of Scotland. This article addresses concepts and constructs of place, landscape and environment through observational filmmaking practice, reflecting on ideas and questions raised through the making of the film. Considering how practice-based methods intersect with, and materialise, concepts and sensory dynamics of place and place-making, the article explores embodied observational practices as "arts of noticing" – a practice of attunement to polyrhythmic lifeworlds proposed by anthropologist Anna Tsing. [\[1\]](#) Entangling sensory and material world-making processes of the forest ecosystem, *Arboreal* embroiders tensions between the spectacular and the fragile, the pictorial iconography of the Highlands landscape and its perpetual flow of life, and everyday acts of labour at Dundreggan's tree nursery in parallel with the often-unseen rhythms of the forest. Contexts and methods of observational camera and field recording practices are positioned as "attunement": curious, generative and evocative, provoking a sensory syntax and tactile space, disrupting fixities of place as a "bounded" world of vision that landscape, through its historical pictorial frameworks, is associated with. Correlating with practice methods connected to embodiment and attunement, the film's focus on the young nursery workers who propagate seed and care for young trees underscore senses of recovery and growth.

Arboreal evolved from prior practice-based field research focused on coastal temperate rain forests in the West Highlands. During this research I discovered Trees for Life's native tree nursery and estate at Dundreggan, Glen Moriston, and was keen to develop my practice-led ideas in the context of forest rewilding at Dundreggan. Exploring practices of rewilding as human and more-than-human collaborative survival I began to draw correlations between my

ongoing research into observational documentary practice and theories of landscape, environmental humanities and documentary new materialism with rewilding's open-ended and experimental ethos as an approach to reforestation. [2] As a conservation practice, rewilding is positioned as a novel "future-nature" approach to ecosystem restoration associated with a new and diverse range of agencies and methods. [3] Proponents of rewilding are said to part ways with traditional closely managed "compositional" practices of conservation which seek to reproduce "lost" states, to instead foreground ecosystem functionality and integrity alongside people-nature advocacy. [4] Native forests are now understood to be of significant ecological value compared with plantation species from both carbon sequestration and biodiversity perspectives, and rewilding's focus on ecological health and biodiversity enables the scaled-up approach to landscape restoration needed in the Highlands, where just 1% of its uniquely biodiverse ancient forest survives. [5]

Trees for Life's Dundreggan tree nursery, edged by the forest landscape it supports, develops experimental approaches to arboriculture including propagation of typically hard-to-grow varieties such as aspen and juniper. Over its 30-year existence, the charity has established over two million trees and manages ambitious large-scale projects from *Lynx to Scotland* to *Affric Highlands* – a ground-breaking Rewilding Europe programme and the largest rewilding project in the UK. [6] Trees for Life's Dundreggan Rewilding Centre, the first of its kind in the world, opened to the public in 2023. [7]

Cinematic placeness of the forest and tensions of landscape

Exploring industries of landscape-scale rewilding as placemaking through the lens of filmmaking unavoidably enfold visual identities of landscape and its registers of place. The

indeterminate nature of rewilding in the context of landscape-scale forest regeneration complicates iconographies of landscape and its pictorial paradigms, influencing my approach to the film. One of my aims was to explore transformations of place and landscape through a dialectic between subject and form, reflecting on, and seeking to disrupt, fixities of landscape as a visualist paradigm while navigating visual iconographies of the Scottish Highlands. Landscape's historical identity as both "picture" and "place" is doubly visual – a "view" of world "framed" by the scope of human vision, shaping and shaped by its dual identity as material land-scape, and as representation, a picture of land, "both a package and the commodity inside the package". [8] Extending this idea, Michael Andrews argues landscape paintings are "crucial shaping influences" generating familiarity both with places, and the pictures representing them, so landscape is already an artifice before it has become the subject for a work of art. [9] Expanding to photography and cinematography, visual representation of iconographic landscapes is challenged by their excessive mediation as images, a glossy motif for specific placeness as an overriding register – especially problematic in relation to the visual "branding" of Highlands landscapes.

Phenomenologies of landscape reconceptualise visualist paradigms as "being" rather than "seeing" – a dwelling perspective of temporality and flow. Tim Ingold's concept of the taskscape challenges landscape's fixity as pictorial regime sublimated to the human gaze, arguing that landscape is generated through a socially constructed process continually in motion – inextricably linked to time and shaped through temporal patterns of dwelling on the land. [10] This theory aligns with Doreen Massey's challenge to the "groundedness" of place as central to meaning, questioning identities of place as inevitably tied to assumed histories of particular locations and repositioning place from "territory" to "flow". Place (and by extension, placeness of landscape) thus becomes a "particular constellation of social

relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” and creating a nexus of “ongoing, unfinished stories”. [11] More recent theories of multispecies assemblage correspond with, and expand, phenomenologies of landscape as dwelling, rhythm and flow in the context of the Anthropocene. Especially pertinent to this research, Tsing’s premise of polyphonic assemblage enfolds human and more-than-human liveliness as a temporal rhythm of lifeworld, a gathering or “happening” greater than the sum of its parts. [12] Her identification of polyphonic assemblage as the gathering of rhythms “as they result from world-making projects, human and not human” resonates with multispecies industries of work and labour at Dundreggan. [13] This context complicates both the pictorial paradigm of the cinematic landscape and the humanist enterprise of documentary film.

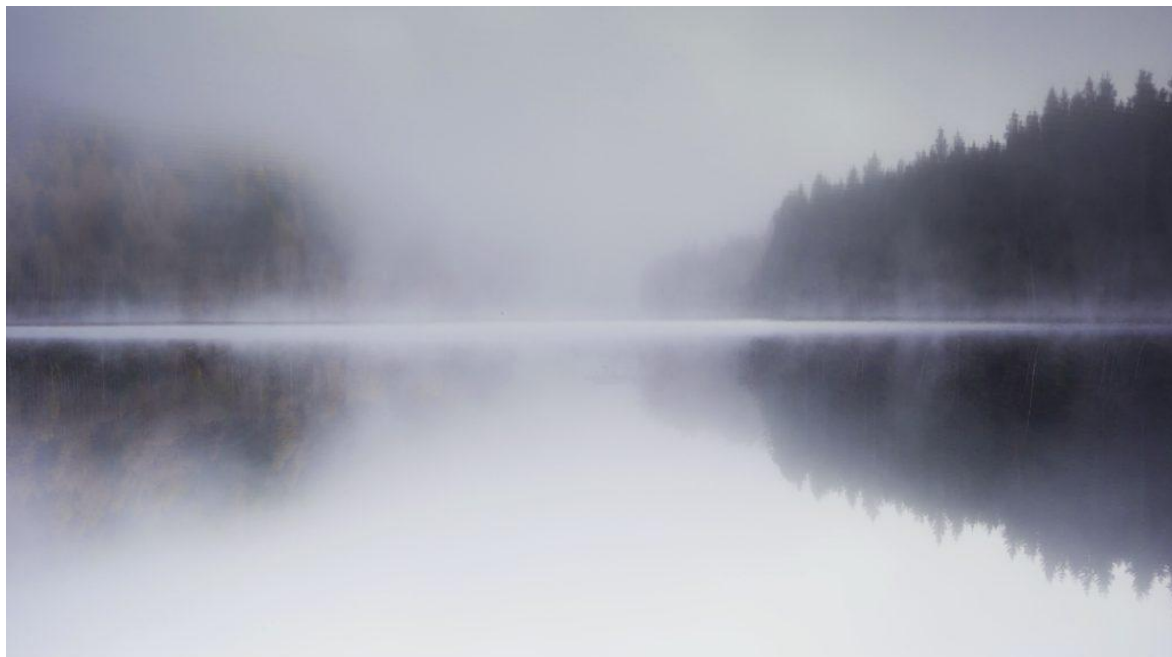


FIGURE 3—Film still from *Arboreal*, opening shot

From *Arboreal*'s opening scenes, landscape is pictured in relation to spectacle and atmosphere. While making the film I was rarely drawn to panoramic and iconographic landscape “views”, and there are few such shots in the film. Most of these were filmed for

their atmospheric and material qualities – “quasi-thingly” atmospheres of twilight, mist and wind – such as the opening and closing shots of early morning and evening mist rising from a pine-fringed loch. [14] These images speak to a familiar iconography of the Highlands while evoking a degree of alterity and ambiguity. This atmosphere is heightened and familiarity shifted through rotation of some of these images 180 degrees, accentuating impossible to capture angles while the “real” and the “reflected” image switch places in a reverse orientation of landscape. Familiar purple heather, archetype of the Highlands imagination, crops up in images of spider webs and reflected in pools – an incidental presence rather than subject – but nonetheless, like the lochs, mists and pine trees, an inescapable motif of the Highlands.



FIGURE 4—Film still from *Arboreal*, a spider nestling under the heather

Orchestrated juxtapositions of micro and macro aim to draw attention to Highlands placeness and landscape in the context of forest regeneration assemblages. Humans and insects

frequently appear in adjacent shots, sized similarly within the frame, so that (in shot-size semantics) the insect appears in close-up while the human is in wide-shot.



FIGURE 5—Film still from *Arboreal*



FIGURE 6—Film still from *Arboreal*

Alternating between filming in the forest and the tree nursery, I began thinking about the nursery as a kind of “eco-space” – a collaborative and permeable inter-space between human and forest worlds. [15] I used similar filming methods in these locations, including a macro lens to film both microscopic insects and the nursery assistants at work. This is mirrored in an approach to field recordings and sound design, such as using contact microphones to record vibrations of thousands of barely visible midges and other insects hitting the taut skins of the polytunnels. I recorded this ethereal sound intermittent with filming nursery assistant Heather working on aspen propagation tasks, which bled into the experience of filming. The materialised and atmospheric, amplified presence of clouds of unseen billowing insects became one of the film’s key sonic registers, underscoring the entirety of the film’s soundscape.

Observational filmmaking as art of attunement

In the context of documentary filmmaking, the observational paradigm’s assumed ocular-centric ontology and objectifying gaze is misleading. To paraphrase anthropologist, filmmaker and theorist David MacDougall, despite its problematic associations, the term “observational” has stuck, so “let it stand”. [16] My identification with observational methods is as an embodied, sensory and thinking practice, participative and imaginative. Grimshaw & Ravetz’s process-led links between drawing and observational filmmaking challenge the “making/taking” binary, arguing for the cinematic “frame” as “something flexible, organic, and emergent from within the shared environment in which subjects and filmmakers are situated”. [17] Similarly, Ilona Hongisto’s “aesthetics of the frame” makes a case for documentary filmmaking as a mode of participation in the world: the cinematic frame, mediated by the filmmaker’s aesthetic, sensory and conceptual choices while engaging with the world before the lens, performs “a double movement that both captures the real and

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expresses it.” [18] Rather than a mode of representation, the aesthetics of the frame expresses a world “in becoming”, so that the act of filming is actively entangled in the processes that create reality: an embodied frame which creates agency, participating in the emergence of meaning.

As depicted in the opening passage of this article, many times while filming I was captured in an intensely focused, participatory flow, comparably described by Jean Rouch as a kind of trance. [19] Similarly, filming with human subjects becomes an intersubjective, transformative encounter, where each might be shaped by the other. The shallow range of focus afforded by the macro lens used for the majority of my filming process I felt deepened the atmospheric intensity and its sense of “tactile space” emerging through the encounter and mediated via the camera. [20]



FIGURE 7—Film still from *Arboreal*, processing juniper cones



FIGURE 8—Film still from *Arboreal*, processing juniper cones



FIGURE 9— Film still from *Arboreal*, processing juniper cones

There is here a meaningful correlation with the pictorial and temporal dichotomies of landscape discussed earlier. Participation in the world expressed through the frame enfolds

the imaginative, sensory and conceptual, giving rise to a transformed aesthetic or poetic register – a “performative” image which fuses affect, metaphorical connotation and indexical record, evoked through the filming process, and deepened or further revealed in post-production. [\[21\]](#)

These ideas are equally pertinent to acts of listening through recording sonic environments. Recordings made via contact microphones amplified less-visible, more-than-human assemblages in certain environments, such as the unexpected, other-worldly music produced by multitudes of insects hitting polytunnel walls which became a keynote sound in the film. [\[22\]](#) Another keynote emerged from multiple sonic registers of waterflow: lochs, burns, falls, rivers, rainfall, seed washing and sieving and washing up creating an almost-always present watery soundtrack. Water is sometimes also seen without being heard, in reflections of trees, seen in the skins of puddles, lochs or rivers.

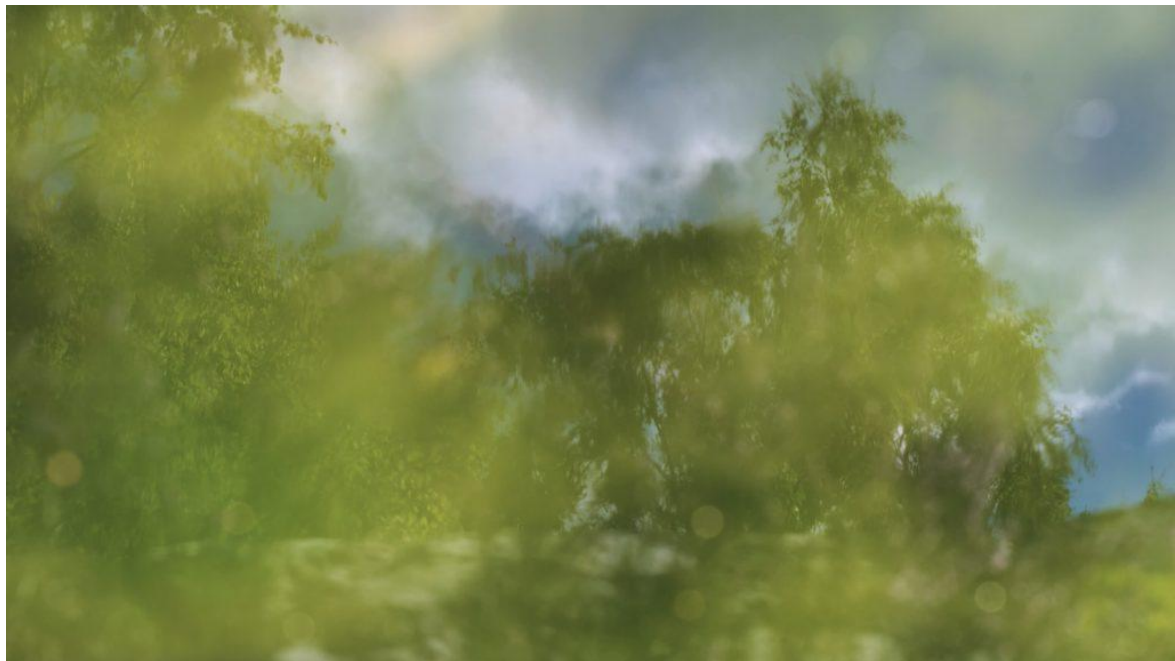


FIGURE 10—Film still from *Arboreal*

I recorded a conversational interview with nursery assistant Heather, but rigorously questioned my instinct to include this vocal narrative, given my aim to explore co-existences of human and more-than-human activities of labour in the eco-space of the nursery-forest. The absence of voice, however, felt objectifying, and counter to my participatory experience of filming at the nursery. I decided to use fragments of the voice recording for a degree of exposition which felt necessary to the film, further amplified by its enriched subjectivity of working life. Narrated everyday practices of labour and meditations on the ethos of rewilding articulate Heather's close, emotional connection to her work, while the inclusion of some of the recorded gaps and stutters of the recorded interview, interwoven with overlapping, incidental work conversations in the nursery moderate the authority of her voice within the tapestry of the environment.

Emerging from heightened awareness and intimacy of attunement, camera and recording devices are inquisitive extensions of the body, senses and mind. These technologies then speak back to the perception of the maker, and making process, through their own technological affordances, making visible the unseen and unexpected, as a reciprocal and interdependent practice. Returning to Anna Tsing's environmentally emplaced "arts of noticing", this practice is a means to attune to the assemblages, encounters and multiple temporal rhythms of worldmaking, a "new alliance" which, Tsing proposes, opens us to new ways of imagining, and the potential to foster multispecies collaborative survival. [23]

Tsing's description of the intertwining harmonics of musical polyphony as an analogy for the "multiple temporal rhythms and trajectories of the assemblage" further corresponds to *Arboreal's* process-led editing practice, unhooked from both a linear storyline and a narrative arc. [24] A material, generative and improvisational approach, images and sounds untied from their indices formed new creative and rhythmic associations, the shape of the film

unfurling from within. Sound ecologist and composer Hildegard Westerkamp refers to an equivalent process in her composition practice, analogising sonic materials recorded in the field with a comparable function to words used by a poet when brought into the studio – yet, although sounds might be in a sense “freed” in the context of the compositional environment, they are “always rooted...never abstract”. [25] Similarly, although *Arboreal*'s structure emerges through the generative process of making, its visual and sonic materials are always emplaced. Editing compositionally involves close attunement to materials, alive to new dynamics and meanings which might spring from their orchestration, coalescence, and counterpoint. This practice echoes poetic observational modes of documentary, from 1920s city symphonies to more recent work located in meaningful environments, often crossing (porous) boundaries of cinematic documentary and artists moving image. [26] The city symphony films' dynamic orchestrations of time and space become – referencing Yuri Tsivian's judgement of Dziga Vertov's cinematic aims – a means “not to show but to think”, a way to reveal the “invisible connections between things”. [27] A century later, the transformative encounter afforded by process-led, active and sensory practices of observational filmmaking as an art of attunement might offer an intimate means of discovering the visible and unseen, world-making lifeways of future-nature landscapes.



FIGURE 11—Film still from *Arboreal*, working in the aspen tunnel

Notes

[1] Anna L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Collard et al, “A manifesto for abundant futures,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105, 2 (2014): 322–330.

[4] Jamie Lorimer, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: conservation after nature* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Sophie Wynne-Jones, “Rewilding: An Emotional Nature,” *Area*, 00 (2022): 1–9.

[5] Emily Warner et al, “Does restoring native forest restore ecosystem functioning? Evidence from a large-scale reforestation project in the Scottish Highlands,” *Restoration Ecology*, 30, 3 (2021): accessed 6 March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec.13530>

[6] Rewilding Europe, Affric Highlands Scotland
<https://rewildingeurope.com/landscapes/affric-highlands/>

[7] Trees For Life, Dundreggan Rewilding Centre <https://visitdundreggan.co.uk/>

[8] John Wylie, *Landscape* (Routledge, 2007): 21; W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 5.

[9] Michael Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 1.

[10] Tim Ingold, “The Temporality of the Landscape,” *World Archaeology* 25, 2 (1993): 152–174.

[11] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1994): 154; Doreen Massey, "Landscape as a provocation: reflections on moving mountains," *Journal of Material Culture* 11, 1–2 (2006): 46.

[12] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, 23.

[13] *Ibid*, 24.

[14] Tony Griffero, *Quasi-Things: The Paradigm of Atmospheres* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2017).

[15] Ane Kirstine Brunbjerg et al, "Ecospace: A unified framework for understanding variation in terrestrial biodiversity," *Basic and Applied Ecology* 18 (2017): 86–94.

[16] David MacDougall, *The Looking Machine* (Manchester University Press, 2019): 119.

[17] Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, "Drawing with a camera? Ethnographic film and transformative anthropology," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21:2 (2015): 265.

[18] Ilona Hongisto, *Soul of the Documentary: Framing, Expression, Ethics* (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 17.

[19] Paul Henley, *Beyond observation, A history of authorship in ethnographic film* (Manchester University Press 2020): 242.

[20] MacDougall, *The Looking Machine*.

[21] Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, (eds) *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' in the Arts* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012).

[22] R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

[23] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.

[24] *Ibid*, 24.

[25] Hildegard Westerkamp, "Linking soundscape composition and acoustic ecology," *Organised Sound*, 7(1) (2002): 53.

[26] Examples include Academy Award nominated *Hale County, This Morning this Evening* (Dir: Ramell Ross 2018), *The Drift* (Maeve Brennan 2017) and films by Lucian Castaing-Taylor, J.P Sniadecki, Stephanie Spray and others produced under the umbrella of Harvard University's Sensory Ethnography Lab.

[27] Yuri Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties* (Pordenone: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto Press, 2005):1–28.

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Biography

Dr Jenny Holt is Reader in Film and Deputy Head of the School of Digital Arts, Manchester Metropolitan University. Her practice-led research focuses on dialogues between processes and poetics of artistdocumentary film and landscape, environment and work. Her films have explored landscape and labour of young people working in shepherding, forestry and farming in the English Midlands; tensions between working life and tourism in the Lake District; the urban-rural interface of a Halifax housing estate, and the play of forces at the highest point of the M62 motorway. Recent film *Arboreal* (2024), focused on landscape-scale forest regeneration located within the bounds of a ground-breaking rewilding initiative in the Highlands of Scotland, was a recipient of the BAFTSS Practice Research Short Film Award (2025).