Monkeywrenched images

ecocinema and sabotage

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Abstract

Ecological sabotage, or monkeywrenching, involves the destruction of property and infrastructure to defend nature from industrial development. Its emblematic tactic is tree spiking, where a ceramic spike is hammered into old-growth trees in order to disable logging equipment. This essay considers monkeywrenching to be as much an aesthetic practice as an activist one, and it examines films that utilize principles of sabotage as a formal strategy. Through an analysis of films such as *Leviathan* (2012), *The East* (2013), *Night Moves* (2013), and the works of James Benning, I argue that cinematic monkeywrenching entails a modernist practice that disrupts the image's mimetic representation of nature and criticizes commercial cinema's exploitation of the environment. These techniques produce an 'ugly' aesthetic, where ugliness, according to Theodor Adorno, registers the injury to nature caused by its do7mination by humanity. A monkeywrenched cinema is one that produces an aesthetic suspension or temporal delay in film's depiction of non-human nature as a means of expressing a non-interventionist ethical relation to the world.

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Introduction

Artie Vierkant's digital video *Exposure Adjustment on a Sunset* (2009) offers a straightforward premise: The image presents a real-time depiction of a sunset over the ocean where Vierkant sets the brightness, determined by the digital camera's exposure algorithm, to a constant level. The video offers at first a wholly romantic image suffused with natural beauty. It is only slowly, as the single take progresses through its visual capture of the sun descending beneath the horizon, that the work reveals that some other operation is in effect. As the light from the setting sun fades, the fixed brightness setting used to render the image is forced to compensate to maintain its consistent level, introducing an increasing amount of noise into the frame. The visual apparatus no longer seems responsive to changing conditions, and the image progressively diverges from the reality it represents. Faced with the diminishing light, the picturesque scene of a sunset degrades until it disaggregates into abstract blocks of differing light value.

This image degradation results from throwing a wrench into the representational system at work. The video first appears as a transparent view of the natural world, premised on the invisibility of representational technology. But operating from the beginning, there is a type of stoppage in the machinery that produces the image, initially unseen but soon made visible by glitches in the image. This hidden action is comparable to the act of tree spiking by environmental activists. In this type of ecological sabotage, or monkeywrenching, a metal or ceramic spike is hammered into the trunks of old-growth trees in order to prevent logging. The spike disables, potentially dangerously, logging equipment, and since clear-cutters sometimes have no way of telling which trees are spiked, the effect is to protect with minimal intervention wide areas of wilderness from development. Vierkant's manipulated brightness setting acts as a representational spike, disrupting the 'development' of the image by interrupting the seamless depiction of the natural world by the machinery of image production. His video offers an iteration of what Nadia Bozak calls 'the sunless image,' where darkness 'overpowers the light source' - cinema's 'essential ingredient' and 'material basis' - and thereby makes its status as 'a light-based media . . . readily, self-reflexively, apparent' ([2012] , 40). Vierkant's monkeywrenching of the image invites an examination of the relation of this practice of environmental activism to the aesthetic forms that represent it. (Figures 1-3 : Image degradation in *Exposure Adjustment on a Sunset*)

Environmental activist Dave Foreman, a major proponent of this type of direct action, offers a concise definition:

Monkeywrenching, ecological sabotage, ecotage, ecodefense, or "night work" - these are all terms for the destruction of machines or property that are used to destroy

the natural world. Monkeywrenching includes such acts as pulling up survey stakes, putting sand in the crankcases of bulldozers, rendering dirt

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Figure 1-3. Image degradation in *Exposure Adjustment on a Sunset.*

roads in wild areas impassable to vehicles, cutting down billboards, and removing and destroying trap lines . . . [Monkeywrenching is nonviolent and is aimed only at inanimate objects, never toward physically hurting people. ([1991] , 118)

The term itself derives from Edward Abbey's novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* ([1975]), in which a small group of individuals use sabotage tactics to prevent the industrial development of the American Southwest, emblematized by the Glen Canyon Dam in Arizona. Abbey's novel galvanized activists - including Foreman, who established Earth First! in 1979 - to legitimize more radical actions taken on behalf of the environment. Monkeywrenching in particular seeks to interrupt production processes, to stall or introduce delay, to incapacitate or destroy equipment, and to push industrial machinery past the limits of its operating power, causing it to break or lay dormant. It might also attack existing infrastructure, such as a dam or research facilities. Ecotage, a portmanteau for ecological sabotage, is to be sharply distinguished from eco-terrorism, in that one of its fundamental principles is that its use of violence is not directed at individuals. As Foreman writes, monkeywrenching 'is never directed against human beings or other forms of life. It is aimed at inanimate machines and tools that are destroying life' (2012, 113). Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the passage of the Patriot Act, however, radical environmentalists have become a consistent target of federal prosecution for domestic terrorism, such that the FBI has named eco-terrorism a top priority for law enforcement (Sumner and Weidman [2013] ; Wagner [2008]).

Monkeywrenching is relevant to media studies in Part as a mode of activism that targets the commercial exploitation of the natural environment by film and media industries. These industries are resource intensive, utilizing significant amounts of raw materials and disrupting local environments for film sets (Maxwell and Miller2012; Starosielski and Walker2016; Cubitt [2017] ; Vaughan [2019]). Environmental activism has not often used direct action, let alone sabotage, against film productions. One notable and commonly cited exception is the organized protests against the filming of *The Beach* (Danny Boyle, 2000), shot on Maya Bay in Thailand (Cohen2005). Producers received permit approval to make temporary alterations to the beach, prompting immediate protests when preparation for the film began. After pre-production was briefly halted, a committee appointed by the Thai Royal Forestry Department allowed the production to go forward, and this decision sparked a three-week sit-in that blocked the film crew access to their location. In addition to considering actions like this one, media studies can also view illicit acts of filming, undertaken in defense of non-human nature, as instances of cinematic monkeywrenching. Here, one would include examples drawn from animal rights activism, such as the undercover videos taken at factory farms in violation of so-called 'ag-gag' laws (which aim to restrict the visual documen-

tation of agribusiness practices) or the documentary *The Cove* (Louie Psihoyos, 2009), which resorted to subterfuge in order to document dolphin hunting in Japan.

This essay, however, will argue that monkeywrenching is as much an aesthetic practice as an activist one. This involves more than the examination of the depiction of monkeywrenching in narrative and documentary filmmaking, though I do consider this dimension later. Monkeywrenching is understood, rather, as a type of environmental activism that is already and even primarily aesthetic, such that certain modes of filmmaking, in parallel to the tactics of ecotage, monkeywrench the medium by disrupting commercial cinema's profligacy. The conservationist strategies of monkeywrenching, once transposed to film aesthetics, resemble a set of formal interventions that disclose the infrastructural conditions of the image. That is to say, a monkeywrenched film challenges the mimetic representation of nature and its dependence on the invisibility of the technology that produces the image. This partly entails streamlined production methods and an efficient use of the resource-intensive image - a filmmaking practice that treads lightly, in other words. As a matter of aesthetics, though, monkeywrenching draws on modernist devices that interrupt or disrupt representational transparency in order to critique industry's exploitation of the environment. The textual strategies called upon can be varied - to include formal abstraction, sound/ image disjunction, and extended duration - but their similarity to the tactics of ecotage demonstrates the often-unexplored concordance between environmental activism and ecocinema.

The monkeywrenching of film produces an aggressive ecocinema that operates more through formal shocks than by creating immersive experiences of the natural world, as ecocinema is typically said to do. Ecocinema, as defined by Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, is distinguished from 'environmentalist' films on the basis of its 'consciousness-raising and activist intentions' ([2010], 45). 'Ecocinema overtly strives to inspire personal and political action on the Part of viewers, stimulating our thinking so as to bring about concrete changes in the choices we make, daily and in the long run, as individuals and as societies, locally and globally' (45). Ecocinema, she argues, promotes environmental awareness by presenting the viewer with an ecocentric perspective of the natural world as a corrective to anthropocentric biases. For Scott MacDonald, ecocinema instills a 'deep appreciation' of the environment by providing sustained focus on natural landscapes that are usually overlooked ([2013] , 19). This type of filmmaking demands 'patience and mindfulness' (19) from a spectator asked to closely attend to 'uneventful' nature. Monkeywrenching's confrontational tactics instead shock the complacency of the viewer, utilizing formal techniques that present wilderness not as untouched by humanity but injured by it. However, raising public consciousness is ultimately secondary to the aims of this type of ecocinema - indeed ecotage often operates without an audience. Beyond emphasizing environmental harms, it implicates filmmaking's own production methods as Part of these processes of extraction. Cinematic ecotage exposes the image as something that both requires resources to produce it and constitutes a resource in its own right. In this, it is related to Susan Sontag's ([1977]) call for an 'ecology of images' that, in distinction to 'images of ecology' (Ross [1994]

), seeks to conserve the seemingly 'unlimited resource' of photographic images which de-realize the world by endlessly consuming it. MacDonald, for instance, ties the transience inherent to the material infrastructures of cinema (the deterioration of the film strip from projection, the instability of the digital image, the obsolescence of celluloid) to the disappearance of 'comparatively natural environments' ([2013] , 19). Ecocinema, in his argument, is a counter-tendency to both:

If we cannot halt the ongoing transformation of the natural environment (or of particular modes of cinema and cinema spectatorship) . . . we can certainly use cinema to honor those dimensions of what is disappearing that we *would* preserve if we could, and we can hope that by valuing and conserving what seems on the verge of utter demise we can hold onto some vestiges of it, and the continuities it represents, longer than may currently seem possible. (19, original emphasis)

Monkeywrenching shares this conservationist impulse but, as a tactic of radical activism, it is less willing to utilize images of the natural environment as an honorific, as compensation for the relentless and unstoppable degradation of nature. Ecotage instead uses images to intervene in the ongoing ruination of nature. As elaborated in the sections to follow, monkeywrenched images introduce a stop or pause - an aesthetic suspension - of the extractions characteristic of commercial cinema, producing representational spikes comparable to the tree spikes of environmental activists.

Monkeywrenching's ugly aesthetics

The practice of monkeywrenching is associated with the Animal Liberation Front (founded in 1974), the 1980s activities of Earth First! (Foreman published a field manual titled *Ecodefense* on ecotage in1985), and the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), later in the 1990s. At the first national gathering of Earth First! in March 1981, the group staged an action at the Glen Canyon Dam. Members of the organization assembled along the Colorado River, as five of their fellow activists unfurled a large strip of black plastic, measuring three hundred feet in length, from the top of the dam, giving the appearance of a crack in the structure. Abbey spoke to the group, voicing his opposition to the industrial development on the river and in its surrounding areas. 'If opposition is not enough,' he said, 'we must resist, and if resistance is not enough, then subvert' (Foreman1991, 22). The crack provided an aesthetic realization of the destruction dreamed by the characters of Abbey's novel. Like Vierkant's representational spike, the crack 'breaches' the dam, producing the illusion of an infrastructural failure. For John Durham Peters, a characteristic feature of infrastructure is that it is forgotten - it withdraws so that other actions can take place on its ground - and 'the bigger the infrastructure, the more likely it is to drift out of awareness and the bigger the potential catastrophe' ([2015] , 32). The simulated crack is an aesthetic disfiguration of the dam, a marring of its surface, that calls attention to the natural forces that it keeps at bay and to the 'potential catastrophe' that humanity's intervention makes possible.

This disfiguring gesture, which tries to liberate natural resources from industrial development, falls under the aesthetic category of the ugly, considered by Adorno ([1997][1970]) as modernism's defense against the 'commercialization of the beautiful' (Hohendahl [2005] , 171) by the culture industry. According to Peter Uwe Hohendahl, the ugly - having primacy to the beautiful in Adorno's reformulation - intensifies the 'oppositional force' of the autonomous artwork (171). The deforming act of ecotage - understood thus far as the introduction of a glitch or crack into a representational system - performs the 'violation of the traditional aesthetic code that separates the advanced artwork from the threat of the culture industry' (171), which Adorno aligns with the ugly. The ugly artwork appears so because it emphasizes 'the state of material' (173), adhering to the representational forms dictated by its constitutive elements, and thereby offering 'radical dissonance' rather than the 'false reconciliation' of the beautiful (186). As Adorno indicates, 'the impression of ugliness stems from the principle of violence and destruction' (46) - specifically from humanity's domination of nature. The aesthetic judgment about what is ugly registers nature's resistance to this

domination ('its facade of having yet to be mastered'), and it is therefore dependent on specific historical conditions (47). From Adorno's perspective, 'ugliness would vanish if the relation of man to nature renounced its repressive character' (47). As an index of suffering, the ugly expresses the injury to nature by industrializing forces. The persistence of this 'wild' nature in dialectical tension with the productive forces that seek to tame it upsets the classical values of harmony, balance, and proportion that define the beautiful. Monkeywrenching as an artistic practice, as a modernist device, aims to liberate this repressed nature from the 'strategy of containment' (Price [2010], 39) that is the beautiful.

Consider the direct action against the seal fur trade undertaken by the environmentalist organization Greenpeace, whose early campaigns recognized the importance to its activist aims of creating compelling imagery that could circulate in the public consciousness. Greenpeace's savvy use of the mass media allowed it to establish 'a concrete presence in the global community by specializing in the construction of sharp little media moments that the newswires and television outlets can't seem to resist,' according to Stephen Dale ([1996] , 14). The group utilized confrontational tactics that generated the desired media attention, such as the blockading of whaling ships, or placing their members in harm's way between the whales and the harpooners or within the range of a nuclear test site as they did off Amchitka Island (Weyler [2004]). As Part of Greenpeace's campaign against the hunting of baby seals, its members spray-painted the animals' pelts, tarnishing their fur with green blotches. These stains were a form of ecodefense, a minimal intervention designed to ruin the commercial value of the fur - though this action might also have made the animals more vulnerable to natural predation. The gesture of ecotage responds to the actual degradation of the natural world with a representational counter-movement: the violent act of clubbing a seal is counter-posed by an act of aesthetic violence that aims to deflect it.

By rendering the seals' fur 'ugly' by means of these amorphous blots, the Greenpeace activists made visible, by interrupting or suspending, the violent domination of nature.

Ugliness, as monkeywrenching deploys it, is primarily a formal effect. Environmentalist media typically relies on images of ecological devastation in order to rouse advocacy, and this content-based representational strategy makes use of what Umberto Eco terms 'ugliness in itself' ([2007] , 19), referring to actual entities that elicit disgust, such as the excremental and the rotten, or one might add, industrial pollution. In distinction, ecotage is a formal intervention, an anti-mimetic strategy allied with modernism's critique of representational transparency. As Thomas Huhn notes, aesthetic autonomy is premised on the repression of nature, since 'the principle that gives aesthetic form to material is the same principle according to which the domination of nature occurs' ([1988] , 142). As he succinctly puts it, 'form is possible only at the expense of nature' (142). Art's formal beauty excludes the ugly, but in ugliness, Huhn notes, 'the memory of repressed nature' returns (142). Ugliness in modern art retains the persistence of a fear of nature that had supposedly been surpassed by modernity's overcoming of the archaic. As Adorno argues, 'the image of beauty as that of a single

and differentiated something originates with the emancipation from the fear of the overpowering wholeness and undifferentiatedness of nature' (50). Artistic beauty, and particularly its commercialization, is thus a form of denial of humanity's entanglement with and dependence on nature. It is an aesthetic illusion of our mastery over it. Monkeywrenching's ugly aesthetics addresses itself directly to this illusion, introducing a formal disturbance (like a crack in a dam) that gestures at what beauty aims to keep at bay.

A brief examination of the experimental documentary *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel, 2012) helps to bring this ugliness into view. Filmed on a commercial fishing vessel in the Atlantic, *Leviathan* provides an account of the repetitive and often dangerous labor entailed in industrial fishing. Associated with the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University, the filmmakers reject documentary's more conventional devices - voice-over narration, on-camera interviews, explanatory title cards - in favor of the 'rawness' of embodied experience, achieved through the use of GoPro cameras variously positioned around the ship, whether strapped to the fishermen themselves, attached to long poles held at the surface of the water, or allowed to slide and slosh around with the dismembered fish parts on the deck. The intended effect is one of experiential immediacy, of an unmediated encounter with the world that 'exists before interpretation' (Castaing-Taylor and Paravel2014, n.p.; for a critical account of sensory ethnography's immersive aesthetic, see Pavsek2015). From my perspective, *Leviathan* exhibits a modernist tendency to utilize the seeming rawness of nature to break open representational mimesis and access a sensuous immediacy, and this appears in the film as a formal ugliness that distorts the transparency of the image. One might note, for instance, the perspectival disorientation produced by the lightweight mobility of the GoPro cameras, which enables them to attain extremely close proximity to what is filmed, with the effect of abstracting the subject matter from its immediate spatial context. When the camera is suspended at the surface level of the ocean, the rolling of the waves continually submerges our point of view beneath the water, creating an unsteady horizon line that causes the image to alternate between representational depth and the flatness of modernist abstraction. This is what Christopher Pinney calls the 'aqueous modernism' of the film, which offers 'a boiling Cubism or Vorticism rather than the stable antinomies of Renaissance composition' ([2015] , 36). Like Vierkant's digital video, *Leviathan* makes self-reflexive use of light (via its diffusion or refraction through water) in order to modulate the image between extremes of legibility and illegibility. For instance, the camera's close proximity to the fishermen and to their trawling nets causes a frequent splattering of the lens, whether from water or blood. The droplets obscure or smear what the image depicts. Similarly, in the series of images that open the film, a pre-dawn hauling of the catch, taken from the perspective of one of the fishermen, is shown in near darkness, which emphasizes the remoteness of the vessel on the open ocean. Throughout *Leviathan*, natural elements produce formal disruptions to the transparency of the image, making it 'ugly' in Adorno's sense of creating a 'dissonance' that recalls humanity's archaic fear of nature.

The disequilibrium caused by the documentary's mobile frame, the image's shifting or disappearing horizon line, and the ocean-rocked vessel expresses the exposure of the fisherman to the dangers of an overwhelming nature. What connects *Leviathan* to the tradition of monkeywrenching is its implicit critique of commercial fishing by virtue of its extensive attention to industrialized practices typically kept out of view. The film's de-personalizing of the fishermen redirects focus to the technological assemblage of the ship as a whole, as a machine optimized for natural resource extraction. The spectator watches as fish are efficiently and indifferently disemboweled and beheaded, or as rays are mutilated one after another, or as a bloodied stream of unused parts spills off the side of the boat. There is no sabotage carried out against this killing machine except for the formal sabotage of the film itself, whose modernist devices reintroduce repressed nature into the frame.

The lure of ecotage

Recent documentary and narrative films have addressed the ethics of monkeywrenching and its sometimes close relationship to eco-terrorism. These films coincide with heightened attention to ecosabotage arising from political inaction regarding a worsening climate crisis and to the media-grabbing tactics of local activism, such as the indigenous resistance to oil pipeline expansion at Standing Rock and elsewhere. Distinct from the previous discussion of monkeywrenching as a formal device, here it is taken up as a thematic issue, as the premise for narrative action or the subject matter for documentary examination. As instances of commercial cinema, even if of the indie variety, these films broadly speaking do not participate in the association I struck earlier between monkeywrenching and modernism's antimimetic aesthetic. Rather, they exploit the more cinematic aspects of ecosabotage - that is, its visual impact and its narrative economy - as an often clandestine and confrontational activity that pits passionate environmentalists against more powerful corporate interests. Narratives of monkeywrenching tend to emphasize its consequences for its practitioners, utilizing a melodramatic mode that personalizes the appeal of and ethical stakes regarding this more extreme form of activism. These films, however, do usefully criticize the romanticizing of radical activism like monkeywrenching, often presented heroically for the seeming purity of its convictions about the defense of nature. In both *The East* (Zal Batmanglij, 2013) and *Night Moves* (Kelly Reichardt, 2011), this critique is generally directed at the gendered and classed aspects of monkeywrenching, where ecodefense is linked to hubristic narratives of the white male savior.

The lure of ecotage, as it is presented by these films, is the immediacy of its effect, characteristic of how violence offers the possibility for cathartic release when other avenues for activism are cut off or frustrated. Radical environmentalists routinely express their frustration with the incremental pace of policy solutions to environmental crisis and with the perceived insufficiencies of traditional forms of protest. Paul Watson, one of the first members of Greenpeace and founder in 1978 of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, an organization that uses direct action for the protection of marine life, broke from Greenpeace in Part because he found its Quaker-inspired practice of bearing witness to be ineffective. As he says in the documentary *Eco-Pirate: The Story of Paul Watson* (Trish Dolman, 2011), 'bearing witness means nothing to me. It's just like you're witness to an atrocity. I don't believe in protest either . . . It's a very submissive thing.' Similar sentiments are voiced in a documentary released the same year - *If A Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front* (Marshall Curry, 2011), which documents the arrest and prosecution of members of the radical environ-

mentalist group - with a focus on activist Daniel McGowan - for arson against timber companies. Those activists were 'tired of the talk [and] tired of the philosophizing' and thus turned to more extreme measures. McGowan defends his decision to commit arson and other forms of property destruction by asserting that he had no intention of harming individuals, nor did he harm any, even as he recognizes that his actions are criminal. Watson is less remorseful, and he claims that violence is integral to effective activism:

Why should we be surprised that there are violent factions in the environmental and animal rights movement when there are violent factions of every other movement that has existed or has ever existed? Social reform is a violent enterprise and always has been. The reality is that there is no social revolution ever achieved without violence. All social revolutions are violent revolutions.

In *The East* and *Night Moves*, environmental activists echo these sentiments, justifying their turn to violence because of the perceived ineffectiveness of traditional activism. The former film concerns an eco-terrorist group called The East that carries out 'jams' against corporate bad actors, seeking to hold them personally responsible for their damage to the natural environment. (Figure 4: Jamming an oil executive in *The East*) The jams entail inflicting personal harm in proportion to the societal harm done by these companies, with the punishments resembling the suffering of their victims: drug manufacturers poisoned with their own drug and polluters bathing in the same contaminated water that killed a young child from cancer. The East's retributive, extra-legal justice seeks to enforce accountability. 'I want them to feel the consequences of their actions,' says the group's de-facto leader Benji (Alexander Skarsgard). For the activists, violence personalizes what is otherwise abstract corporate decision-making. As one activist named Izzy (Ellen Page) tells her father, 'A lot of people have been hurt because of what you've done You create, for a living, toxic chemicals that will outlast us all and

feel nothing. But tonight you will feel something.' As Izzy's emphasis on feeling indicates, the jams function as melodramatic scenarios to identify the culpable, extract their remorseful confession, and remedy injustice by punishing the guilty.

As melodramas, however, the jams translate the societal problem of environmental devastation into personalized narratives, at the risk of overlooking systemic causes. Indeed, *The East* emphasizes the personal motivations that drive the members of the eco-terrorist group, by linking each jam to the private traumas of its participants. The group carries out

Figure 4. Jamming an oil executive in *The East*.

its jam against McCabe-Grey, a pharmaceutical manufacturer celebrating the release of its antibiotic to the U.S. military, because its member Doc (Toby Kebbell) lost his sister to the harmful drug and is suffering neurological damage himself from it. Likewise, when The East targets a major chemical polluter, it is because Izzy's father is an executive at the company. The jam, where executives are forced to wade out into contaminated water, extracts not only a confession regarding the illegal dump-

ing of pollutants, but also nearly reconciles father and daughter, long estranged from one another. This suggests that The East's choice of ecoterrorist strategies is motivated more by personal revenge and unresolved anger than any desire for sustainable change, and as such constitutes a short-term tactic that delivers more immediate satisfactions than the slow process of building consensus among the general public. The film's conclusion seems to confirm this perspective, as it proposes an alternative to the use of violence, offered by the film's protagonist Sarah (Brit Marling), an agent for a private intelligence firm named Hiller Brood, who infiltrates The East in order to discern their intended corporate targets but who ultimately becomes sympathetic to their cause. When Benji threatens to expose the list of undercover Hiller Brood agents, putting their lives at risk, Sarah refuses to hand it over, and a closingcredits sequence shows her using information about the firm's clients to convince the agents to expose corporate wrong-doing. 'If some of them saw the things that I've seen, they would turn,' she says, and thus replaces forced contrition with the more deliberative process of rhetorical persuasion.

This difference in tactics is structured around a gendered divide regarding the appeal of violence and more radical forms of activism, particularly where the desire for interventionist strategies like eco-terrorism is linked to a masculinist idealization of action over more seemingly passive strategies such as persuasion and bearing witness. Consider, for instance, that in *The East* eco-terrorism is legitimized on the basis of the suffering and sacrifice of women, linking the protection of the environment by avenging male activists to the protection of femininity (see Merchant1980on the association of nature with the feminine). Relevant to this claim is not only Doc's retribution for his sister but also the death of Izzy. Following her father's expression of guilt, Izzy is killed by armed security guards who arrive at the scene of the jam. Her death establishes her as a martyr to the cause, and the nowimpossible reconciliation with her father keeps open the emotional trauma that motivates the desire for violent retribution. Activism is taken up in defense of damage done to women's bodies, just as those bodies are made to bear the traces of ecological harm - as, for example, with the female pharmaceutical executive who appears on television after having been poisoned by her own drug. By the film's conclusion, eco-terrorism seems more like a masculine prerogative, carried out both in defense of and at the expense of women.

Reichardt's *Night Moves* also displays skepticism toward ecotage and ecoterrorism for its masculinist privileging of immediate action. Though the film features a premise similar to that of Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* - that is, the blowing up of a dam by environmental activists - Reichardt considers her film to be 'almost the opposite' of the 'romanticizing of activism' that operates in that novel and elsewhere. This is characteristic of Reichardt's filmmaking, whose neorealist style tempers its more melodramatic elements. For instance, in *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), the film she made prior to *Night Moves*, Reichardt offers a feminist revision of the western in a narrative about a lost wagon train that demythologizes the masculine ethos of that genre as one of conquest and mastery. Accordingly, in *Night Moves*, Reichardt hews close to

the logistics of the act of ecotage - following the saboteurs as they meet to acquire a boat, purchase fertilizer for the explosives, and disperse after the crime - without providing much information about the monkeywrenchers' personal motives or backstories. Nonetheless, the spectator can intuit some details that place the saboteurs within particular societal ranks. Dena (Dakota Fanning), similar to Izzy, seems to come from a wealthy family, and her involvement in ecotage therefore suggests possibly a rejection of her upbringing, a defection from her class interests. Josh (Jesse Eisenberg), meanwhile, lives and works in a sustainable farming community, but his frustration with the seeming ineffectiveness of this off-the-grid lifestyle attracts him to the more dramatic possibilities of ecotage. Finally, their collaborator Harmon (Peter Sarsgaard) has a military background, which makes him useful for carrying out the operation, but he seems less motivated by an ethical defense of nature than nostalgia for combat. Given these motivations, monkeywrenching is presented not as an act of necessity, the final recourse of communities endangered by more powerful interests, but an act of privilege, to which activists are drawn because of its heroic possibilities. Reichardt's film aims to defuse these aggrandizing associations, not least by choosing to not depict the explosion of the dam.

There is little heroism in their act of ecotage, and when the dam explosion results in the unintended death of someone camping downstream, the guilty conspirators regard each with mutual distrust. When Dena explicitly expresses regret over the accidental homicide, Josh and Harmon suspect that she might confess to authorities. Josh's heightened paranoia and his increasing isolation from others indicate a masculine anxiety that refuses to accept responsibility for his actions and projects his own guilty conscience onto Dena. Reichardt emphasizes Josh's withdrawal from the support system of his community by isolating him in shadows and keeping him separated from others in the frame. Each encounter seems to confirm his own paranoid assumptions, causing him to misunderstand the flirtatious gestures of a friend, or to perceive the distant gazes of his acquaintances as looks of suspicion. Ultimately, fearing exposure, Josh murders Dena, suffocating her in the steamy interior of a sauna, and thereby violently stifling the threat of her voice as that which might implicate him. In a phone call to Harmon, he calls this 'an accident,' suggesting a continued inability to bear responsibility for his actions. These unintentional consequences are Part of the film's critique of violence, whose effects are immediate but unpredictable. The morning after the dam explosion, Josh listens intently to a conversation between two members of his farming collective as they debate the effectiveness of ecotage. One argues that 'someone's got to start somewhere,' while the other points out that the dam is only one of twelve on the same river so it 'doesn't do anything' to destroy one. He dismisses their act of monkeywrenching as 'theater,' and offers their own sustainable community as the slower but more sensible solution. This critique converts the masculine desire for effective action into something merely theatrical, a hubristic overreach that undermines its own intentions.

We can understand the skepticism about ecotage and eco-terrorism operating in these narrative features with reference to Hannah Arendt's ([1970]) critique of violence. Arendt argues that while violence may be justifiable, it is never legitimate. Violence can be narrowly justified as a response to a pressing cause. 'No one questions the use of violence in self-defense,' Arendt writes, 'because the danger is not only clear but also present, and the end justifying the means is immediate' (52). Environmental activists have in fact used, with limited success, a necessity defense - which justifies a criminal act when in response to imminent danger - as a legal strategy for acts of destruction taken in defense of the environment. A recent case involved three activists charged with felonies in Minnesota for forcibly shutting down oil pipelines owned and operated by the Canadian company Enbridge Inc. Arendt, however, casts doubt on the institutionalizing of violence as a sustainable tactic. Considered by her to be a non-political but nonetheless rational action, violence can potentially serve short-term goals, but where sustained, it undermines its original aims. This is because force is not synonymous with power. Power is not organized violence. Rather, '*power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together' (44, original emphasis). The often clandestine and solitary act of monkeywrenching - particularly in contrast to the sustainable community-building featured in *Night Moves* and to a lesser degree in *The East* - may be dramatic and emotionally cathartic, but, as even some of its proponents acknowledge, it is not a long-term strategy for social change.

James Benning, cinematic eco-saboteur

James Benning's experimental films, spanning more than four decades, devote considerable attention to the natural environment, characteristically presenting landscapes using static long takes and ambient sound in a manner informed by structuralist filmmaking. Benning's filmmaking, I would argue, transposes the activist tradition of monkeywrenching into an aesthetic register, even as this single rubric does not encompass the full range of his extensive work. Here, monkeywrenching is less a question of subject matter, as it tends to be in narrative feature filmmaking, where it serves the purposes of character development and narrative conflict. Rather, in Benning's work, monkeywrenching takes on a formal dimension, as a textual disturbance that critiques the film image's beautifying of non-human nature by disclosing the exploitative human interventions that the beautiful image otherwise conceals. As Nikolaj Lubecker and Daniele Rugo note, Benning's landscape films do not present 'an elegiac consecration of nature' ([2018] , 1), emphasizing instead the politics of land use and the infrastructural and industrial networks that often invisibly crisscross those areas.

As an avant-garde practitioner of films concerned with nature, operating outside commercial film distribution, Benning utilizes production methods that resemble the characteristic features of the eco-saboteur, particularly as modeled by Abbey's Hayduke in *The Monkey Wrench Gang.* Benning's 'lifelong rebellion against commercial cinema' (MacDonald [2018] , 8) positions his films in opposition to the extractive tendencies of industrial film production. Though he has lived in New York and near to Los Angeles, Benning chooses locations distant from these centers of commercial production. His production methods are comparatively lightweight, often consisting of a crew of one as the filmmaker travels alone to the locations for his sitespecific films. Benning's 'aesthetics of self-reliance' (Panse [2018] , 100) entails the patient observation of nature, and insofar as he 'avoids marks of his subjectivity in his work' (Panse [2018] , 101), he thereby models the anonymity of the monkeywrencher's 'night work.' One imagines Benning like Hayduke, traveling solo across the country, documenting the enclosure and commercial development of the American west. Benning may not be pulling up survey stakes, but his work at times configures the act of filming into one of civil disobedience. For instance, his 'California Trilogy' is, as critic Michael Sicinski notes, '270 minutes of illegal trespassing' ([2013] , n.p.) and Mark Peranson calls Benning's *RR* ([2018] , n.p.) a 'pirate movie,' because it was 'filmed and recorded, as always, by a one-man band, with all shots captured without any permissions or

permits' (n.p.). As Benning told the *Los Angeles Times*, he has never been arrested while filming, but he was 'held at gunpoint for 20 minutes by a guard at the state prison in Central Valley, while filming *El Valley Centro*' (Gottlieb [2005] , n.p.). The sometimes illicit nature of his filmmaking joins its individualist and itinerant aspects to establish Benning's affinity to the eco-saboteur. Just as monkeywrenching aims to preserve nonhuman nature by destroying its potential use as an exploitable resource, Benning's resistance to mainstream narrative filmmaking entails the cancellation of the commercial value of the image, especially as the patient attentiveness demanded by its long duration and minimal action makes it difficult to consume.

As the filmmaker has indicated, his use of extended duration, enabled particularly by his transition to high definition digital video, introduces a political dimension to the image. 'Duration,' Benning has said, 'puts the political back in the shot' (Panse2013, 66). In recent criticism (Lam [2016] ; Ross [2016]), Benning's filmmaking has been grouped under the category of 'slow cinema,' a contemporary mode of art cinema popular on the international film festival circuit. Slow cinema is a realist style characterized by the use of long takes, minimal story content (especially in relation to extensive shot lengths), and a distanced, static camera - all of which contribute to a pronounced emphasis on temporal passage and its perceptible materialization in the image. These formal choices are often framed as a rejection of the accelerated pace of commercial filmmaking, or as Moira Weigel ([2016]) has more recently argued, they express the imposing bodily demands of precarious labor in a post-Fordist, globalized economy. Benning's filmmaking brings an ecocritical dimension to slow cinema. As Stephanie Lam argues, his films are more than simply 'nature worship,' as they 'invite a framing of screened nature as therapeutic experience set at a remove from the ebbs and flows of mainstream television, film, and most of today's on-line environments' (213). For Lam, Benning's 'slow ecocinema' renews the spectator's 'practice of ordinary looking' (213), which has been dominated by the spectacle of contemporary image culture. Similarly, in his consideration of Benning's serial killer films such as *Landscape Suicide* (1986) and *Stemple Pass* (2013), Julian Ross notes Benning's dissent from the mass-media representations of the convicted murderers featured in his films (Ed Gein, Ted Kaczynski). By constructing counter-narratives about these notorious figures, Benning creates an 'ethical cinema where slowness is employed not only as a methodology against studio and conventional film-making but also against approaches to representation in general' (262).

From my perspective, Benning's slow ecocinema is less a generalized critique of the acceleration of everyday life than a specifically ecocritical intervention into the capitalist exploitation of labor and natural resources, as evidenced by his California trilogy's attention to the inequalities of water usage by agricultural and industrial interests. The slowness of his films is therefore not only a matter of the spectator's response, of the retraining of perception through the patient observation of nature, but also a question of production methods - as with the necessity of waiting to the filmmaker's practice. Benning must travel to the various sites that serve as location

shoots for his documentary aesthetic, as in *Deseret* (1995) and *13 Lakes* (2004). Once on site, Benning confronts choices of framing and shot duration, which often entail the patient endurance of changing conditions in search of his desired image. The 'certain anxiety of waiting' (Panse [2013] , 63) that Benning attributes to his spectator also applies to the production of the images, as when Benning describes, during the filming of *RR*, not knowing when trains would pass into the frame. The filmmaker's switch to a digital format has alleviated the difficulty of having to make choices about duration on location, but it has not changed the waiting required to capture the slowness of environmental change.

His filmmaking enacts the temporal delay integral to monkeywrenching. Ecotage incapacitates machinery in order to stall industrial development. What Benning's slow ecocinema enacts, in extending the image to such a degree, is the introduction of delay into the machinery of film. Here the monkeywrenching of cinema is not, or not primarily, the total stoppage of image production (the absence of an image) but an ethical suspension of the image over time that converts passive observation into active intervention. This is because what becomes apparent in the slow unfolding of the image is a politicized response about land use and exploitation.

The radical inconsequence of Stemple Pass

As Nikolaj Lubecker ([2018]) emphasizes, Benning's filmmaking has a pronounced interest in violence, including political assassination and serial killing. *American Dreams (lost and found)* (1984) features the diary entries of Arthur Bremer, who attempted the assassination of George Wallace. *Landscape Suicide* provides a structuralist portrait of two murderers: 16year-old Bernadette Protti, who killed a classmate in 1984, and the infamous Ed Gein, who preserved and refashioned the bodies of his victims. *North on Evers* documents Benning's cross-country itinerary as he travels to sites of historical violence including the Trinity nuclear testing site, the place of civil rights leader Medger Evers' assassination, and the Hoover Dam - about which, in a statement reminiscent of Hayduke, Benning narrates that once 'it symbolized hope for the future, but now I saw it as one of the last technologies to be trusted.' In Benning's *Two Cabins* project (2007-) - encompassing films, gallery installations, and drawings and other printed materials - the filmmaker examines the lure of eco-terrorism, violence carried out in defense of nature, through the juxtaposition of Henry David Thoreau to Ted Kaczynski, otherwise known as the Unabomber. The two cabins of this multimedia project refer to replicas built by Benning of Thoreau's own at Walden Pond and of Kaczynski's, where he lived in seclusion in Montana until his capture in 1996. The former cabin is the subject of Benning's *Concord Woods* (2014), presented in two hour-long shots, one at the summer solstice and the other at the winter solstice. The latter cabin is depicted in Benning's *Stemple Pass*, which consists of four half hour-long takes, each showing the same forested mountains on Benning's property in California during a different season. (Figure 5: Fall in *Stemple Pass*) In drawing a comparison between the civilly disobedient Thoreau and the criminally violent Kaczynski, as well as considering his own relationship to these two figures, Benning demonstrates the specificity of ecotage, as a form of aesthetic violence, in its distinction from eco-terrorism. In an interview with *Artforum*, for instance, Benning expresses some affinity with Kaczynski's criticism of the 'industrial-technological system,' as his infamous ([1995]) manifesto 'Industrial Society and its Future' termed it. 'My intension [sic] is not to exploit,' Benning said, 'but rather to show how complex Kaczynski's thinking is. I believe his warnings are just. Of course I find his methods wrong' (Benning [2012] , n.p.). The Unabomber's 'experiments,' as he called them, entailed sending explosive packages to university scientists, timber and oil company executives, computer store employees, and others - resulting in three deaths and

23 injuries across a terror campaign lasting more than a decade. Benning's own experiments in film and multimedia in the *Two Cabins* project, by contrast, utilize alternative methods for the defense of nature - methods, as I have been arguing, that deploy monkeywrenching's sabotage as a formal strategy.

Stemple Pass strikes a resemblance between the filmmaker and the ecoterrorist, but only up to a point, and it is at this point of divergence that the distinction between ecotage and eco-terrorism is made. Benning recreates Kaczynski's cabin on his own property, and narrates Kaczynski's writing in

Figure 5. Fall in *Stemple Pass.*

his own voice. In the film, Benning reads excerpts from the Unabomber's manifesto, private journals written by Kaczynski and purchased at auction by a friend of Benning's, two encrypted notebooks decoded by the filmmaker, and a prison interview conducted in 2001. Through his tonally flat delivery, Benning minimizes his own presence and any moralistic judgments that might arise from any distance between his own perspective and the ecoterrorist he ventriloquizes. To the extent possible, Benning masks his own persona behind that of Kazcynzki's. In *Two Cabins* (2011), he stages this masking of self spatially. The short film and installation present the view from the window of each cabin, with sound recordings made at their original sites, placing the spectator (and himself as filmmaker) in the literal position of Thoreau and Kaczynski - implicitly raising the question of whether the sharing of a view implies a shared viewpoint. In the case of Kaczynski, this ideological alignment only goes so far. As stated before, Benning shares his critique but not his methods. In *Stemple Pass*, the texts read by Benning trace a history of Kaczynski's radicalization, from a quotidian accounting of his survivalist lifestyle, to the acts of ecosabotage he carries out in the areas around his cabin (sugaring the gas tanks of vehicles, committing acts of vandalism against his distant neighbors, and more ominously, stringing wire across off-road trails to snare motorcyclists), and finally, to his bomb-making and plans to blow up a commercial airplane. Along this path toward ecoterrorism, Benning's own perspective diverges from Kaczynski's, but in a film that so closely aligns the two, how can we discern this break happening?

The difference between them - between Benning's just methods and Kaczynski's unjust ones - can be explained by distinguishing the type of action each undertakes in responses to environmental harm. Benning's formal treatment of the Unabomber's cabin treads lightly; his static camera frames a seemingly uninterrupted span of time, with each of the four shots taken from precisely the same location. This minimal intervention might suggest passivity or inaction, especially in contrast to Kaczynski's stated compulsion, heard in Benning's voice-over, to act in defense of nature. However, I see the film's quietude as a version of what Anne-Lise Francois ([2008]) calls 'recessive action.' Recessive actions are those that appear as inactions, since on being enacted, they immediately withdraw and therefore elude any positivist accounting. Like the 'self-canceling revelation' of the open secret, which frees its recipient 'from the ethical imperative to *act* upon knowledge' (3, original emphasis), recessive actions oppose 'the

empiricist tendency to define action by its measurable consequence' (32) through its conversion of latent potential into actual yield. Francois indicates that tree spiking provided the initial inspiration for the types of 'reticent assertions' that she examines in literature; monkeywrenching 'allowed [her] to think *as an act* the disappearance or cancellation of unused potential, and . . . because, in ideal circumstances, it exemplified an act complete at the moment of its being publicized' (36, original emphasis). The tree spike, hidden from view, only destroys the abstract commercial value of the tree as a potential resource, and its effectiveness derives - counter to a utilitarian accounting - from its not being used (i.e. not having to actually destroy equipment). In *Stemple Pass*, Benning's characteristically impassive camera functions like a recessive action, in that the film recognizes the need to preserve nature while freeing the spectator from the need to intervene on its behalf. Kaczynski, by contrast, cannot *not* act in defense of nature. If recessive actions are content to remain unobserved, to go uncounted on the public record, Kaczynski's turn to eco-terrorism instead betrays a desire to measure his success by the material consequences of his actions.

Distinguishing Benning from Kaczynski, and ecotage from eco-terrorism, involves confronting the difficulty of drawing attention to those actions that are effective because they go unobserved. In *Stemple Pass*, this means attending to Benning's use of sound/image relations and extended duration. As mentioned before, the spoken texts trace Kaczynski's increasing radicalization. They begin with a diaristic account of his cabin life, including his commitment to self-reliance, his dietary habits and hunting expeditions, and his growing impatience with his neighbors for their intrusions or disruptive noise ('It seems like there's no place in the world where one can be alone'). Kaczynski's situation mirrors that of Benning's spectator: presented with an idyllic landscape, the spectator's appreciation of its natural beauty is interrupted by the disruptive noise of Kaczynski's misanthropic sentiments, spoken in voice-over. Benning's narration 'interprets' the image, prompting the spectator to perceive the world through Kaczynski's aggrieved perspective, fueled by a desire 'to get revenge for all the wilderness being fucked up by the system.' The final spoken words reference Kaczynski's appreciation of nature: 'In the woods your awareness is turned outward. To me, this alertness or openness to one's senses is one of the greatest luxuries of living close to nature, and you can't understand this unless you've experienced it yourself.' Several more minutes pass before the end of the shot, leaving the spectator alone to experience nature with the memory of Kaczynski's words. In this 'non-action' of letting the shot continue, the spectator is offered the possibility for reflection, for the ethical consideration of Kaczynski's violent remedy for environmental harm. As Francois notes, the encounter with nature, like the open secret, asks no action from its observer; natural revelation is a disclosure that demands no accounting for itself, allowing its spectator to 'return empty-handed.' Rather than making use of this disclosure, by turning knowledge into action, 'the very gratuity with which "nature" gives "herself up"' prompts instead 'the inconsequent swerve into art' (Francois2008, 10). In Benning's

own aesthetic response to Kaczynski's violent actions, nature is simply there, requiring no acknowledgment. The radical 'inconsequence' of

Stemple Pass is its resistance to humanity's need to involve itself, to see the trace of its action upon the world. By being left alone, nature becomes something other than the site of human drama, including one carried out in its defense.

Even as Benning's quiet, contemplative films present non-human nature as beautiful, they nonetheless reveal the scarred traces of human intervention. Their extended duration allows the viewer to scrutinize the images. Though initially the experience may appear to be one of a sympathetic immersion in the natural world, an appreciative gaze at untouched wilderness, closer examination discloses the disruptive presence of humanity whose land-use policies and natural resource management alters the landscape. Even Kaczynski, who retreated into the remote Montana woods, could not escape into complete seclusion - hence Benning's added sound effect of a distant helicopter in *Stemple Pass*. The beautiful image of nature, which is often less a question of appreciation than commodification, is thus continually disrupted by something dissonant, a disturbing presence that upsets the formal harmony of nature's wholeness. Monkeywrenching as an activist practice is committed to disclosing the injurious harm done to non-human nature by extractive industries. As an aesthetic practice, monkeywrenching utilizes the dissonance of the ugly, which according to Adorno registers nature's resistance to its domination. A monkeywrenched image introduces an aesthetic delay or suspension that makes its easy consumption by the viewer more difficult and more deliberate. Conservationism therefore defines both ecotage's activism and its aesthetic. Monkeywrenching seeks the greatest possible effect from the smallest possible act, as when the consequence of the actual presence of a single tree spike is amplified by the virtual or potential presence of another spike in any other tree. It is a minimal intervention that leaves barely a trace of itself, like the invisible operation of Vierkant's fixed brightness setting, but whose effectiveness is registered in the dramatic stoppage of machinery (of extraction, of image production). A monkeywrenched cinema holds the natural world in abeyance, suspending it in a state of dormancy, resistant to development and ultimately indifferent to any human drama that might play out within it.

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Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Graig Uhlin is an associate professor of Screen Studies at Oklahoma State University. His research focuses on ecocinema and aesthetics, particularly within modernist and avant-garde filmmaking, and he is currently writing a book on the films of David Fincher. His articles have recently appeared in *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, *Games & Culture*, and *The Cine-Files*, as well as in edited collections on transmedia directors, affective ecocriticism, and vegetal ecocriticism.

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