

Study of a River

By Claudia Costa Pederson

Trained as a painter, filmmaker, and sculptor, Peter Hutton's filmic oeuvre is often discussed in relation to North American landscape painting traditions and to the early cinema tableaux documentaries.¹

An exemplar of Hutton's large body of work, "Study of a River" (1995), a 16 minute, black and white silent film, evokes comparisons with the landscapes of the Hudson River School and with the textural, slow, episodic structures of experimental film. Hutton's film is significant because it works between and around historical visualities. The film highlights the role of mimesis to inquire about the relationship between the politics of documenting nature and national and Euro-American identity formation.²

"Study of a River" depicts the winter landscape of the Hudson River in twenty-seven static shots taken from a boat, the river banks, and a bridge. Shots span from extreme long-shots, such as the opening scene showing a train running parallel to the river from a great distance, to extreme close-ups, including the image of raindrops hitting a mud puddle registering as scraggy lines of light. The visual style of fog, snow, light, shadow and texture quotes French poetic realism.³

Paralleling Hutton's play on scale, "Study of a River" conveys awe through the juxtaposition and movements of natural and industrial forms. The expansive river surface dotted with ice floes, the snow and wind swept river banks, the massive forms of moving ships and a bridge combine to simulate the feeling of the American sublime. Hutton's attention to color tone and texture with a range of blacks, whites, and greys suggest the visual and spiritual complexities latent in the landscape. The absence of sound further reinforces the spatial focus of "Study of a River," an allusion to landscape painting as well as meditation. With "Study of a River," Hutton examines how mimesis, a defining aesthetic of North American art, inter-



*Frame enlargement shows an ice cutter on the frozen Hudson.
Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

sects with national identity. The film oscillates between homage and ambivalence through angular compositions emphasizing the river's negative space. This evocation of North American landscape art differs from the life-like mimesis and idealized pastoralism characterizing this tradition.⁴

For Hutton, the traces of human presence in the landscape are predominantly imbedded in industrial technologies of boats and trains.⁵ Like his predecessors in painting, the artist's attention to technological forms is equivocal. The choice of episodic film, Hutton's hallmark, rejects the notion of documentary film as "truth" (an objective view of "actuality"), as defined by Scottish filmmaker John Grierson, who coined the term "documentary" in 1926.⁶ Instead, he favors the non-linearity of episodic documentary, which unfolds through carefully considered composition, autobiography, and sensation. With "Study of a River," Hutton evokes the mimetic aesthetics of past landscape traditions in painting and cinema to ultimately point to their artificiality. If not self-evident "truth", Hutton asks, what then are the underpinnings of such fraught, yet culturally defining, representations of the North American nature?

Hutton's interrogations are also in dialogue with popular culture and amateur tropes. "Study of a River" evokes the artist's familial and professional backgrounds, as a seaman's son, as a former seaman

himself, and as the director of the Film and Electronic Arts Program at Bard College since 1989. Hutton's cinematic tableaux of the Yangtze River, the Polish industrial city of Lodz, northern Iceland, and a ship graveyard on the Bangladeshi shore, (the subjects of his other films) indicate his understanding of globalization, continuing "Study of a River"'s exploration of the interactions of industry and nature.⁷

Hutton's visits to the Detroit Art Institute with his father in the 1950s to watch amateur travelogue films, and his father's extensive photographic documentation of his travels were formative. Hutton mentions his interest in the realist genre of travel literature, in particular, the diaries of Henry Hudson's voyage up the Hudson River punctuated by awe for the landscape's beauty as a source of inspiration.⁸ As a meditation on national and spatial identities Hutton's "Study of a River" suggests that these notions are profoundly tied to the vagaries of memory, ambivalent signs, and media/visual ecosystems.

Hutton's sublimity hinges between the historical entanglements of mimetic models of representation and the political tropes of nation and empire building through industry and technology. The Hudson River school's depictions of the American sublime were instrumental for popularizing the "American grand tour," where wealthy European and native city dwellers traveled from the Hudson River, to the Catskills, along the Erie Canal to Niagara Falls, and back through the White Mountains and Connecticut valley.⁹ In the episodic recordings of North African and Middle Eastern historical sites by Alexandre Promio for the Lumière brothers, documentary film origins double this movement. Explicitly both referring to and rejecting these histories, Hutton refrains from depicting the American landscape as wild, empty spaces. Here, industrial ships plow the Hudson River, reminders that landscape is always an interplay between nature and capital.

¹ Tom Gunning, "The Image and its Eclipse: The Films of Peter Hutton", *Spiral*, no. 4 (July 1985), pp. 7-10; Scott MacDonald, "Ten + (Alternative) Films about American Cities", *The Isle Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003*, Michael P. Brench and Scott Slovic, eds., (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), pp. 231.

² Patricia Zimmerman, *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Mette Hjort and Scott McKenzie, eds., *Cinema and Nation*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Jeffrey Geiger, *American Documentary Film: Projecting the Nation*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

³ Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies, the Key Concepts*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 151.

⁴ Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 135.

⁵ David Schuyler, *Sanctified Landscape: Writers, Artists, and the Hudson River Valley, 1820-1909*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012), pp. 28-46.

⁶ Ann Curthoys, *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective*, (Canberra, Australia: ANU E Press, 2005), pp. 151.

⁷ P. Adams Sitney, "Immanent Domain: The Films of Peter Hutton", *Artforum*, no. 9, Vol. XLVI (May 2008), pp. 366.

⁸ "Lived Experience", *Mouse Magazine*. <http://moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=945>. Accessed July 7, 2015.

⁹ Linda S. Ferber, *The Hudson River School: Nature and the American Vision*, (New York: Skira Rizolli, 2009), pp. 80-122.

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