

This Is My Land

Ben Rivers' Portraits and Landscapes

Sunday, March 29, 2009 — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

Ben Rivers In Person

The work of Ben Rivers occupies a distinctive place between personal document and expressive explorations of place. Detailed intimacies of portraiture are met with suggestions of the mysterious and vast through impressionistic images of landscape. These quiet contemplations are augmented with the fervent energies of the occupants to reveal myriad layers of character. (Vanessa O'Neill)

A young and highly prolific filmmaker, Rivers films are beautifully shot and hand-processed documents showing old, crumbling houses and folks living out of the way in shacks and tall grass. [...] Intimacy and appreciation for his subjects [are] protected by limited revelations and sparse soundtracks. The films are landscapes, but not old-fashioned, or tending towards the ideal; there is a reality and brutality in the imagery. [...] These are scenes from a child's paradise, complete with piles of spare tires and spinning cookies in broken-down cars in an empty field. They are current, common histories, odes to the freedom fighters that would have, in the past, come in ballad form. A sense of freedom runs throughout the films, suggesting any rural setting where safety does not trump the joy of smashing around. (Cinema Project Program Notes)

This Is My Land (2006) by Ben Rivers; 16mm, color, sound, 14 minutes, print from the maker

"The daily routine of self-sufficient Jake Williams, who lives alone within miles of forest in Aberdeenshire, Scotland. Jake always has many jobs on at any one time, finds a use for everything, is an expert mandolin player and has compost heaps going back many years. He has a different sense of time to most people in the 21st Century." (Ben Rivers)

Astika (2006) by Ben Rivers; 16mm, color, sound, 8 minutes, print from the maker

"A portrait of Astika, a recluse who lives on a Danish island. He has lived on his farm for fifteen years, but has allowed nature to run wild, to the point that he has no option but to move away." (BR)

Ah, Liberty! (2008) by Ben Rivers; 16mm, b&w, sound, 20 minutes, print from the maker

"A family's life in the wilderness of the Scottish Highlands, working, playing on a farm through the seasons; free-range animals and children, junk and nature, all within the most sublime of landscapes. A sense of freedom, with no particular story, beginning, middle or end, just fragments of lives lived. A poetic study which contrasts the languid setting with the youngsters' restless energy." (Ben Rivers)

"I have frequently compared Rivers' work to that of certain key figures in the early history of documentary, before genre-cops and petty ideologues severed the poetry and allusiveness from reality-based cinema. [Robert] Flaherty is a major point of contact, of course, but with *Ah, Liberty!* I was reminded of the grand aspirations of John Grierson, who saw no incompatibility between Flaherty's more observational, Bazinian approach and the montage constructions of Eisenstein and especially Vertov. In fact, for Grierson and his acolytes, like Humphrey Jennings, a dialectical synthesis of these modes was an imperative, necessary if cinema is going to be up to the task of accurately representing reality in all its complexity. *Ah, Liberty!* is a beautiful work, and one that takes several viewings to fully absorb, because in certain respects it realizes the Griersonian aspiration even more than some of the masterworks that movement actually produced. While *Origin of the Species* is a perfect gem that completely explores its subject in miniature form, *Ah, Liberty!* resembles Grierson's *Night Mail* or Jennings' *Listen to Britain*, ideal, impressionistic tone poems around a subject that nevertheless provide a thorough (if objectively 'incomplete') knowledge of the subject. In the case of *Ah, Liberty!*, we're observing the environs of poor

British kids, living in a rural hinterland, about whom we know very little specifically. The film's opening voiceover makes an ironic promise of conventional, liberal activist documentary, à la the Buñuel of *Las Hurdes*, but of course Rivers sets out to undermine that dubious approach. But what Rivers actually provides, from the rich, hazy establishing shot of the cloud-capped mountains, to the tracking shot across the wire fence, through extended observation of the boys riding around in red wagons or jerry-rigged doorless cars, is something like a feature-length Flaherty film or an ethnographic entry from Michel Brault, with all the expository passages removed." (Michael Sicinski, *The Academic Hack*. www.academichack.net/Viewsish2008.htm#Liberty)

Origin of the Species (2008) by Ben Rivers; 16mm, color, sound, 16 minutes, print from the maker

"A seventy-year-old man living in a remote part of Scotland obsessed for years with 'trying to really understand' Darwin's book, of which he is great fan. While pursuing this passion, he has constantly worked on small inventions to make his life easier. (Ben Rivers)

"A film that is all the more perfect for being utterly modest in intention, *Origin of the Species* is really just a portrait of a man ('the extraordinary S.') living in the wilderness, making his way and describing the world as he sees it. Rivers allows his subject ample room to opine on the natural world, evolution, the place of humankind in the universe, and the future of the planet, and although there is nothing particularly revelatory in his statements, they are clearly the thoughts of an intelligent man. Whether S. is an autodidact, or a learned man who dropped out of the larger culture, neither he nor Rivers cares to say. But the film is an act of generosity, and it is a rare pleasure to hear from someone on the apparent margins of society whose views are expansive rather than channelled into some pregiven demographic schema. Nevertheless, Rivers' achievement with this film is only minimally anthropological. From image to image, from shot to shot, there is an exquisiteness to *Origin of the Species* that is not only rare and phenomenal, but conceptually necessary, since Rivers has fashioned a film whose form feels celestially preordained, like the shape of a rock or the path of a stream." (Michael Sicinski, *The Academic Hack*. www.academichack.net/Viewsish2008.htm#Origin)

A World Rattled of Habit (2009) by Ben Rivers; 16mm, color, sound, 10 minutes, print from the maker

"The story of a journey to Woodbridge, Suffolk, to visit his friend Ben and his father Oleg..." (BR)

DIALOGUES (provided by Ben Rivers):

Astika

- [Phone call in Danish] She has left.
- So I was beginning to dream about snow and ice, and the water, and the north... it was calling me... back.
- And I bought this place fifteen and a half years ago, and it's a shame to move now because it had been wild and now its... the earth and ground is settled now, so now its really ready to spring to forests, and so I have... and I was... that's one of the reason, one of the only reason I would like to live ten or twenty years more, it was to see how all the wild trees was, how big they would be in ten or twenty years, but now it's... over.
- And I like this space because some corners I... I never go there... because, to make it in peace for certain birds that don't like humans, so they have places where they can build, then, live without any humans disturbing them... but that's also... over now.
- And so I try to...
- One of the reason I wanted to do that, it was so my old parents, they didn't have to go to Langeland at all, they didn't have to clean up after me... you now, if I drop dead now, you think they should clean all that up? Shit, so, better bring it down... so they don't even have to come down to the island, just sell it as... as a burning out place, burned out, yeah. And so I would like to say goodbye to him in a way so he knew that he must know why... he also got his hair burnt up...but no killing.
- Actually it was one of the reasons in December I take the decision to... to kill myself, take the ticket, end my life... and... I have to buy the firecrackers before new years eve, as you can't buy them... so that's

- one of the reason I postponed it a year... but now the picture's changed, no burning down, now... except my shoulders.
- Its like this bone up here is split and it should go around, it doesn't, and there's two pieces of bone that's floating around, so sometimes I can't use it for two weeks or three weeks... and my name means Yes... Yes.
 - There's so many birds, different birds and herbs and snakes and, all kinds of wild animals, and its only because I let it get wild... and that's my point, my idea... and nobody really get it... oh, no, why don't you plant Christmas trees, oh no, Christmas trees... see I think, that's sick!
 - Hey Mama look, he's also going to... look mum he's also going to... and ok, when I got papers from the government and that, they still wrote me as a schoolboy, my title is student... and I went out of school when I was fourteen years old... they never found out.
 - I'm really going to miss it, really sorry all the birds and ants and other stuff who have found a peaceful place... and now I move so it's, over... that.

Ah, Liberty!

- A young world... A world early in the morning of time... A hard, unfriendly world.
- Caveman's TV...caveman's TV...caveman's TV... caveman's TV... caveman's TV.
- On the ball, on the ball, one two, two one day two, two a two two one, one.
- Get the fucking dogs out the way will ya, or I'll kill them, deliberately!
- Ok just tell me when... Liberty is the absence of ideas. That's what I like best... I've fallen back on the things I used to like, which are not ideas. And I cultivate them. They are feelings. Or rather, impressions. Impressions of well being. Impressions of understanding. That's the real life. At least, something close to it. You go along with it.
- Get off the world... get off the world... get off the world... get off the world... get off the world.

Origin of the Species

- Say when did the universe start? Well, it started with the Big Bang... and what was there before the Big Bang...? Nothing... you can't imagine nothing... no time... you can't imagine no time.
- I always had a burning curiosity, and... evolution's been my bag for an awful long time... and I was fortunate, you know I'd be... I'd be working up in the hills, up in the woods, cutting down trees and stuff like that, and I was right with nature all the time... and, everything that I saw that was strange and different and things like that, I just automatically... it just begged a question, you know, how come it's like this? How did it get like this? And the thing that'll... amaze you, Ben is... the time. It has taken so very very long, you know time has been around for an awful long time... even 3.8 billion years they say for life to be on Earth... and, an awful awful lot happens in 3.8 billion years... and some things happen very very slowly, and yet other times, things happen very fast... like for instance, man's brain, it evolved very quick, and it's all, it's just trouble, there's just trouble.
- I just, I don't know what's going to happen... I can't see the world surviving, unless there's some awful disease or something wipes man out. But Charles Darwin was pondering, just in the *Descent of Man*, he's just pondering the beginnings of the early days of Earth... he says before man come along, it just looked as if the world was waiting for man to come along... because here was a beautiful amazing world, turning on itself, and there was no audience, there was nobody here to see it, there was nobody here to... appreciate it... because other animals are quite happy and stuff like that but they can't ponder the meaning of life, or the meaning of the world or anything like that.
- What is it? If it's moving... or it can be standing still or moving at the same time or something like that...and Sneuder's [sic] Cat, or whatever you call him, it could be living and dead at the same time... and some things are only there if we observe them... You see and when I was a kid, well a teenager, something like that, and you used to say, these philosophers say, if you was in the woods... and it was just shite at that time, but it's come to be true now, if you was in the woods and a tree fell down and it made this loud noise, if you weren't there would that tree made a noise? Would it have made a noise? Of course it would... but now when you read this quantum physics... it could make a noise and it could not make a noise... it doesn't make sense, and, er, everything's really contradictory.

- Some things didn't really matter, you know, some mutations didn't matter all that much... and they were neither beneficial to survival nor detrimental to survival... but if they just hung on, there'd come a time when there was probably a time when that was the thing that saved the day.
- And some of the things that are just so very very subtle, they can change the whole...whole existence of a species or something like that...and it's something so just very very subtle, very small, yeah.

A World Rattled of Habit

- He wants to do some filming in your house.
- Oh absolutely, yes, go ahead, knock yourself out.
- What about you, do you wanna be, can I film you?
- That's... if you desperately want my face in your film I'm gonna stick my face out.
- You know you got to set up right, lights are right, ok and action! Then it comes out nice.
- So, there you are. I haven't got much space for my face inside the house. You know, it's overloaded you know.
- You see it's kind of like everything got warped you know, like I had, I used to have a couch here but its now become a storage space. You have to have a special artistic ability to decorate that cleverly, you see what I mean?
- This has taken years...
- Oh, it takes years, exactly... that, you know and its tastefully laid out in my case, you know, it's a bullshit language... tastefully, what the fuck you mean tastefully! It means piece of shit rubbish, yes.
- So, that's why my outlook and things very different than normal people, because I was not in a normal propaganda one area only, I was exposed all of a sudden to all opposites, you see and then you get clear mind.
- I er, my father had problem with Soviet Union regime, so, we went to U S of A, sort of emigrated there... and I arrived to Germany January 1945 and I left Germany in 1952, so, this is, what I'm saying you know like, if I was only in Soviet Union I probably would believe all this shit, if I was only in Germany I probably would believe in that shit, if I was only in United States I would believe that shit, if I was only in Britain I believe all, oh yeah, wonderful country, it's nothing but the fucking best! Because all the thing is just a bullshit propaganda, and so you say well, you have to learn how navigate through this shit, that is where it left me. So all mission of each individual, my way, you have to see that through, and navigate through the shit, its, you're floating through.
- Ask her... Yes yes... hi Nick, how are you? ...No, no, it ringed once, like trrr trrr, I got it...how you doing?
- Dad?... that's alright, we're just going to go off for a bit... yeah... ok... well, we'll see you in a bit.
- Come on... stop.
- "Rhinestone Cowboy," he should walk out to that...Dad, what's this thing here?
- Suddenly it's a David Lynch film.
- That's a short piece.
- What you on about? ...When? ...when?
- So, you don't know what's going to be next, right?
- Yeah, it's Darth.
- You got to kind of write down, I just shove them in you know, I haven't got a clue what is where when why, and I... pick up sort of disc you know and then shove them in, oh.
- Is he doing it as Darth Vader?
- Sort of folk.
- Nice to see you, sorry I got all...
- So, take care and see you in the future.
- Yeah, cheers Oleg see you soon.
- See you Dad, see you in a bit.
- Right, bye bye Ben.