



# How to See Things

Lessons in perception from five documentary filmmakers.

**T**HE FIRST MOTION PICTURES were simple observations. About 125 years ago, when the medium of film was hatching, it captured snippets of basic human and animal behaviour. It allowed us to witness things we hadn't.

Modern films typically try to seduce us with different attributes – escape, elation, explosions – and a constant regurgitation of themes and ideas, most of them fictionalized hints of human experience. Curiously, the proliferation of creative technology and humanity's ever-astonishing impact on the planet has revived the root motivation of film. The quantity and caliber of documentaries being made about vital environmental issues is unprecedented, and the opportunities to viscerally witness how humans are reshaping the physical and social environments around them – for better, worse or somewhere in between – have never been riper. We needn't be satisfied with mere entertainment. The deluge of docs lets us defragment the consequences of globalization, climate change and mass consumption, carefully regard our mistakes and inventions, and evolve based on the things we've seen. Watching and learning is half the battle.

## Stand on the Front Lines

Filmmaker and activist Richard Boyce went way off the beaten track to find harrowing stumps of 1,000-year-old western red cedars. He'd already kayaked beside the same section of Crown land, along the shoreline of Quatsino Sound off northern Vancouver Island, a hot spot for sport fishers, whale watchers and cruise ships. Yet from the water's surface, the forest still looks intact. Boyce says this is because the clear-cut is designed using the land contours to hide logging from fishing boats and tourists – to preserve the *concept* of BC's supernatural wilderness, rather than the ecosystem itself.

Boyce's *Rainforest: The Limit of Splendour* (2011) counters the "false image of the forestry industry in Canada" offered by government and industry officials with his front-line investigation of logging's

impacts on coastal BC. The filmmaker climbs 300-footers to explore the canopy's vibrancy, speaks with native elders and working loggers among the trees, revisits contentious forestry projects and plunges deep into the landscape for scars. "Go past those gates or deactivated logging roads and you see what's really going on," says Boyce. He thinks logging companies are "fairly conscientious" in public areas, but a 100-km drive and 15-km hike into the bush reveals eroded mountainsides, torn-up riverbeds and clear-cut old-growth, "because at that point they think nobody's watching."

The photo of Boyce overlooking Quatsino

Sound surrounded by huge stumps is where *Rainforest's* heart-punching final scene takes place. This image's shock value has also aided his protest efforts in other ways. In 2009, five years into working on his film, Boyce was contacted by a Natural Resources Canada representative asking for "dramatic photos of our fabulous old-growth forests" for use in display materials by the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers, which promotes the industry to trading partners abroad. He replied by sending this photo and other images of clear-cut carnage to all 14 council ministers, and rallied other Islanders to do the same. No ministers responded.

**LEFT:** Richard Boyce poses with stumps of surreptitiously logged 1,000-year-old Western red cedars on Vancouver Island, the remote location of the final scene in *Rainforest: The Limit of Splendour*. This is one of many images he sent to the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers. **RIGHT:** A serene scene from *Coastal Tarsands*.

Boyce's current project, *Coastal Tarsands*, takes a similarly intrepid approach to framing the sea-level predicament in Kitimat, BC. He believes the location was chosen as the terminus for the proposed Northern Gateway pipeline because it's so remote and hard to document. He wants to topple that barrier and "provide concrete evidence of the completely different reality than the one being presented by Enbridge and the government." To do so, Boyce arranged tugboat access and some time this spring to film 30-metre storm waves, hurricane-grade winds, the 24-foot-tide change every six hours, the area's surge channels and whirlpools, and other seasonal changes. "All of these things can compel people to see that it is such a challenging environment, especially if you want to put supertankers through it."

His plan is to release *Coastal Tarsands* as a series of vignettes during 2013, giving physical exposure to the Kitimat ecosystem during the BC election cycle, and as the Northern Gateway hearings and public

debates play out. He also hopes his work will help dispute well-funded pro-pipeline messaging, such as Enbridge's misleading animations of the supertankers' navigation route. "People can make up their own minds about which one is real."

[rainforestmovie.ca](http://rainforestmovie.ca) | [coastaltarsands.ca](http://coastaltarsands.ca)

### Let Memory Be Your Guide

Dutch director Jeroen van Velzen created *Wavumba* (2012) by unearthing fantasies from his adolescence. The film's title, which translates from Swahili as "they who smell of fish," refers to an Indigenous culture from coastal Kenya whose presence and lore had loomed large in van Velzen's residual imagination for years. He wasn't alone. For decades, people have travelled from as far inland as Nairobi to the island of Wasini, believing it to be a magical place where bush doctors can cure disease and sea shaman can speak to ocean wildlife and catch massive sharks with their bare hands.

Van Velzen lived on the mainland near Wasini with his family when he was 10

and 11, visited from boarding school for a few months every year as a teenager, and still returns there to see his father. He remembers a specific sea shaman, a man who taught him how to fish and shared the tribe's otherworldly stories. "The whole film originated by trying to find him and go fishing with him again," explains van Velzen. "He was my motivation, my inspiration to try and recapture that childish way of looking at life – which he gave me – where everything is very mystical and magical."

Although this familiar stranger had passed on, *Wavumba* would become van Velzen's testament to the fading tribe's cultural beliefs, and he would get to fish with another living legend. His film is a confluence of wonderfully strange, intimate and enigmatic elements: cryptic recollections of shamans by Wasini elders; spellbinding nocturnal and maritime scenery; and an alienating protagonist whose life story echoes *The Old Man and the Sea*.

*Wavumba's* meandering narrative arc follows Masoud – a stubborn, wrinkled



Masoud, the stubborn, mysteriously gifted protagonist of *Wavumba*.



A yellow-ribbed warbler in flight, one of the enchanting stars of *Silent Skies* – and a very challenging subject to photograph.

fisherman who can't recall his age but can still read the ocean's subtleties – as he makes a final attempt to catch a shark in open water in his weather-beaten three-seat boat. During a couple dozen fishing trips with Masoud (and his first mate, Juma, who takes Masoud's criticism like a champ), van Velzen came to understand the intense calculation in the old man's interaction with natural phenomena. To determine what the weather might do next, for example, Masoud would interpret the cries and flight patterns of seagulls or move his hand through the water in search of fluorescence – a sign that "the spirits are getting very excited" and giving off electrical energy to communicate.

It's this kind of baffling wisdom that builds a constant tension between fact and fiction into *Wavumba*, which is part of what makes the doc so compelling. Locals do corroborate that Masoud was once a heroically gifted fisherman, yet the old man boasts about catching a 400-kg shark and bringing it to shore alone on his small, rickety boat – an unbelievable feat, to say the least. And while Wasini interpretations of natural phenomena can be equally bizarre and brilliant, van Velzen's film ultimately stresses the deeper value in observing the world like they do. "You realize, coming from

the West, you have no contact with your natural surroundings," he says. "It kind of puts you back in your place." [eastwest-distribution.com/film\\_wavumba.htm](http://eastwest-distribution.com/film_wavumba.htm)

### Zoom In

Su Rynard had noticed the disappearance of barn swallows and whippoorwills at her summer cottaging spot in Kawartha Lakes, Ontario. But until she read Bridget Stutchbury's *The Silence of the Songbirds*, she didn't understand that "I'm not seeing them because they're just not around anymore."

The accomplished video artist and documentarian wanted to respond meaningfully to this realization. She began with a three-minute film called *Silent Skies*. The short flick is sombre and elegant, unravelling a harsh truth that Rynard is now developing into a feature-length film: "that we're losing our songbirds, and that humans, in how they've changed the world, are in a way responsible for that decline."

*Silent Skies* is remarkable for its close-range footage of a yellow-ribbed warbler, a Swainson's thrush and an American robin, all of them – amazingly – in flight. "It's a whole different kind of filming to be shooting from a light aircraft glider with a goose," says Rynard, alluding to Jacques

Cluzaud's *Winged Migration* (2001). "These are small little birds that are impossible to see in the sky once they're up there." During pre-production research, Rynard's producer found a scientific resource that turned this substantial creative challenge into a serendipitous collaboration.

The centrepiece of University of Western Ontario's \$9.3-million Advanced Facility for Avian Research (AFAR) is a sophisticated wind tunnel. The two-storey, 3.7-metre-long steel structure allows scientists to control temperature, humidity and barometric pressure so they can work very carefully with birds in a cylindrical isolation chamber, where some will fly for hours. AFAR's hardware is designed to measure the toll of migratory flight on fat stores, mass, water and immunological function in various birds on a range of diets, and to assess the biomechanics of flapping wings.

"When I thought about the tunnel, what popped into my mind was the importance of the possibility of trying to actually film something in it, because the migration of songbirds is, for the most part, invisible," recalls Rynard. AFAR welcomed her, and she brought more hardware into the lab: a slow-motion camera that shoots up to 1,000 frames per second (as opposed to 24 or 30) in short sequences. This "hugely slow and



The dolomite quarry in Guelph, Ontario, captured from a helicopter in *Dolime Dilemma: Water Proof?*

expensive” process was further complicated by the camera’s need for light and the birds’ aversion to it.

“We had to balance shining light from behind the bird and working together with the scientists, who watched the birds very closely for any sign of stress or duress – and to make sure they were flying well, which means their legs are tucked up and mouths are shut,” says Rynard. “That was our biggest challenge: How to light something that wants to be in the dark, while also being extremely respectful of both the scientists and birds.”

Rynard is now working with AFAR to collect and study specific species for her feature doc, *Songbird S-O-S*, planned for release in 2015. “It depends on what birds can be captured, cared for and adapt to flying [in the tunnel],” she explains, but their wanted list includes a wood thrush, blackburnian and magnolia warblers, a scarlet tanager, an indigo bunting, a catbird, an eastern meadow lark and a swallow. The film will also examine several species’ migration patterns and other avian research, and experiment with technology like weather radar and thermal cameras to represent songbirds graphically.

But there’s no sight like a slow-mo close-up of a songbird in flight to showcase what we’ve got before it’s gone.

[songbirdsos.com](http://songbirdsos.com) | [surynard.com](http://surynard.com)

#### Zoom Out

Even before pitching her documentary short, Kristy Neville knew she needed a helicopter to make it work. At the time she was looking to assemble a crew of fellow Ryerson University film students, and she knew a chopper shoot “was a selling component too, it gave the project production value.” The cost of renting one for an hour (\$800) would constitute more than half of Neville’s budget, but it was worth it to show residents of Guelph, Ontario, the problem hiding in plain sight beside their city’s commuter parkway.

*Dolime Dilemma: Water Proof?* depicts the controversy over Guelph’s dolomite mine, which pulverizes rock to extract aggregate materials, supplying busy Toronto-based concrete and asphalt plants. In 2008, the mine was found to be damaging the aquitard, the dense layer of rock that forms a natural protective barrier between the aquifer – the city’s water supply – and surface. Two consultant groups have since given conflicting opinions about whether the operator’s management plan properly insures the municipality against the future possibility of the water supply becoming polluted. Yet the mine remains licensed by Ontario’s Ministry of Natural Resources to extract 500,000 tonnes per year, an amount James Dick Construction wants

increased so it can exhaust the resource faster. Local stakeholders have lobbied the Ministry of the Environment for years to intervene, arguing that the true risk can’t be substantiated until after extraction is complete, when the quarry is turned into a lake and groundwater contaminants can potentially mix with the aquifer.

Neville interviewed Mayor Karen Farbridge (who wants the mining to stop until real mitigation assurances are in place), two representatives of local advocacy group Wellington Water Watchers (who want the extractors to post a bond for the estimated cost of fallout), and University of Guelph water resources engineer Hugh Whiteley (who says preserving the aquitard is just as important as protecting the aquifer). Both provincial ministries refused to comment, but James Dick Construction vice president Greg Sweetnam explains the economic interests at stake and offers a vast understatement of the operation (“We’re basically digging a big hole”).

The scenes that give Neville’s 12-minute film gravitas and, appropriately, a lovely fluidity, are from the helicopter shoot. Interviews are bookended, interspersed and overlaid with footage overlooking the mine site and Speed River, sometimes paired with gloomy music or a speech by the Council of Canadians’ Maude Barlowe about the myth of water abundance. While



*Water’s* director of photography Nicholas de Pencier (left, with his eye to the camera), co-director Edward Burtynsky (in sunglasses) and producer Noah Weinzwieg on location at Xiluodu Dam, Jinsha River, Yunnan Province, China.

the shoot itself was tricky (especially having only practiced manoeuvres in Google Earth as preparation), the aerial view of the mine informs the local debate with significant qualities: reverence, scale and physicality.

*Dolime Dilemma* drew interest from the mining operators, Guelph audiences and a half-dozen film festivals. Neville hopes her contribution to the discussion will help keep James Dick Construction engaged with the community until the ramifications of damage can be realized. “They think they’ve fixed it, and maybe they have,” says Neville. “You do have hydrogeologists who say it’s fine, and some who say it’s not.”

The point is that all stakeholders must remain involved until a concrete answer – or evidence of a contamination – emerges. And that process begins with getting perspective on the bigger picture.

[facebook.com/DolimeDilemmaWaterProof](https://facebook.com/DolimeDilemmaWaterProof)

#### Observe

Preeminent Canadian photographer Ed Burtynsky’s large-format images are staggering exercises in contrast. They can both seduce and repulse; they

are abstract and precise; they magnify immensity. He’s offered penetrating glimpses into how the industrial revolution has remade a rising China. He’s wrapped our heads around the unfathomable dent of bitumen extraction in Northern Alberta. He may have even cracked the code to engaging a wide, disparate spectrum of people in their shared, incremental destruction of the planet.

Yet Burtynsky’s approach is hardly rocket science. “Still images need the viewer to complete the image,” he explains during a discussion panel at 2013’s Planet in Focus (PiF) festival. “It doesn’t speak; it doesn’t have music; it doesn’t have anything. It just sits there and the ingredients that you have in your grey matter connects with that and creates meaning, and that’s universal.”

Not that this simple inevitability has stopped him from experimenting with moving pictures. For the last few years Burtynsky has been collaborating with the dynamic duo that profiled his photographic practice in *Manufacturing Consent* (2006), Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier. This fall they will release a documentary,

*Water*, which investigates four distinct aspects of how “we shape the water and it shapes us” – sources and controls, agriculture and aquaculture, distressed landscapes and waterfronts. The trio presented an exclusive sneak peak during their PiF panel, previewing clips of epic, wide-angle vistas and massive, mind-boggling examples of terraforming.

Baichwal describes how they relied on one another’s strengths to produce a stratified portrait. Whereas Burtynsky would wait for the perfect light to capture an aerial perspective (overlooking a rice paddy plantation, for example), Baichwal and de Pencier pursued “very particular stories or narratives, or more like existential situations of people living with water” (by floating with a local among the paddies with a small camera in tow). “It ended up being a perfect division of skill sets,” she says.

Burtynsky had already shifted his focus to human interaction with water (rather than oil extraction and its implications) when he began collaborating with Baichwal and de Pencier a few years ago. A tragically fortuitous event – the Deepwater Horizon



A scene from *Water* overlooking an aquaculture project in Fujian Province, China.  
 RIGHT: Abalone farming in Fujian Province, China.

oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010 – gave the project a sudden momentum, and Burtynsky the chance to capture his two muses, demonstrating yet again how humans can be “dwarfed by our own technological advancement.” He says seeing oil and water in the oceanscape “represented the classic Frankenstein story,” wherein an experiment allows life to get out of control, leaving those who created it “trying to contain the monster.” Hearing such an interpretation from

Burtynsky is a rarity; the ambiguity of his images has often been described as the source of their power. Baichwal says *Water* will emulate this same quality by bringing viewers “into a relationship, into a space where they can think about something in a different way without being told what to think.” And the trio behind the film would argue that candid, exceptional observation is essential to both the viewer and creator, perhaps more so than pinpointing an immediate solution to an intricate problem.

“I think reality is too complex to do that,” says Baichwal. “You have to sit in the space of meditating on a question instead of immediately trying to answer.” [mercuryfilms.ca](http://mercuryfilms.ca) | [edwardburtynsky.com](http://edwardburtynsky.com)  
 Eric Rumble is editor-in-chief of **AJ**.

These five films were presented at last year’s Planet in Focus festival – stay tuned for the 2013 lineup at [planetinfocus.org](http://planetinfocus.org). Watch trailers for these and other environmental docs at [alternativesjournal.ca/393](http://alternativesjournal.ca/393).



Footage from the Planet in Focus discussion panel with Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier will be released by [greenheroes.tv](http://greenheroes.tv) in June 2013.

Keep up to speed on the Northern Gateway debate by following Richard Boyce’s *Coastal Tarsands*. Likewise, watch for Kristy Neville’s next documentary project, *Tar*, to which she contributed as a producer. [coastaltarsands.ca](http://coastaltarsands.ca) | [tarfilm.com](http://tarfilm.com)