

Filmwell

O'er The Land (Stratman, 2008)

Posted by [M. Leary](#) on 3/24/09 •



This riveting collection of images and voiceovers seems like an abstraction of all the ways America's addiction to violence and technology relates to nature in its most ambivalently Annie Dillard state. It is easy to say that Deborah Stratman shows that nature really hasn't been overcome by our freedom to build, and fight, and travel. Nature in its most looming Malick or

Robinson Jeffers forms persists at the borders of our artificial civilization created by infrared cameras, patrols, gun shows, and displays of athletic prowess. Beyond lurks reels of dark forests and unrelenting rivers.

And this in itself is a mouthful, or rather a rich eyeful in the case of *O'er the Land*. But this montaged arrangement of revolutionary war re-enactments, high school football games, malfunctioning jet fighters, and endless rows of RVs eventually ranges past such an easy reading.

All throughout are haunting takes of creaking forests, thundering rivers, and caged birds. These interstices begin to rival the pomposity of marching band percussion, flamethrower demonstrations, and the thunder of rural gun clubs. They lurk within the fabric of the film like so many Herzog narrations of the inherent malevolence of nature. Though he has many similar sequences in his work (e.g. the beginning of *Heart of Glass*, most of *Fata Morgana*), *O'er the Land* almost becomes the obverse of Herzog's ecological cinema. It chooses to look when Herzog speaks. Its poetic edits

undo the more patently coherent way Herzog places characters within the wilderness Stratman simply catalogs.

And inasmuch as I am a fanboy of Herzog's lifelong involvement with nature, I appreciate *O'er the Land* as a film that more immediately engages a similar impulse. Brakhage fans can all remember when *Dog Star Man* first clicked, and the mythical woodland wanderer Brakhage became embedded in our material experience of the rest of his films. Stratman doesn't, at least in *O'er the Land*, make similar kinds of comments on the ontology of film. But she does make intriguing connections in her thematically connected edits about what Milbank refers to as the ontology of violence.

The way she opposes images of man and nature, technology and the hum of natural cycles, is a handy representation of John Milbank's conjecture that modernism's addiction to difference, distinction, and ideological systems that oppose one thought or demographic to another manifests itself in the kind of violence we see in the world today. The Revolutionary War re-enactment may be a liturgical form of this history of violence, a sensibility which Stratman sees at so many different layers of American culture. Perhaps high school football games are more fundamentally American than we thought.

In a moment of pure cinema, Lt. Col. William Rankin recounts the time he ejected from a jet at 47,000 feet over Norfolk and landed in a thunderstorm that tossed him around for 45 minutes before he landed in North Carolina. This parable of a man tossed in a storm captured by Stratman's knack for image and voiceover brings together all these meditations on nature and our history of violence. It also calls to mind a few lines from Jeffer's poem *Hurt Hawks*:

The intrepid readiness, the terrible eyes.

The wild God of the world is sometimes merciful to those

That ask mercy, not often to the arrogant.

You do not know him, you communal people, or you have forgotten him;

Intemperate and savage, the hawk remembers him;

Beautiful and wild, the hawks, and men that are dying, remember him.