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Kelly Reichardt's *Bestiario*

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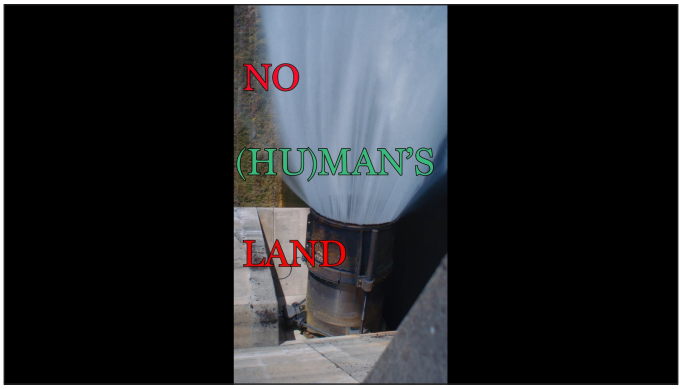
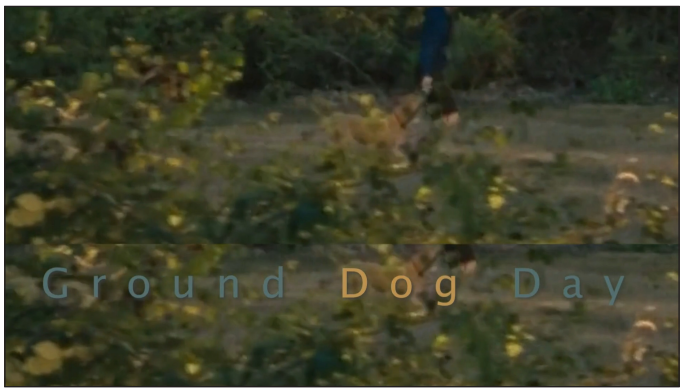
"Kelly Reichardt's *Bestiario*" is a three-part videoessay that employs videographic ecocriticism to explore entanglements between humans and the more-than-human in cinema. Across its sections—"Birds Eye Views," "No(Hu)Man's Land," and "Ground Dog Day"—it unsettles anthropocentric regimes of representation and questions hierarchical divisions by foregrounding ecological and multispecies relations through fragmentation, temporal drag, and reframing.





Creator's Statement

My work draws on recent developments in videographic criticism that examine the affective and political dimensions of the medium, particularly interested in its environmental potential. Notably in this emerging field, Kevin B. Lee (2024) reflects on the scarcity within the videographic practice of what he calls *eco-cinematic criticism*, a necessary approach with potential to address the climate crisis—not only through the themes presented in films but also through the very form of the medium itself. He argues

that "the video essay can be a media ecological practice in and of itself" (Lee 2024). In another, co-authored, work, Kevin B. Lee and Silvia Cipelletti (2024) also explore videographic criticism as a form of ecocinema, highlighting the ecological potential of videoessays[1] to recycle and transform existing materials into new expressions.

Building on the ideas of Lee and Cipelletti, I introduce a concept that serves as both a practice and a theoretical tool, inherently ecological in its approach: *videographic ecocriticism*. As a theoretical tool, it can be applied to any media product. As Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt suggest in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (2012), all cinema can be viewed through an environmental lens due to its cultural and material embeddedness. As both independent artistic products and critical tools, videoessays themselves are also a form of art. In turn, art is inherently ecological because it emerges from an ecosystem—an intertwining of environment, human agency, and the relationships between these elements. My interest lies in exploring how videographic ecocriticism can expand the affective and aesthetic ways we engage with the climate crisis, promoting a non-instrumentalist and self-reflective approach to environmental art (Seymour 2018). Videographic ecocriticism is both a distinct "genre" within videographic practice and a potentially intrinsic dimension of the medium itself.

Videographic ecocriticism positions the videoessay as a tool that cultivates a non-anthropocentric, hybrid approach to film criticism and cinephilia, while simultaneously engaging with diverse affective and aesthetic modes. These modes address the current ecological crisis to move beyond prescriptivist notions of the "correct" way of thinking and feeling about the environment as a pervasive tendency in film ecocriticism, as criticized by David Ingram (2014). As a critically *accented* language that positions itself in the margins of the hegemonic film criticism language (Zecchi 2024), this form also advances an exploration of affects and sensibilities often neglected by traditional ecocriticism. Avoiding a rigid and moralist approach in environmentalism—and its arguably elitist connotations—, this approach engages with the vast array of affects that are effectively mobilized about the climate crisis, including playfulness and transgressiveness. The pleasures that stem from this stance do not undermine the advocacy for critical and urgent issues or the commitment to rigorous scholarly engagement.

The possibilities of new technologies allow videoessayists to rediscover cinema through a lens that decenters the human perspective. The concept of *becoming* is central

[1] Following Barbara Zecchi's (2024) proposal, I choose to use the term *videoessay*—as opposed to the more commonly used *video essay*—both to reflect my own *accented* perspective and to emphasize a more unified identity for the form, rather than highlighting two separate components.

to my argument. Building on the videoessay as a form of Gilles Deleuze's *becoming* (Zecchi 2024), videographic ecocriticism engages with the process of *becoming* other, which proves highly effective in addressing the environmental crisis. This ongoing state of production, characterized by a process of production—never fully realized—aligns the ethos of videoessays with an ecological stance, as it interrupts the purity of the object and participates in processes of reassembly and recycling that challenge the notion of a complete, whole entity. Videoessays embrace the contamination of boundaries, the unholiness of the original process, questioning the relationship between the original and the copy, and transgressing established borders to find connections between the self and nonhuman others.

"Kelly Reichardt's *Bestiario*" is a three-part videoessay I developed during the 2023 Middlebury Workshop on Videographic Criticism. The inspiration for this work arose from my observation of the prominent presence of the more-than-human in Reichardt's films. The anthropocentric focus of narrative cinema—that privileges the human figure—gives way to uncentered, unfocused spectatorship in videographic ecocriticism. What is in the background comes to the fore, and what is hidden becomes uncovered by the practices of repetition, delay, and freezing of the image. The new technologies allow us to develop what Anna Tsing (2010) calls "art of noticing" and what Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster (2016) call "art of attentiveness" as a way of becoming aware of what was already there. Videographic ecocriticism not only enables a new form of perceiving, but also invites active engagement as a creator, allowing one to craft new works by selecting and foregrounding elements already present within the original material: for instance, the wind in the trees, or the birds flying in the background, as I show in the first part of my videoessay. "*Bestiario*" evokes a sense of awareness by prompting viewers to remain curious about the intricate network of relationships between living and non-living entities that collectively shape our worldly experience. Through my intervention on Reichardt's films, I aim to highlight and expand these moments.

My project is structured into three distinct videoessays, each focusing on a different animal present in Reichardt's cinematic universe. Each piece utilizes a unique screen ratio, tailored to reflect the animal's perspective and physicality. The first piece, titled "Birds Eye Views," explores the various ways birds appear throughout Reichardt's films, whether prominently in the foreground or subtly in the background. By shifting the perspective from humans to birds, this first part encourages viewers to engage in serene contemplation, mimicking the tranquil vantage point of the birds themselves. By bringing an element normally positioned in the background to the forefront, I invite viewers to reflect on all the ways in which we can practice noticing in our daily lives.

In the second video of my project, titled "No(Hu)Man's Land," I turn the focus to humankind, positioning humans as just one among many interconnected agents. By selecting humans for this compilation, I aim to level the hierarchical distinctions typically made between our species and others. This section uses fragmentation of human bodies and the pervasive presence of surveillance technologies and non-organic substances to illustrate the hybrid nature of humanity. I embed their disjointed corporalities in different environments to highlight the interconnectedness of humans with the space. Moreover, in this section, I practice another dimension of videographic ecocriticism: the exploration of matter's aliveness. Laura Mulvey (2005) considers cinema to be the medium that blurs the distinction between life and death, between the animate and the inanimate, and that new technologies enable the spectator to further explore these relations. The changes between movement and stillness are constantly repeated in my piece. Through fragmenting and slowing down the presence of human figures, and—conversely—through creating movement from inert objects, such as the mannequin in one of the scenes, I go back and forth between the animate and the inanimate. Echoing Donna Haraway (1991) and her notion of cyborg, but also the material ecocriticism concepts of Jane Bennett's vibrant matter (2010) and Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality (2016), this videoessay presents humans as complex assemblages of flesh and plastic, of organism and mechanism, of body and environment. The interplay between these elements, and between the stillness and movement, allows for the interconnectedness between the challenging traditional views of human separateness and superiority, merging them in a complex network of meaning and materiality.

The final piece of *Bestiario* explores the recurring presence of dogs in Reichardt's films, with a particular focus on her late dog, Lucy. Titled "Ground Dog Day," this section is inspired by Donna Haraway's invitation to think about dogs not as literary and romantic depictions of humans' aspirations, but as earthy companions in a "multipartner mud dance" (2008: 32). This approach challenges the often-idealized cinematic depictions of dogs, focusing instead on their material presence as everyday companions. By showcasing dogs amid both soil and asphalt, water and snow, the videoessay emphasizes their tangible, lively presence, encouraging a deeper reflection on our shared, grounded existence with these beings. Dogs stop being a representation or illustration of an ideal and become a material-semiotic being in an entangled relationship with the surrounding environment. Moreover, the association of images allows the viewer to challenge a linear, teleological, and traditionally rational narrative structure. Conversely, I intervene in the images by selecting and contextualizing them to create a new meaning. The art of gaps that characterizes the essay film, as described by Laura Rascaroli (2017), disrupts the humanist-rationalist impulse for coherence,

giving way to multiple temporalities and associations that relate to the many kinds of encounters between all sorts of critters. These associations also allow as many connections as there are alliances in the world: alliances between critters, human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic.

In "*Bestiario*," I aim to shift the cinematic perspective away from an anthropocentric viewpoint. In an era marked by species extinction, recognizing and valuing every possible alliance is crucial. By focusing on the rich tapestry of multispecies relationships and entanglements that surround us, this project encourages participants to immerse themselves in the mud and engage with the diverse array of creatures that inhabit our environment, inviting us to join them as fellow beings. It is an offer to look down and look up, to look around and look within, to explore the material-semiotic nodes that shape our existence, and to understand how intertwined our lives are with those of other critters. Engaging in videographic ecocriticism offers a way not only to observe but also to actively participate in a shared, multispecies world. While not all videographic criticism is explicitly ecocritical, I argue that the medium is inherently ecological, as all art is (Morton 2021). Moreover, the freedom that defines videoessays allows this practice to move beyond prescriptive notions of what constitutes environmental art. Rather than focusing solely on its potential to inspire change or adhering to narrow definitions of what is considered aesthetically or affectively correct within environmental discourse, videographic ecocriticism embraces cinema's potential to explore, imagine, and reassess our evolving relationship with the nonhuman. It creates a space for diagnosing and reflecting on our current environmental realities, encouraging us not only to understand why ecology is essential but to recognize ourselves as ecological.

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Biography

Celia Sainz (PhD 2025, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Visiting Assistant Professor at Williams College and Visiting Instructor at Mount Holyoke College) explores the representational challenges of the ecological crisis through "videographic ecocriticism," working with film and music videos to examine less explored, ambivalent feelings tied to climate collapse—from malaise induced by rising temperatures to the pervasive pleasures of petroculture. Her work has appeared in *[In]Transition* and *Feminist Media Histories*, and was recognized in *Sight and Sound*'s "Best Video Essay" poll (2021) and "Emerging Voices" list (2024). She was trained at Middlebury College's Workshop in Videographic Criticism as part of the 2023 cohort and returned as an instructor in 2025. Celia is the editor of the video essay section of the peer-reviewed journal *Teknokultura* and contributes to film curation across

festivals, currently serving as Assistant Curator for the Massachusetts Multicultural Film Festival.

Review by Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, University of the Balearic Islands

Celia Sainz's "*Bestiario*" reflects on the presence of non-human lives on screen by creatively engaging with footage from Kelly Reichardt's oeuvre. Sainz mobilizes the potentialities of the videographic form to interrogate the limitations of anthropocentric perspectives. As the title suggests, it draws on the form of a bestiary, a compendium of short, illustrated descriptions of beasts, real and imaginary, usually accompanied by a moralizing explanation. Yet, the videoessay does not offer such moral lessons, and through its formal innovations it puts non-human and human animals on the same plane of reference, dismantling the hierarchical species divides. If, traditionally, the bestiary was the realm in which humans would allegorize, and often privilege, their place among other species, Sainz's videoessay can be read as a cinematic response to Jane Bennett's (2010) call for the democratization of attention to different forms of being.

The piece is divided into three segments, each centered on a different animal appearing throughout Reichardt's body of work, and each featuring experiments with film form, most notably, with aspect ratio. "Birds Eye Views" brings to the fore the animal presence that usually operates as a mere background or metaphor for the human action. "No(Hu)Man's Land" embeds the fragmented human figures within a variety of environments and the "vibrant matter" of things (Bennett 2010); in "Ground Dog Day," the viewers are invited to adopt the perspective of dogs that stage prominently in Reichardt's films. Given the videoessay's main aim of decentering the human, it might seem counterintuitive that the human body is, somewhat, still occupying the center, at least in terms of the structure: framed by the birds, in the first video, and the dogs, in the third. Yet, the videoessay questions, in many ways, what center means, reclaiming and repositioning the margins of human-oriented plots. The disjointed aesthetics and the very title of "No(Hu)Man's Land" subverts the notion of the human/the (white) man, understood as "the measure of all things", and points to how, at least in Euro-Western culture, not all of us are considered as fully human (Braidotti 2013: 1). The videoessay, thus, pushes the anthropos off center, challenging the binaries of life/matter and organic/inorganic, while gesturing towards myriad lives and zoe-centered egalitarianism (Braidotti 2013: 60), which resists the hegemonic discourses on disconnection. In the proposed non-anthropocentric approach to Reichardt's cinema, effected through an episodic, almost vignette-like format, Sainz creatively rescales our perspective, encouraging us, as she writes, "to look down and look up, to look around

and look within." Such playful (and poetic) rescaling of perspective, heightened by the layered, textural approach and the use of multiscreen in some parts of the work, turns out to be particularly fruitful for highlighting the heterogenous, non-human lives on screen that usually pass unnoticed in anthropocentrically driven narrative cinema.

Folded into this explicit challenging of the anthropocentric viewing is a reflection on form, particularly, videographic form, and its capacity to enable encounters with the non-human, a reflection which manifests itself through a set of strategies of (re)framing, repetition, cutting, delaying and freezing the image, the interplay of foreground and background, among others.

Notably, the research statement extends beyond Reichardt's fascinating treatment of animality, inviting a broader consideration of the capacity of videographic ecocriticism (a concept proposed by Sainz) to attend to the non- or more-than-human worlds. Sainz asks us to think beyond what is represented on screen towards questions of cinematic spectatorship, while building a case for formal experimentation.

While watching Celia Sainz's beautiful work, imbued with her durational, affective attention to the animals on screen, I was reminded of Laura McMahon's Deleuzian approach to animal worlds through her engagement with the time-image. Sainz's work addresses, and performs, what McMahon, in her article on another bestiary (Denis Côté's 2012 documentary *Bestiaire*), theorizes as cinema's "attunement to nonhuman perceptual worlds" (2014: 195). In so doing, the videoessay, like Reichardt's cinema, eschews positioning the animal solely as an object of the gaze, offering instead "a glimpse of meaningful, perceptual life-worlds that extend beyond the anthropocentric" (2014: 196). Here, to my mind, lies the truly transformative potential of the videographic form, also traced in Sainz's written statement: not merely representing non-human lives on screen, but changing our viewing habits through film form, very much in line with ecocinema studies. Videographic criticism partakes, thus, in the broader ecocinematic "arts of noticing," which has been particularly pressing in what has been dubbed as the Anthropocene. It also poses questions that have been explored by film scholars invested in critical animal studies, interested in theorizing modes of witnessing, as opposed to visually consuming non-human lives through cinematic means (see, for instance, Pick 2011). Through its intertwining of aesthetics and politics, Sainz's work, and her proposed concept of videographic ecocriticism, is an exciting contribution to the incipient field of environmentally oriented videographic film studies.

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Review by Nicole Seymour, California State University, Fullerton

Celia Sainz's triptych of videographic criticism, "Kelly Reichardt's *Bestiario*," further highlights the already "prominent presence of the more-than-human in Reichardt's films" (Sainz), especially birds and dogs. But on a metacritical level, it accomplishes at least three other things.

First, Sainz introduces videographic *eco*criticism as a practice. She builds on Kevin B. Lee, who has noted "'the ecological potential of video essays to recycle and transform existing materials into new expressions'" (Lee quoted in Sainz). Given how film scholars such as Salma Monani (2024) and Hunter Vaughan (2019) have detailed the often-devastating material impact of filmmaking on local and global environments, such recycling and transformation are impactful practices. Further, Sainz's technical innovations demonstrate an attunement nonhuman life; for instance, "each [videoessay] utilizes a unique screen ratio, tailored to reflect the [given] animal's perspective and physicality" (Sainz).

Second, Sainz's work questions the nature/culture divide so often upheld by early ecocritics and by foundational environmental genres such as nature writing. In the "No (Hu)Man's Land" videoessay, for example, she presents images of landscapes bisected by bridges and powerlines. At one point, a brown graffitied wall gives way to a brown field; the urban and the rural are bound together by color palette. Later, Sainz overlays an image of a green forest with an image of a kitchen. Reichardt is not interested in pristine nature, as Sainz shows us—and, in any case, such a thing does not exist.

But most striking of all, in my opinion, is how Sainz makes a case for criticism as art. Her creator's statement argues that, "[w]hile not all videographic criticism is explicitly ecocritical, … the medium is inherently ecological, as all art is" (Sainz; my emphasis). The "Ground Dog's Day" videoessay presents the best evidence for this case. At one point, Sainz employs latitudinal split screen, with the top footage taking up about two-thirds of the screen and the bottom about one-third. Later, she layers five different pieces of Reichardt footage latitudinally—a striation that I would find pleasing unto itself, regardless of content. By inviting us to follow the movement in all five pieces, Sainz reminds us to look at all parts of the screen, not just the center.

As I pondered Sainz's videographic-ecocriticism-as-art case, I realized that few people would attempt to make the same case for written ecocriticism—which is my personal bread and butter. And indeed, only a couple examples of artistic flair jump immediately to my mind: Max Liboiron's darkly hilarious footnotes in *Pollution is Colonialism* (2021) and Shiloh R. Krupar's critical speculation in *Hot Spotter's Report: Military Fables of Toxic Waste* (2013). But perhaps we should take Sainz's case as an exhortation to us all, to look for the everyday beauty and pleasures within our work as scholars, critics, makers, and teachers.

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