
THE BOX

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Erin Espelie

True Life Adventure I–III (2012–13)



Image courtesy of Erin Espelie

Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.

—Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder*

God falls down into grammar—Dan Beachy-Quick, “Museums”

In the beginning was the word. A voice speaks from the void. It is a gentle voice that will greet listeners of a certain age as a long lost friend. The words being spoken are a folksy variation on the Rachel Carson quote above (both passages were written only a few years apart). The words are spoken by Winston Hibler, who co-wrote and narrated the *True-Life Adventures* films that Walt Disney produced throughout the 1950s and became staples of elementary school curricula for decades thereafter. Over 50 years later, Erin Espelie revisits these narrations, which often alternated between fostering stewardship and blatant anthropomorphisms, as the backdrop for a trilogy of her own backyard true-life adventures.

After the word is the image. Espelie pays tribute to one of the most distinctive elements of the Disney films—the skillful synchronization of original symphonic scores to enhance the balletic movements of various animals—through her musical editing, fluid compositions and camera movements, and during the trilogy’s most playful moment, projectile bird droppings. The images in her videos have all been collected in the out-of-doors. To be in nature is to be in time as much as in space. Erratic scales of time collide. A two-week-old fly, halfway through its life, rests on a leaf that fell from a 150-year-old tree at the end of a season and landed on a rock formation millions of years old. To be in nature is to be in one instant within an eternity of present moments. This has been going on long before you. This will be going on long after you.

It’s possible that this experience could bring out feelings of the sublime. These, however, are also just the facts.

Then the image becomes time. Espelie brings her training as a scientist to bear on the creation of the video. The temporal and spatial parameters of the work are carefully selected and documented. All three videos take place in the immediate environments of her home near Gold Run Creek in Colorado’s Rocky Mountains. Espelie’s first *True Life Adventure* was filmed in 3 square feet over 3 hours on the summer solstice of 2012. The second covers 30 square feet over 3 hours during the winter solstice of 2012. The third focuses on .3 square feet over 30 days in late summer 2013. Her history in journalism aids her in setting up the specifics of what, where, and when she’s filming. The artist in her is able to redirect these clearly articulated boundaries so that they tap into that sense of timelessness within time.

In the end was the word. But the word was not enough. Espelie’s *True Life Adventures* use the original Hibler narrations to emphasize various pleasures and ironies contained within the new sound/image juxtapositions she’s creating. At their best, the Disney films were able to capture the wonders and realities of the natural world. But the original narration also serves to make this boundless world knowable by placing it in a context more relatable to a human consciousness. Language, along with the tone of Hibler’s voice, is used as a salve. Espelie, a great reader of poetry, collages the original soundtracks to create new meanings, and by the end of the series, language breaks apart. For much of the trilogy’s running time, Espelie indulges the desire to translate the world into language and understanding. But the narrations become more fragmented as the series progresses. The rushing flow of the world can be measured and named but will continue to burst out of the banks of any river that tries to contain it. Shortly after the completion of *True Life Adventure III*, a great flood ran through Gold Run Creek, creating a new landscape waiting to be described in words and images.

Erin Espelie is a filmmaker, writer, editor, and university lecturer based in the Colorado Rockies; Durham, North Carolina; and New York City. Her films have shown at the New York Film Festival, British Film Institute, Natural History Museum of London, Whitechapel Gallery (London), Rotterdam International Film Festival, and many more. Most of her professional career has been on the staff of *Natural History* magazine, where she serves as Editor In Chief and writes a monthly column, “The Natural Explanation.” A scientist by training, Espelie holds a degree in molecular biology and genetics from Cornell University, and she currently teaches courses on environmental issues and the documentary arts at Duke University.

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16 mins., video

Wexner Center for the Arts
The Ohio State University
