

Los Angeles Filmforum presents  
**Experimentations: Imag(in)ing Knowledge in Film**  
**Programs 14: Old Nature: Natural History Films from the Silent Era**  
**Sunday, January 19, 2025, 7:30 pm**  
**At Brain Dead**

Los Angeles Filmforum is the city's longest running organization dedicated to weekly screenings of experimental film, documentaries, video art, and experimental animation. 2025 is our 50th year. [www.lafilmforum.org](http://www.lafilmforum.org)

*Experimentations: Imag(in)ing Knowledge in Film* is Filmforum's expansive film series and upcoming publication that investigates the ways that experimental and scientific films produce and question the visualization of the world. Combining artist films utilizing scientific imagery, science and natural history films, and films of indigenous and traditional knowledge, the series examines how science, nature, and technology films shape our understanding of humans, nature, gender, knowledge, and progress. The multi-venue public screening series presents analog and digital time-based media incorporating diverse scientific and experimental film traditions from across the globe. The series will include eighteen screenings between September 2024 and February 2025, with films and digital works from 1874 to today from around the world, multiple guests, panels and wonderful collaborations that will reveal the possibilities and circumstances of cinema in this realm.

*Experimentations: Imag(in)ing Knowledge in Film* is among more than 70 exhibitions and programs presented as part of PST ART. Returning in September 2024 with its latest edition, PST ART: Art & Science Collide, this landmark regional event explores the intersections of art and science, both past and present. PST ART is presented by Getty. For more information about PST ART: Art & Science Collide, please visit: [pst.art](http://pst.art).

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*Andy Warhol*

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts



DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS  
City of Los Angeles

**Los Angeles Filmforum and Brain Dead present  
Experimentations: Imag(in)ing Knowledge in Film, Program 14  
Old Nature: Natural History Films from the Silent Era  
Live musical accompaniment by musicians Marc Merza and Emma Palm  
Introduced by Jennifer Lynn Peterson**

Note that some of these films include imagery of hunting and animal deaths, and other problematic dated forms of representation (which is part of the investigation of the show).

This screening of archival natural history films from the 1910s and 1920s reveals how animals, science, industry, and geography were visualized by motion pictures one hundred years ago. Beautifully preserved by the EYE Film Museum Amsterdam, most of these films feature applied color processes such as tinting, toning, or stencil coloring. These shorts were made by early film companies in Europe and the United States, but they are from the collection of a Dutch film distributor and were shown in the Netherlands, which explains their Dutch intertitles (for which we have provided English-language translations). Strikingly different from today's nature documentaries, these films celebrate hunting, logging, mining, and other forms of resource extraction. Portraying nature through the lens of popular scientific knowledge, this program shows some of the styles of visualization, as well as the impulses of objectification, underpinning the history of Western science and knowledge production. Popular science films such as these were seen by millions of viewers in the years before World War II, in both theatrical venues (as short films before the main feature) and in "nontheatrical" venues such as schools, museums, lecture halls, churches, and prisons, where they were often presented along with a live lecture. Such films aimed to speak to popular audiences. They were not used by scientists but functioned rather as a form of education for the layperson.

When these films were made, they were thought to represent the peak of modern visual education, demonstrating the apparent triumph of capitalist domination of the earth. As much as these films embody an appreciation for nature, they are also explicit about their hierarchical, colonialist value system. Watching these films now, however, produces a collision between "old nature" as depicted on screen and "new nature" today. As new forms of ecological awareness emerge in the face of the interlocking environmental crises of global warming, mass extinction, and climate injustice, images and stories are more important than ever. Film, with its unparalleled ability to direct and focus our attention, provides opportunities to shape our emotional understanding of the environment and its history, bringing it down to human scale. Cinema is a medium well-suited to help us perceive the disorienting scale and temporal complexity of the Anthropocene (the human epoch). It does this, especially in popular science films such as these, by focusing our attention on specific animals, ecosystems, places, and power dynamics. These century-old natural history films can help shape our sense of present-day environmental loss, enabling us to perceive the contradictory "time of the biographical and the time of the geological" together. It is precisely the disorienting perspective of the Anthropocene viewing condition that revitalizes these old films with new meaning. A live performance of ambient electronic music will open access points for the audience to more fully draw out these complexities and others through the experience of public spectatorship.

All eleven films are from the archival collection of the EYE Film Institute, Amsterdam, which has preserved and digitized them. All films are silent and will be accompanied by live music performed by Marc Merza and Emma Palm.

Total running time: 66:40.

Curated by Jennifer Lynn Peterson

Special thanks to the EYE Film Museum, Amsterdam, and Jasper Spoelstra; Darrell Brett of Brain Dead Studios

**Jennifer Lynn Peterson** holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and is currently a Professor of Media Studies at Woodbury University in Los Angeles, where she is also Dean of Faculty: Governance. A film historian whose research focuses on the relationship between media and the environment, she is the author of *Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film* (Duke University Press, 2013). Her scholarly articles have been published in *Representations*, *JCMS*, *Feminist Media Histories*, *Camera Obscura*, and in numerous edited collections. Her film, art, and book reviews have been published in *Texte zur Kunst*, *Millennium Film Journal*, *Film Quarterly*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *Artforum.com*. Previously, she was Associate Professor in the Film Studies Program at the University of Colorado Boulder. Her second book, on American motion pictures and nature conservation in the interwar years, is under contract for publication by Columbia University Press.

**Emma Palm** is a Taiwanese-American Los Angeles based musician and multimedia artist. Her music blends synthesizers, field recordings, guqin and vocals to create meditative soundscapes and textures that attempt to translate the nuances of identity, environment, and memory.

**Marc Merza** is a Filipino-American artist and musician based in Los Angeles, California. His recordings are at times improvisational and spontaneous, and other times, heavily crafted, sculpted and reworked. He often composes on guitar, clarinet and Kulintang (a Filipino gong set) to speak to others, but the use of tape loops, field recordings and electronic equipment are not foreign in his music making practice.

#### Screening:

#### **Water Birds of West Africa (Oiseaux aquatiques d'Afrique Occidentale)**

Pathé, France, 1925, 4:03

This film shows several species of African birds in their habitat in Senegal. The film features an applied stencil coloring process called PathécOLOR that was unique to the French Pathé company that produced the film. At the time, such colors were thought to have a realistic effect. Today, however, these pastel hues appeal to the viewer's imagination. Camera operator M. Livier.

#### **Forest Ants, Caterpillars, and Crickets (De Woudmieren/Rupsen/de Krekel)**

Production Company Unknown, circa 1925, 10:36

This is a compilation film with footage from three different natural history films about insect behavior and life cycles. Each segment has a different color tint. Tinting was an applied color process that was widely used in the silent era, in both fiction and nonfiction films. These monochromatic color tints produce a sense of wonderment that works in tension with the photographic realism of the insect imagery.

#### **From the Belly of the Earth (Uit den schoot der aarde)**

Production Company Unknown, 1919, 10:01

This film educates viewers about the origin of life and the evolution of species, which were still relatively new scientific concepts being popularized at the time. We see a volcano, a series of reptiles and primates, along with skeletons, fossils, and other discoveries from nineteenth century paleontology. The film concludes with shots of dinosaur statues from Carl Hagenbeck's Tierpark (zoo) in Germany.

#### **The Octopus (La Pieuvre)**

Pathé, France, 1912, 4:44

This film about the octopus treats this intelligent species as alien, referring to it as a monster in the intertitles. Most of the film shows the octopus in its seashore habitat, but the last shot was taken in a glass-walled aquarium, a common staging technique in nature films of this era.

### **Falcon Hunting in Algeria (Leven in Algerije)**

Pathé, France, circa 1909-1927, 2:15

This Pathé film shows Algerian men hunting rabbits using trained falcons. It also shows men in and around their clay houses, and a woman spinning wool. The film has unusually vibrant stencil-colored hues.

### **A Bear Hunt in the Arctic Regions (Capture d'ours blancs dans les glaces de l'océan)**

Pathé, France, 1911, 5:10

Hunting films were popular in the silent era. This film shows polar bear hunting and death in a way that today's viewers will find shocking. Polar bears have become a symbol of species endangerment due to their vulnerability to global warming, but as this film shows, they were once seen by European hunters as mere trophies to be scored.

### **Wood from the High North (Hout uit het Hoge Noorden)**

Fox Film Corporation, United States, 1926, 11:38

A film about the lumber industry, from tree-felling to log driving downriver to the sawmill. While emphasizing the difficult labor of log driving, the film also shows the remains of the heavily logged forest landscapes. A classic resource extraction film, many such "process" films were made about different kinds of industrial production.

### **Marble Industry at Carrara (Industrie des marbres à carrare)**

Gaumont, France, 1914, 6:05

This film showing the famous marble industry of Carrara, Italy captures an ancient industry at the start of the First World War. Quarries have been operating here since the time of Ancient Rome, and Michelangelo sculpted his statues out of Carrara marble. While this film presents nature as a source of "free gifts" to be mastered and used, around the time this film was made Carrara was the center of an anarchist movement which grew out of the local stoneworker's culture. Some of the unnamed workers shown here were likely participants in the movement, but such a political context goes unmentioned in the film.

### **Berchtesgaden Park and the Königssee Lake (Berchtesgaden en het Koningsmeer)**

Eclair, France, circa 1915, 3:18

The Bavarian nature park shown in this film is one of the oldest conservation parks in the Alps, and it remains an important biosphere reserve today. But by 1933, Adolf Hitler had purchased a mountain home there, and during World War II the area became a Nazi stronghold. While most of the area's Nazi buildings were destroyed after the war, the history of this region should remind us that the idea of nature, which is a complex cultural construct, can move in different ideological directions. Certain mythic ideas of nature, particularly related to the eugenicist, racist fetish for "purity," have been (and are still) used for ecofascist purposes.

### **Hokkaido, Japan (Hokkaido, Japan)**

Universal Animated Weekly, United States, 1920, 4:59

In this footage from an American newsreel, we see a Japanese village on the island of Hokkaido burning in a huge fire with billowing smoke caused by a volcano eruption. This natural disaster footage emphasizes action, danger, and a feeling of catastrophe.

### **Turkey: Istanbul and the Golden Horn (Turkije/Stamboul et la Corne d'Or)**

Radios, France, 1912, 3:51

Travelogue films such as this were extremely popular in the silent era. Such films showed the world's places and people as exotic visions for the armchair tourist. The genre is a curious kind of geography lesson, in which the foreign location shown is both tantalizing and a source of potential tension. Here we see crowded street scenes, an outdoor barbershop, a busy harbor, and the Hagia Sophia. This is another compilation reel of footage shot by two French early cinema production companies: Radios and Eclipse. Every shot is tinted in glorious amber, red, pink, yellow, and blue hues.

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Los Angeles Filmforum screenings are supported by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors through the Los Angeles County Department of Arts & Culture, the Department of Cultural Affairs, City of Los Angeles. We also depend on our members, ticket buyers, and individual donors.

Coming soon to Los Angeles Filmforum:

January 26, 7:30 pm - Experimentations: Imag(in)ing Knowledge in Film: This Bit of That India, with curator Shai Heredia, at 2220 Arts + Archives

February 2, 3:00 pm - Experimentations: Imag(in)ing Knowledge in Film: Unstable Ground: Science, Extraction, and Belief in Monisme, with director Riar Rizaldi in person, at 2220 Arts + Archives

February 2, 7:00 pm - Experimentations: Imag(in)ing Knowledge in Film: Resisting Western Science's Colonial Mandate: Rock Bottom Riser, with director Fern Silva in person

Memberships available, \$40 Student \$75 Individual, \$125 Dual, or \$225 Silver Nitrate

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