

Phill Niblock, *THIR*, 1972

Intentionally produced as a component of an intermedial environment, the single-screen version of *THIR* is one of Niblock's major films and the inaugural project for his shift into a purely observational mode of filmmaking. In its abbreviated form, *THIR* runs roughly forty-five minutes and features thirty discrete shots with no repetition. Each of these visual vignettes has an average running time of over one minute – a long take by any standard. Niblock's emphasis on shots of prolonged duration is of central importance to his filmmaking sensibility. In visual terms, *THIR* is incredibly consistent. Each shot of natural detail – including extreme close-ups of leaves, streams, flowers, crawling ants – evinces a careful and deliberate compositional sense and contributes to the production of a visual field that is rich, nuanced, and sumptuous. Through the selective use of a shallow depth of field, extreme close-ups, and tight, straightjacket framing, Niblock achieves a textural and visual intimacy that is poetic, elegiac, and classically beautiful. Yet, again, Niblock's lyricism is achieved through the deliberate, vigilant ordering of natural detail rather than through an expressive, gestural, or spontaneous compositional sense.

As in his music, the composition of Niblock's films is staid and deliberate without being clinical. Niblock's photography in *THIR* emphasizes a wide spectrum of color throughout, often featuring heavy patches of dark, chiaroscuro lighting and almost microscopic close-ups of tactile, concrete, natural detail. Every shot in the film – of flowing water, leaves shaking in the wind, or light jutting through the forest's canopy – is still. When movement does occur, it happens within the frame as a function of natural forces, such as wind, water, or the frantic movement of insects, rather than as a result of the filmmaker's camera movements. Shot entirely on a tripod, this experimental nature film displays a deep, saturated visual palette that exaggerates the natural gradations of the forest's native color spectrum. *THIR* is a film composed of incredibly beautiful, highly aestheticized photographic interpretations of the forest's visual minutiae.

One moment we see a wide, long shot of mountains; in the next vignette, an extreme close-up of a plant's stamen; in another, light flickering abstractly over a rushing stream. From one image to the next there are incredible jumps in scale. Because of its massive shifts in perspective and visual scope the film displays a binary system of wide landscape shots and tight close-ups, as well as a very conscious compositional and structural logic. In these transitions from one image to the next, the film presents a series of independently composed observational episodes rather than an associative chain of abstract details, as one might see in a more gestural, expressive avant-garde film. The widest shots of the film, which depict traveling clouds, mountain tops, and distant valleys, are filmed at a slow frame rate (creating a time-lapse effect) and thus rapidly accelerating the temporality of the work's observational sense. As beams of light jut through clouds, they race quickly across valleys and horizontal planes of trees, to show a sun setting over the course of one minute.

Juan Carlos Kase, *Phill Niblock's Observational Cinema*, 2012 (excerpt)