**Author:** Patrick Tarrant
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**Duration:** 19’ 34”
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**Screening:** Screenworks Launch Event, The Cube, Bristol, June 20, 2018.

**Research Statement**

**Preface**

One of the reviewers of this submission has wondered if I might briefly reflect on the ability of the film, *The Trembling Giant*, to “present its ideas self-evidently”. This is a good question considering that the title of this submission, ‘The Trembling Giant as Hyperobject’, flags up the significance of a key term that only became known to me after I made the film.

One might be wary of efforts to frame a creative work as research after the fact, but there is a symmetry and sympathy between my film and Timothy Morton’s book on hyperobjects that makes the order of things unimportant. For instance, the aspen colony in Utah that gives its name to this film is the one and only object I ever considered, an object I chose precisely for the qualities of scale that make the colony, in Morton’s terms, a hyperobject. Similarly, Morton’s book provides language (‘phasing’ for instance) that is perfect for describing the way nature and machine intersect and reveal one another in the film, but nothing was more fundamental to the film, from the beginning, than just this intersection.

To answer the reviewer’s question more directly, it is safe to say that the choices I have made when discussing my film here are choices that I have made about writing and about the further opportunity it provides to reflect, connect and refine. My writing is a spoiler, not least because it offers its own readings of forms and ideas that the film itself leaves to others to decipher.

One further note: The clonal colony of quaking aspen in Fish Lake Utah is known as The Trembling Giant, named both for its trembling leaves and for its massively distributed root system, which spans some 106 acres. Also known as Pando (Latin for ‘I Spread’), this colony is in fact a single organism that puts up genetically identical stems, rather than trees, all from that one root system. The Trembling Giant can therefore be thought of as one tree. It is the distribution of this organism underground that has enabled it to survive for an estimated 80,000 years, protected from events above ground. But the perils of a warming planet are a new kind of threat and it is the sheer asymmetry of The Trembling Giant’s longevity and the rapid rise of this new and genuine threat to its existence that frames the film and the following reflections.

**Criteria**

Given the technique of filming a clonal colony of quaking aspen, known as The Trembling Giant, through the holes in a film reel as it turns on a 16mm film projector:



Figure 1. Filming technique illustration.

– Does the technique produce optical effects that are compelling in themselves and sufficiently novel to produce new perceptual experiences, screen spaces and cinematic landscapes?
– Are the optical effects and found film sounds — both derived from the film projector which is deployed as synecdoche for cinema — productive for thinking about cinema’s relation to landscape, global warming and the Anthropocene?
– Does this filmmaking technique productively translate the significance and scale of an 80,000 year old quaking aspen colony to give new form to longstanding ideas and fears about human influence on the planet?

**Research Questions**

1. Given the technique of filming through the holes in a film reel as it turns on a 16mm film projector — first used in *The Take-Up* (Tarrant, 2014) and lately in *Another Self Portrait* (2017) — how can the ensuing visual disturbances, spatial distortions and appropriated film-sound be used to say something new about the relationship between cinema and the iconic, filmic landscapes of the American south-west in a time of global warming?

2. According to Edward Bach’s 38 flower remedies, the bark of the quaking aspen is thought to provide the cure ‘for any fear whose cause can’t be named’. How might an encounter with the epic durational timeframe represented by the 80,000 year-old Trembling Giant address the kinds of fears conjured by the Anthropocene on the one hand and by cinema on the other?

3. How can Timothy Morton’s (2013) concept of the Hyperobject bring clarity to the asymmetrical relations of scale and force that exist between a human and human induced climate change, or between a human and The Trembling Giant?

4. How can a notion of phasing, derived again from Morton’s discussion of hyperobjects, illuminate the ecology of interactions that occur when rhizomatic trees, an archive of 16mm films, a film projector and a digital camera conspire to translate one another?



Figure 2. Trail Rides, still frame from The Trembling Giant (2016)

**Context**

*The Trembling Giant*’s tremulous technique emerges form a direct engagement with the experimental films and ‘Nervous System’ and ‘Nervous Magic Lantern’ performances of Ken Jacobs who has spent many decades projecting images through a spinning propeller, with depth cues being a key consideration in that, and other, efforts. My innovation is to invert his process and *record* images through a spinning propeller, that propeller, moreover, being the ready-made propeller that is represented by a film reel as it spins on a 16mm projector. By using a film projector my technique demands consideration of the mediating effects of cinema in our lives (especially in our understanding of landscape) and introduces such phenomena as depth effects, intermittence and a kind of movement that Jacobs calls ‘eternalism’. Eternalism occurs when the rapid alternation between two similar images is rendered circular and evolving because of interceding moments of black, as opposed to the twitching back and forth that would occur without the black. This effect is apprehended as a rolling, or rippling, movement in my film, caused by, but different to, the turning movement of the film reel.

Where certain artist-filmmakers like Ben Rivers have made landscape films that explore climate change and the Anthropocene — as he has in *Slow Action* (2010) and *I Know Where I’m Going* (2009) — while also making use of found film sound, as I do here, once again the novelty of my own effort lies in the fact that a 16mm film always occupies the profilmic space immediately in front of the camera; camera and projector augmenting and translating each other and making the apparatus itself a fundamental part of the film’s reflexive stance and a part of its argument about a certain technologised seeing and listening. In the language of Erica Balsom’s (2013) book on the use of ‘cinema’ in artists’ moving image work, my film might be understood as an artist’s film that also ‘exhibits’ cinema. Balsom uses the term ‘exhibit’ to refer both to the gallery presentation of work that incorporates ‘cinema’ but also to the notion that a work might examine and analyse cinema in a gallery context: “not simply as celluloid, projector, or binary code, but also as a social and historical institution” (2013: 13). One difference worth noting between my film and those art objects that Balsom has in mind, is that whereas they exhibit cinema in an exhibition space, cinema is exhibited and analysed in my work in the *profilmic* space where it acts on the image even before it is recorded. Placing a film projector into the very world one is filming suggests that the world itself is a social institution framed by the cinematic. That said, for all the mediating effects of the projector before the camera, a sense of the ‘cinematic’ perhaps emerges most easily in this film via the combination of landscapes and the 16mm soundtracks that provide a mix of drama and dread and too-good-to-be-true, Foley-like supplements to the environment. For instance, shots 10 and 11 in this film reveal cows in their idyll, but the mooing sounds that accompany them aren’t quite right, casting the real cows, thereby, out of their Eden and into an alienated space of technology and representation. And when sounds of breathing or interrupted speech are combined with shots of branches or bushes in the foreground, a sense is readily created of what one of the reviewers of this submission calls a ‘surreptitious point of view’.

The very idea that an old 16mm projector might rattle on in front of a digital camera is suggestive of a concern with media archaeology that productively intersects, in this case, with a sense of geological time and the Anthropocene. This is gestured at in the final minutes of the film which pass by in a quiet reverie after the last people escape the planet in their helicopters and motor homes while the spinner keeps spinning. When viewed anthropocentrically, this spinner seems an-empathetic in its persistence, but when viewed from the perspective of the planet, its spinning seems more cosmologically attuned. We could also say it ‘phases’ in sympathy with the planet rather than its people (more on phasing later). The eternally spinning film reel can also be understood as the kind of obsolete object that the filmmaker Stan Douglas describes as “an index of an understanding of the world lost to us” (Stan Douglas cited in Balsom, 2013: 11). But I don’t mean to emphasise the redemptive power of this index (that is, the ability of the film reel to bring an obsolete cinema back into our contemporary, digital frame of reference). Rather, I mean to emphasise the loss. In fact, not the loss, but a *withdrawal* from the kind of understanding that is confined to human scales of space and time.

A key consideration of this research comes from the idea that not only the aspen colony but also cinema itself might be understood in terms of what Morton calls Hyperobjects. This framework has the potential to help us grasp the scale of forces that would make even a giant tremble, while also serving as an analytical tool that helps to read the narrative clues and visual disturbances found in the film. Hyperobjects are things and processes as diverse as black holes, global warming, the internet, the sum of plastic bags on the planet, or The Trembling Giant, which not only seems to have lived forever but has a root system that spans 106 acres. Although much diminished in this company, I suggest that cinema, too, is a kind of hyperobject insofar as it still defies us with its scale (we can’t see all the films), but also its influence (we can’t see and hear all that is in films, in part because they obfuscate, but also because they move through time as evolving ideological signifiers). Morton (2013: 15) stresses that hyperobjects “are not simply mental (or otherwise ideal) constructs, but are real entities whose primordial reality is withdrawn from humans”. Part of this withdrawal has to do with these objects not being an anthropocentric concern in the first place. They are, as Morton says, “real whether or not someone is thinking of them,” but they do also make our own fragility conspicuous (Morton, 2013: 2).

One of the qualities of the use of sound in this film is precisely its withdrawal, since nearly all dialogue, narration and narratively suggestive sound and music found on the 16mm films is left out of my video. For instance, the first of very few words heard in *The Trembling Giant* come from an educational film about trees and climate called *How Long Is Always?*, a title we hear flatly and speedily announced because it serves only as an audio-slate before the beginning of the film proper and is therefore not intended for projection. The narrator of *How Long Is Always?* will go on to conjure a frightening future in which there are no trees left, but his fearful warning is withheld from my film. A profound shift takes place in the time between a film like mine made after the inauguration of the Anthropocene, where it is the people who disappear, and films made before. This becomes even clearer when one understands that the ambition of the older film is to celebrate the science and technologies that could, if applied earnestly, ensure the coexistence of trees and people in urban settings. But it is a feature of my film that the sounds of cinema should evoke more of a sense of withdrawal — of cinema witnessing the world rather than talking over it — so that we might be a little warier of those ‘fears’ that cinema would have us transfixed by and a little more attentive to fears of our own reckoning. *How Long Is Always?* may mean well, or not, as it seeks to assuage our fears, but it is deployed here as anachronism in the age of the Anthropocene.

Morton argues that “by postponing doom into some hypothetical future, these narratives [like *How Long Is Always?*] inoculate us against the very real object that has intruded into ecological, social and psychic space” (2013: 103-104). Hyperobjects, he notes, spell doom *now*. Irmgard Emmelhainz (2015: 135) warns about another kind of displacement of our fears, arguing in *Art in the Anthropocene* that the Anthropocene has transformed the world into images: “[f]or instance, the exhaustive visualization and documentation of wildlife is effectively concealing its ongoing extinction”. Central to the tripartite relationship between cinema, landscape and global warming that underpins this research, is the idea that cinema continues as it always has to project the kinds of fears that are sufficient to engage us but also to distract us from the very big and real dangers we might otherwise be focused on. There’s us fiddling in our cinema seats while the world burns. In an age of global warming it is no longer plausible to pretend we don’t know the source of our fears, and it certainly isn’t cinema, unless by cinema we mean a place where we can be in the dark. Industries, including the film industry, are complicit in the destruction — but also the deception — that makes a concept like the Anthropocene necessary, and *The Trembling Giant* brings the apparatus of cinema in contact with an 80,000 year-old organism to make that point.

Because a hyperobject like cinema is so massively distributed and therefore withdrawn from our apprehension as an object, it cannot be what cinema has presented to us locally (what it says) that defines it. Hyperobjects are revealed in their *interobjectivity*, like the tides and the moon. Hence it is cinema’s interactions with the world — with landscape or capital — that will enable us to apprehend it. This interobjectivity is reflected in my hybrid apparatus insofar as it too is withdrawn and largely unseen but is revealed in its interactions with lenses, focal planes, optics, perception and the backcountry of Utah. But this hybrid filmmaking procedure also makes connections between different media formats such as film and video, or between modalities such as projection and recording, in part as a way of describing this hybrid moment in moving image practice, but also as a way of practically interleaving two phases of image making technology. Morton identifies phasing as an important tool for understanding hyperobjects. On occasions where such an object might not be apparent to us at all, in fact the object may simply be at a point in its phase-sequence (like a comet that will be back in a thousand years) where its presence is invisible to us. Phasing also helps to understand the interactions and distortions that can occur between two processes or technologies, such as when my film reel slices horizontally and distributes what would be a spatial displacement over time to create the animated image, while the digital camera focuses in and out of deep spaces that are further demarcated by their shallow depth of field. This phasing is most evident in an image like that at seven minutes and eight seconds in my film — also excerpted here: <https://vimeo.com/122559114> — where aspen trees appear to move in multiple planes and along multiple axes. Morton (2013: 77) suggests that “[p]hasing happens because one object translates another one”. Other instances in the film of a kind of translation of visual fields and phenomena can be found in the idea that cinema’s animated, frame by frame, underpinnings are reconstituted in the intermittent pulse of the spinning reel. Also re-captured here are echoes of the flicker and unsteady registration associated with small gauge filmmaking, as well as the general capacity of cinema to render special effects that seem to defy the rules of optics. Digital ecologies intersect material ones here and when they don’t phase in sync they produce a disturbance that is a feature rather than a bug, a translation of their difference rather than a negation. One of the achievements of the film, therefore, is to find an expression of its own digital materiality that connects it to a wider ecology of technological objects and ecological hyperobjects.

**Methods**

The primary method of this research derives from an engagement with experimental film practice and structural filmmaking traditions. It is in such contexts where technological and material concerns become the very substance of the films produced under their rubric and where experimentation drives new expressive forms. This kind of structural concern is most obvious in my 2014 film, *The Take-Up,* where the holes in the take-up reel slowly fill with the film being taken up, slowly occluding the camera’s view over time. This is an allegory of analogue film defying the digital. In *The Trembling Giant*, where it is plant versus people, a structural kind of thinking centres on the fact that the film projector is placed in the very landscapes that have been made-over as ‘cinematic’ by Hollywood; these landscapes are thereby rendered ‘cinematic’ twice over. This doubling also echoes the interleaving of two hyperobjects in this research, namely cinema and The Trembling Giant aspen colony.

**Outcomes**

The simplest lesson of the filmmaking technique employed here is that out of focus objects will move under the influence of the spinner, while focused objects will not discernibly move, meaning that one can intercede on planes within a video or film image *without* the use of digital effects. I call this technique ‘Profilmic Parallax Projections’, named after the depth-inducing phenomenon of parallax where objects in the background appear to move more slowly along a lateral axis than foreground objects. In my films the more out of focus the object, whether it is near or far, the more it will move, and this has been explored in my filming of aspen trees and other objects arranged in space with some concern for the way this contributes to a certain expansion of depth cues on screen. Beyond this optical phenomenon is the larger endeavour to reveal the withdrawn phases of a colony of aspen that is massively distributed in time, an idea practically treated through my technological innovation but also given vivid form by Morton’s notion of Hyperobjects. Finally, *The Trembling Giant* stands as an example of how cinema might be exhibited in artists’ film in the very act of recording, recalling in the process the dual function of the Lumière brothers’ Cinématographe, which combined camera and projector in one apparatus.

**Dissemination**

Self-funded, with the price of the DCP covered by London South Bank University.

*Award Nomination:*

Nominated for Best Short Film, BFI London Film Festival 2016

*Invited Screenings:*

Image Forum Festival 2017, Japan

Tabor Film Festival 2017, Poland

*Selected Screenings via Open Submission:*

BFI London Film Festival, UK

Slamdance Film Festival, USA

Haverhill Experimental Film Festival, USA

Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival, Czech Republic

Revelation Perth International Film Festival, Australia

West Virginia Mountaineer Short Film Festival, USA

*Installations:*

Mykonos Biennale 2017, Greece

Pori Film Festival 2016, Finland

‘Besides The Screen’ Exhibition and Conference 2016, UK

**Impact**

The film’s impact is most readily defined by its address to audiences of non-academics at film festivals. Two invitations were extended to me for screening the film, plus a further enquiry from Nate Dorr who programmes the Imagine Science Film Festival in New York City. These invitations arise as a result of prior festival screenings. This technique is also used by me at recruitment events since it offers applicants something they have never seen before.

**References**

**Bibliography**

Balsom, Erica (2013) *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*. Amsterdam University Press.

Emmelhainz, Irmgard (2015) ‘Images Do Not Show: The Desire to See in the Anthropocene’ in Heather Davis and Turpin, E, (Eds) *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*. Open Humanities Press: London.

Morton, Tim (2011) *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press: London.

**Filmography**

Rivers, Ben*. Slow Action* (2010, 16mm, UK) —-  *I Know Where I’m Going* (2009, 16mm, UK)

Jacobs, Ken. *Celestial Subway Lines* (2004) [Nervous Magic Lantern performance]
—- *On The Bridge* (1996) [Nervous System work]

*How Long Is Always?* (date and author unknown)

**Peer Reviews**

*All reviews refer to original research statements which have been edited in response to what follows:*

**Review 1: Accept work subject to minor revisions of statement**

I found the most striking thing about *The Trembling Giant as Hyperobject* to be the quite meditative effect that it had on me while watching, an effect that wasn’t lessened by repeat viewings or altered contexts for my viewing. I have watched the film three times now, in different settings with varying screen sizes and quality of sound projection, and on each occasion found my mind involuntarily drifting at different points of the film, but very much drifting away from an intellectualised and focused concern with the film’s content and formal structures (which the film does also encourage and invite), and into a more contemplative and intuitive viewing experience. Whether the intermittent inducing of a loss of focus was the intention of the author or not (and indeed I hope they take this comment as it is meant – a compliment not a criticism), this repeated experience of watching the film reveals, I feel, a quality in the film that speaks very much to the questions posed by Tarrant in the ‘Criteria’ section of the research statement, specifically the extent to which the technique produces optical effects that are compelling in themselves (which they certainly are), and sufficiently novel to produce new perceptual experiences, screen spaces, and cinematic landscapes.

Reflecting upon the film, and the experience of watching it, a few elements stuck out in particular. The technique of shooting through the rotating film reel of a 16mm projector employed in the film creates an aesthetic of kinetic energy, as each shot pulsates to varying degrees – the ‘trembling’ referenced in the film’s title – and this both coexists with and serves as a counterpoint to the sense of stasis created by the editing, that for the most part privileges lengthy shot durations and a measured, contemplative pace. The inherent aesthetic conflict and uneasy tension that this creates seems to link directly to Tarrant’s discussion of a central idea of the project being the conflict between cinema’s projection of fears regarding landscape and global warming that simultaneously ‘distract us from the very big and real dangers we might otherwise be focused on’.

Moreover, the spinning film reel through which the images are recorded also creates a distancing effect between audience and subject, a barrier through which what we are looking at is distorted and obscured, as though viewed surreptitiously. While this visual remove is not explored in the research statement, a sense of withdrawal is discussed in relation to the film’s absence of dialogue, narration, or narratively suggestive sound or music. It was my experience of watching the film that the visual technique of the spinning reel complimented the narratively muted soundscape in creating a sense of distance and withdrawal, which in turn facilitated the aforementioned meditative and intuitive viewing experience.

Most of the shots in the film are unpopulated by people or animals, which I found made the intermittent inclusion of populated shots – two dogs and a human being walking towards a river, a car puncturing a hitherto unpopulated shot by crossing the lower periphery of the frame, a car driving away from the camera along a winding road – quite jarring when they appear. Formally the shots are entirely in keeping – locked off static shots recorded through the spinning projector reel – but the inclusion of cars or people mean that they attain an almost violating quality such is their seeming incongruity within the film. This response seems apt in the context of Tarrant’s concern with human induced climate change, and in relation to the sense of conflict and tension caused by the filming technique that he employs.

One final point I would make is that having watched the film both before and after reading the research statement, I found that very little of Tarrant’s research considerations are self-evident in the film. That is not to detract from the experience of watching the film without the benefit of the research context – as stated I found the film deeply absorbing on each occasion that I viewed it – but there is perhaps scope within the research statement to reflect on the ability of the film to present its ideas self-evidently. I wouldn’t, however, suggest this as a necessary pre-requisite to publication.

In sum, I recommend that Screenworks accept *The Trembling Giant as Hyperobject* and the accompanying research statement for publication.

**Review 2: Accept work subject to minor revisions of statement**

*The Trembling Giant* successfully combines cinematic reflexivity with contemplation of nature. Moreover, Ken Jacobs’ ‘eternalism’ technique is applied in the work in a novel and evocative way. The rippling effect of the perpetually turning film-reel evokes an array of associations and questions connected to the interplay between nature and technology. The work invites its audience to contemplate on their own perception of these concepts, questioning the relationship between the natural environment and technology used for its visual representation as being either opposites or reciprocal.

In the theoretical essay the idea of film exhibiting cinema is used, referencing Erica Balsom’s publication *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (2013). This argument seems to overlap largely with the original conception by filmmaker and theorist Peter Gidal in his seminal publication *Structural Film Anthology* (Gidal, 1987). Structural/materialist filmmaking can be seen as a methodology that was, and is, used to critically reflect on cinematic representation; the cinematic apparatus itself becomes subject of the work. *The Trembling Giant* can clearly be understood in such terms.

Moreover, Timothy Morton’s idea of the ‘hyperobject’ is used as a reference, in a further underpinning of the practice based output. The proposition is made that cinema can be described as a hyperobject. According to the author, the use of the spinning film reel and found sounds are to be understood within this context, connecting cinematic reflexivity and the hyperobject in a mutually productive way. The hyperobject can be summarized as a concept negotiating between the representational and the real, trying to solve the tension between anthropocentric understanding of nature as an external event and the ominous immanence of ecological catastrophe increasingly manifested in global shifts such as climate change, distribution of plastics in the sea and the spread of nuclear waste.

However, the Anthropocene is not a representational problem but a real event, for example: the rising CO2 levels in the atmosphere are disturbingly material. The material nature of the Anthropocene is key to its problematics. Fossil fuels are still burned on gigantic scale, the production and use of plastic bottles is still rising and nuclear accidents are still covered up.

In regard to the desired productive thinking about cinema’s relation to landscape, global warming and the Anthropocene this tension between real events and representation cannot be left unattended. In the supporting research statement several clues can be found, for example an interesting connection is made between Edward Bach’s 38 flower remedies and the depicted quacken aspen colony. But can such a connection be made by the audience? Also, in the film several overlaps appear between shifts and intensities produced by visible effects in nature (vibrating leaves, rippling water) and the effects of the turning film-reel. Both instances, called ‘phases’ by the author, provide opportunities to connect the representational and the real. These openings are left largely unattended and deserve more attention in the research statement and the summative outcome.

The suggested change would incorporate one or more propositions regarding an emerging shift in the makers’ and audiences’ understanding of the tensions between representation of nature (particularly in cinema) and real events in the natural environment, and how these might be evoked by the work.

*All reviews refer to original research statements which have been edited in response.*