

I want to thank Betsy Jacks and David Barnes for making this event happen. For some years we had been talking about an event honoring the landscape filmmaking of Peter Hutton, and when we heard in May-June of this past summer that Peter was seriously ill, we decided that it was time to make the event happen. At that moment, we hoped that scheduling the event might be helpful for Peter, might in some small way help sustain him during what looked to be an ongoing struggle with cancer, give him something to look forward to. We hoped he would be here with us today. Alas, that was not to be. Peter died very quickly—and maybe that was best, though it was shocking for all of us who loved and admired him. And as a result, there is a certain melancholy in this event today.

When we lost Peter, we lost many things. We lost a wonderful, remarkably genuine, engaging, unpretentious, fun-to-be-around person. Peter mattered to a great many people. When Bard College hosted a memorial moment soon after Peter's death, hundreds of people gathered to share the loss—more, I'm sure, than that those planning that memorial moment on very short notice had expected.

We also lost an accomplished and charismatic teacher. Peter taught at CalArts, Harvard, Hampshire College, SUNY-Purchase and since 1985, at Bard College, and chaired the Film and Electronic Media Department for decades. As a teacher Peter inspired students wherever he taught. His students, many of them filmmakers, are spread across the country. Perhaps the most famous of the students is the documentarian Ken Burns, who studied with Peter at Hampshire College. If you know Burns's best films (*The Civil War*, for example), you know that what has given them the impact they have had is their careful pacing, their calm, dignified address—and this seems to me the legacy of Peter's teaching. Burns himself has called Peter “a national treasure.”

But of course, it is Peter's accomplishments as an artist that brings us here today—and that are instigating retrospectives of his work around the world this fall and spring. Peter finished his first film in 1970 and over the following 46 years developed an approach and style that make his work instantly recognizable. His was fascinated with landscape and cityscape—but in a very unusual cinematic way.

To put Peter's approach into context, it is useful to recognize what the Thomas Cole National Historic Site is recognizing today: that Peter's films are a modern embodiment of the spirit that

informed Thomas Cole's paintings and the movement Cole was so important in instigating: what is usually called the Hudson River School of American landscape painting. Of course, Cole and the Hudson River School produced many kinds of painting: there is the great painting tradition of Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt, and the Rocky Mountain painters (Thomas Moran et al)—a tradition that forms the background of many an American Western film—but there are other equally significant tendencies that emphasize a quieter, more humble sense of the spiritual: I'm thinking of the Luminist painters who focused on light as a spiritual entity, and the Tonalists, whose quiet scenes, particularly evening scenes and nocturnes, evoke a spiritual sensibility.

Thomas Cole was of special importance for Peter. He filmed many of the locations that Cole painted, and entitled his film, *In Titan's Goblet*, in recognition of Cole's painting *The Titan's Goblet*. But more importantly, Peter understood that he and Cole were neighbors not only spatially—Catskill is only a few miles from Tivoli, where Peter lived—but in their attitude toward modernity. Much of Cole's painting combines a celebratory attitude toward the Hudson Valley and Catskill landscape Cole loved with a deep concern for the beauties and the spiritual importance of that landscape. Cole often painted Catskill scenes that demonstrated not so much what the region looked like at the moment of the painting, but rather what *it had looked like*—what it should have continued to look like. The industrialization of the valley was in full-swing during Cole's lifetime. Cole's paintings were/are often meditations on the natural beauty that surrounds us; they are meant to slow us down, not to participate in the frenzy of industrial transformation.

Though Peter was making films a century after Cole was painting—and though he was working with an artistic medium, cinema, that was a product of the industrial revolution—his attitude toward what he filmed was in sync with Cole's. For Hutton the job of cinema is to provide a respite from the frenzy of our lives, and from the hard-sell and hysterical consumption promoted by most of modern media. Like Cole, Hutton wanted to slow us down. His films do this in several ways: for many years Hutton chose to make his films in black-and-white; and he always chose to make them silent. His model for this was film history's great originals: the Lumiere Brothers, the very first filmmakers whose films are, or seem now, quite meditations on the world around them. While most of modern culture is about Bigness, Hutton often chose the opposite.

Our screening set-up will seem a bit strange: the projector in the room with us (and thanks to Carl Nabozny and his crew for their help). But in fact, I think this situation would be fine with Peter.

Some years ago, when Peter came to show his epic, *At Sea*, about the lives of commercial shipping vessels, at Hamilton College, we got into a bit of a wrestling match in the projection booth, because Peter wanted to change the lens in the projector, to make the image *smaller* than normal. He always worked against the slick, the commercial, the expected.

I am going to show you two Hutton films: his first Hudson Valley landscape film, *Landscape (for Manon)*, completed in 1987, and *Time and Tide*, completed in 2000, Peter's first foray into color since 1970, and his most elaborate film about the Hudson River.

I mentioned earlier that this cannot help but be a somewhat melancholy moment—it would have been so lovely to have Peter here with us for this celebration—but there is also something quite the opposite of melancholy in this moment—at least for those of us who love cinema. Of course, fine arts institutions have often embraced cinema: for decades the Museum of Modern Art has had a film exhibition program, and the Whitney has long embraced independent cinema. But so far as I know, the Thomas Cole Site is the first institution to formally recognize that the spirit of classic American landscape painting of the 19th Century remains alive not only in museums of painting and in the work of some modern painters, but also in the work of modern filmmakers—Peter Hutton most obviously. As a film historian, I am deeply grateful for this recognition—and I know Peter felt the same way.

I thank the Thomas Cole National Historic Site for this moment, and I thank all of you for being here. I'm especially grateful that Betsy and David have allowed this presentation to include a screening of Peter's work, because your experience of the films is far more important than anything I can say about them.

There will be a moment between the two films when I'll need to switch the reels; at that time, I'll pose a riddle to those of you who know this region—that relates to *Time and Tide*.

LANDSCAPE (FOR MANON)

Time and Tide was Hutton's first turn to color in 30 years and it focuses on the Hudson as we now it now—though it begins with a film made in 1903, called *Down the Hudson*, one of many films during the early years of the last century that evoked Hudson River paintings, at least in their titles—though the films themselves were focused on modernity, particularly the railroad and the

acceleration of travel. The high-speed quality of this short film is followed by Hutton much more serene exploration of the river. Especially for those of you who know this region well, I have a riddle for you. A single image in this film was not shot in the Hudson Valley—I wonder if you'll recognize it.

I'll see you after the film.

TIME AND TIDE

So, which image was not filmed in the Hudson Valley?

Yes, the General Electric sign—Hutton's subtle reference to GE's pollution of the river and the controversy over the PCBs buried in the soil at the bottom of the river that was in the news during the period when *Time and Tide* was shot.

Questions