THE SPIRIT IN THE WILD:
A CONVERSATION WITH THE LAND

THESIS FILM & ANALYSIS

BY
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Précis

The landscape in which we grow up profoundly and irrevocably shapes the way we view the world. I have been shaped by the landscapes of Western Washington; its glacial mountains, deep, dark forests, and misty hills. Though my whole life I have been inspired by the landscape and the animals that inhabit it, in recent years my creative work has come to more consciously focus around my relationship to the land, and why this is so important.

When we lose respect for and connection to the land, we are devastated as a species. The evidence of such is apparent as fast-moving modernity surrounds us with anxiety, disparateness, isolation, and ultimately, meaninglessness. The autocatalytic rapidity of technology’s evolution is outpacing humanity’s ability to adapt emotionally, and we are left empty. Culture is swallowing up nature.

For my creative thesis project, I wanted to explore my relationship to my home ground through the making of an animated film. I hoped that in so doing, I would gain a deeper connection to the landscape. For this project, the question I investigated was how I could identify the qualities of Western Washington’s landscapes that make it so unique, and express them in an animated film.

To explore this question, I ventured into the land to draw and paint from life. I wanted the creative choices I made to be determined by the land, by my conversation with it. While in the field, I created conceptual pieces which later drove the film I made. I wanted nothing that I had to say about the land, or the indigenous culture which appears in the film, to be false or misappropriated.

In making the film, as anticipated, I encountered the aesthetic setbacks and technical difficulties of using digital technologies. However, the final film cannot be discredited based
solely on its use of digital media. Through my work in the field and my active engagement with the land, I was able to produce a work which portrays some of the qualities that make Western Washington unlike anywhere else. The procedures used in creating this film can be employed by other artists and filmmakers who wish to try to further understand their own home grounds. More films made that depict or intimate the intricacy and complexity of geographies would counter the harmful effects of mass media misrepresentation.
Contents

Introduction..................................................................................................................................................1

Influences...................................................................................................................................................3

Fig. 1. Example of hair shapes inspired by Northwest Coast art.............................................................6

Fig. 2. A: Characteristic firm ovoids and eyelid......................................................................................6

Fig. 2. B: Soft ovoids and eyelid, not typical of older specimens.............................................................6

Fig. 3. Tracings of eyelid and u templates.................................................................................................6

Fig. 4. Spirits: elk, bear, and wolf............................................................................................................7

Creative Process........................................................................................................................................8

Results and Discussion..............................................................................................................................12

Conclusion...............................................................................................................................................14

Works Cited..............................................................................................................................................16

Further References....................................................................................................................................18

Image Credits..........................................................................................................................................20

Appendix..................................................................................................................................................21
Introduction

Whatever landscape a child is exposed to early on, that will be the sort of gauze through which he or she will see all the world afterward.

--Wallace Stegner

The way I see the world has been defined by the Douglas fir forests, mist-shrouded hills, and rugged emergent coasts of Western Washington, where I have lived my entire life. When surrounded by the unique qualities of one’s native place, one feels, as Cox and Holmes describe, “safe, enclosed, and protected,” contributing to the feeling of “existential insideness” or the sense that one is at home (67-8).

I have felt an affinity with this mysterious and primeval land since I can remember, but perhaps it was not until I ventured into other geographies that I noticed how profoundly our surroundings shape our perceptions. One experiences something different when one is amidst the closeness of fir boughs, roiling in a winter storm, than when one is faced with the open, undulating vastness of the Palouse, or the dry, sun-bleached pastels of a high desert in Southern California. The differences are how we recognize where we are, that we are home.

With the advancement of culture and technology, humanity is pushed farther and farther away from the authenticity of nature. The distractions and devastation of an ever present technological milieu create disconnectedness, isolation, and despair. People fear or believe already that there is no longer a place for humans within nature, and many, including myself, yearn to return to it. In a culture such as ours, the land is constantly threatened with destruction.

One way it is threatened is by the fact that many people do not much understand it. According to Lopez, Americans tend to possess a disturbing lack of knowledge about the true scope and nature of the geography of their country (About This Life 130). Movies, television, and
other media representations can present a familiar, romanticized, homogenized American landscape that reveals nothing of its true character (ibid. 131). In such representations:

The animals are all beautiful, diligent, one might even say well-behaved. Nature’s unruliness, the power of rivers and skies to intimidate, and any evidence of disastrous human land management practices are all but invisible. It is, in short, a magnificent garden, a colonial vision of paradise imposed on a real place that is, at best, only selectively known. (ibid.)

Lopez continues, “The more superficial a society's knowledge of the real dimensions of the land it occupies becomes, the more vulnerable the land is to exploitation, to manipulation for short-term gain” (ibid. 137). Commercial filmmaking and big studio animation can fail to represent the complexities of North American geographies, homogenizing them for mass consumption. One can see evidence of this in the number of studio animated features with settings that begin to all look like the Los Angeles suburbs in which they were created.

In my own work, I wanted to represent the land in a way that would counter the mass media homogenization described by Lopez. I wanted to portray both the horror as well as the beauty found in nature, for such is a truer depiction. For my creative thesis project, I wanted to explore my relationship with my home ground through the making of an animated film. Thus, the question I investigated was whether, through animation/filmmaking, I could identify and distill the qualities of Western Washington’s landscape that distinguish it from any other place on earth. Several artistic concerns arose as I began to pursue making the film.
One purpose with which I was concerned was the expression of reverence for the land in my work. Woodruff holds that reverence must be in awe of something. He explains, “You feel, when you are in awe, that you are human, that your mind is dwarfed by what it confronts, that you cannot capture it in a set of beliefs, and that you had best keep your mouth closed and your mind open while awaiting further disclosure” (147). The practice of expressing reverence for the land in art can allow people to rediscover why preserving nature, and our relationship to it, is vital. This is because art is able to impart meaning to people in an emotional way. It can express a truth found not in logic, data, and facts, but in mystery, beauty, and idiosyncrasy.

The technological nature of animation also became a main artistic concern. Due to time and budgetary considerations, I was not able to animate on paper and paint the backgrounds with real (nondigital) paint, which is my preference. Instead I opted for quicker and less expensive digital media, such as Adobe® Flash® and Photoshop®. Given the digital methods employed, I wondered if my aims in making this film could still emerge. Would the digital media conflict with the aims of the project to such an extent that the film would, in the end, fail? Would digital methods prove a cheapening of the work?

Ultimately my purpose in making the film was a quest for, as Lopez limns, “how to live a moral and compassionate existence when one is fully aware of the blood, the horror inherent in life, when one finds darkness not only in one’s culture but within oneself” (Arctic Dreams 413). In a period of my life in which I am trying to discover who I am and how to live, the making of the film is an attempt to express a “leaning into the light” (ibid.).

Influences

Cinema is an amalgamation of many arts, and can be influenced by a variety of sources. As such, my inspirations are not only confined to films, but are also derived from literature and
the fine arts. Many writers and artists influenced my film and the approach I took when making it, but here I examine the few which I deem to be key.

I studied several authors while making this film, but Barry Lopez stands out as the one whose ideas most affected the questions I asked and my creative process. Lopez values listening to the land to try to better understand what is staggeringly complex and unfathomable. Of entering an unfamiliar place, he describes the approach of a Native Alaskan man, “I walk around in it and strain my senses in appreciation of it for a long time before I, myself, ever speak a word. Entered in such a respectful manner, he believed, the land would open to him” (Arctic Dreams 257). This indigenously influenced philosophy informed the way I chose to pursue the creation of conceptual work for this film.

Additionally, I am indebted to Lopez for his ideas about the harmful effects of mass media homogenization of the land, which caused me to consciously try to represent my home ground in a way that would counter such images. Lopez speaks of making the mistake of beginning to regard different geographies as much the same, saying that actually, “Each place is itself only, and nowhere repeated,” and that “to ignore the differences is not to make things better, it creates isolation, despair” (“Nonfiction Reading”).

In cinematically exploring the pain that results from humankind’s divorce from nature, I looked to Terrence Malick’s films, including Days of Heaven (1978) and The Tree of Life (2011). In his films, Malick employs image, sound, music, the dialogue of the actors, and voiceover to express that which speech alone, often corrupt and false, cannot. In The New World (2005), Malick combines lyrical images of a river with the following voiceover by Captain Smith (played by Colin Farrell): “That fort is not the world. The river leads back there. It leads onward too. Deeper. Into the wild. Start over. Exchange this false life for a true one. Give up the name of
Smith” (*The New World*). In my film too there is the yearning to shed the false trappings of culture (especially Western); to flee into the truth of wild nature.

In the quest to express reverence for nature, Director/animator Hayao Miyazaki’s imaginative films, including *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) have been influential. Common themes in his work are human destruction of nature and human suffering. Miyazaki shows the darkness and horror of life, yet he presents reasons to find beauty and faith in humanity. Like Stegner and other thinkers important to this project, Miyazaki states, “The setting where one is born and comes to know the world is crucially important for any group of people” (146). This philosophy is reflected in the way he imbues the geographies in his films with honesty and rich detail. There is also in them the elements of mystery and wonder in nature, important aspects of expressing reverence.

Northwest Coast Indian art is the art of the indigenous peoples western Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and Alaska. The art informed the way I chose to stylize and design the landscapes and characters of my film. I studied the traditions and works of Pacific Coast tribes of Washington State, such as the Makah and the Chehalis. Incorporating these formal traditions, which spring directly from the landscape with which I am concerned, would imbue it with a depth that comes with an alliance to the land and ancient traditions.

I employed several formal elements from Northwest Coast Indian art, including line, shape, and color. As a reference, Holm’s *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* (1970) was pivotal. It should be kept in mind, however, that it was not my intention to copy designs with scientific or historical accuracy or adhere to the design principals of this art rigorously; rather I meant to allow it to inspire a novel creation.
According to Holm, the formline of Northwest Coast art is considered to be the most fundamental characteristic of it (35). Its semi-angularity and constantly varying width give Northwest Coast designs strength, solidity, and rhythm uncommon in curvilinear designs (Holm 84). I incorporated the formline wherever possible: in the arabesque curves of the coastal landscape, in the design of text, and in the shapes of wind-blown hair:

![Fig. 1. Example of hair shapes inspired by Northwest Coast art](image1)

Formal design elements which I incorporated in character designs were the ovoid, the u-shape, and the eyelid:

![Fig. 2. A: Characteristic firm ovoids and eyelid B: Soft ovoids and eyelid, not typical of older specimens](image2)

![Fig. 3. Tracings of eyelid and u templates](image3)
These are most noticeably seen in the design of the elk, wolf, and bear spirits which appear in the film. I used the ovoid in conjunction with the eyelid shape for the design of the Spirits’ eyes. I included ovoid joints and ovoid eye surrounds, characteristic design elements of Northwest Coast art.

The designs were not only influenced by two-dimensional Northwest Coast Indian art, but also by the three-dimensional traditions of mask making and totem carving. Studying masks and totem poles from references such as *Spirit and Ancestor: a century of Northwest Coast Indian art at the Burke Museum* (Holm 1987) was essential to designing characters which, when animated, would move and turn through three-dimensional space.

![Fig. 4. Spirits: elk, bear, and wolf](image)

The color palette of the film is an extension of the traditional vermilion, blue, blue-green, and white of Northwest Coast art. I included these colors, as well as their analogous colors, such as green, orange, and yellow-orange. Keeping the palette thus confined helped to create aesthetic harmony and a strong visual statement.
Another influence on form and style, as well as on the manner in which I aesthetically and philosophically approached this project, was the Canadian Group of Seven. As Lopez describes, the Group was a collective of “landscape painters who gained prominence for their indigenous Canadian style in the 1910s,” and their paintings, the result of trips into the Canadian wilderness, were “a conversation with the land” (*Arctic Dreams* 226). With their simplified, luminous color palettes, “...broad, rich treatment,” and “architectural and massive” forms, the paintings expressed “grandeur and beauty, a sense of the sublime, vastness, majesty, dignity, austerity, and simplicity” (Murray 12). I was inspired by the aesthetic concerns and approach of the group (especially by the work of Tom Thomson, who influenced the group but died before its official formation), and by their dedication to understanding the land more intimately. As artists they strove to locate and distill the qualities of the Canadian wilderness that make it so unique. I transferred this mission to my own work of portraying Western Washington.

**Creative Process**

The production of my film occurred over the period of approximately one year beginning in the summer of 2011, and consisted roughly of three stages: preproduction, production, and postproduction. These labels were designed for live action filmmaking, and thus I feel that they are not necessarily the best descriptors for the processes of animated filmmaking. However, they can prove to be useful categories when organizing the large number of files involved in animation, and for describing the processes involved in making an animated film. The stages were neither exclusive nor well-delineated, rather they coincided and overlapped one another throughout the creative process. This more organic working method allowed the film to take shape in a manner better suited to the ongoing evolution and formation of ideas.
The preproduction stage consisted of the compilation of reference materials and inspirations, visual development, character design, storyboarding, and layout.

The visual development practices I employed were vital in my efforts to deepen my understanding of my home geography. To create visual development pieces, I sketched and painted from life in the mountains and hills, and on beaches and riverbanks, often in the characteristic rain or mist of the Northwest. In addition to drawing in the forested area around my home, I traveled to several locations throughout Western Washington, including Mt. Rainier, Packwood, the Hoh Rainforest, and Second Beach. If I was not sketching, I was simply watching and experiencing: committing to memory all that my senses could imbibe, and letting the land impress upon me its essence and character. Later I would make pictures from memory, incorporating my own invented elements. My aim was to allow elements in the geography to inspire the direction and shape of the story I would tell. By being in the landscape and experiencing it intimately, there was less of a chance that I would represent it in a false manner.

I also drew from the trove of memories I collected from 23 years of living in Washington. For instance, annual trips to the northwestern-most region of the Olympic Peninsula, beginning since before I can remember, were formative. During those trips I explored sea life in the tide pools and learned about human effects on the environment. I camped by roaring ocean waves, admired and climbed towering sea stacks, explored a wondrous and sometimes frightening forest, followed deer, and, in 1999, watched as the Makah people brought in their first Grey Whale in decades.

Character designs went through many iterations before arriving at the versions which appear in the film. The designs were informed by research of the costume of the period in which the film is roughly set, the late nineteenth-century. I studied the history and costume of
Northwest Coast tribes, particularly as documented in “Edward S. Curtis’s The North American Indian,” and incorporated the design elements from Northwest Coast Indian art as previously explained.

I did not write a screenplay for this film, but instead employed storyboarding to visually plan each shot in my film. The story went through many changes before I began production, and continued to change even into the final stages of filmmaking. The challenge was to tell a good story that would also be academically viable for this thesis. When I felt that I had arrived at a story that was relatively close to the final version, I created a shot list to help me adhere to my production schedule. This list included notes and any information that I needed to remember for each shot. By checking off each shot as I completed it, I could track my progress.

With the completed storyboard frames I made an animatic, which is a video that allows animators to plan the editing of a film. I sent animatics, as they continued to reflect changes in my story, to Tyler Combs, a student composer I had located who agreed to create the music for the film. To work with Mr. Combs on the musical score, I began by telling him what I was hoping for in the music, including suggested instruments and overall mood. As he developed the music, he sent me his progress via email, and I gave him my notes. We continued in this manner until we arrived at the final version of the score, which features the talents of violinist Jen Schwartz and flutist Dana Carey. Mr. Combs recorded their performances in a studio in Los Angeles where he attends school, and combined them with synthesized elements that he created with his computer.

Layout, which functioned in close conjunction with storyboarding, was the process by which I decided how to compose the shots in a way that would portray my cinematic intent. This includes inserting characters within the environment and the frame of the shot in a
compositionally clear manner, with lighting and other elements enhancing clarity and meaning. The layout drawings were later used as templates over which I painted the backgrounds for the film.

The production stage employed elements generated in the preproduction stage; layouts were used to paint backgrounds, storyboard frames informed animation keyframes, and the animatic gave me a feel for the timing of the animation. Though I would be using traditional two-dimensional animation techniques, I chose to work almost exclusively in digital media, rather than my preferred pencil and paper, due to financial and time constraints. To minimize the digital appearance of the film, I initially planned to paint the backgrounds with acrylic paint on heavyweight paper. However, as my story continued to change and time continued to disappear, I opted to paint the backgrounds in the quicker medium of Adobe® Photoshop®. This proved useful when backgrounds had to be generated or modified quickly.

I animated with a Wacom® Pen Tablet in the programs Adobe® Flash® and Photoshop®, drawing each frame individually. In addition to animation and filmmaking techniques learned during a year studying Character Animation at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), Richard Williams’ The Animator’s Survival Kit was a useful technical reference, particularly for quadrupedal walk cycles (330-31). For the most part I used the usual frame rate for traditional two-dimensional North American animation, which is 12 frames per second. However, there are several shots in the film that utilize a slower frame rate, or that simply use key poses to tell the story, and I did this to save time.

Once animation, backgrounds, and other elements were complete, I composited the shots. The postproduction task of compositing consists of combining the various elements of animation, background, effects, textures, lighting, camera movements, and music into a single file.
To accomplish this, I used Adobe® After Effects® and Premiere®. I wanted to minimize the
digital sterility of the film, so I laid the texture of rough heavy paper (which I had scanned) over
all the shots, and included some hand-painted and hand-drawn elements where I could. The
resulting film is approximately four minutes long.

Results and Discussion

In making this film, technology sometimes proved difficult to use due to my lack of
proficiency in it. Namely, I had not used Flash® much before beginning this project, and I at first
found it difficult to draw in. The mediation of Flash® in drawing can lead to drawings of poor
quality because in Flash®, the artist has reduced control over the placement and weight of marks.
Additionally, the small size of the monitor (12 inches) I was using for this project was not ideal.
As long as one can see problems that arise, one can fix them, but with such a small monitor,
problems could not always be spotted. Thus, drawing with a small monitor can be very difficult.

With time and practice I was able to improve my ability to draw in Flash®, and I
discovered how to adjust the program’s brush tool settings in a way that allowed me to produce
drawings with which I was more satisfied. After so doing, I was pleased to find that I was no
longer trying to fight the program’s alteration of my lines. I used this newfound knowledge to
polish my animation, and was far more satisfied with the result than I had been previously.

As I used these digital techniques, I wondered whether they would negatively affect the
final film. Technology is inherent to filmmaking and animation, but like filmmaker Godfrey
Reggio, I “[view] all tools, especially high-technology ones, with suspicion” (Dempsey 4). Is it
right to choose to use Flash® and other digital methods to animate just because they are
expedient and cheap? One can well argue that these are the very characteristics which make
digital media an undesirable choice. I find that I am drawn to traditional techniques, such as
pencil animation on paper, in which the direct mark of the artist can be seen in the final piece, unmediated and unaltered by technology. There seems to be a kind of humanity in this.

That said, the choice of media is largely a matter of personal preference. Despite my reservations against technology, I do not only admire non-digital films or those which are mostly non-digital; interestingly, I admire and respond emotionally to many films that are created exclusively with digital media, including _Piece of Cake_ (Ivanova 2009), _Valencia, California_ (Forman 2010), _a.breeze.from.mt.Parnassus_ (Stokous 2011), _Little Boat_ (Boles 2011), _Wife of a Farmer_ (Winterstein 2012), _Will_ (Lee 2012), and _Swelter_ (Streilein 2012). These films attest to the fact that emotional poignancy is largely owing to the artistic prowess and vision of the filmmaker, and that digital methods do not preclude effectiveness in connecting with the viewer or creating a work of beauty.

While I might have preferred the use of traditional methods for aesthetic and philosophical reasons, my film cannot be deemed a failure base solely on medium, and it is up to viewers to discover whether the work speaks to them. While the film might have weaknesses stemming from my shortcomings as a designer, filmmaker, and draughtsman, it can be deemed a success in several respects.

Owing to the active engagement with the landscape I employed when creating conceptual pieces for the film, it succeeds in representing Washington’s unique qualities and intimating the mystery found in nature. Digital media did not interfere with the intention of expressing reverence in the work. For these reasons, the film counters mass media homogenization, and would not facilitate exploitation of the land. The weaknesses that the film possesses represent areas in which this film challenged me and helped me to improve artistically. The film is an
important personal step towards defining my purpose in art and life, which includes a close engagement with the land.

Ultimately each viewer of *The Spirit in the Wild* must discover his or her own meaning in it. In the creation of the film I did not intend to imbue it forcefully with certain themes and ideologies; rather, I believed that if I could tell a good story, inspired by the land, my views would naturally surface. In this sense I followed Lopez, a proponent of the virtues of the craft of storytelling, who writes, “It does not seem to matter greatly what the subject is, as long as the context is intimate and the story is told for its own sake, not forced to serve merely as the vehicle for an idea” (*Crossing Open Ground* 64). If the film speaks to even one person, I deem it a successful piece.

In the future, I will continue to create work that undertakes an emotional and physical engagement with the land. I will continue to practice and improve my skills in drawing and filmmaking, and perfect my skill in those media which I feel are best suited to my artistic concerns. This will allow me to create work that is higher in quality and meaningfulness. Though I have completed this film, my treatment of this subject has not been exhausted. The land will continue to be a driving force behind my work.

The methods used to make this film could be used by other filmmakers and artists who also seek a deeper understanding of the land in their work. More films made that express reverence for the land and represent it truthfully would counteract homogenized or false imagery that negatively affects the land.

**Conclusion**

I see the film as a response to something in the land that spoke to me. Whether it was the last golden daylight trapped in the needles of a Douglas fir, mists ghosting down the morning
hills, waves crashing violently against the ancient sea stacks of the coast, or the fleeting regard of a wild animal, it inspired the film I made in some way. It is a reflection of a way to live that counters apathy, corruption, cultural decay, and despair. Only others may determine the degree to which the film succeeds or fails in this. I hope that the film inspires others to seek a more intimate relationship with their local geographies.

Active artistic engagement with the landscape allows artists and filmmakers to create works which represent the uniqueness of geographies. Such engagement with the landscape constitutes thoughtful and attentive looking, and encourages artists to scrutinize visual forms in a manner which strengthens local knowledge. The observational attentiveness required in making strong drawings facilitates a closeness with nature and develops one’s understanding of a place. Because I employed these practices during visual development, the final film was able to intimate the complexity and intricacy of Western Washington’s landscape. As such, the film stands in opposition to media representations that serve to manipulate the land.

In the practice of making the film, I discovered a way of being that allowed me to connect more closely with nature. I found that walking out into the real land and listening with a “sharpness of the senses,” and a lack of expectation, was the best way to try to know my home geography better (Lopez, Crossing Open Ground 150-51). I believe it is this element of physical and emotional engagement with the land that is vital in the effort to know a place. I strove to find something transcendent in the landscape, but this film barely skims the surface. I believe that much more listening is needed in order to more deeply understand this place.
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Malick, Terrence, dir. The Tree of Life. Fox Searchlight, 2011. DVD.

Miyazaki, Hayao, dir. My Neighbor Totoro. 50th Street, 1988. Film.


Further References

The following is a list of influential literature and films. Though not discussed in this analysis, these works inspired this project and shaped me as a filmmaker/animator.


Cocteau, Jean, dir. *Beauty and the Beast (La Belle et La Bête).* The Criterion Collection, 1946. DVD.

Costner, Kevin, dir. *Dances with Wolves.* Orion Pictures, 1990. VHS.

Geronimi, Clyde, dir. *Sleeping Beauty.* Disney, 1959. DVD.


Eyre, Chris, dir. *Smoke Signals.* Mirmax, 1998. DVD.


Penn, Sean, dir. Into the Wild. Paramount Vantage, 2007. DVD.


Rae, Heather dir. Trudell. Appaloosa, 2005. DVD.

Reggio, Godfrey, dir. Koyaanisqatsi. MGM, 1982. DVD.


Image Credits

Fig. 2: Holm, Bill. *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970. 38. Print.

Appendix
A selection of preproduction pieces

Visual Development:
Character Design:
Storyboards:
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