

FILM REVIEWS

To launch the addition of film reviews to our review section, *BC Studies* offers two commentaries on Nettie Wild's film *Koneline*.

Koneline: our land beautiful

Nettie Wild

Vancouver: Canada Wild
Productions, 2016. 96 mins.

MATTHEW GARTNER
University of British Columbia

WINNER OF the Best Canadian Feature at the 2016 Hot Docs Festival, Nettie Wild's *Koneline: our land beautiful* weaves together stories of humanity's relationships with industry, the wilderness, and nature in northwestern British Columbia. Telling the story of a group of miners that wants to work with the locals, as well as Tahltan and other residents who are resistant to the mine's presence, the film begins with every sign of a text that offers argumentative pushes and empathetic shoves. Ultimately, Wild uses this persuasive mode of documentary to show that some matters are simply too large to be understood

through binary formulations. The film does not judge what is right and what is wrong, does not privilege either the enterprise of industry or the conservation of the hinterland, and does not take sides between preservation and progress. In the process, *Koneline* opens up the structures on each side of these supposed conflicts and reveals their own layers of disagreement. While we are tempted to see the residents' concerns for the land as uniform, the film confuses this by establishing a difference between nature and the wilderness: the former is pregnant with history and value, while the latter can be used to capitalize on this value for monetary gain. With graceful aesthetic touches, *Koneline* champions visuals in place of argumentation, and it places these atop a nest of interwoven motivations and histories.

The film does begin by emphasizing the difference between the miners and those who seek to stop them, providing the latter with a comparatively rich interiority. When residents are interviewed or followed, background sounds fill the audio tracks with lively household chatter and music. It is not simply preservation of the natural that is at stake for these individuals, it is the sustenance of home and culture.

In contrast, the miners are offered cold and distant soundscapes, their interview sequences being accompanied by humming machinery and silence. While a blockade is being established to deny the mining company access to a road, the camera remains behind the protectors, leading the audience to see the miners as invaders. At the close of the first sequence that spends time with the mine workers, the camera captures power lines being pulled taut between their supporting towers as the invaders tighten their grip on the region. A shot of gorgeous landscape is interrupted by a worker entering the frame and surveying the land around him.

But, as the film moves on, it becomes apparent that these are but two of the many voices that make up a conversation of parallels and conflicts: residents use technology to hunt a diminished population of moose while other residents declare these acts undesirable; some helicopters transfer salmon in order to create sustainable fisheries while others transport electricity towers used to power the mine; individuals oppose the desires of their families and communities by working on the mine; residents industrialize the wilderness and cut down trees in order to create hunting trails; and many established locals still define themselves in reference to frontier imagery and thought.

In place of a conclusive declaration of a victorious perspective, Wild poetically links these stories to sublime shots of the region's natural beauty. But the camera does not simply capture the skyward carvings of infinite peaks or the diving curves of the valleys. It steps into cartographers's charts and gorgeous postcards with bird's-eye views of conifers, deep scans of star-filled skies, and vignettes photographed in beautifying slow motion. *Koneline* does not ask viewers to measure the success

or failure of its exposure of injustice but, rather, to reflect on why it is that each character holds her or his particular view. Common in the motivation of each of the players is her or his appreciation of the value of the land: sometimes monetary, other times cultural, but always wrapped up in an appreciation of rich, breathtaking imagery.

Editor's note: Director Nettie Wild also created an online project, *North Through South*, in which young urban artists creatively responded to the perspectives of different characters in the film. See <https://norththroughsouth.com>.

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AS THE LANGUAGE and culture director for the Tahltan Nation and a Tahltan academic, I believe giving voice to our people is crucial. Until recent times, the academy has privileged the voices of settlers and outsiders in the telling of Indigenous peoples' stories and experiences. While I have spoken to many of our people about this film, the voices of Tahltan filmmaker Michael Bourquin and Ts'msyen-Tahltan graduate student Shalane Pauls specifically supported my voice in this review.

The Tāltān title *Koneline* and its English subtitle *our land beautiful* seem to indicate that the story would be told by us and would be about our relationship with the land. However, that is not the case. Several Tāltān first language

speakers have said that *koneline* means “beautiful place” or “beautiful country.” With the misuse of the Tāltān title, along with the outsiders’ view of the impact of industrial development on our people and our lands, we feel that our language and our struggle have been commodified.

The footage chosen by Nettie Wild highlights industry and how it threatens to change our lands, with a focus on how this will affect some of our people. It also focuses on several settlers and visitors to our lands. As the artist, she chose the colours – the voices – to paint the canvas, to narrate a perspective. Our Tahltan eyes focus on how our relationship with the land is being fractured due to colonization and the need for jobs, and how our people may be perceived through the footage chosen. As humans, everything we encounter is filtered through our lived experiences. Because of this, we feel that the story told through the lens of non-Tahltan people has not been helpful to Indigenous-settler relations.

The film poorly portrays Tahltan people on our territory. An example of this is the juxtaposition of the Tahltan hunters and the settler hunters. The Tahltan hunters use high-powered rifles and drive a pickup truck. The settler hunters visiting our lands carry bows and arrows and are shown walking in the pristine wilderness while talking about being one with nature. This is reminiscent of the “pizza test,” a term used during the *Delgamuukw* court case in northern British Columbia. The lawyer for the Crown argued that if Indigenous peoples ate contemporary foods, such as pizza, as opposed to eating only traditional Indigenous foods, then this not only extinguished their Aboriginal rights but also negated their “Indian” authenticity – a ridiculous premise. Using this unfair test, the settler hunters may appear to be more Indigenous than our hunters. Having said this, we have to be

careful not to fall into the trap of feeling obliged to explain our people’s actions and situations to outsiders.

This film focused on many settlers and visitors to our lands. Big-game outfitting in British Columbia is a lucrative business, and our people have a long history of guiding outsiders who have come into our lands, showing them where and what to hunt. In terms of how industry is affecting outfitters’ livelihoods, the settler outfitter spoke about how it is driving the animals away, but her focus was on how this was bad for business. Our focus is on how it disrupts our people’s lives as well as the lives of the animals with whom we share the land. It is a tough situation our people are in, needing to survive by making money to live and support our families. Because of colonization, we often have to turn our backs on our ancestors’ teachings about protecting the land, about nurturing our relationship with it and with all those with whom we share it.

Wild’s film demonstrates that settlers have a long way to go in understanding colonization, both past and present. Canada was founded on the appropriation of our lands and our ways of life. In order for reconciliation to occur, settlers need to relinquish the desire to speak for us; they need to become allies as we strive to make room to tell our stories with our own voices. Ts’msyen scholar Charles Menzies (2016) says that, when carrying out research with Indigenous peoples, non-Indigenous researchers need to step back, turn their gaze, and follow rather than direct – advice non-Indigenous filmmakers need to respect and abide by.

REFERENCES

- Menzies, Charles. 2016. *People of the Saltwater: An Ethnography of Git lax m’oon*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.