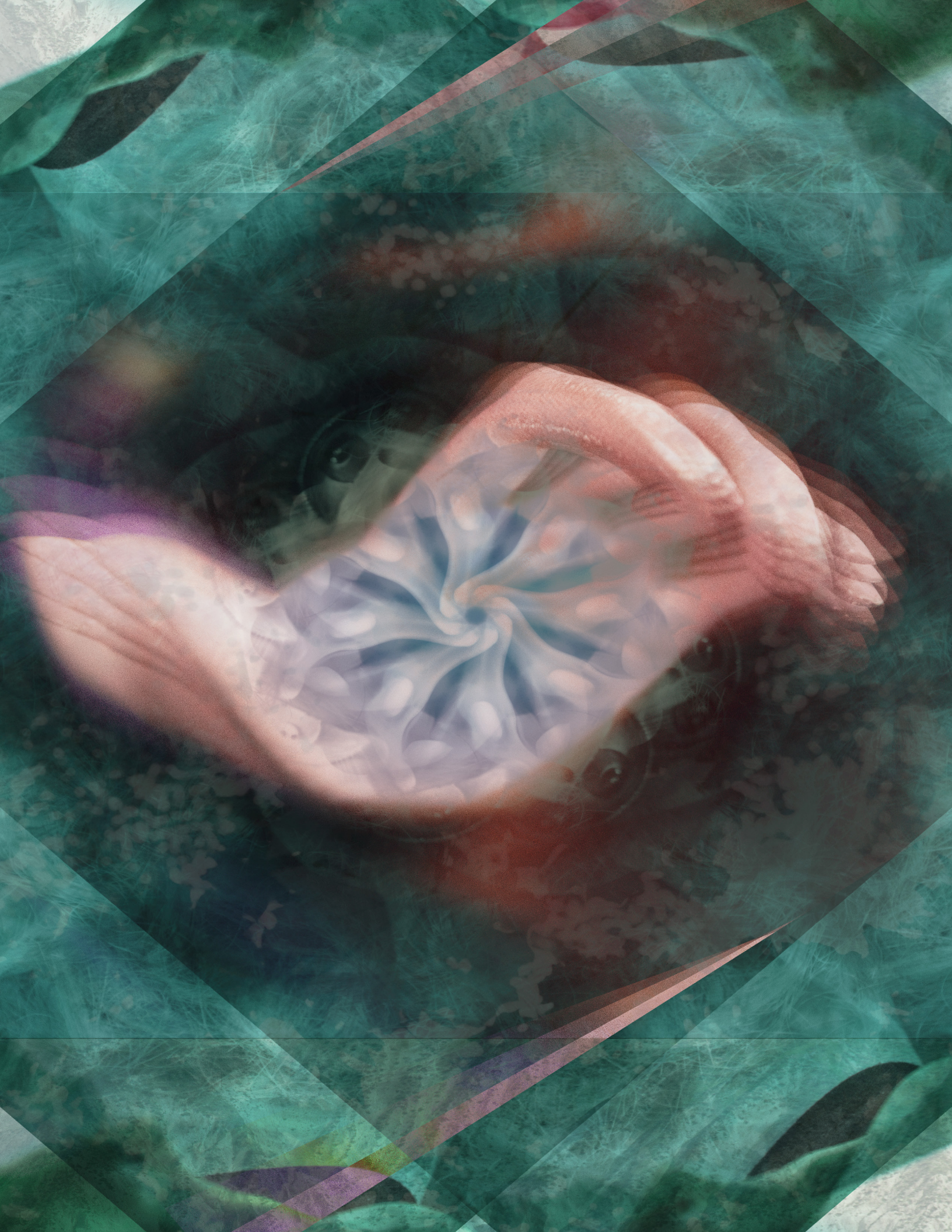


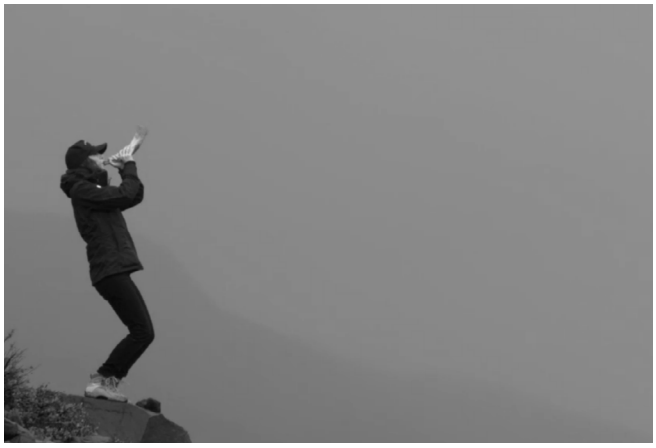
Rebecca Coyle & Philip Hayward

Location, Location, Location: Music, Place, and Ecocriticism in the *National Parks Project*

In 1911 the Canadian Government proposed an organization to oversee the protection of valued areas of natural beauty in the face of increasing human expansion into wilderness areas. The National Parks Act was passed in 1930 to enable the designation, protection, and maintenance of national parks. There are currently forty four national park sites across all provinces and territories (Parks Canada). As part of the celebration of the organization's centenary, Parks Canada commissioned *The National Parks Project*, comprising thirteen short audio-visual pieces that were broadcast on television, compiled on DVD, and posted individually online.[1] The genesis of the project was an initial pilot production on Newfoundland's Gros Morne National Park made by a group of young Canadian media activists, who initially aggregated in 2004 to produce the online journal FilmCAN and who later diversified into distribution and production. FilmCAN have summarized the project in the following terms:

> In the tradition of the Group of Seven, Margaret Atwood's *Survival* and other cultural touchstones, the *National Parks Project* aims to explore the ways in which the wilderness shapes our cultural imagination, and to contextualize it for our modern, technology-driven society.

The references are illuminating: the Group of Seven were Canadian artists, initially based around Toronto, who advanced Canadian landscape painting during the 1920s and early 1930s, venturing widely across Canada and painting in remote locations. By contrast, Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, published in 1972, was a pioneering survey of Canadian literature which argued that the notion of survival was a key motif in Canadian culture and literature. The linkage between the two in FilmCAN's characterization centres on the notion of the wilderness and of human survival in and comprehension of the wilderness. More particularly, it points to the manner in which those factors have produced senses of belonging and imaginative investment in place. While they do not specify it, the considerable tradition of Canadian documentary filmmaking, which includes a substantial body addressed to landscape issues, provides another significant context (Leach and Sloniowski).



The most significant aspect of FilmCAN's characterization of the project is its reference to "the ways in which the wilderness shapes our cultural imagination." This characterization suggests that however primarily metropolitan contemporary Canadian society may appear, its interface with the (un-developed) natural world remains a key cultural reference point. The films commissioned for the project are 'documentary' in that they visually document places, particular human presences, and performances in those places, but are also reflections on the cultural imagination of and engagement with place that the collaborative teams of documentary makers and musicians enact through their audio-visual interaction. Individual films also document site-specific music performance practices, some enacted in real-time and others created through textual editing of disparate elements. The project resulted in the production of a distinct and disparate body of films, each addressed to iconic national parks' locations, which are summarized in the following table.

Seven of the films visually represent musicians who contribute to the soundtrack, shot on location in the parks.

1. The musical material was also released on CD and vinyl (through Last Gang Records).

Table 1 – Locations and production personnel for individual films in the *National Parks Project* (2011)

Park (and location)	**Film Director**	**Musical Performers**
1) Bruce Peninsula and Fathom Five Marine Park (Ontario)	Daniel Cockburn	Christine Fellows, Sandro Perri, and John Samson
2) Cape Breton Highlands (Nova Scotia)	Keith Behrman	Tony Dekker, Daniela Gesundheit, and Old Man Luedecke
3) Gros Morne (Newfoundland)	Sturla Gunnarsson	Melissa Auf der Maur, Jamie Fleming, and Sam Shalabi
4) Gwaii Haanas (British Columbia)	Scott Smith	Jim Guthrie, Sarah Harmer, and Bry Webb
5) Kluane (Yukon)	Louise Archambault	Ian D'Sa, Mishka Stein, and Graham Van Pelt
6) Kouchibouguac (New Brunswick)	Jamie Travis	Don Kerr, Casey Mecija, and Ohad Benchetrit
7) Mingan Archipelago (Quebec)	Catherine Martin	Jennifer Castle, Sebastien Grainger, and Dan Werb
8) Nahanni (Northwest Territories)	Kevin McMahon	Olga Goreas, Jace Lasek, and Shad
9) Prince Albert (Saskatchewan)	Stephane Lafleur	Mathieu Charbonneau, Andre Ethier, and Rebecca Foon
10) Prince Edward Island	John Walker	Dale Morningstar, Chad Ross, and Sophie Trudeau
11) Sirmilik (Nunavut)	Zacharias Kunuk	Dean Stone, Tanya Tagaq, and Andrew Whiteman
12) Waterton Lakes (Alberta)	Peter Lynch	Laura Barrett, Mark Hamilton, and Cadence Weapon
13) Wapusk (Manitoba)	Hubert Davis	Kathleen Edwards, Matt Mays, and Sam Roberts

The Gros Morne and *Nahanni* films make this aspect a central focus. *The Gros Morne* film primarily comprises shots of the park, of the band getting to the dramatic shoreline where they perform, and footage of the three musicians performing. The *Nahanni* film is similar but also includes a final sequence of the musicians riding dinghies on a fast moving river. The *Similuk* film includes a brief sequence of its trio performing in the snow and the *Waterton Lakes* film includes footage of a local Blackfoot drumming and chanting ensemble. Two films include their musicians in dramatic scenarios. *The Prince Edward Island* film includes its trio, and violinist Sophie Trudeau, in particular, in a languorous vignette of travellers visiting the locale, while the *Kouchibouguac* film loosely takes the form of an extended music video, centred on the song's singer Casey Mecija. The final film of this type is a notable deviation from what might be described as the core representational formula of the National Park films (i.e. montages of spectacular macro- and micro-landscape footage accompanied by original score and/or ambient sounds). By contrast, the *Wapusk* film largely eschews a sustained representation of the park's landscape attractions and, instead, foregrounds a discussion of songwriting and musical creativity on its soundtrack. These musical elements include recorded statements by its three musicians, and are accompanied by a guitar-based instrumental (implicitly produced by the trio) while the screen shows subtle landscape images, textures, and occasional shots of the performers. One of the key aspects of this discussion involves consideration of place as inspirational on creativity. Notably *not* referring to the Wapusk National Park in particular, songwriter Matt Mays states in the film:

> Being at home sometimes in the places where ideas will flow freely because it's so familiar… and then you hit a point where you've almost run out of breathing room in a sense on a creative level and that's when you need to move, which seems to free up ideas. Not necessarily in a coherent way but it shakes you out of your static mode that you find yourself in when you have been in one place for too long. And that shaking up now has a chance to re-form itself, to reconnect to a full thought.

The visits to the various parks documented in each film take the performers out of their (implicitly urban/suburban) professional locales and comfort zones and require them to engage with both the natural wilderness – and, pointedly, with the experience of being in that wilderness – as part of the process of producing music *in situ* that represents their engagement with their respective locales on a variety of levels. Unsurprisingly, for a film series celebrating Canada's national parks, all of the films show the musicians' interactions as musically productive. Any issues concerning weather, terrain, lack of power, different experiences of the wilderness, and its creative enablement (or otherwise) of individuals and ensembles are elided within the meta-production's affirmatory project. The only markers of different experiences and creative outcomes within the films are the music tracks themselves. Some are instrumental/textural 'jams,' either recorded live on location and played in extract(s) in part(s) of the film's soundtracks (or subsequently edited and post-produced), while others are more fully composed songs or combinations of song and instrumental pieces. The musical styles of the various pieces reflect the established genre orientations of the performers concerned: folk/bluegrass in the case of Tony Dekker, Daniela Gesundheit, and Old Man Luedecke's music for the *Cape Breton Highlands* film; and experimental progressive rock in the case of Melissa Auf der Maur, Jamie Fleming, and Sam Shalabi's performance in the *Gros Morne* film etc. In this regard, the musicians' contacts with and experiences within the wilderness are expressed through their established musical genres and oeuvres, rather than striving to transform wilderness through their interactions.

The overall project can thereby be regarded as nostalgic in reaffirming the wilderness myth and the tiny and almost irrelevant place and role of humans within it. [...] this places the films outside of one of the most prominent new directions in documentary cinema and cinema criticism of the last decade: that of eco-cinema.

With the possible exception of the *Bruce Peninsula* and *Wapusk* films, which effectively use their specific locations as pretexts for more general/abstract discussions, all thirteen films include audio/musical tracks that attempt to complement (established perceptions) of the grandeur and majesty of their respective wildernesses. The films' performances of these representations is ritualistic, celebrating a Canadian tradition and ethos of wilderness as ground (and grounding) of a Canadian identity conceived outside of the metropolitan context that the majority of the nation's inhabitants operate within. In this regard, the films adhere to and re-inscribe the traditional set of values that were celebrated in Parks Canada's centenary and in the commemorative films. The overall project can thereby be regarded as nostalgic in re-affirming the wilderness myth and the tiny, almost irrelevant place and role of humans within it. Indeed, the combination of wide landscape images, and stirring instrumental passages and textures (and occasional songs) in the films directly propagates such aspects. Almost without exception, this places the films outside of one of the most prominent new directions in documentary cine-

ma and cinema criticism of the last decade: that of eco-cinema. Eco-cinema is, in essence, an interactive critical and production approach that seeks to represent ecological issues on-screen, to produce films in an ecologically responsible and sustainable manner, and to promote an active eco-consciousness amongst film viewers more generally (for more detailed expositions see Cubbitt; Rust, Salma, and Cubbitt). For eco-cinema, it is not enough to simply represent those few areas of the planet that remain relatively untouched by human presence. Instead, eco-cinema attempts to stimulate social awareness of the urgency of intervention into interconnected aspects of global population growth, environmental pollution, and carbon emissions that contribute to global warming. For eco-cinema, the changes wrought on the global environment during the Holocene epoch[2] are key.

Eco-cinema does not make celebratory representations of wildernesses redundant, nor necessarily conceive of these as ideologically problematic in themselves. From an ecocritical viewpoint, highlighting the essential values and virtues of wildernesses is increasingly important when so few humans have experiences or comprehensions of such locales. Ecocriticism does, however, strongly focus on ecological issues that directly intersect with representations of wildernesses. In the Canadian case, for example, ecocriticism would regard various impacts of global climate change, and of global warming in particular, as *the* key aspects of any contemporary consideration of wilderness in a national context. Despite this, representations of Holocene era impact are only present to any significant extent in two of the National Parks films. One of these – *Sirmilik* – is produced by an indigenous film maker, and the second, Lynch's *Waterton Lakes*, profiles indigenous cultural areas and heritage issues.

I) *Sirmilik*[3] (Zacharias Kunuk)

Inuk film producer Zacharias Kunuk's film represents an Inuit community, and the film's trio of musicians, amidst a large, dramatic landscape. The monumentality of the landscape is emphasized in aerial shots of glaciers and rocky outcrops, and repeated long-shots of ice and rocks. The musicians score these sequences with classic ambient music devices such as sustained, soft-edged tones, and slow melodic variations (some involving heavily processed wordless vocal lines). These elements suggest the slowness of glacial movement, while more percussive tones at the rear of the mix evoke the cracking and groaning of ice sheets. The sole spoken voice on the soundtrack is that of an adult, speaking in Inuktitut language, relating how he learned traditional hunting and weather prediction skills from his father. While this narration is primarily placed over images of icy landscapes it is subsequently complemented by images of an ice hole cut for hunting, and of an individual skinning a large mammal. These elements provide a sense of cultural continuity that are not obviously in any tension with more modern images, such as a snowmobile moving across the ice. Similarly, a sequence showing Inuit throat-singer Tanya Tagaq, percussionist Dean Stone, and guitarist Andrew Whiteman playing live outside represents the musicians as at ease in their snowy surroundings. This musical sequence has a relatively unprocessed live sound, with Tagaq's rhythmic throat singing accompanied by simple percussion and unobtrusive guitar lines.

Tagaq's presence in the film and performance of a modernized form of traditional *katajjaq* singing is far from incidental. The guttural form of singing, which utilizes rhythmic breathing patterns and deep, throaty timbres, is a traditional, unaccompanied Inuit singing style, mainly practiced by women, and is used for various purposes: softly, to sooth babies; and, more dramatically, in duet/'duel' interchanges between two (or more) performers. While the form declined in prominence in the 20th Century, performers such as Tagaq, who largely performs as a solo vocalist with musical accompanists, have repopularized the style within Inuit communities and achieved a substantial profile in the 'world music' scene. Tagaq's presence in the film thereby embodies the dynamic potential of modernized versions of Inuit tradition and serves to emphasize Inuit capacity to productively embrace change. The film cleverly emphasizes this, cutting away from the ensemble's performance on the ice (complete with amplifiers) to a whale surfacing, its blowing sound briefly substituting Tagaq's singing in the mix before her vocal line returns.

While the film's sparse narration does not hint at any pressing environmental issues, at least until the final sequence, the visual images suggest a particular story. Sirmilik is located on the eastern side of Baffin Bay, 73 degrees north, opposite northern Greenland. While the region experiences a brief summer when night-time temperatures can stay

2. The era since the last Ice Age during which human impacts have had a major impact on the planet and its climate.
3. An Inuit term meaning "the place of glaciers."

just above freezing point, the film's scenes of a settlement with an ice-free sports area where young people play basketball and hockey, and shots of bare rocky scarps in bright sunlight and ice-free waters suggest something other than traditional Inuit life-styles. This aspect is made plain in the film's final sequence. Accompanying the image of an Inuit hunter sitting on the ice, cradling a gun, the translation caption for a final section of the hunter's Inuktitut narration simply states: "These days the weather seems to have changed. I seem to make mistakes when I try to predict the weather."

These simple, understated words identify the main threat to Inuit lifestyle and livelihood, and end the film on a note that is anything but celebratory.[4] This delivers on FilmCAN's initial vision for their multi-part film project, to "contextualize" wilderness "for our modern, technology-driven society" from an Inuit viewpoint, making poetic use of sound and image to capture a national park region on the cusp of significant change due to the impact of global warming.

4. In this manner, the film provides a more subtle complement to Kunuk's earlier collaboration with Ian Mauro on the 2010 documentary *Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change*.

II) *Waterton Lakes* (Peter Lynch)

Lynch's film takes the history of the First Nations people of the region as a key focus through which to construct a representation of Holocene impact. As Lynch has identified, pre-production work included recording interviews with members of the local Blackfoot community about their perspectives on landscape, environmental history, and cultural survival that were used to give direction to the project (De Vries). The film takes its key orientation from the cataclysmic decline in buffalo numbers in the mid-19th Century. This was one crucial factor, along with the impact of European diseases and alcohol, in radically reducing both the number of the local Blackfoot community and their social viability and vitality in the mid-late 1800s. Understood in this context, the expanses of water and surrounding landscape represented in the film show an absence of human habitation that suggests a recent emptying, rather than the preservation of essential natural wilderness. This aspect is further emphasized in the film by the device of having local community members hold animal skulls and bones (taken from the local natural history museum) to symbolize what has been lost.

To create further impact and contemporary identification, Lynch juxtaposes these images with footage of the death throes of a small mammal, found by the crew whilst filming.

As Lynch emphasizes, his film was an attempt to expand and extend traditional European and Euro-American traditions of representing landscape to give them a greater sense of addressing the impacts of the Holocene era. The film attempted to provide:

> a complex radical portrait of a national park that teases and engages with the boundaries of art and cinema. It subverts the conventional idea of the national park and its position in our national consciousness. It revolves around the most significant new world tragedy the massacre of the buffalo and decimation of our first nations culture. It draws this through the frame of geological time, the Blackfoot

> culture the history of photography of national parks and landscape painting. (De Vries)

Music had a particular significance for the director, given his perception that: "Music can be abstract and poetic and I wanted the music to form part of the portrait as well as power up the narrative" (De Vries). The layered uses of music in the film are particularly striking. Rather than opting for a score that produces an affective and thematic colourization of the film's narrative, narration, and/or visual themes, various aspects operate cumulatively, which adds elements and skeins to the overall impressions that the audio-visual text produces.

In addition to the contributions of the three participating musicians Laura Barrett, Mark Hamilton, and Rollie Pemberton (aka 'Cadence Weapon'), the film also features footage of a traditional Blackfoot performance involving a group of male participants striking a single, large, horizontally-positioned drum whilst chanting. Without explanation as to the nature and purpose of the chant, the sequence serves to provide a sonic signature and pulse for the representations of contemporary Blackfoot culture that contrast to sequences of landscape accompanied by ambient sound alone. Various aspects of the music's production and its subsequent style were actively determined by engagement with location and by responses to particular circumstances and incidents. Lynch has related that many of these were directed by him: "I had the musicians listen to Narcisse Blood, a Blackfoot elder, about the creation myth, which then informed them in their songwriting process" (De Vries). The processes of musical engagement with and interpretation of both Blackfoot culture and the creation myth varies between musicians. One outcome of this encounter featured in the film takes the form of Pemberton's sampling of traditional drum sounds into one of his contributions to the film's score. Complementing this, Hamilton contributes a song alluding to the creation myth. More subtly, the score also features elements such as Bennett producing musical sequences from striking bones found during the production (effectively playing the materiality of the park itself) and her rendition of a song composed during the shoot, entitled "Humble Fawn," which describes a young deer's visit to the musicians' camp site during production.

The most significant aspect of the score's elements is the manner in which they work cumulatively. Pemberton's sequence, featuring sampled traditional drums, has the arresting refrain "I don't wanna play the new songs," which can simultaneously be taken to signal Blackfoot dedication to preserving traditional cultural practices, while also providing an ironic comment on his own musical and songwriting activity in seeking to represent those practices. Linking to 20th Century popular music traditions, Lynch also asked the musicians to provide a new take on the 1930s' song "Don't Fence Me In" (Cole Porter/Robert Fletcher, 1934). In the gentle, low-dynamic version provided by Barrett and Hamilton, the song both provides a nostalgic link to earlier representations of prairie life and offers its opening lines as an implicit statement of Blackfoot historical aspirations to resist confinement into reserves:

> Oh, give me land, lots of land under starry skies above
> Don't fence me in
> Let me ride through the wide open country that I love
> Don't fence me in

This song was also covered in a different form as part of the state of Nevada's 2013 tourism campaign, publicized with the slogan "A World Within: A State Apart." A key element in the launch was a riff-heavy, power-pop cover of Porter's song by US band The Killers, which also served as the soundtrack to the campaign's TV ad (Travel Nevada). While the Nevada TV ad relegated the state's Indigenous people to colourful choreographic flourishes at the margins of marketable Nevada, Lynch's film situates Blackfoot culture, sonically and visually, within a deeper temporal context that attempts to represent Holocene impact in a complex and respectful manner.

Conclusion

In their discussion of three Australian eco-media initiatives, Ward and Coyle emphasize representations of place in eco-media as significant by dint of their "normative function in reinforcing ethical values and environmental action" (203). Place is obviously crucial to the thirteen Parks Canada films as their *raison d'être*, but while they may all reflect ethical values concerning the importance of wilderness preservation, environmental action is only foregrounded in the two examples discussed in the latter part of this paper. Sound and music are crucial to all the films, and the soundtracks are, by and large, inventive and aesthetically effective, but the possibilities for utilizing sound to create more complex reflections on place and to involve it in eco-cinematic critique and creative expression are less well developed and principally articulated in Kunuk's and Lynch's productions. In this regard, the thirteen films – en masse – may well serve to commemorate the past of Parks

Canada but a far smaller selection point to the importance of engaging with a rapidly changing global environment that is impervious to park boundaries and regulated preservation.

Acknowledgement

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