

THOUGHT & MEMORY

by

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DEDICATION

To my family and friends who have supported this creative endeavor. To the raven.

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ABSTRACT

The raven is widespread and manifests itself across cultures, myths, and sciences around the globe. It has garnered a reputation as a divine messenger and symbol of prophecy, fate, and intellect, but also an omen of death, disgust, and ill fortune. This essay will explore evidence that depictions of this bird throughout human history have created a complex portrait of the raven in the modern day. It will assess the history of the expository and poetic documentary modes as tools to provide the groundwork necessary for mending the perception of the raven in culture, science, and society but also advocate for creating a more holistic world view incorporating traditional knowledge and modern science. When dealing with a subject as diverse and widespread as the raven in documentary film, its prevalence in many cultures inevitably flirts with themes of anthropomorphism, globalization, objective vs. subjective reality, and the convergence of oral tradition and science. This essay and film will provide dialogue for supporting, improving, and rejecting some of these themes, and how that is a driving force behind the creation of my thesis film production titled *Thought & Memory*.

CHAPTER ONE

FILM BACKGROUND

Filmmaker Biography

Braeden is a documentary filmmaker and candidate for the Montana State University MFA in Science & Natural History Filmmaking. He earned a B.S. in Biological Sciences with an Honors Baccalaureate and merges his passions for the arts, sciences, and communicating prevalent issues in the natural world through compelling storytelling and films. Inspired by a life spent in the Rocky Mountains of Montana and Wyoming, he is most at home in the outdoors and hopes to share the same interest with a broad audience through film, photography, and science. With an emphasis on expository and poetic modes, Braeden's work explores the realms between scientific inquiry and public understanding covering a range of topics.

Filmmaker Artist Statement

As a filmmaker and artist, my interests are guided by the relationships between people, the sciences, and their impact on and interactions with the world around them. With years of experience working and studying in biological sciences, research, and conservation, I came to realize how easily the science can be disconnected from public knowledge or perception and aim to bridge the gap between these domains through the art of documentary filmmaking. My work is produced to inform the public about the realms of science, natural history, and human culture that can be observed through a scientific, cinematic, and approachable lens.

Film Logline

The raven is widespread and manifests itself across cultures, myths, and sciences around the globe.

Film Synopsis

The raven is an intelligent animal recognized by science and oral tradition. Often portrayed as a trickster, omen of death, and bringer of creation and destruction, it has been the target of intrigue across beliefs and cultures around the world. The film *Thought & Memory* highlights the significance of the raven in science, myth, and oral tradition as a variety of scientists, writers, indigenous tribal leaders, and artists paint a more nuanced understanding of the raven across these topics. Filming took place throughout Montana, New York, Alaska, and Washington, as well as the traditional lands of the first peoples of Southeast Alaska.

Crew Statement

This production was directed, produced, filmed, edited, and written by Braeden Meyer. Original score was composed by Chris Riise of Norway. During the New York shoot, Tavis Cline assisted the director in a variety of roles: grip, gaffer, assistant, and concierge to Mr. Boria Sax. During the Alaska shoot, Joseph Meyer assisted the director in a variety of roles: gaffer, assistant, and concierge to Mr. Twitchell and Dr. Worl.

CHAPTER TWO

ACCESS & CONNECTION TO THE MATERIAL

I always come back to the connections made in documentary filmmaking as my favorite part of the creative process—through in-depth research and constant networking, I have been fortunate to meet a multitude of personalities and individuals who breathe life into this creative work. Their values, insights, and perspectives truly inform the complexities of the raven as an intelligent species, and Raven as an entity in indigenous cultures throughout my film *Thought & Memory*.

Academic research and scientific intrigue are at the forefront of my work, as it is a constant method of my artistic approach to science and natural history filmmaking. From a scientific background and personal curiosity to learn more about the raven, I desired to create a film that takes a popularly demonized bird and portrays the species in a more positive light. While I have also been fascinated by the depictions of the raven in popular culture, a historical and cultural basis of my film concept draws from science and oral tradition throughout millennia. I have spent the last 2 years researching and cultivating relationships with my film subjects through conversation, collaboration, and meeting in person whenever possible before and after filming took place. The first year prioritized raising funds, pre-production, and networking to travel and interview the experts necessary to explore the complexities of the raven. Ranging from assisting in scientific study and assessments of the bird to documenting cultural heritage celebration and traditional stories of Raven, these relationships grew and have taught me to heed the findings of science yet honor the stories and tradition of the raven.

From writers and storytellers to scientists and indigenous leaders, *Thought & Memory* evokes a conversation between a long-established thread of story tradition and modern science. As such, it is important for me to separate these ideas as two means of understanding the world but also allow for overlap and conflict to occur. This presents an organic and informative experience by which our understanding of the raven navigates the relationship between Western science and indigenous knowledge. As a white male filmmaker, I must also address my own separation from the stories and traditions of the indigenous peoples of Southeast/Southwest coastal Alaska (Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Yup'ik and Cup'ik, Sugpiaq/Alutiiq, and Unangax) in my film but also depend upon my relationships with indigenous leaders, storytellers, and linguists in my research and travels to learn directly from them and present the traditions and stories of Raven as a creator figure and culture hero truthfully. Traditional knowledge and modern science are both important, and it is imperative that they work together to build a more holistic worldview. By encouraging a more inclusive basis of understanding the world, the raven embodies how we must blend our own knowledge and traditions to consider alternative ways of connecting to the natural world. *Thought & Memory* flirts with these topics and elevates the raven as a mediator to blur the lines between these realms to suggest a larger discussion take place.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH TOPIC & ARTISTIC APPROACH

Section 3.1: Research Topic

The Common raven (*Corvus corax*) is widespread and has been revered by many cultures as a being known for its intellect, prophetic powers, and an omen of death and ill-fortune. Some have held a strong connection between ravens and death, war, funerals, and as mystical aids in battles. Others portray ravens as divine messengers, omens of fate and prophecy, protectors, and hold the raven in high regard as a creator, guide, trickster, and conniving entity (Schwan 1998).¹ Despite temporal and spatial differences, the raven manifests itself within cultures, myths, and sciences around the globe.

Modern science is proving how intelligent ravens are through tool use and advanced communication, which supports the tradition of the raven as not only a being of death and life, but a highly intellectual species as it informs scientific, traditional, and cultural reverence of the bird (Meyer and Rearden 2024).² My film *Thought & Memory* explores popular perception of the raven as a demonized bird, omen of death and darkness, and ponders the concept of how it mirrors humans as a coevolved and intellectual species. Ravens hold such an important place in human story and history because we share a lot of the same traits and, like humans, there is a dark side and a light side (Meyer and Ewing 2024).³ While many cultures possess a positive mindset of the raven, the demonization of the species has grown into a misguided interpretation

¹ Mark Schwan, *Raven: The Northern Bird of Paradox*, 1998.

² Braeden Meyer and Don Rearden, “Thought & Memory” interview 5 - Don Rearden, personal, June 3, 2024.

³ Braeden Meyer and Susan Ewing, “Thought & Memory” interview 2 - Susan Ewing, personal, April 29, 2024.

in the modern day as mainly an omen of death, destruction, and evil. Throughout history, culture and oral tradition has played a vital role in the formation of human society as we have come to understand the world. This leads to shared inspiration by anthropomorphizing the natural world, god-like figures, and placing significance upon animals. We must also understand modern and historical ways of knowing the world, as it allows a more dynamic and holistic worldview informed by science and tradition.

For millennia, people have attributed human characteristics to deities, animals, and other symbolic forms of connection to the natural world and the unknown. Anthropomorphism is deeply intertwined with stories and myth, and so are the bases for the raven's significance throughout the Northern hemisphere. Key terms of language, intelligence, intellect, emotion, empathy, malice, and other human emotions can be cast upon deities and animals to create a connection with the nonhuman world. This, in turn, encourages discourse between science and tradition. Anthropomorphism is defined as the interpretation of nonhuman things or events in terms of human characteristics, but many scholars feel that the tendency to anthropomorphize hinders the understanding of the world as it is deep-seated and persistent (Stewart Guthrie 2025).⁴ By attributing subjective or emotional traits to the raven, however, I would argue that this is beneficial in documentary and may be why the shift in symbolism of the species is so malleable. It is driven by changing perceptions of the bird and encourages a more holistic understanding of the world.

Ravens have been recognized as important beings in the myths and stories of many cultures, retaining a lasting impression on more contemporary works through folklore, pop

⁴ Stewart E. Guthrie, "Anthropomorphism," Encyclopædia Britannica, January 18, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/anthropomorphism>.

culture, writing, and film. In my film, Susan Ewing states how “In terms of coevolution/coexistence between ravens and humans, it’s evidenced by how ravens found their way into so many stories. And stories are our way of making sense of the world” (2024).⁵ Earlier accounts of birds feasting on corpses in battlefields or during a plague have seared the image of a bird that dances uncomfortably close to death and darkness into the minds of most people in our modern globalized society. According to Mark Schwan, “The raven is considered first and foremost a bird of evil. Its resonant ‘kaw’ has signaled pending doom throughout history... We speak admiringly of a pride of lions, or kindly of a charm of finches, but a terror of ravens and a murder of crows? Somehow it does not seem fair, although opportunistically scavenging and feeding on dead animals makes the association with death obvious” (1998).⁶ This image of the raven has been stigmatized through contemporary popular filmography and literature such as Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Raven* (Poetry Foundation 2022).⁷ It has been alluded to in countless creative pieces and serves as a common thread demonizing the raven, providing a foundation to simply label the raven as an omen of death and ill-fortune, trickster, and other demeaning terms across cultures worldwide. Rearden comments how “That’s the irony of this erasure and of colonization, is take something that was the creator and turn it into a symbol of death and darkness” (2024).⁸ Modern developments in science provide justification and rationale to support the raven as a highly intellectual species as presented in story and myth.

⁵ Braeden Meyer and Susan Ewing. “Thought & Memory” interview 2 – Susan Ewing. April 29, 2024.

⁶ Mark Schwan, *Raven: The Northern Bird of Paradox*, 1998.

⁷ “The Raven,” Poetry Foundation, 2025, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48860/the-raven>.

⁸ Braeden Meyer and Don Rearden, “Thought & Memory” interview 5 - Don Rearden. June 3, 2024.

In my film, Boria Sax states that “when we speak about any animal as intelligent, what we basically mean in the end is that they resemble us” (2024).⁹ Intelligence is defined as the ability to learn or understand things or to deal with new or difficult situations,¹⁰ whereas intellect is defined as the ability to think in a logical way (Britannica 2025).¹¹ Various studies strengthen the scientific basis for raven intelligence and shed light upon why ravens have been important in cultures and oral traditions throughout history. Simone Pika and her team conducted the first systematic assessment of physical and social cognitive performance of common ravens, utilizing a primate cognition test to discover that clear cognitive skills existed by the age of 4 months in ravens—driven by social interaction with other individuals and species, as well as problem solving and interacting with their environment (2020).¹²

The social lives of humans and ravens is a key driver in mental evolution and intellect. Susan Ewing comments how the social structure of ravens and humans is “one of those things that makes ravens such prominent actors in our stories. It’s just a reminder that we’re always learning new things about the relationships between our species and ravens, and the relationships between ravens and other non-human animal species” (2024).¹³ A study by Boucherie et al. describes the socio-ecological conditions faced by ravens and illustrates that a key part of social complexity in birds is due to the variable and unpredictable social environment in which they navigate.

⁹ Braeden Meyer and Boria Sax, “Thought & Memory” interview 1 - Boria Sax. March 11, 2024.

¹⁰ Britannica Dictionary, “Intelligence Definition and Meaning.,” Encyclopædia Britannica, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/intelligence#:~:text=1,human%20intelligence>.

¹¹ Britannica Dictionary, “Intellect Definition & Meaning.,” Encyclopædia Britannica, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/intellect>.

¹² Simone Pika et al., “Ravens Parallel Great Apes in Physical and Social Cognitive Skills,” *Scientific Reports* 10, no. 1 (December 10, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-77060-8>.

¹³ Braeden Meyer and Susan Ewing, “Thought & Memory” interview 2 - Susan Ewing, personal, April 29, 2024.

Through interspecies interactions, the raven holds the potential for developing a much higher intellect akin to that of other social species like wolves, primates, and even humans (2019).¹⁴ As a highly social animal, the raven has developed the ability to interact with its environment in a socio-emotional manner to make connections between individuals, groups, and society—much like human intelligence is driven by the same factors. Ravens thrive by learning and adjusting behavior in novel situations, a key factor of intelligence, but also rely on their own emotional intelligence to think logically in these conditions (Meyer and Ewing 2024)¹⁵.

Supported by science and tradition, these studies provide a framework by which modern society can perceive the raven as an emotionally intelligent being. The species possesses the ability to interact with its environment in ways few organisms can, demonstrating intellect through critical thinking. Throughout *Thought & Memory*, voiceover and interviews provide insight into the cultural and scientific significance of the raven. In the film, John Marzluff comments that “ravens clearly use thought and memory a lot, and that wasn’t lost upon human observers of ravens. And many of the legends from the Norse gods to North America and Asia, related to the raven’s ability to think about things and remember those things, and how those might have helped humans” (2024).¹⁶ By collaborating directly with experts in the realms of science, oral tradition, and culture, my film encourages a broader understanding of our relationship with an animal that has coexisted with us for millennia. It is important to acknowledge all aspects of this understanding, and to inform it by incorporating the observations of tradition and discoveries of modern science.

¹⁴ Palmyre H. Boucherie et al., “What Constitutes ‘Social Complexity’ and ‘Social Intelligence’ in Birds? Lessons from Ravens,” *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology* 73, no. 1 (January 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00265-018-2607-2>.

¹⁵ Braeden Meyer and Susan Ewing, “Thought & Memory” interview 2 - Susan Ewing, personal, April 29, 2024.

¹⁶ Braeden Meyer and Dr. John Marzluff, “Thought & Memory” interview 3 - Dr. John Marzluff, personal, May 5, 2024.

Section 3.2: Artistic Approach and Connection to the Broader Field

Thought & Memory creates a malleable space for the discussion and collision of oral tradition and scientific understanding. As a widespread species, the raven is the perfect subject to explore these topics. It is complex and fulfills many roles in myth, story, and religion: a divine messenger; symbol of prophecy and fate; culture hero and trickster; an omen of death and ill fortune; a being capable of traveling between realms. To ignite discussion about two distinct ways of understanding the world, we can call upon the long-established lessons and stories from oral tradition as confirmation and support for the observation and testing of modern science. And vice-versa. Providing space for the raven as a mediary to promote such discussion is the basis for my film *Thought & Memory*. The film overlays poetic visual association with the formal organization of the expository mode through multiple interviews to provide context and narration to foster a blending of ideas to spark a conversation to consider why we have developed such a complicated relationship with a species that has always been with us. Ravens were incredibly well adapted to the Pleistocene landscape when modern humans evolved and have been with us ever since.

For millennia, cultures throughout Northern Europe, North America, and Asia observed the high intelligence of the species—and only recently have we begun to develop a scientific understanding of it (Meyer and Rearden 2024).¹⁷ In the production of my film, I intended to push the boundaries of scientific and traditional understanding of the bird as a mirror to our understanding of the world around us. *Thought & Memory* informs modern understanding of these topics to encourage didactic inquiry into the opposition or overlap of oral tradition and

¹⁷ Braeden Meyer and Don Rearden, “Thought & Memory” interview 5 - Don Rearden. June 3, 2024.

modern science. During an interview for my thesis film, Susan Ewing states that “Science is one way of knowing the world and story is another way of knowing the world, and there is some place where those two different traditions meet. But they’re both really important, they can support each other” (2024).¹⁸ This voiceover plays as visuals of Tlingit artistic animal representation coincide with the modern day as tourists, buses, and cars move across the screen. The film combines implied relationships between tradition and modern science as well as a direct overlap of ideologies. The same is done when Lance discusses the teachings of Raven to rebuild the world and encourage a more nuanced understanding of these topics.

Our mythology, society, and culture has been mirrored by this highly intelligent species, so it is difficult to separate this connection from how we have come to know and understand the raven. By utilizing immersive sound design paired with first-hand knowledge provided by scientists, indigenous storytellers and leaders, writers, and artists, *Thought & Memory* blends a contemplative and formal approach to portray the raven as a powerful species capable of thriving alongside humans for as long as we can remember. Formal portraiture of the raven is often juxtaposed with poetic sequences of the environment and immersive sound design. The title and end sequences contain traditional instrumentation to encourage the audience to reflect on our relationship with the natural world, the raven as an intelligent animal, and Raven as a powerful entity within indigenous cultures in the Northern hemisphere. The music becomes very subtle at times or even drops off entirely to allow for further immersion into the realm of the raven or traditional chants and music to suggest an alternative connection the bird itself and the natural, nonhuman world.

¹⁸ Braeden Meyer and Susan Ewing, “Thought & Memory” interview 2 - Susan Ewing, personal, April 29, 2024.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEORIZING YOUR FILM

Section 4.1: Connection to the Material

To formulate a more nuanced and holistic worldview, modern science must connect to story and oral tradition. Observation and traditional knowledge have existed for millennia and provide evidence to support modern scientific findings and create a unified knowledge base informed by diverse cultures and traditions. *Thought & Memory* explores the overlap of traditional and scientific knowledge as a shared means of understanding the world. While being interviewed for my film, Don Rearden states, “It’s been around forever. It’s what make us human. And that knowledge has been passed for generations and generations, where scientific knowledge is relatively new. Only recently have we started giving credit to that knowledge. We need to understand it, because it’s also where we came from” (2024).¹⁹ To accomplish this, several themes are explored in the film and paper: anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism; globalization; objective and subjective reality; convergence of tradition and science.

I am influenced by filmmakers like Roz Mortimer (*Invisible* 2007, *The Deathless Woman* 2019).²⁰, Marie Amiguet (*The Velvet Queen* 2021)²¹, and Shaunak Shen (*All That Breathes* 2022)²² who actively blur the lines between poetic and expository documentary modes

¹⁹ Braeden Meyer and Don Rearden, “Thought & Memory” interview 5 - Don Rearden. June 3, 2024.

²⁰ Roz Mortimer, “Spectral Cinema: Invisible Things Are Not Necessarily Not There,” *The Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRAJ)* 12, no. Spectral Cinema and Contested Landscapes (December 2023): 163–68, https://doi.org/10.1386/miraj_00114_2.

²¹ Sylvain Tesson and Marie Amiguet, *The Velvet Queen* (France: Oscilloscope, 2021).

²² *All That Breathes*, film (India, UK, United States: Submarine Deluxe, Sideshow, HBO, 2022).

emphasizing human-animal relationships. The aspects of documentary filmmaking I resonate with the most include building connections and collaborating with my interview subjects to explore diverse topics, learning and educating as part of the creative process, and taking inspiration from current and exciting issues within science and natural history topics. Ranging from a debate over the multi-million-dollar vertebrate fossil trade to a species that has coexisted with us for millennia, my works pull from people, culture, and science to inform our understanding of the world around us.

A film about an emotionally intelligent species like the raven is undoubtedly open to themes of anthropomorphism. According to Guthrie, “Imbuing the imagined or real behavior of nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions is the essence of anthropomorphism. These nonhuman agents may include anything that acts with apparent independence, including nonhuman animals” (2025).²³ This can be invaluable when comparing realms of human thought, understanding, and tradition such as in *Thought & Memory*. Another documentary explores the overlap between human scientific understanding of an organism, while also relying on an emotional and social relationship to create a deeper understanding of it. In *My Octopus Teacher*, the producer and main character Craig Foster forms a unique emotionally based connection with an octopus, which explores themes of anthropomorphism and the intersection of science and a relationship with a highly intelligent species. When reviewing the film, Churchill et al. cites how “the human–animal relation is not a ‘hierarchic’ one characterized by the ‘addition’ of rationality to a mechanistically conceived animal body, but a lateral relation of kinship, *Einfühlung*, and *Ineinander* among living

²³ Stewart E. Guthrie, “Anthropomorphism,” Encyclopædia Britannica, January 18, 2025.

beings...” (2023).²⁴ It suggests an alternative connection between humans and the natural world to understand our place in it. *My Octopus Teacher* was recognized by much acclaim but also criticized for promoting an unnatural, sometimes unethical, connection between a human and an intelligent animal. The film presents a chance encounter drastically affected Foster’s understanding of himself and the natural world. In doing so, the film suggests audiences to be open to alternative ways of understanding the natural world, particularly through emotion and intellect (2023).²⁵ It provides common ground for the relationship between man and nature but is often reliant on a human-centric, exploitative mindset that presents the animal as needing the presence of the protagonist in its daily life. Foster continually presents an emotional basis for his connection to the octopus and the power of the sea yet ignores the natural forces in the sea as a force of nature. Despite seeming so different from human beings, the octopus is presented in a way that is palatable to most viewers, and forced anthropomorphizing of the animal is in some ways detrimental to it as an individual and wild species (2023).²⁶ The constant interruption of the day-to-day life of the octopus, as well as imparting human emotion and traits onto it, prevents the natural setting to occur and instead favors yet another anthropocentric presentation of the nonhuman realm of nature.

Anthropocentrism is defined as a philosophy that humans are the central and most significant entities, embedded in many Western religions and philosophies, and regards humans as separate and superior to nature, identifying nonhuman entities as resources to be exploited for

²⁴ Scott D. Churchill et al., “Review of *My Octopus Teacher*,” *The Humanistic Psychologist* 51, no. 2 (June 2023): 224–31, <https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000323>.

²⁵ Scott D. Churchill et al., “Review of *My Octopus Teacher*,” *The Humanistic Psychologist* 51, no. 2 (June 2023).

²⁶ Scott D. Churchill et al., “Review of *My Octopus Teacher*,” *The Humanistic Psychologist* 51, no. 2 (June 2023).

the benefit of mankind (Britannica 2025).²⁷ Churchill et al. quotes William Cronon in his book *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* and comments how the way we understand the world is so entangled with our own values and assumptions that the two can never be fully separated. When we use the word “nature” it says as much about ourselves as things we label with it. Once we acknowledge that we can never know at first hand the “nature” we seek to understand and protect, we can instead encounter that world through the lens of our own ideas and imaginings (2023).²⁸ *My Octopus Teacher* explores themes of anthropomorphism, anthropocentrism, and ecocentrism. It presents a lens by which we can assess our relationship with a similarly intelligent species and how we utilize that connection. This inspired me to explore this relationship further in assessing our long-standing connection with the raven as a highly intelligent species, its relationship with us, and how I can avoid a common trend for documentary films to focus on only the human side of nature as opposed ‘the other’ in my film *Thought & Memory*.

My film is inspired by Roz Mortimer’s *Invisible* (2007) to present an intersection between science and traditional knowledge in the modern day but also acknowledges critiques of films like *My Octopus Teacher* to provide an alternative connection to an animal that is a highly intelligent and emotional species. Chatterjee writes how globalization is fundamentally a form of ideological, political, and economical colonization (2004).²⁹ Continuing a colonial mindset when comparing to nature and forming a relationship with another intelligent species is detrimental

²⁷ Britannica Dictionary, “Anthropocentrism,” Encyclopædia Britannica, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/anthropocentrism>.

²⁸ Scott D. Churchill et al., “Review of *My Octopus Teacher*,” *The Humanistic Psychologist* 51, no. 2 (June 2023).

²⁹ I. Partha Chatterjee, “Empire after Globalisation,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 37 (2004): 4155–64, <https://doi.org/http://www.jstor.org/stable/4415532>.

and can be improved through powerful tools like documentary filmmaking that already blend modes of perceiving and understanding the ‘other’. Western science is a driving force in understanding the natural world but often omits traditional ways of understanding based on observation and story. Indigenous oral tradition has been seriously enfeebled through writing and print. Kerstin Knopf suggests that there is a potential for blending oral tradition and film/video. Information is transported through visual and sonic effects, and both traditions are interconnective transmitters of information by visual and audio means. This indirect producer/audience contact would be like the direct contact between storyteller and audience in the oral tradition. Knopf remarks that film and video would be a much more appropriate medium for preserving oral tradition than the medium of print (2008).³⁰ My film aims to balance these methods and ideologies to encourage discourse of the raven and our own connection with nature.

When considering alternative ways to connect to and understand the natural world, the films of Jean Painlevé must be considered. As perhaps the most well-known science filmmaker, Painlevé was initially focused on cinematic innovation and representing nonhuman life, i.e. the ‘other’ (Belinda Smaill, 2017).³¹ His films were less structured by human activity and instead focused on the implementation of sound as he began to mix science with juxtapositions of sound and image. As Painlevé perfected his craft, the appeal of many of his films included their insight into a world usually concealed from the human eye by pushing the limits of what cinema could achieve. Technical aspects focused on proximity to the film subject, such as birthing seahorses and specimens as humans manipulated the preserved dissections in

³⁰ Kerstin Knopf, “Oral Tradition as Reflected in Film,” *Decolonizing the Lens of Power*, January 1, 2008, 83–169, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789042028838_004.

³¹ Belinda Maria Smaill, “Encountering Animals: Re-Viewing the Cinema of Jean Painlevé,” *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, no. 42 (2017): 82–99.

L'Hippocampe (2017)³². Rather than focusing on the established ‘spectacle’ and hyper realistic sequences of many blue-chip wildlife films, which uses images and voiceover work to address the viewer as the subject of knowledge, Painlevé preserved aspects of skill and cinematic innovation required to capture and present extraordinary footage. This prevents an implicit ideological address common to blue chip wildlife filmmaking and encourages an alternative means to understand the natural world. The archetypal “voice of god” that clarifies the world on screen by way of scientific rationale implies that humans are not next to animals but are authorized to describe and categorize animals. This encourages a sense of human mastery over an animal other and minimizes a more complex human/nonhuman relation a recognition that animal worlds are part of an ecology that includes human worlds. Painlevé rejected this separation and opted for a disembodied narrator to inform his documentation of the natural world and worked in tandem with fantastic imagery to showcase his animal subjects (2017).³³

In my film *Thought & Memory*, I aimed to evoke a similar paradigm wherein scientific rationale and voiceover could be juxtaposed with observation and traditional knowledge, while also allowing the raven to have its equal share of the spotlight in more formal portraits and intimate sequences demonstrating their emotional intelligence. Story and oral tradition have been with us forever, and only recently have we begun to scientifically understand the world. The first peoples made deductions and learned from observation and passing on lessons, a key component of the modern scientific process.

³² Belinda Maria Smaill, “Encountering Animals: Re-Viewing the Cinema of Jean Painlevé,” *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, no. 42 (2017): 82–99.

³³ Belinda Maria Smaill, “Encountering Animals: Re-Viewing the Cinema of Jean Painlevé,” *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, no. 42 (2017): 82–99.

In creating her film *Invisible*, documentary filmmaker Roz Mortimer challenges hierarchies of knowledge and the ideas of social and cultural authority. Instead, she passes the authority of the film narrative to the indigenous subjects of her film and creates an alternative form of science documentary that rejects positioning these characters as the ‘other’ (2020).³⁴ The story is told through testimony and traditional stories of Inuit mothers, creating a mold where traditional environmental knowledge informs Western science. Mortimer claims that *Invisible* dismantles Western colonialist interpretations of knowledge and otherness to impose moral, environmental, and scientific authority to the Inuit community whose stories are at the center of the film (2020).³⁵ To blur the lines between oral tradition and Western science and, my film encourages cross-cultural understanding of the raven and world around us as a variety of experts present these topics in my film.

Oral tradition is intrinsically ‘invisible’ as it relies on the verbal transmission of what is considered truth. In my film, that same tradition pairs with scientific knowledge to provide a deeper understanding of the two realms of thought through documentary filmmaking. Stine et al. writes how many oral history interviews capture audio alone and transcribe them, which fails to convey emotions, intonations, pauses, dialects, and other conduits of meaning in human nonverbal communication. When using video recording, however, this not only enhances the oral histories themselves but provides a human and emotional foundation on which to create the film

³⁴ Roz Mortimer, “Ghosts, Imagination and Theatre: Re-Enacting the Futural Past Through Documentary Film,” *PhD Diss., University of Forward Thinking Westminster*, 2020, https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/download/1dbf2e9adca2a37dc43233a80779767f2810173250d00a724bc72655f372ddc1/4161047/Mortimer_Roz_PhDthesis.pdf.

³⁵ Roz Mortimer, “Ghosts, Imagination and Theatre: Re-Enacting the Futural Past Through Documentary Film,” *PhD Diss., University of Forward Thinking Westminster*, 2020.

itself (2025).³⁶ *Thought & Memory* challenges the notion of ‘seeing as believing’ and incorporates voices of first peoples, dissemination of knowledge through the unseen, and cultural symbolism of a highly intellectual species like the raven.

If a film is to question the relationship between objective science and subjective oral tradition, it is important to balance the importance of what is seen or unseen on screen to establish an alternative means of understanding both realms of knowledge. Mortimer writes that, when filmmakers are confronted with subjects or events that are lack visibility, this can bring the invisible to the forefront as a way of subverting hierarchies of knowledge production. As with most postcolonial filmmakers, this work often centers on acknowledging how the most important things that happen can be invisible and unvisualizable (2020).³⁷ As a tool, juxtaposition and poetic manipulation of audio and visual components can imply a subjective reality or truth—especially when portraying a being capable of traveling between realms like the raven. Each is not without their own objectivity and subjectivity, however, and Mortimer continues to explore how the literary theorist Rosemary Jackson challenges the established Western dominance of understanding, knowledge, and truth:

In a culture which equates the ‘real’ with the ‘visible’ and gives the eye dominance over other sense organs, the un-real is that which is in-visible. That which is not seen, or which threatens to be un-seeable, can only have subversive function in relation to an epistemological and metaphysical system which makes ‘I see’ synonymous with ‘I understand’. (Jackson, 2002: 54) (2020).³⁸

³⁶ 1. Mark D. Stine and John H. Hepp, “The Art of the Documentary Meets Oral History,” *Culture, Time and Passion: The Fibres of Art*, January 13, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/34460765/The_art_of_the_documentary_meets_oral_history.

³⁷ Roz Mortimer, “Ghosts, Imagination and Theatre: Re-Enacting the Futural Past Through Documentary Film,” *PhD Diss., University of Forward Thinking Westminster*, 2020.

³⁸ Roz Mortimer, “Ghosts, Imagination and Theatre: Re-Enacting the Futural Past Through Documentary Film,” *PhD Diss., University of Forward Thinking Westminster*, 2020.

While Mortimer explores this overlap between what is visible or invisible, the same can be applied when considering a juncture between traditional knowledge and modern science. Only by acknowledging both and developing a more nuanced understanding can we inform a more holistic worldview. Through juxtaposition of visuals and immersive sound design, as well as a contemplative score, *Thought & Memory* builds a foundation by which the diverse interpretations of the raven contribute to a much more inclusive representation of the species. Cross-cultural understanding and blending of ideologies is at the heart of my film concept. The raven is a mediator for this and simultaneously acts as our guide to navigate these realms of observation and knowledge to encourage overlap between science and tradition.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISSEMINATION & DISTRIBUTION PLANS

Section 5.1: Financial Information

FUNDING			
Name	Type	Amt.	Status
Ivan Doig Cntr. Research Grant	Grant	\$1,000	COMPLETE
MSU Graduate Adv. Grant	Grant	\$500	APPROVED
IndieGoGo Campaign	Crowdfunding	\$2,860	COMPLETE
Sacajawea Audubon Society	Grant	\$5,000	APPROVED
Student Loans	Loan	\$6,000	COMPLETE
Actual			
TOTAL:		\$9,360	
Anticipated:		\$15,360	

Table 1. Production funding breakdown, including funding provided, and amount received.

OVERHEAD COSTS - production						
Description	Trip	Type	Amount	Qty.	Total	Status
Desktop hard drive 14tb	N/A	Gear	\$200	3	\$600	PAID
Portable hard drive 5tb	N/A	Gear	\$125	3	\$375	PAID
Scoring	NWY	Post-Production	\$0	1	\$0	PAID
Animation	N/A	Post-Production	\$1,000	1	\$1,000	PAID
Distribution	N/A	Post-Production	\$50	5	\$250	PAID
TOTAL:					\$2,225	
Description	Trip	Type	Amt.	Qty.	Total	Status
Gas	YELL	Travel	\$60	6	\$360	PAID
Food	YELL	Travel	\$50	6	\$300	PAID
Hotel	YELL	Travel	\$100	6	\$600	PAID
YNP Permitting - Long Form	YELL	Production	\$300	1	\$300	PAID
YNP Permitting - Location Fees	YELL	Production	\$150	2	\$300	PAID
Subtotal:					\$1,860	
Gas	MT	Travel	\$60	8	\$480	PAID
Food	MT	Travel	\$50	6	\$300	PAID
Hotel	MT	Travel	\$100	5	\$500	PAID
Subtotal:					\$1,280	
Flight round trip	NY	Travel	\$600	1	\$600	PAID
Food	NY	Travel	\$50	5	\$250	PAID
Hotel	NY	Travel	\$150	5	\$750	PAID
Car rental	NY	Travel	\$170	5	\$850	PAID
Subtotal:					\$2,450	
Flight round trip	AK	Travel	\$600	2	\$1,200	PAID
Food	AK	Travel	\$50	14	\$700	PAID
Hotel	AK	Travel	\$120	14	\$1,680	PAID
Car rental	AK	Travel	\$150	14	\$2,100	PAID
Gas	AK	Travel	\$60	6	\$360	PAID
Subtotal:					\$6,040	
TOTAL:					\$11,630	
Funding:					\$9,360	
COSTS:					\$13,855	

Table 2. Production budget breakdown, including total costs, funding provided, and overall funding needed.

Section 5.2: Distribution and Dissemination

Beyond the thesis film production, the intended distribution of *Thought & Memory* will incorporate public screenings, digital delivery to several supporters and organizations, and a film festival circuit as outlined below. Including the official thesis defense and screening of the film, it will also be screened as part of the MFA Prismatic student organization public screening hosted at the Gallatin Valley Regal Cinemas early May. Two organizations will receive digital copies of the film for public distribution as part of film agreements during Celebration in Alaska, as well as sponsorship from the Ivan Doig Center at MSU that helped fund this production. On campus, the Ivan Doig Center for the Study of the Lands & Peoples of the North American West provided a sum of \$1,000 through the 2024 Graduate Research Award and will receive a copy of the film for their public records and research archive at MSU.

As part of filming completed in Juneau, Alaska during Celebration, the film agreement permitted filming of both Celebration and interview with President of the Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI) Rosita Worl with the caveat that the filmmaker provide a comp copy of the finished documentary and the raw footage of the interview to SHI within two months of its completion. Both the Ivan Doig Center and SHI are stellar public archives for this creative work as it focuses on the complex relationship to the raven in science, culture, and oral tradition. In addition to public screenings and distribution of the thesis film, I plan to expand the production into a longer form documentary to show during a public screening hosted by the Sacajawea Audubon Society locally in Bozeman Montana in Fall 2025. The Sacajawea Audubon Society granted a sum of \$5,000 to aid in production and travel costs to film in Alaska during summer

2024, and this presents a wonderful opportunity to distribute the film locally and involve film subjects within the region to be part of a Q&A panel after the screening.

A film festival circuit will be completed over the next year (2025-2026 festival run) and the film will be submitted to a variety of science, culture, and natural history inspired festivals. Some festivals to be considered will be the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival (Missoula, MT), Jackson Wild festival (Jackson, WY), Science New Wave festival (Brooklyn, NY), Raw Science Film Festival (New York, NY), World Culture Film Festival (Los Angeles, CA), Thurrock International Film Festival (Grays, Essex UK), and Oslo Film Festival (Oslo, Norway) to name a few. Priority will be towards festivals in regions where filming took place (MT, AK, WA, and NY).

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