

THE EDGE HALFWAY BETWEEN: DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTH
OF THE WEST THROUGH AN EXPLORATION OF
MONTANA'S GHOST TOWNS

by

Ariadne Katsaris

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Science and Natural History Filmmaking

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

May 2025

©COPYRIGHT

by

Ariadne Katsaris

2025

All Rights Reserved

DEDICATION

Dedicated to Dorothy Dunn, Mary Elling, and the children of Elkhorn.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee, Hugo Sindelar, Jennifer Boles, and Theo Lipfert for their support throughout the making of this film. Thank you to Rachel Phillips of the Gallatin History Museum and Crystal Alegria of the Extreme History Project. Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to the people of Bannack, Elkhorn, and Virginia City for sharing their stories with me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. BACKGROUND	1
Filmmaker Bio	1
Filmmaker Artist Statement	1
Film Logline.....	2
Film Synopsis.....	2
Crew	3
2. CONNECTION TO THE MATERIAL	4
3. RESEARCH TOPIC AND ARTISTIC APPROACH	6
Research.....	6
Artistic Approach	10
4. THEORIZING YOUR FILM.....	14
5. DISSEMINATION.....	22
Financial Information.....	22
Distribution	23
REFERENCES CITED.....	25

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Table 1. Budget Breakdown.....	22

ABSTRACT

The Wild West. A vision of swinging saloon doors, a woman in need, and a man and his horse, all set against the backdrop of a little town and a great big sky. These romantic notions of the American West run rampant in our culture. But what happens after the cowboy rides off into the sunset? The town, taken for all it is worth, exploited, extracted, bled dry, turns into a ghost. Hundreds of years later, these ghost towns become commodified and turned into chapters in a guidebook. Yet the deeper history of these towns is far more expansive than can be contained in a quick blurb. Much of the history of ghost towns is rooted in fear, colonialism, and struggle. The ghost stories of those left behind in these towns- a teenage drowning victim, children fallen from sickness, and an elderly widow- speak to this deeper truth. A horror-like aesthetic of the film pays homage to the darker underbelly of these towns and the West as a whole. Taking an experimental approach, this film seeks to be an expansive expedition through history. This film exposes the essential truths about ghost towns, and what they say about both the past and the present.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND

Filmmaker Bio

Ariadne Katsaris is a Greek-Cypriot filmmaker who focuses on the power that visual storytelling can have in sharing knowledge with a community. Her films seek to explore the world through a lens of augmented reality. Her previous work has screened at Big Sky Documentary Film Festival. She is currently working on a documentary that explores the subjectivity of history through the lens of ghost stories. She is based in Bozeman, Montana where she is in the process of obtaining her MFA from Montana State University's Science and Natural History Filmmaking program. She received a BA in Film Production and a BA in Biology from University of Denver.

Filmmaker Artist Statement

I love learning. Ever since I was a child, I've wanted to know how, and more importantly why, the world works. Who are the different people that make up the world? What are the niche communities that make up society? Learning is at the center of every film, even if it's not obvious.

It's this passion for discovering new things that is the driving force behind every film I create. As a documentary filmmaker, I get to become a part of so many different communities. Whether it be learning to cook food, learning about what it takes to be a mortuary archeologist, or learning how to survive in the woods, my films are always motivated by curiosity and exploration. Learning doesn't always have to be straightforward. We learn from documentaries in

many ways, sometimes directly being relayed information, but sometimes subconsciously gaining social information. There are so many wonderful stories in the world that people simply have no idea even exist. My goal is to uncover these stories and to share them with the world.

I started this goal during my time as an undergraduate film student at University of Denver. My senior thesis followed my grandmother as she taught me how to make traditional Greek dishes. During graduate school, I've let my curiosity lead me to new subjects. I've explored the intricacies of uncovering skeletons, the beauty of a ghost town, and the realities of surviving in the wilderness. Though these may seem like a random assortment of films, they are all connected by one major thread- I learned something new while making them.

Film Logline

Exploring the ghost towns of Montana, this evocative journey through the corridors of time examines the history of these towns as well as the spirits that may still linger there.

Film Synopsis

History meets the paranormal in this evocative journey through the corridors of time. This film compiles Montana history with the ghost stories endemic of the region. It travels through three of the Southwest Montana's most prolific ghost towns- Bannack, Elkhorn, and Virginia City. Nuggets of knowledge are imparted through newspaper articles and photographs developed in these towns in the 1800s. The awakening of each town's ghost blurs the line between past and present. With each town played as a brief vignette, the viewer will have a

distinct impression of three different ambiances of abandonment. Drawing inspiration from films such as *The Blair Witch Project*¹, the film will have an analog horror aesthetic.

Crew

Ariadne Katsaris – Director, DP

Karly Noetzel – Sound

Andrew Motte – Assistant Camera

¹ Myrick, Daniel, dir. *The Blair Witch Project*. Film. Artisan Home Entertainment, 1999.

CHAPTER TWO

CONNECTION TO THE MATERIAL

I have always been fascinated by the supernatural. I grew up with a love of everything ghostly, starting with *Goosebumps* books as a child and graduating to horror movies like *The Blair Witch Project* as I got older. When we visited Bannack during a film production class, I was enchanted by the town and knew I wanted to explore more towns like it. It is rare to find places in today's world that are so isolated yet contain such a rich history. Montana provides a unique landscape for several of these places.

I am also fascinated by the concept of storytelling. It is how we have shared knowledge for generations. Storytelling is an evolving medium. Tales that used to spread via tongue can now be spread via images. This has made ghost stories all the more fascinating. The invention of the camera may have been a way to prove ghosts exist, but concrete evidence still has yet to be captured. With my film, I can explore the concept of ghosts through a visual medium, using a camera and post-production software to bring to life the visions of these old stories. The difference in visuals and editing between each town is indicative of the spirit of each place- no pun intended.

I began my research by visiting each of these towns without a camera. I spoke to locals within these towns at length, all of whom were eager to share their history and their love of the town. They were able to give me insight into the town that I otherwise would not have had by simply searching online, as pertaining to both the spirits and the history. Those I spoke to did not raise any concerns with my project and seemed interested to see the final product.

I also made several research connections via email. I emailed several museums and experts in this area looking for archival materials. I spoke with museums in each county of each respective town. I explained my project in depth and described exactly what I would be using their materials for. I made my intentions to examine history through an alternative lens clear, which all the researchers and townspeople I corresponded with responded positively to. For local connections, I met with researchers, such as Rachel Phillips at the Gallatin County History Museum and Crystal Alegria of Extreme History Project, several times in person to discuss the project before making plans to film there. I ensured that people felt comfortable being on camera or being recorded.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH TOPIC AND ARTISTIC APPROACH

Research

The Edge Halfway Between seeks to explore alternative ways of portraying history through documentary. An experimental approach to historical storytelling is faithful to the material and can be a successful path to getting audiences to engage actively with media.

Many historical documentaries utilize a traditional approach to convey information. The traditional approach's techniques include use of archival materials such as photographs and documents, narration, and interviews². An experimental approach may also employ these elements but repurposes them in a more engaging manner. Deborah Stratman's *Illinois Parables* is one such experimental film³. This film tells the history of the state of Illinois through nine vignettes. Using modern day footage from 2016, mixed with voiceover narration of historical documents, as well as archival photographs and footage, the film acts as a historical collage. This incorporation of modern-day footage combined with the traditional archival materials encourages the viewer to be an active participant in the viewing of the film, as it opens a line of communication between the past and the present. Stratman uses this line of communication in

² Blumer, Ronald. "So You Want to Make a History Documentary?" History News Network, November 4, 2002. <https://www.hnn.us/article/so-you-want-to-make-a-history-documentary#:~:text=These%20are%20the%20four%20elements,creations%20and%20the%20scholarly%20commentary>.

³ Stratman, Deborah, dir. *The Illinois Parables*. Film. Pythagoras Films, 2016.

her film to open conversations about ideas such as settlement, violence, and faith⁴. This collage-style approach also leaves the viewer with a more holistic view of the subject than a traditional approach does. By focusing on giving the viewer a complete experience of a place, the viewer participates in the experience of existing in this time period and location, rather than simply learning facts about it. In this sense, an experimental style of historical documentary places an emphasis on constructing a comprehensive view of history, making it an ultimately more expansive medium.

Due to the experimental genre's aforementioned advantages, *The Edge Halfway Between* will utilize an experimental approach to explore the history of three distinct ghost towns in Southwest Montana. Montana's history is rife with ghost towns. I selected Bannack, Elkhorn, and Virginia City as the three ghost towns that my film will center around. As abandoned mining towns, they have the unique distinction of having the official title of ghost town. More importantly, these settlements give the term 'ghost town' a literal meaning. Each of these places are home to actual ghost sightings that add essential threads to their historical tapestry⁵. As my film explores both history and the paranormal, finding towns that had both these facets was imperative.

⁴ Balsom, Erika. "The Illinois Parables: Deborah Stratman on Her Histories of the Land." BFI, October 4, 2016. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/interviews/illinois-parables-deborah-stratman-her-histories-land>.

⁵ "5 of the Most Haunted Places in Montana." Southwest Montana. Accessed April 28, 2025. <https://southwestmt.com/blog/5-haunted-places-montana/>.

For example, Bannack was one of the original, and perhaps most prolific, gold mining towns in 1800s Montana. The miners, concerned only with their greed, failed to establish a functional society. Crime quickly became rampant as the community became a target for robbers, preying on the settlers' wealth and ineptitude. Corruption ran deep in Bannack, led by the town's own sheriff. A vigilante group took matters into their own hands, executing the sheriff, and along with it, any chance Bannack had of becoming Montana's shining state capital⁶. Some 50 years after Bannack's initial descent into darkness, an unlucky few were still residing in what was left of the once promising town. One of these unfortunate souls was 16-year-old Dorothy Dunn. One summer afternoon, Dorothy and two friends decided to go for a wade in a local pond. However, the water was much deeper than the three girls anticipated, and, unable to swim, only two made it out of the pond alive. The next time anyone saw Dorothy, or rather, her apparition, would be at the Hotel Meade, wearing her signature long blue dress. Dorothy's spirit wanders the halls of the hotel to this day⁷.

Home to a large silver mine, Elkhorn was once of Montana's most successful mining towns, with a total 14 million dollars in silver exports. The mine, 800 feet deep, was the main employer of the immigrant families that populated Elkhorn. Life was good for these families. But life was not good for long. Mining towns are breeding grounds for diseases due to the polluted water from mining contaminants. Elkhorn was no exception. In 1888, diphtheria swept through

⁶ Alexander, Kathy. "Bannack, Montana - Gold to Ghost." *Legends of America*, December 2022. <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/mt-bannack/>.

⁷ Staley, Michael. "Haunting in the Hotel Meade." *Montana Ghost Town Quarterly*. Autumn 2004.

the town, killing most of the town's children and devastating these once happy families. After losing his own son to the illness, the town's only doctor fled the area, leaving the afflicted with no chance of survival. The Elkhorn cemetery holds their graves. Reports of children running through the town or being spotted in the cemetery permeate this city's history⁸.

Greed and gold once again drew miners to Virginia City. Unlike the family-oriented Elkhorn, Virginia City was a lawless land of robbers and fortune seekers. Road agents, or criminals, ran rampant through the town, robbing and murdering alongside the trails. Vigilantism quickly dealt with the worst of the criminals. Within 20 years, the gold ran out, and along with it the people of Virginia City⁹. Mary Elling was one of the more permanent residents of the town. Her and her husband Henry owned the Elling House. The house, already a mansion by 1800s standards, was expanded further by Mary after Henry's death. After Mary died, strange happenings began around the house. Windows were broken, furniture moved around, doors were inexplicably locked. Though the house changed hands several times, the paranormal patterns continued. It is speculated that Mary still lives in the house, continuing the renovations that obsessed her after her husband's death¹⁰.

⁸ Burkhardt, Dan. "Days of Death." *The Billings Gazette*, March 8, 1998.

⁹ Graetz, Rick, and Susie Graetz. "Montana's First Incorporated Town and Today's 'Living Ghost Town' | Virginia City, Montana: A Community Profile." Visit Southwest Montana, 2024. <https://southwestmt.com/specialfeatures/this-is-montana/communities/virginia-city-montanas-first-incorporated-town/>.

¹⁰ "Elling House." Visit Southwest Montana, 2025. <https://southwestmt.com/ghosts/ghost-stories/elling-house/>.

In the modern day, these towns have been commodified into tourist attractions. Events such as Bannack Days claim to take visitors back to the past, creating a sanitized image of the West as an adventurous era filled with nothing but panning for gold and riding horses. In reality, the ghost town is a representation of failure, a mark of unpreparedness, greed, and violence. An experimental approach allows a film to blur the lines between past and present, and bring these hard truths to light.

When dealing with both a paranormal and historical subject matter, an experimental approach to historical documentary can be an immersive way for audiences to actively engage in the viewing experience. *The Edge Halfway Between* invites the viewer to not only become engrossed in the history of ghost towns, but to partake in the underlying emotion that storytelling has been rooted in since its inception.

Artistic Approach

This film will be experimental, both within the form and the artistic approach. The aesthetic for this film will be a subset of the found-footage style, referred to as analog horror. Analog horror has a tactile feel to it, with both visual and sonic texture, created through distortions of footage and audio¹¹. Modern-day footage of the towns will be edited to give a Super 8 film effect, a popular look in the analog horror genre. Archival photographs and footage will also be used to underscore the found-footage roots of analog horror. Found-footage is

¹¹ “Analog Horror.” TV Tropes. Accessed May 1, 2025.
<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AnalogHorror>.

characterized by “first person perspective...and hand-held cameras,” both of which are a cornerstone of my film, and which “allows for the exploration of unconventional storytelling”¹². Soundscapes will feature heavily in the film. Atmospheric sounds, as well as manipulated frequencies and sound effects, will encourage the viewer to imagine themselves in that space. For example, when discussing the illness that swept through Elkhorn, sounds of sickness will accompany the visuals. The atmosphere will feel unsettling, lost, and lonely.

I was struck by the silence of these towns when visiting. The silence does not feel like a lack of sound, but rather a sound in itself. It is a heavy, oppressive blanket, encasing the entire town until it feels as though there is no outside world. It is impossible to recreate this silence in film. The hum of the projector, the cough of an audience member, a passing car outside- environmental sounds exist and disrupt silence as a complete state. Instead, I will use frequencies to create the same unsettling feeling that the silence gave me when I visited these abandoned towns. Specifically, I will use an infrasound frequency below 20 Hertz. Humans are unable to actively hear this sound, but we can still sense it in the same way we sense vibrations. It is a frequency emitted by natural disasters such as volcanoes and earthquakes. It invokes a feeling of dread and unease. I will also mix audible frequencies around 2,000-5,000 Hz with diegetic sound. These frequencies increase activation in the amygdala, the part of the brain that processes

¹² DeGuzman, Kyle. “Found Footage Films - Genre & Style Explained.” StudioBinder, January 1, 2024. <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-found-footage-filmmaking/#:~:text=FOUND%20FOOTAGE%20DEFINITION&text=Found%20footage%20filmmaking%20is%20a,like%20action%20or%20sci%2Dfi>.

fear¹³. Overall, the addition of these frequencies will work to create an ominous sonic experience.

Frequencies will feature heavily in the film beyond infrasound. Each town will have a layered and unique soundscape, and frequencies will create the basis for each town. For example, Bannack and Virginia City were gold mining towns. I have included the frequency at which pure gold vibrates (316 Hz) during sequences that explore mining in these towns. For Elkhorn, a silver town, a frequency of 6145 Hz can be heard during the mine sequence, which is the frequency at which pure silver vibrates when struck. I am also using frequencies to create a distinct sonic landscape between the history portion of each town and the ghost portion. A frequency of 444 Hz is played when a ‘ghost’ is shown onscreen. This frequency, commonly referred to as the angel frequency, is said to open a listener’s mind to the spiritual realm¹⁴. These frequencies may be subtle to the viewer, but should have a subconscious effect and, at minimum, serve to further create distinct landscapes between each vignette.

This choice of aesthetic speaks to the film’s central idea of recontextualizing the Wild West. The footage is authentic yet will be heavily edited to completely change the interpretation of each town. This will be particularly obvious through the inclusion of the ‘ghosts.’ Archival

¹³ Wood, Owen. “Infrasound: The Terrifying Tonality.” *Of Note*, 30 Oct. 2019, blogs.wdav.org/2019/10/infrasound-the-terrifying-tonality/.

¹⁴ Insight Network, Inc. (n.d.). *Manifestation Music 444 Hz & 888 Hz Abundance Frequencies*. Insight Timer . <https://insighttimer.com/carloscarty/guided-meditations/manifestation-music-444-hz-888-hz-abundance-frequencies#:~:text=The%20444Hz%20tone%20is%20associated,creative%20energies%20and%20universal%20abundance.>

footage will be used to add the appropriate ghost to each town's setting. Dorothy Dunn of Bannack will be represented by a music box ballerina, trapped in the halls of the Hotel Meade. The children of Elkhorn will be represented by lambs, a popular headstone carving to denote a children's grave at this time. Mary Elling will be represented by dolls. These dolls symbolize the guests that would often patronize the Elling House for parties and charity events. This footage will be sourced from online archives such as Pixabay and stylized to have a ghostly appearance. Each aesthetic choice serves to make *The Edge Halfway Between* a transformative contemplation on the West.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEORIZING YOUR FILM

A popular depiction of the Wild West entails rugged cowboys, gun-slinging duels, and wide-open spaces. Rather than giving a literal history of ghost towns, my film seeks to uncover the essential truth of the ghost town as a concept. Essential truth is defined as the deeper theme of a film that reveals insights into the human condition¹⁵. As the creator of this film, I aim to deconstruct the myth of the West as free and powerful. Through an analog horror stylization and inclusion of paranormal stories, this film instead prioritizes a curation of the essential truth of the Wild West: fear, vulnerability, and failure.

The Edge Halfway Between visually explores the ghost towns of the American West through a horror lens. An analog horror aesthetic is utilized in the film to achieve this. Analog horror is an offshoot of the found-footage genre. Whereas found footage seeks to give the audience the feeling of watching raw, unedited footage, analog horror is obviously manipulated and edited¹⁶. Analog horror also engages more with the tactile aspects of film, usually featuring visual or sonic abstractions throughout. The use of this aesthetic in my film, both in post-production and in the shooting itself, is intended to create a sense of dread in the audience. Analog horror directly speaks to the presence of someone behind the camera, manipulating

¹⁵ Kameran, Rachel. "Where the Truth Lies - Or Not." *International Documentary Association*, February 14, 2011.

¹⁶ "Analog Horror." TV Tropes. Accessed May 1, 2025.
<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AnalogHorror>.

reality. This stylization will serve as a mechanism that will enhance the ambience the film seeks to curate through aesthetic understanding. Randolph Jordan discusses the role that aesthetics play in our perception of truth. He argues that “the search for meaning in the world is related to the search for aesthetic pleasure.”¹⁷ Our minds often search for details in aesthetics that will reinforce our perception of events. In this case, the analog horror aesthetic should establish the audience’s perception of the Wild West as a haunted place.

The Blair Witch Project exemplifies the power of aesthetic understanding¹⁸. The film follows three friends on a camping trip gone wrong, culminating in them being stalked and killed by a supernatural entity. Upon its initial release, audiences were questioning whether the film was real. There was widespread concern about the wellbeing of the cast, to the point where the cast was forced to make statements confirming the film was fictional. Despite the subject matter being a supernatural story, the aesthetic understanding of the found-footage filming style was powerful enough to make people overlook the supernatural subject matter, which in other horror movies was never debated to be ‘real.’ Found footage, and by association analog horror, can use aesthetic understanding to have a strong effect on how an audience views a film.

In regard to the six different documentary modes as identified by documentary scholar Bill Nichols, *The Edge Halfway Between* is made in the poetic mode. Nichols describes how the poetic mode “moves away from the ‘objective’ reality of a given situation or people, to grasp at

¹⁷ Jordan, Randolph. “The Gap: Documentary Truth between Reality and Perception.” *Off Screen* 7, no. 1 (January 2003).

¹⁸ Myrick, Daniel, dir. *The Blair Witch Project*. Film. Artisan Home Entertainment, 1999.

an ‘inner truth’ that can only be grasped by poetical manipulation.”¹⁹ The inclusion of ghost stories in my film is used as a vehicle to uncover the ‘inner truth’ of each of these towns. The poetical manipulation of footage to visualize these ghosts will expose this truth to the audience. For example, the lamb ghosts of Elkhorn represent the children who died of diphtheria caused by ore runoff in the water supply. This reveals the corruption of innocence that occurred by exploiting the Elkhorn mine for greed. While the film is based in factual historical information, the emphasis is placed on unveiling the inner truth of these ghost towns, rather than sharing historical facts.

An analysis by documentary scholar Rachel Kameran further discusses the inner truths that can be revealed through filmmaking²⁰. Kameran argues that each film contains an essential and a literal truth. “The craft of documentary filmmaking—good filmmaking—is to provide the analysis needed to reveal human insights, the essential, truths” Kameran asserts. Horror movies and documentaries are ideal designs for reflecting the inner truth of human thinking.

Cropsey is a film that falls into the horror documentary genre²¹. This film at first centers around the urban legend of Cropsey, a terrifying boogeyman who steals children in the dead of night. The film then transitions into a discussion of the real missing children in the area, as well as the actual serial killer that bears a striking resemblance to the legend, leaving viewers with the

¹⁹ Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to documentary*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2024.

²⁰ Kameran, Rachel. “Where the Truth Lies - Or Not.” *International Documentary Association*, February 14, 2011.

²¹ Zeman, Joshua, dir. *Cropsey*. Film. Ghost Robot, 2010.

question- was Cropsey the inspiration or the scapegoat for this killer? The literal truth of *Cropsey* is that urban legends and real life are often connected. The legend of Cropsey represents the essential truth, that which makes the film and legend truly scary- the innate human fear of being lost and forgotten. By tapping into the essential truth of a topic, the horror genre can reveal exactly what we are afraid of.

The mythology of the American West also centers around fear- or rather a lack thereof. Popular ideas of the Wild West during the 1800s glorify “freedom, open spaces, self-reliance, and the possibilities of a fresh start” with “the gun-toting cowboy with his high-crowned hat” as a fearless hero and protector of the space²². The cowboy is always ready to draw his gun or ride his horse into battle²³. He is a man of steel who never feels anything but confident. This image of a fearless cowboy is certainly enticing but is in direct contrast to the actual experience of living in this time period. In truth, many towns of the West were in “an unending state of vulnerability.”²⁴ This vulnerability was in part due to harsh terrain, isolation, and an overreliance on a single commodity²⁵. The commodity in question for the towns of Bannack, Elkhorn, and

²² Mintz, Steven. “The West of the Imagination.” Inside Higher Ed | Higher Education News, Events and Jobs, June 27, 2024. <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/2024/06/27/westerns-enduring-impact-american-national-identity>.

²³ Capozzi, Nicco. “The Myth of the American Cowboy.” Medium, February 11, 2018. <https://medium.com/@StormFoxEsq/the-myth-of-the-american-cowboy-22260d0fec8d>.

²⁴ Limerick, Patricia Nelson, and Mark Klett. “Haunted by Rhyolite: Learning from the Landscape of Failure.” *American Art* 6, no. 4 (October 1992): 18–39. <https://doi.org/10.1086/424167>.

²⁵ Schweiger, Chip. “Rise and Fall of America’s Frontier Towns: From Boom to Bust.” The Cowboy Accountant, October 22, 2024. <https://cowboyaccountant.com/2024/09/09/rise-and-fall-of-americas-frontier-towns-from-boom-to->

Virginia City was mining²⁶. Mining is an extractive industry. The settlers of these towns were extracting gold and silver from the earth, but this extraction also drove colonization in this region. Carole Pateman refers to this as the ‘settler contract.’²⁷ The settler contract is a tenet that white settlers used to justify their seizure of land from Indigenous populations by claiming that the land was “uncultivated wilderness” and that Indigenous people “had no recognizable form of sovereign government.” Therefore, they were unqualified to be stewards of the land. The settlers used this idea to justify taking over the land and mining it for all it was worth. Yet the cultivation of this supposed wilderness ultimately led to the demise of these towns, for when the earth became depleted, so did they²⁸. These depleted towns, as they now stand as ghosts of their former selves, are a reminder of the failure of the West.

In modern times, ghost towns have been commodified and turned into living museums, creating a sense of separation from the past. This idea of the west as ancient history — as if we are quarantined from the past — is misguided. *The Edge Halfway Between* seeks to connect the past and the present. This is partially achieved through the creation of abstract soundscapes. These soundscapes disorient the audience in time. As the film progresses, the soundscapes become less connected from their images. The soundscape is not a literal sonic representation of

bust/#:~:text=Frontier%20towns%20were%20often%20teetering,maintaining%20order%20was%20nearly%20impossible.

²⁶ Weiser-Alexander, Kathy. “Ghost Towns & Mining Camps of Montana.” *Legends of America*, October 2024. <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/mt-ghosttowns/>.

²⁷ Pateman, Carole, and Charles W. Mills. *Contract and Domination*. Polity, 2007.

²⁸ Toren, Tammie. “Montana’s Mining Legacy: The Fascinating Story of Ghost Towns.” *The River*, April 12, 2024. <https://theriver979.com/montana-ghost-towns/>.

these towns but rather an interpretation meant to evoke the aforementioned essential truth of each place. For example, a casino-like soundscape for Virginia City speaks to the town's economic reliance on gambling. *Sans Soleil* invokes a similar strategy²⁹. In one portion of the film, footage of passengers sleeping on a train is paired with sounds of screaming. Despite the somewhat peaceful expressions of the sleeping passengers, the use of screams gives the impression that the passengers are having horrible nightmares. Director Chris Marker uses these sounds to orient us in a time and place of his choosing, ascribing new meaning to the footage. Sound can be a powerful way to recontextualize the history of these settlements and meld the past to the present.

The inclusion of the spirits in my film further blurs the lines of time. At its core, a ghost town “embodies the interplay between life and death and contemplates a scene where the remoteness of the past and the irreversibility of time’s passage are not abstractions, but a vivid and concrete reality”³⁰. The spirits of each town may look ghostly, but they interact with their surroundings in a way that follows the rules of reality in the corporeal world. For example, the ballerina of Bannack does not pass through walls, but instead is restricted by them. She engages with the world around her as a living being would, obscuring the constraints of life and death. This interplay between life and death is even evidenced in the film’s title. ‘The edge halfway between’ refers to the space between heaven and hell- purgatory, a timeless place where spirits

²⁹ Marker, Chris, dir. *Sans Soleil*. Film. Argos Film, 1983.

³⁰ Limerick, Patricia Nelson, and Mark Klett. “Haunted by Rhyolite: Learning from the Landscape of Failure.” *American Art* 6, no. 4 (October 1992): 18–39. <https://doi.org/10.1086/424167>.

are trapped. As important as creating an abstract of history was in my film, I still needed to ensure the film was rooted in accuracy.

As a historian and filmmaker, there were many decisions I had to make regarding the information contained in my film. My philosophy when creating this film centered around the tenets of significance and legitimacy. Richard Blumenberg argues that instead of aspiring to the impossible ideal of ‘truth’, films should strive to show authenticity³¹. Authenticity can be achieved through two tenets- legitimacy and significance. Blumenberg explains that legitimacy “shows by means of cinematography that events or actions actually happened,” while significance “results as events are made important only by virtue of the fact that they have been photographed and projected.” Everything I have included about the history of the towns is legitimate as to how it is maintained in the historical record. Included photographs are verified by the Library of Congress as belonging to the time period and location. All newspaper snippets are from the Southwest Montana region, within the time period of any event taking place in the film. However, I am choosing the pieces of history to assign significance by deciding which pieces of history to include in the film.

By making this film, I am complicit in the omission of authenticity as well. The very nature of what I have chosen to include speaks to the romanticization of the history of ghost towns. Each of these towns could have an entire feature length film about their history, let alone their local legends. Each town’s history has been cut down to a few minutes, showcasing only

³¹ Blumenberg, Richard M. “Documentary Films and the Problem of ‘Truth.’” *Journal of the University Film Association* 29, no. 4 (1977).

the parts of history that fit my narrative. I did not mention the corrupt sheriff of Bannack who robbed his own citizens, nor the suspiciously high number of child deaths due to causes other than diphtheria in Elkhorn, nor the suffering that Native American tribes of the region endured as a direct result of the creation of these mining towns. This is reflective of the perception of the idealized American West as a whole. A traditional Western rarely mentions a Native American as more than an enemy, a woman as more than a love interest, or a child as more than an adoring fan. As previously mentioned, romantic notions of the West overemphasize the significance of lawlessness, individualism, and whiteness in this time period³². By placing an abstract lens on these parts of the West's history, my film is critiquing an over-emphasis and over-simplification of these impressions of the West.

Overall, *The Edge Halfway Between* denounces the myth of the American West, instead speaking to its ugly truth. An analog horror aesthetic and the inclusion of the paranormal functions to expose the essential truth of ghost towns, a truth of failure, fear, and vulnerability. Deliberate omissions of parts of each town's history serves as a critique of this history's erasure in the romantic idealization of the West. My film emphasizes the importance of the essential truth and what it can reveal about the human condition.

³² Mintz, Steven. "The West of the Imagination." Inside Higher Ed | Higher Education News, Events and Jobs, June 27, 2024. <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/2024/06/27/westerns-enduring-impact-american-national-identity>.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISSEMINATION

Financial Information

This film is entirely self-funded. The only major cost for production was the purchase of a new camera. Production help was provided in kind, and I will complete all elements of post-production myself. I am not seeking any more funding at this time.

Table 1. Budget Breakdown

Description	QTY	Unit	x	Rate	Subtotal	Total
Personnel						
DP/Producer	1	days	4	In kind	0.00	
Camera 2	1	days	4	In kind	0.00	
Sound Recordist	1	days	4	In kind	0.00	
Interview Subject	2	days	1	In kind	0.00	
Personnel Subtotal						0.00

Equipment						
Sony FX30 Body	1	unit	1	1,528.30	1,528.30	
Sony 24-70 mm lens	1	unit	1	489.00	489.00	
Batteries	2	unit	1	70.00	140.00	
Tripod	1	unit	1	25.00	25.00	
Sound Kit	1	unit	1	In kind	0.00	
Equipment Subtotal						2,182.30

Administration						
Gas	4	days	1	25.00	100.00	
State Park Admission	1	visits	4	8.00	32.00	
Production Meals	1	unit	4	10.00	40.00	
E&O Insurance	1	amount	1	In kind	0.00	
Administration Subtotal						172.00

Table 1 Continued.

Post Production						
Editor	1	weeks	8	In kind	0.00	
Colorist	1	weeks	2	In kind	0.00	
Music	1	weeks	2	In kind	0.00	
Post Production Subtotal						0.00
Distribution						
Festivals	5	unit	1	200.00	200.00	
Distribution Subtotal						200.00
Grand Total						2,545.30

Distribution

I plan to distribute my film amongst several film festivals, primarily those focusing on historical or experimental content. One such festival is the History Film Festival by ISTR Film. This festival accepts documentaries that portray history as a compelling story, regardless of form. I believe that my film could be a good fit for this festival as it is unique in its approach to history, but is still historically accurate. Another festival I would like to submit my film to would be Dark History and Horror Convention. This festival accepts paranormal and dark history content. With heavy features of ghosts, as well as themes of greed and corruption, I believe my film would be pertinent to the content they are curating.

I would also love to organize community screenings near each of the ghost towns featured. The Dillon Montana Community Foundation often sets up events for residents of Dillon, the nearest populated town to Bannack. The Jefferson County Museum in Clancy was very helpful with providing me with many archival resources about Elkhorn, and may be open to hosting a community screening. Virginia City is a tourist destination for the summer and has an

old theater which can be rented for events. This would be an ideal place for a screening of my film.

This film could also potentially be sold to a museum to be featured as an exhibit installation. The Gallatin County History Museum has plenty of material regarding ghost towns. Having a film interpretation to pair with other items and materials on display could bring new life to the exhibit. Museums like Museum of the Rockies are/may also be looking for new material to show in their auditoriums. Due to its length, this film could be a good fit for a venue in that vein.

REFERENCES CITED

- “5 of the Most Haunted Places in Montana.” Southwest Montana. Accessed April 28, 2025. <https://southwestmt.com/blog/5-haunted-places-montana/>.
- Alexander, Kathy. “Bannack, Montana - Gold to Ghost.” Legends of America, December 2022. <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/mt-bannack/>.
- “Analog Horror.” TV Tropes. Accessed May 1, 2025. <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki/Main/AnalogHorror>.
- Balsom, Erika. “The Illinois Parables: Deborah Stratman on Her Histories of the Land.” BFI, October 4, 2016. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/interviews/illinois-parables-deborah-stratman-her-histories-land>.
- Blumenberg, Richard M. “Documentary Films and the Problem of ‘Truth.’” *Journal of the University Film Association* 29, no. 4 (1977).
- Blumer, Ronald. “So You Want to Make a History Documentary?” History News Network, November 4, 2002. <https://www.hnn.us/article/so-you-want-to-make-a-history-documentary#:~:text=These%20are%20the%20four%20elements,creations%20and%20the%20scholarly%20commentary>.
- Burkhart, Dan. “Days of Death.” *The Billings Gazette*, March 8, 1998.
- Capozzi, Nicco. “The Myth of the American Cowboy.” Medium, February 11, 2018. <https://medium.com/@StormFoxEsq/the-myth-of-the-american-cowboy-22260d0fec8>.
- DeGuzman, Kyle. “Found Footage Films - Genre & Style Explained.” StudioBinder, January 1, 2024. <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-found-footage-filmmaking/#:~:text=FOUND%20FOOTAGE%20DEFINITION&text=Found%20footage%20filmmaking%20is%20a,like%20action%20or%20sci%2Dfi>.
- “Elling House.” Visit Southwest Montana, 2025. <https://southwestmt.com/ghosts/ghost-stories/elling-house/>.
- Graetz, Rick, and Susie Graetz. “Montana’s First Incorporated Town and Today’s ‘Living Ghost Town’ | Virginia City, Montana: A Community Profile.” Visit Southwest Montana, 2024. <https://southwestmt.com/specialfeatures/this-is-montana/communities/virginia-city-montanas-first-incorporated-town/>.
- Insight Network, Inc. (n.d.). *Manifestation Music 444 Hz & 888 Hz Abundance Frequencies*. Insight Timer . <https://insighttimer.com/carlosarty/guided-meditations/manifestation-music-444-hz-888-hz-abundance->

frequencies#:~:text=The%20444Hz%20tone%20is%20associated,creative%20energies%20and%20universal%20abundance.

Jordan, Randolph. "The Gap: Documentary Truth between Reality and Perception." *Off Screen* 7, no. 1 (January 2003).

Kamerman, Rachel. "Where the Truth Lies - Or Not." *International Documentary Association*, February 14, 2011.

Limerick, Patricia Nelson, and Mark Klett. "Haunted by Rhyolite: Learning from the Landscape of Failure." *American Art* 6, no. 4 (October 1992): 18–39. <https://doi.org/10.1086/424167>.

Marker, Chris, dir. *Sans Soleil*. Film. Argos Film, 1983.

Mintz, Steven. "The West of the Imagination." Inside Higher Ed | Higher Education News, Events and Jobs, June 27, 2024. <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/2024/06/27/westerns-enduring-impact-american-national-identity>.

Myrick, Daniel, dir. *The Blair Witch Project*. Film. Artisan Home Entertainment, 1999.

Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to documentary*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2024.

Pateman, Carole, and Charles W. Mills. *Contract and Domination*. Polity, 2007.

Schweiger, Chip. "Rise and Fall of America's Frontier Towns: From Boom to Bust." The Cowboy Accountant, October 22, 2024. <https://cowboyaccountant.com/2024/09/09/rise-and-fall-of-americas-frontier-towns-from-boom-to-bust/#:~:text=Frontier%20towns%20were%20often%20teetering,maintaining%20order%20was%20nearly%20impossible>.

Staley, Michael. "Haunting in the Hotel Meade." *Montana Ghost Town Quarterly*. Autumn 2004.

Stratman, Deborah, dir. *The Illinois Parables*. Film. Pythagoras Films, 2016.

Toren, Tammie. "Montana's Mining Legacy: The Fascinating Story of Ghost Towns." The River, April 12, 2024. <https://theriver979.com/montana-ghost-towns/>.

Weiser-Alexander, Kathy. "Ghost Towns & Mining Camps of Montana." Legends of America, October 2024. <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/mt-ghosttowns/>.

Wood, Owen. "Infrasound: The Terrifying Tonality." *Of Note*, 30 Oct. 2019, blogs.wdav.org/2019/10/infrasound-the-terrifying-tonality/.