

IMPACT: HOW ECOTOURISM IS HARMING OUR WILD SPACES

by

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## ABSTRACT

The following thesis looks at how the U.S. National Parks Service has balanced (or at least attempted to balance) two competing goals: to preserve America's wild spaces and make those wild spaces accessible to the public. The thesis explains how the parks came to find themselves in this balancing act and how they have managed to tackle the conflict in the past. The main argument of the thesis is that much of this conflict appeared as the result of the park's implementation of transportation infrastructure. To effectively support this argument, the project broadly goes over how roadways took over much of the transportation infrastructure in the parks and how they negatively impact the environment. The thesis then discusses how the National Parks Service may more effectively combat those impacts. The remainder of the paper dedicates itself to constructing a travel film that effectively communicates the problems and solutions found and details of the film's production. The thesis found that travel films are uniquely suited to this goal and how their utilization may serve as a powerful advocacy device.

## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, the National Parks Service of the United States has sought two goals: to conserve the natural beauty of the country's wild spaces and make those wild spaces accessible to the public. At the heart of these goals, however, is a contradiction that the National Parks Service must navigate. The past decade alone has seen a 20% increase in annual visitation to our National Parks, including significant consecutive spikes in 2020 and 2021 (McGivney 2022). This development would be a substantial victory for the National Parks Service. The parks bring in more funding to better attend to their operations, the money incentivizes local and federal governments to provide more public investment in the environment, and the public can enjoy the parks. This spike in visitation, nonetheless, does not come without consequences. Factors such as pollution, climate change, and habitat fragmentation are all present and looming environmental disasters exacerbated by tourism (Buckley 2011; Gossling 2013; Li et al. 2013). This thesis explores these factors and evaluates how members of the National Parks Service and the communities surrounding the parks attempt to address them.

Most ways tourism negatively affects ecosystems involve cars and the roads they require. Many studies are looking into how cars affect the environment. Those impacts fall roughly into three categories: wildlife mortality, human disturbance, and habitat degradation (Caro 2015; Jackson 2000; Havlick 2002). Wildlife mortality is a prominent factor. State Farm Insurance estimates that the U.S. sees nearly one million wildlife-vehicle collisions yearly (Ament et al. 2008), each incident presenting a mortality risk to humans and animals all over the country. The

land within and around national parks represents regions where animals, often including endangered species, congregate close to human activity. Human disturbance as a category refers to how human presence impacts the ecosystem. For one, heavy traffic presents noise pollution that disturbs the surrounding wildlife but also positions national parks as a hotbed for people irresponsibly attempting to disturb wildlife physically. Habitat degradation applies to several impacts, including the immediate habitat destruction brought about by road construction and maintenance, the pollution created by vehicle emissions, chemicals, and litter involved with roadways, and the barriers presented to the ease of wildlife movement.

So how does the National Park Service address the impacts that roads present? For this thesis, much of the focus will be on Glacier National Park, which exemplifies many strategies for mitigation that the project will explore, including modes of public transport like buses and trains. Public transportation reduces the risk of collision and disturbance by concentrating high volumes of people into one vehicle. Glacier also uses strategies that minimize the risk among guests who travel by car, including seasonal closures, wildlife crossing signs, and suggestions not to disturb the animals (Ament *et al.* 2008). Most impressively, Glacier and the communities surrounding it employ wildlife crossing structures. These structures, such as bridges and tunnels, allow animals to safely cross roads without harming themselves or the vehicles driving below or above them. Various crossing structures are employed at the park because different species respond to varying strategies (Clevenger & Waltho 2004; Waller *et al.* 2020).

This thesis paper and the accompanying thesis film explore the mitigation techniques used by the National Parks Service and argue a case for the public to utilize them. The thesis paper examines media, such as *An Idiot Abroad: Season 2: Episode 2*, “Trans-Siberian Express” (Yee

2011), *The Endless Summer* (Brown 1966), and *Encounters at the End of the World* (Herzog 2007).

It will discuss how these films inspired the thesis film and how it used the strategies derived to construct a narrative about a sustainable trip to Glacier National Park. Ultimately, the thesis paper and film will argue that the balance between sustainability and accessibility is possible. The written thesis and thesis film will analyze the steps necessary to make that balance reality and demonstrate how to communicate those steps persuasively to the non-expert viewer effectively.

## CHAPTER 2

## HISTORY

This thesis centers around three institutions: the film industry, automobile transportation, and the National Parks Service. All three have significant roots in the early 20th century United States and thus have histories that intertwine over the years. National parks, as a concept, grew from the Transcendental Movement of the 19th century. Early settlements of the American West inspired writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, as well as painters like Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, and Albert Bierstadt, to create art that romanticized nature and the American wilderness. This art and literature, in turn, fostered a newfound appreciation for the natural world in America's populated areas and fed into a sense of National Pride influenced by the Manifest Destiny movement. The movement continued to snowball until the demand for protected areas became significant enough to require government action. Yellowstone became the first National Park signed into law in 1872. Congress saw Yellowstone as a "pleasuring ground" for Americans to enjoy (except for Native Americans, whom they kicked off the land). Continued pressure from American naturalists, such as John Muir and the Sierra Club, led to a need for these parks to have a strengthened, centralized management body. For decades, the U.S. Government signed more national parks and monuments into law, but each operated independently, so success was variable. Woodrow Wilson signed the National Parks Service Act into law in 1916 (History.com Editors 2018), which brought some uniformity to park management.

The history of automobile transportation is far more complex. Rudimentary versions of automobiles have been around for hundreds of years, utilizing steam, gasoline, and electricity, but what we know today as the car was not invented until 1886 and did not entirely become popular in the U.S. among the non-wealthy until the invention of the Ford Model T in 1908. This chapter will focus on the transition period in the U.S. between railways and roadways. This transition started long before the Model T. In the first century of the United States, the population centers attached themselves to the others by railroads and dirt roads. The railroads were mainly for getting to and from major cities, leaving most of the remaining connectivity to dirt roads. These roads were good for people traveling by horse or wagon, but many were left unhappy. The Good Roads Movement was started in the late 1870s by a bicyclist club, the League of American Wheelmen, who looked to the federal government to pave the country's roads. For decades the group published magazines and pamphlets preaching to millions of Americans the benefits of well-improved roads in their daily lives. In 1893, the federal government established the Office of Road Inquiry to investigate the matter. By the 20th century, automobile owners had joined the movement. Early adopters of the car had found driving cross-country a deeply unpleasant endeavor (Kelly 2015). With the invention of the Model T, state governments and local communities had begun paving stretches of road, but the expense was too significant to do effectively on their own. The first unpaved intercontinental roadway, The Lincoln Highway, was built from 1912 to 1913. Its construction began as a publicity stunt to promote national tourism and the need for federal involvement in road construction (Kelly 2015). The federal government finally began involvement in road construction in the 1916 Federal Aid Road Act, which matched state funds to pitch in for

paved roads. The 1921 Federal Aid Highway Act paved up to 7% of state highways, and finally, the 1926 establishment of the National Highway System (Havlick 2002; Kelly 2015).

Unlike national parks or highways, the development of motion pictures has less to do with the federal government but provides crucial insight into the development of the thesis film. Like the national parks and early federal highways, filmmaking existed in the late 19th century. The motion picture is the end product of many inventions, including the Kinetograph (1888), an early camera, the Kinetoscope (1891), an early viewing device, and the Cinématographe (1895), a hand-cranked camera that also functioned as a projector. These developments created a booming industry of film as a novelty. Animated photographs of the American West were of particular interest. *Royal Gorge, Colorado* (Edison 1898), *Upper Falls of the Yellowstone* (Edison 1901), and *Gap Entrance to Rocky Mountains* (American Mutoscope and Biograph 1902) all provided viewers with the spectacle the industry was interested in at the time.

Manifest Destiny created a national fascination with the American West in the late 18th century, which conceivably influenced many early filmmakers who grew up to focus on Westerns in the early decades of cinema. As the novelty wore off, however, filmmakers began crafting narratives to showcase using the new invention, thus leading to the birth of the film industry as we know it today. Quite fittingly for this thesis, one of the first narrative films made in the United States was *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903, directed by Edwin S. Porter (Cook & Sklar 2003; Ruoff 2006). The film depicts a group of robbers boarding a train to rob wealthy passengers on a journey west. For this thesis, *The Great Train Robbery* presents a unique perspective on the culture that produced the history covered thus far. During this time, the wealthy used their influence to implore the government to establish protected lands, which they made pilgrimages to visit by train.

The rest of the country fought tooth and nail to get the government to build roads allowing them to go, too. At the turn of the century, all eyes pointed West, where all three industries were about to intermingle.

The national parks brought a much different experience before the arrival of cars. Back then, they were experienced mainly by train. Wealthy individuals paid top dollar to take vacations out to the wild west, which was an excellent incentive for the rail industry to advertise tourism to the national parks (Ruoff 2006). The National Parks System and the railway companies designed an ad campaign featuring the slogan “See America First,” which sought to bring back the myth of the American Frontier, fanning the flames of Manifest Destiny for tourism (Havlick 2002; Ruoff 2006). In other words, both groups sought to transition the American West from the wild and dangerous wilderness of the Old West into a tame and family-friendly natural wonder featuring great natural spectacles not yet seen by most of the public. Films like *Grand Canyon, Arizona* (Nestor 1912) and *Glacier National Park* (Pathé 1912) paired with advertisements that made the parks not just lovely places to visit but also a patriotic necessity to do so as soon as possible. The train companies would come to regret this. After the conclusion of World War I, America saw the expansion of its “leisure class,” a new and affordable method of transport in the Model T, and a national desire to see the West. The parks had concluded that it was time to build roads within the protected lands and thus began the Park Service’s challenge of balancing conservation and tourism (Havlick 2002).

Jumping decades ahead to 1956, Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act into law, authorizing \$25 billion to go towards constructing 41,000 miles of interstate highway across the country (Weingroff 1996). The act created unprecedented

interconnectivity in the country, giving Americans full, personal access to wherever they wanted. The newfound access, a stable economy, and a new environmentalism movement led to a massive outdoor recreation boom in the late 1960s and 1970s (Cole 2018). With the invention of new affordable, handheld cameras, such as the Kodak Super 8, visitors were creating homemade advertisements for the parks. The “See America First” campaign had evolved into a culture of “Film America First” to show off the footage to friends and neighbors: leisure had become a status symbol. The recreation boom reached such a dire point that experts worried that the parks might be in danger of being loved to death. Since the 1970s, parks began attempting limits on guest volume through a permit system; however, by the 80s, concerns began mounting that the parks system regulated the joy and spontaneity out of the experience. Park managers took a new approach using education (Cole 2018). The National Parks and National Forest Services began advertising campaigns centered around personal responsibility. The National Forest Service revamped Smokey the Bear to educate visitors about forest fires and introduced Woodsy the Owl to educate about pollution. The National Parks Service and naturalist community sought to create a movement dedicated to educating the public about low-impact recreation practices. They brought together scientists, educators, and seasoned recreationists to compile all the best methods to preserve the natural ecosystem. Their efforts culminated in the “Leave No Trace” movement of the 1990s (Cole 2018).

Fast forward again to today, and history repeats itself. Covid-19 cut Americans from many recreation options and sent them toward the national parks. New developments in digital video recording technology have made it easier to film experiences at any moment with a device that fits into your pocket and the opportunity to use that same device to show off those experiences to the

entire world on the same day, creating some of the most effective advertising yet. This new recreation boom brought many of the same challenges seen 50 years ago and presented unique challenges that went unseen or unaddressed at that time. Infrastructure in and around the parks must prepare to contend with the steep increase in traffic that came with Covid. Once again, park management has opted to limit how many guests are allowed in the park, even though it was a regretful decision the last time (McGivney 2022).

This thesis would like to end the repetition of the National Park system's past mistakes. It posits that new infrastructure projects must accommodate guests without harming the natural ecosystem. As before, guests now need to learn a lot about keeping themselves and the ecosystem safe, but the problems are broader than simple personal responsibility issues. This thesis seeks systematic solutions to the problems presented by today's circumstances and brainstorms how to communicate these solutions to the public.

## CHAPTER 3

## ROAD ECOLOGY

As has been established, the National Parks Service is an organization with two often conflicting mission statements: 1) to preserve and protect America's wild spaces from the encroachment of human development, and 2) to make America's wild spaces freely accessible to the public to enjoy (Havlick 2002). In many instances, these goals may not fall into direct opposition, but when it comes to services like transportation, they are very much at odds. This chapter will detail situations in which those services cause those missions to contradict each other and discuss how the National Parks Service attempts to combat those problems. Then the section will conclude with a unique look at Glacier National Park and how the conflict takes shape in real-world scenarios. Accordingly, the thesis film features Glacier National Park as its subject.

Transportation has five significant effects on the local environment. The first of these effects is direct habitat loss. Immediate habitat loss results from the destruction in the immediate area surrounding the road when constructed and maintained. To build a road, crews must remove all the vegetation and surface soil in the path of construction. Additionally, regulations dictate that roads, especially federal highways, have a buffer zone between the road and the nearest tree cover to mitigate fallen tree damage. Estimates show that the U.S. has lost approximately 18,700 square miles of natural habitat to the road's surface alone – an equivalent area to the combined surface area of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Delaware, plus an additional 2,000 square miles (Havlick 2002; Jackson 2000).

The second impactful effect of roads is the certainty of wildlife collisions. Each collision also holds the possibility of harm to the driver and an even higher probability to the animal. According to the State Farm Insurance Company, the United States sees over a million wildlife-vehicle collisions yearly, translating to an estimated annual four billion dollars in vehicle repair costs alone. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) estimates the total cost to Americans is over \$8 billion annually (Ferris 2015). The FHWA also indicates that the looming prospect of vehicle collisions threatens twenty-one endangered species in the U.S. (Ferris 2015).

Additionally, many ecologists say these statistics must accurately assess the impact, so researchers should make efforts to report minor animal collisions as well. The immediate loss of animal life is an apparent negative impact on roads, but crashes have a secondary effect on animal behavior in the area over time. Further studies by the FHWA sampled only 0.3% of the interstate highway system and found 77,000 birds killed by high-speed impacts. One study found that frogs and toads attempting to cross the road had a near-zero survival rate at traffic levels as low as 26 cars per hour (Havlick 2002).

The barrier effect is when animals begin avoiding crossing roads altogether. Observations find that animals adjust their behavior in high-traffic areas and do not attempt to cross the road if they do not have to. Studies show that the population densities of large mammals tend to be significantly lower within 100-200 meters of a highway (Ament et al. 2008). Many species' populations will only decline partially in areas where road density is one mile per square mile (Havlick 2002). This shift in animal behavior may reduce the number of collisions but presents a new problem in that the roads fragment the habitat, creating a barrier. When a barrier reduces or

entirely cuts off wildlife from crossing, it splits the habitat in two as if they were islands, resulting in several cascading effects.

One significant impact is the loss of biodiversity. Many species have adapted to only living in interior habitats. Species adapted to edge habitats (the boundary between one habitat and the other) that can outcompete the interior species accelerate this biodiversity loss. In other words, some plants and animals only live deep within forests. When roads cut through the middle of the woods, these animals are forced into increasingly smaller portions until sustainable populations can no longer survive in such a small area.

Another impact is on genetic diversity. When habitats split in two, the flora and fauna populations split, too. When cut into small enough pockets, these isolated populations suddenly face threats across generations due to a higher potential for inbreeding (Havlick 2002). Over time, these effects and more can and will lead to the extinction of certain species in the area.

The last two effects roads can have on the environment can group into the categories of disturbance and pollution. There are several ways in which roads disturb the local habitat. High traffic presents a high volume of sound in the area surrounding the road, which exacerbates the barrier effect on animal species with a low tolerance for noise, such as some species of nesting birds (Havlick 2002). Building roads can also allow access to more invasive forms of disturbance – poachers, fishers, loggers, and developers rely on roads to get to the land they wish to exploit. This issue is not as much of a problem for national parks, but the roads leading to national parks bring many people to the surrounding area (Havlick 2002).

Pollution, on the other hand, is another category. While intentional and accidental littering is a significant problem everywhere surrounding roads, chemicals also play a part. Cars exhaust

contributes many pollutants (especially in the days of leaded gasoline). Road maintenance often employs chemical surface treatments to combat dust, ice, and weeds, which leach into the ground and water over time (Havlick 2002).

One source of pollution that can go unnoticed is invasive species of flora and fauna hitching rides on cars. Plant seeds and microscopic animals could relocate hundreds of miles from their natural habitats (Havlick 2002).

How do ecologists plan to combat these effects? The strategies ecologists focused on the topic fall into three categories: *avoidance*, *mitigation*, and *compensation* (Huijser 2022). *Avoidance* is a technique in which ecologists attempt to prevent the effect from happening. For example, communities can construct roads around crucial habitats, avoiding ever disturbing or polluting them in the first place. Additionally, alternative transportation methods can receive infrastructural support to prevent the effects exacerbated by high traffic volumes (Huijser, 2022).

*Mitigation* is employed once the impact is evident. Mitigation techniques aim to reduce the severity of the effects presented by the roads. Programs like “Adopt-a-Highway” and “Highway Patrol” minimize the litter and poachers in certain areas. Communities can construct fences, crossing signs, and wildlife crossing structures to fight against wildlife collisions and the barrier effect. The national parks act as a mitigation technique to fight against logging and development.

Sometimes, however, the results are unavoidable, and *compensation* techniques are employed. Much like carbon offsetting, these techniques would compensate for the effects created by road construction. *Compensation* aims to compensate for habitat destruction and fragmentation by expanding protected areas, establishing new protected areas, and creating “wildlife corridors.”

These corridors create, by design, thin strips of protected land that connect natural areas so that animals can safely navigate their everyday environment around human boundaries (Huijser 2022).

With these techniques, one can hope that the effects of roadways are taken care of, but how does that look in practice?

One study showed that, among National Parks, 33% of parks with endangered species report roads as a significant threat to species survival. Also, 36% reported roads that traveled directly through critical habitats for the species (Ament et al. 2008).

For this thesis, Glacier National Park represents an example that goes through many infrastructural problems and solutions. Glacier is home to many options for transportation: a famously beautiful scenic road, a central passenger railway, and an iconic fleet of red public buses. The park is also home to many large mammals, such as moose and grizzly bears, that pose a significant risk to wildlife collisions. The state of Montana, where Glacier National Park resides, is ranked second in the nation among chances of animal collisions. A Montana driver has a 1 in 47 chance of experiencing an animal collision in a year (Murray 2020).

To combat its unique set of circumstances, Glacier, and the surrounding area, employs several strategies. Following the avoidance technique, the park utilizes its railway to give guests a new perspective of the landscape and buses to reduce traffic through the park to a large degree.

Additionally, due to weather conditions, the park cuts off guests' access to the famous Going-to-the-Sun Road for most of the year. While not necessarily purposeful, this restriction allows the park to avoid the effects of traffic once the snow settles in the park. Also, in 2020, as part of COVID restrictions, the Going-to-the-Sun Road closed entirely to the public. When it eventually opened again in 2021, the park put a reservation system in place. Much like the

restrictions in the original recreation boom, the park had opted to restrict access to the Going-to-the-Sun road rather than deal with the increase in daily visitors (Scott 2021). As this thesis has discussed, cutting off visitor volume is not necessarily ideal, so what mitigation techniques are employed to reduce impact in Glacier National Park?

Glacier is unique among America's National Parks because of the many wildlife crossings implemented in and around the park. For example, as early as the 1980s, the park devised tunnels underneath the road to allow its substantial mountain goat population to get to a popular salt lick location from the mountains above (Ament et al. 2008). More recently, areas around the park, such as the Native American Reservations, have invested in constructing wildlife overpasses and expanding existing culverts under the highway (Waller et al. 2020). Studies suggest that investing in multiple types of crossings maximizes the efficacy of every species being able to cross. For example, grizzly bears, wolves, elk, and deer prefer wide and short overpasses to cross the highway, while cougars and black bears prefer constricted underpasses to travel (Clevenger & Waltho 2004). The study suggests that the ecosystem requires diverse crossing structures of a mix of size classes to mitigate the highway's effects. The park often hosts "map-a-thons" that ask the community to map out where they observed wildlife, alive or dead, near the road. In the park's ongoing fight to mitigate wildlife collisions, these map-a-thons are crucial in telling constructors where to build (Waller et al. 2020). The community's desire to produce these structures, and its participation in their construction, serve as the inspiration for the thesis film. How could a narrative be constructed to invite viewers to desire crossing structures and want to take part in their construction?

## CHAPTER 4

## FILM ANALYSIS

Travel is often used as a storytelling device in fiction and nonfiction, so much so that we have closely tied our understanding of narrative structure to travel. In the essay, “The ‘Narrative is Travel’ Metaphor: Between Spatial Sequence and Open Sequence,” Kai Mikkonen describes how travel in stories often serves as either the model narrative in the form of quests, adventures, and odysseys or as the framework for the narrative, such as in Joseph Campbell’s concept of “The Hero’s Journey” from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Mikkonen 2007). According to Mikkonen, “The narrative potential of travel lies in the fact that we recognize in it temporal and spatial structures that call for narration.” In other words, how we describe travel follows an inherently linear path through time and space within the story. Mikkonen elaborates that this nature strengthens in stories that follow the “personalized point of view of the traveler.” Through the protagonist’s subjective experience, the audience may grasp how it feels to travel within the narrative. The observer becomes familiar with the departure, journey, and destination through the eyes of the protagonist. Thus, the audience feels how the protagonist feels throughout the story.

Regarding documentary filmmaking, the phenomenon Mikkonen describes takes on complex aspects. For example, when describing films according to Bill Nichols’s modes of documentary storytelling, only three of the six could be easily applied to tell a personal linear story about a subject’s journey: the participatory, reflexive, and performative modes. The expository, observational, and poetic modes have an almost inherent intention to present stories objectively (linearly in the case of the expository and objective modes and nonlinearly in the case of the poetic

mode). On the other hand, the participatory, reflexive, and performative modes are very agreeable to linear storytelling and present films from a subjective point of view (Nichols 2010).

This thesis has touched upon how the film industry played and has continued to play an essential role in advertising for the National Parks. Based on the research thus far, one could make a case for how filmmaking is partially responsible for how the parks system has become so heavily centered around the car. For this reason, the following two chapters are interested in constructing a film that utilizes the structure and tropes of travel documentaries that meet the goals of this thesis. Those goals include effectively advocating for a more sustainable form of travel and advertising community infrastructure projects that combat the issues presented by the current system's reliance on cars. To better explore the structure and tropes of the travel documentary, this chapter will analyze three films that will serve as examples of the travel documentary and the aesthetic inspiration for the thesis film. The first is an episode of a travel documentary television program, *An Idiot Abroad*, that served as aesthetic inspiration for filmmakers on the journey. The episode "Trans-Siberian Express" (Dir. Richard Yee, 2011) follows our protagonist on a cross-continental railway trip through Asia. The second is a film that served as the original inspiration to make a travel film in the first place. This film, *The Endless Summer* (Dir. Bruce Brown, 1965), follows two surfers on a worldwide adventure to experience summer for an entire year in different parts of the world. The final film is a definitive example of the travel documentary, *Encounters at the End of the World* (Dir. Werner Herzog, 2007). This film follows its filmmaker on a trip to Antarctica to meet the people who live and work there. The construction of the thesis film will utilize aspects of these films as described in the following chapter.

*An Idiot Abroad* is a 2010-2012 comedic documentary television series centering around two comedians, Ricky Gervais, and Stephen Merchant, sending their somewhat dim-witted friend, Karl Pilkington, on adventures around the world to display the British everyman's perspective on foreign cultures. The show mainly follows Nichols' participatory mode of documentary storytelling. It consists of candid footage of Karl reacting to things and interviews with Karl by the off-screen, and often unheard, camera operators. In a sense, this puts the audience in the shoes of the camera operator as they travel with the protagonist, Karl. (Nichols 2010). The episode relevant to this thesis is the second episode of Season Two, "Trans-Siberian Express." The second season's theme is "Bucket List," so it follows Pilkington going on a series of adventures that many people often want to go on before they die. This episode sees him go on a train ride across the continent of Asia on the famous Trans-Siberian Railway. (Much of the thesis film focuses on a train ride, and the episode influenced cinematography.) Every episode starts with the comedians introducing the concept of the episode to Pilkington, who shows some reluctance before the story cuts to the destination for comedic effect. Throughout every episode of *An Idiot Abroad*, Karl is taken on special excursions to keep the plot moving for the 45-minute runtime. For example, in this episode, he is made to spend some time at a Russian bathhouse in Moscow. These excursions are not necessarily relevant for the 10-15 minute thesis film, so this analysis will mainly focus on the A-plot of the episode, the train journey itself.

The journey begins in Moscow, where Karl boards the train. Much of Karl's time spent on the train dedicates itself to describing the trip and how it feels to be on the train. According to Mikkonen, Karl's details also help the viewer feel they are on the train. The camera also plays an integral role in establishing the feeling, as there is a heavy implication through editing and context

that what the camera sees is what Karl sees. Much of the footage on the train would feel claustrophobic and somewhat flat, but the camera work remains compelling by consistently displaying the train's motion. The interviews with Karl and the candid imagery always have a window or some clue that the train is moving within the frame. This choice allows the viewer to feel some momentum – so as long as the train is moving, so is the story.

*The Endless Summer* is a 1965 documentary travel film directed by Bruce Brown. The film is often considered the iconic surfer film of the era for its imagery and subject matter. The filmmaker follows two friends, Mike Hynsen and Robert August, as they surf worldwide, following the summer weather from the Northern Hemisphere to the Tropics, to the Southern Hemisphere, and back again. One could argue that the film acts as an advertising vehicle for “surfer culture” and the best places to visit for surfing, partly because it succeeded. In that way, it is reminiscent of the National Park travel films that came before it. For this thesis, looking at how the film functions as an advertising vehicle can shine a light on how the thesis film could make its arguments persuasively.

Utilizing a polar opposite strategy to *An Idiot Abroad*, the two subjects of *The Endless Summer* do not speak throughout the film. Brown's narration provides their point of view. Usually, narration can put distance between the viewer and the film; it is typical for Nichols' expository mode in which the story is told from an outside, “objective” point of view. *The Endless Summer*, however, employs several strategies that mitigate the effect and change the relationship between the audience and the subjects. For starters, Brown's narration is notably informal and often light-hearted, even if it is outdated at points. This cordial manner of speaking adds to a sense of fun throughout the film, inviting viewers to join in. Another notable attribute of the narration is that

the narrator was on location with the subjects, changing the perspective from third-person omniscient to first-person. This change gives Brown a chance to describe the details of the journey and filmmaking process in a way that adds texture to the story that closes the distance between the viewer and the film, in line with Nichols' automatic mode. In this mode, according to Nichols, "Rather than following the filmmaker in his or her engagement with the other social actors, we now attend to the filmmaker's engagement with us, speaking not only about the historical world but about the problems and issues of representing it as well" (Nichols 2010). Relating to Mikkonen, details from the director about shooting on location better immerse the viewers into the film by pushing them to identify with the filmmaking process. When Brown describes their car breaking down or not having enough film to follow an extended surfing session, the film takes on a subjective, narrative quality that allows the viewer to feel the time and place of the story.

The final film analyzed for this thesis paper is the 2007 documentary feature, *Encounters at the End of the World*, directed by Werner Herzog. Much of the film utilizes well-constructed visuals and slow-paced cinema, similar to the original silent films that advertised the National Parks. It is similar in that this strategy makes even Antarctica's cold, uninviting hellscape look like moving works of art. These techniques are helpful for the thesis film in enticingly depicting Glacier National Park. Most of the film, however, comprises interviews with the eccentric people of the frozen landscape, with Herzog's narration providing the connective tissue that makes it into a story. Although the narration by the on-location filmmaker sounds much like *The Endless Summer*, *Encounters at the End of the World* does not follow an on-screen, third-party subject's journey but Herzog's journey to meet people chosen to live and work on the continent of Antarctica.

For this reason, the film follows Nichols' performative mode: This mode sees its narration as a performance in which observations and knowledge are presented and experienced directly by the filmmaker or the "host" of the story (Nichols 2010). In the case of this film, Herzog utilizes his famously "cold" narration as the perspective from which to introduce the audience to the interview subjects. This narration is a distinctly different choice from *The Endless Summer*. Herzog's performance is somewhat distant and uninviting; however, this film is the exception that proves the rule of subjectivity in travel stories. Engagement with the stories his interview subjects provide shuts the metaphorical gap between himself and the audience. These stories are more personal to those telling them than even *The Endless Summer*. The ones Herzog chose to include in the edit are often about how the person got to an emotional place where they would want to live in Antarctica. Their warmth and openness to Herzog displayed in the film create the relatability Mikkonen suggests is essential to a compelling travel story. These more personal, intimate stories will influence the story of the thesis film. Their anecdotes about lives that brought them to the bottom of the planet follow the same journey narratives that Mikkonen describes. While not necessarily successful in making Antarctica a place the audience would want to go to, this relatability facilitates the viewer's fantasies about being in the interviewee's scenario. It leads the viewer to desire to drop everything monotonous about their life and find an adventure of their own. One could argue that this sense of adventure is present in all three films and not by coincidence.

All three films follow a subject's journey to a faraway place. The films present linear narratives that begin at departure and end at arrival. This phenomenon is integral to placing the viewer into the time and space of the narrative. Most importantly, how they tell the story compels the audience to experience it from the subject's point of view.

## CHAPTER 5

## THE THESIS FILM

This thesis aims to create an engaging travel film that effectively advocates for a more sustainable form of travel and promotes community infrastructure projects that combat the issues presented by the current system's reliance on cars. The previous chapter looked at some examples of travel films to better illustrate the tropes that make for an engaging travel film. The analysis of those films concluded that a compelling travel film follows a linear narrative from a subjective point of view. The structure of the travel gives the linear narrative its design, and the viewer engages with the journey through the subject's experience. The aesthetics of the film should follow this subjectivity; in other words, the visuals should reflect the subject's perspective. For example, the story's momentum can represent itself through literal movement in the frame. The film may also incorporate shots that imply the subject's literal point of view. Overall, this effect should, in theory, allow the audience to engage better with the film's story and put themselves into the subject's shoes.

The thesis film follows the filmmaker, Blake Fajack, on a journey to Glacier National Park. Glacier was an obvious choice for its easy access by train and the many strategies it incorporates to mitigate the environmental impacts of cars. Since its goal was to compare and contrast the experience of train travel against car travel, principal photography started on the train; to save on costs, it also had to start from a central hub for train travel, in this case, Chicago. Train tickets from Chicago to Glacier National Park cost \$145, and the ride took around 24 hours. The production used a pre-owned Sony A7S camera and iPhone 11 (for when the A7S was inappropriate for

recording.) Sound equipment was unnecessary, as the plan was to record Fajack for voiceover, similar to *The Endless Summer* and *Encounters at the End of the World*. Lodging and rental cars were additional necessary expenses, which added to \$515 and \$480, respectively. The rental car serves as a means of transport upon arrival in the Glacier area and represents travel by car for the second half of the film. For the filmmaker to return home, principal photography required air travel, which cost another \$300. Principal photography utilized bus travel to Chicago from Cincinnati's starting point and Glacier to Bozeman to the airport. These bus tickets combined cost around \$200. The shoot also required an additional \$200 for food and other expenses. Overall, travel and lodging for the trip cost roughly \$1,700. Principal photography started on Sunday, June 19th, 2022, in Chicago and continued through Friday, June 24th, in Bozeman. The train departed on the 19th and arrived in Glacier on the 20th. The timetable spent the 21st and 22nd shooting on location in Glacier and the surrounding area. The 23rd was spent in Bozeman when the airplane departed early on the 24th.

Principal photography began in Chicago and only required a few shots in the area from the a7S, but additional shots were collected as needed by the iPhone. Shooting started in earnest on the train. To emulate *An Idiot Abroad*, Fajack spent his time on the train collecting shots to approximate what he was experiencing throughout the ride, often paying significant attention to the train's movement. Fajack was sure to give special attention to collecting landscape shots as the train arrived in Glacier National Park. The next day, utilizing the rental car, Fajack drove south to collect footage of a significant wildlife crossing bridge. On the way, he collected footage of a black bear recently hit by a car. He spent the afternoon collecting additional footage in the park. He spent the following day collecting footage in the park into the afternoon. Transit made up most of the

schedule for the rest of the afternoon and the next day. Fajack occasionally collected footage on the iPhone throughout this portion of the trip, and the final morning, as the film required a few shots of the airplane taking off.

Due to weather conditions, much of the park was closed off during principal photography, so a plan for a secondary photography trip began for the weekend of October 8th through October 9th. Lodging totaled around \$85. According to Montana.gov, fuel prices across the state averaged about \$3.18 per gallon that week, meaning the gas budget for the 600-800 mile road trip was around \$125. An annual park pass used to enter the park during principal photography had expired, so a \$35 entrance fee was added to the budget. All those expenses, plus a \$50 food budget, added to a \$295 budget for the weekend. The resulting shoot went well. Fajack used the day in the park to collect some much-needed footage of the East side, which is more crowded and sees more traffic.

At the end of secondary photography, the narrative became apparent. The film opened in Chicago, as Fajack described his experience boarding the train. The first half of the film is about the train. He explained the film's premise and gave a first-hand account of his experience riding the train. He talked about how everyone used to ride the train and how it has fallen out of fashion. He went into how the train is an enjoyable way to travel. As he arrived in the park, he argued how the train enriched the experience. The film's second half is about how cars interact with the park. It follows him as he drives around the area. Once he goes over how the roads impact the park, he then goes into how the park and community combat the impacts. He conveyed his experience of seeing the wildlife crossing and argued how it helps the environment. At the climax of the story, he discovers the bear. He talked about his feelings about seeing the animal's corpse and his worry

about how the crossing might not be enough. Finally, the film follows Fajack as he boards the plane, where he turns the camera out the window towards the landscape below. He discussed how more could be done on the landscape level to save the animals and leave with hope for a brighter future.

The ideal scenario for the thesis film is to channel engagement into a proposed phenomenon that Jane Gaines calls “political mimesis” in her essay of the same name (Gaines & Renov 1999). According to Gaines, political mimesis is a theoretical phenomenon in which the politics of a story (in this case, a documentary) influence the audience to adopt new political opinions. In the same way that horror makes one jump, drama makes one cry, or comedies make one laugh, political mimesis is a proposal of what an advocacy documentary intends the audience to do. Although Gaines believes political mimesis to be a fantasy, she also views it as a goal that documentary filmmakers strive to achieve. In some ways, one could say that the original documentaries produced for the national parks created political mimesis to visit and advocate for more national parks; however, actual political mimesis is different in some fundamental ways. In Gaines’ essay, she proposes that the imagery of films that theoretically could find mimesis often has a visceral, almost violent, quality to them, or, in her words, “scenes of rioting, images of bodies clashing, of bodies moving as a mass,” images of sensuous struggle. Gaines posits that filmmakers “use images of bodies in struggle because they want audiences to carry on that same struggle.” In an extension of Mikkonen’s thoughts on the travel film, the engagement with the story depends on how it invites the audience to imagine how it feels to be there. Appealing to the subject’s senses will not only invite the audience to engage with the film but, as these writings suggest, invites them to mimic it.

For this documentary, the goals are to invite the audience to engage with Fajack's journey and, ideally, to influence their opinions to become a preference for alternate modes of travel and a desire for more environmentally conscious infrastructure. The film's narrative gives examples of alternative modes of travel and environmentally conscious infrastructure and argues for their benefit. To be engaging, though, depends on the execution of the film. Originally the plan for the film was to be more like *An Idiot Abroad*, with another party filming Fajack as the subject. Unfortunately, assistant camera people were unavailable due to many factors, such as extreme weather events in Montana during principal photography. In attempts to resolve this problem, the plan was to feature voiceover narration by Fajack, but in the first cut, he found that it could have been more engaging, based on the writings of Mikkonen. Although *The Endless Summer* and *Encounters at the End of the World* managed to pull off narration from the subjective perspective, Fajack was not as experienced as Brown or Herzog were with voiceover narration.

The decision to remedy this issue was to tell the story of the trip using narration recorded in an interview format. Prepared questions guided the conversation to replicate the main talking points of the prewritten narration. Fajack's responses were cut from the interview to construct the film's voiceover. The purpose of this idea was to allow the subject to sound more natural talking to someone else in the room than alone in a sound booth. The decision was necessary because the subject's relatability was imperative for the audience to engage with the film.

A critical issue with the film is that decisions in constructing the documentary cannot remedy the lack of animals in the footage. Despite significant efforts, neither trip to Glacier National Park yielded much in the way of wildlife. Outside of the dead bear, an excellent addition to the climax in line with Gaines' idea of visceral imagery, there is no footage of the animals

struggling with the highway system. Archival footage may prove helpful, but the lack creates doubts that it will be as effective even if footage of the animals in Glacier existed. Any archival footage will not be part of the trip's narrative, thus taking the audience out of the story. Overall, this documentary meets many of the film's goals, but there were unavoidable setbacks, which there were attempts to compensate for, but they may prevent the film from meeting all its goals.

## CHAPTER 6

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this thesis analyzed the state of transportation within the tourism industry to national parks in the United States. Starting from square one, we looked at how the turn of the 20th century saw the rise of national parks, automobiles, and motion pictures and how the three industries that arose from those inventions became intertwined. We looked at how national parks became popularized by films commissioned from the rail industry. As roadways became popularized, the National Parks Service found an endless balancing act between their two goals: maximizing park access and conservation. From there, we determined the significant impacts roads and drivers cause on ecosystems. Studies showed that roadways had five effects: direct habitat loss, wildlife collisions, the barrier effect, disturbance, and pollution.

The thesis film demonstrated that the Parks Service and surrounding communities could combat these effects through avoidance, mitigation, and solutions or combatting them. The thesis film presented the problems roads created for the parks and the solutions for fighting them. The goal is to advocate sustainable forms of travel and promote community infrastructure projects that make current forms of travel more sustainable.

This thesis paper looked at three travel films to design a thesis film to see what makes them effective. The three films were Season 2 Episode 2 of *An Idiot Abroad*, entitled “Trans-Siberian Express,” the 1965 documentary feature, *The Endless Summer*, and the 2007 documentary feature, *Encounters at the End of the World*. Despite differences in presentation, the three documentaries all had two things in common: a subjective point of view and a linear narrative structure built upon

the scaffolding of the journey. Essays on the subject corroborated this observation, saying that subjectivity and linear narratives are what engage the viewer with travel films. The nature of these qualities hooks the viewer into the time and space of the film. The readings suggest that engaging the audience with the documentary can prime them to agree with the film's message and motivate them to mimic the events. With this in mind, the construction of the thesis film was subjective and linear to replicate the tropes in the example travel films. While the resulting film does the job it set out to do, future attempts at similar films would be more effective if the subject was more in front of the camera. There would be more time to obtain footage showing how wildlife interacts with transportation.

Regarding the future of national park infrastructure, the author of this thesis hopes that the country puts more resources into public transportation to and around the national parks. He also hopes communities contribute to projects that create wildlife crossings above and under existing highways and roadways. Then, finally, there will be the establishment of wildlife corridors to connect the country's national parks so that animals can freely move across the landscape. If all these hopes come true, following avoidance, mitigation, and compensation, then there may come a day when parks can sufficiently balance their goals.

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