

THE SMELL OF CEDARS STEEPED IN RAIN:
A HISTORY OF FILM AND THE
NATIONAL PARKS

by

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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 2015

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DEDICATION

For my parents

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ABSTRACT

The national park system reflects a defining aspect of American identity: a fundamental connection to nature. In many ways the history of the national park system is a history of American attitudes toward wilderness and nature. Art and artists have played a crucial role in that history, particularly writers, photographers, and painters. However, the nonfiction films that portray the national parks are mostly educational in nature, and too often fall short of the joyful representations that celebrated painters, writers, and photographers have created for and in the parks. I propose a less interpretive, more immersive model for national park films.

INTRODUCTION

The United States was the first nation to codify as law the idea of public lands, of wildlife and other natural resources as belonging to all citizens and held in a public trust by the government (Organ, p. 2). These resources belong to all Americans, their pleasures and keeping are their birthright. The democratization of nature is thus bred into the national character, and it is unsurprising - perhaps even inevitable - that a nation of farmers, frontiersmen, transcendentalists and flower children would be the birthplace of “America’s Best Idea,” the world’s first system of national parks (Duncan).

The parks, which John Muir called “places to play in and pray in” and which Edward Abbey said help guarantee freedom from tyranny, represent a defining aspect of the American identity: a fundamental connection to nature, and the attitudes derived from that bond¹. From its inception, the policies of the national park system have been a mirror of these attitudes, even as they have changed and evolved.

I am speaking here of attitudes that essentially date to the settlement of Europeans in North America. Pre-Columbian America was also a land of people closely connected to nature, an indigenous population whose daily lives and spirituality were utterly ecological. The “American Identity” I refer to here is, more accurately, European-American identity. In several instances, native populations were actually forcibly displaced from newly established national park land which they had occupied for

¹ “Suppose we were planning to impose a dictatorial regime on the American people – the following preparations would be essential: ...*Raze the wilderness*. Dam the rivers, flood the canyons, drain the swamps, log the forests, strip-mine the hills bulldoze the mountains, irrigate the deserts and improve the national parks into national parking lots.” (Abbey, p. 117-118)

centuries or longer (Vernizzi). Thus marginalized and otherwise tragically mistreated or simply annihilated, native voices would not be a part of the national parks discussion until the mid-20th century.

Writers like Abbey, Muir, and Terry Tempest Williams, along with celebrated visual artists including the Hudson River School, Ansel Adams, and Georgia O'Keeffe, celebrate the national parks in their work. Indeed, several parks owe their existence to painters and photographers sent their work to presidents and congresses before California was a few hours' plane ride from Washington D.C. Art was instrumental in the designation of Kings Canyon, Yellowstone, Acadia, and Yosemite National Parks. The National Park Service is cognizant of this legacy of artistic support and its benefits, and to this day a majority of parks offer artist-in-residence programs which allow artists to live and make art in the park for free, in exchange for the use of the art created during the artist's stay.

While literary, photographic, and painted homages to parks are popular and even iconic, few films have been successful at capturing what it is Americans so value about these special places. The nonfiction films which depict the national parks are mostly educational or government-funded or both. Neither is a bad thing in and of itself, but too often, in practice, these films tend to be didactic and aggressively neutral. The parks are incredible living classrooms, and the fact the federal government runs and funds them for public use is part of what makes them remarkable. Nonetheless, a black and white view of moonrise over Half Dome, or a beautiful passage written about springtime in Arches,

move us because they allow us to simply experience their subjects, without telling us how or why we should. The films often unnecessarily tell more than they show.

Susan Sontag wrote in *Against Interpretation*, “In good films, there is always a directness that entirely frees us from the itch to interpret” (Sontag, p. 6). I argue that films which are, themselves, interpretive - those films whose agenda is to explain, to educate – although valuable, may undercut what is most precious about the national parks, which is the very experience of them. I propose that the genre of national park films should evolve to include more evocative, experiential representations of the parks.

In this era of digital information, video is an increasingly dominant medium. It is time that national park films take their place alongside painting, photography, and literature as one more art form which, in its celebration of parks, does what the parks themselves were designed to do: lets us connect to the part of our American identity that finds exultation in nature; the part that is earthy, if not earthbound.

EARLY DAYS OF THE NATIONAL PARKS

National park films are a reflection of the history of the national parks, which is itself a reflection of the American relationship to wilderness. “Wilderness,” wrote Roderick Frazier Nash, “was the basic ingredient of American culture. From the materials of the physical wilderness, Americans built a civilization. With the idea of wilderness, they sought to give their civilization identity and meaning” (Nash xii). Americans relate uniquely to their land, and as such, throughout its history the country’s land and natural resource policies have often been the first of their kind, particularly the public trust doctrine of wild lands and wildlife (Organ, p.1-2). The creation of a national park system was one such innovation. Called by Wallace Stegner “the best idea we ever had,” the national parks would become beloved piece of the American legacy, and a model for systems in nearly one hundred other countries (National Parks Worldwide).

When Yellowstone became the world’s first national park in 1872, and later, in 1916 when the Organic Act created the National Park Service and defined its mission, Nash’s “wilderness ingredient” was fully incorporated into the national identity. In between these two landmark decisions, in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner made the argument that continuous westward advancement on the American frontier set the nation apart from the rest of the world, on both a political and personal level. As a nation, “The frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy.” As individuals, “this perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character” (Turner).

For most of the century preceding Turner's thesis, artists such as George Catlin, Thomas Cole, and Cole's followers in the Hudson River School had been portraying the American wilderness as imbued with certain virtues the country's citizens considered admirable: "truth, beauty, independence and democracy. In the natural world, people could come close to the lost innocence of their origins. Europe could not compare when America had such a vast expanse of wilderness" (Chambon-Pernet).

Meanwhile, novelists of the early 19th century, notably James Fenimore Cooper, popularized stories of frontiersman-heroes. "For these writers," historian Mireille Chambon-Pernet writes, "nature also came to represent what was real, concrete, and unpretentious, which may be summed up as the essence of the American character." Chambon-Pernet cites Muir, who wrote that glaciers, avalanches and torrents are "the pens with which Nature produces written characters most like our own," as a perfect example of the idea that American identity is intrinsically correlated to American wilderness.

American transcendentalist writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were contemporaries of Cooper, and their writings at least as influential. To John Muir, Emerson was a personal hero and friend. They met in Yosemite in 1871 (after Yosemite had been designated but before the Organic Act created an integrated system of national parks), where Muir invited Emerson to spend the night under the trees, saying, "You are yourself a sequoia. Stop and get acquainted with your big brethren." Emerson was elderly and his traveling companions wouldn't allow him to accept Muir's invitation, but both men remembered the encounter as significant and held each other in

high esteem (Duncan, p. 19). For the transcendentalists, divinity could be seen best in nature. “At the gates of the forest,” Emerson preached, “...here is sanctity which shames our religions, and reality which discredits our heroes. Here we find Nature to be the circumstance which dwarfs every other circumstance...” (Duncan, 11).

With this ideological foundation in place, Americans were eager to identify with Turner’s image of them as an independent people forged in wilderness. The Frontier Thesis was enthusiastically received and quickly incorporated into American history curricula, and within a quarter century the national park system was incorporated into the American landscape (Bogue, 195).

Given the value that so many luminaries had placed on authentic, immersive experiences of nature, one might expect the new national parks to have been minimally managed, so that visitors could “rough it.” This was not the case. Robert B. Keiter, an author, professor of law and director of the Wallace Stegner Center of Land, Resources, and the Environment, writes:

“Throughout much of its early history, the Park Service actively sought to control nature, primarily to improve the visitor experience. Park officials routinely suppressed all wildfires to protect the scenery, eradicated wolves and other major predators to safeguard more desirable wildlife, fed the bears to create an evening spectacle for park visitors, and constructed hotels and roads near attractive venues without regard to the environmental effect. According to the Park Service’s own historian, the agency was practicing ‘facade management,’ not ecological conservation.” (Keiter, ch. 1)

This management strategy seems designed to provide a park experience that was more Edenic than authentic. The nation seemed to have finally manifested its destiny, and its citizens were suddenly missing the space, the wildness, of a frontier yet

unsubdued. In an increasingly industrialized America, the parks were a pastoral refuge for those inclined to meditate on nature.

The “façade management” approach might seem misguided from a modern perspective, but it was the first time a government had attempted to create what Thoreau called “little oases of wildness in the desert of our civilization” for public enjoyment. The public obliged. Muir observed that “Overcivilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home” (Muir, p. 1).

FILMS OF THE EARLY PARKS

Since its inception, artistic luminaries have celebrated the sites of the National Park System. Film is only the latest in a long tradition of artistic media to pay homage to the national parks. The early national park films set a very specific tone in relation to the parks: reverent. Their omniscient narrators left no doubt that the sweeping grandeur of the National Parks was to be described in superlatives and treated as nothing less than holy. Paradoxically, this didactic approach may not actually allow the viewer to experience the park on a personal level, and find that reverence for him or herself.

The introduction to “Scenic Glacier National Park,” a silent film tour made in the 1920s, is a title screen that declares, “Most of us at times feel a primitive, ancestral urge to flee our humdrum existence and seek high adventure in the wilderness.” When visitors dressed for a safari stride purposefully across the porch of a lodge, the titles inform us that “Here the traveler sets forth to learn the secrets of the mountains,” and we see the adventurers ride horses, cook over a campfire, and dine beside the lake. Without benefit of color, synch sound, or even music, the film rests thoughtfully on the grandeur of waterfalls, glaciers, high peaks, sunset, and moonrise.

A 1942 film about the “trifecta of canyons,” “Bryce-Zion-Grand Canyon,” opens with footage of trains bringing visitors to see the parks. “Streamlined transportation links great cities with the Utah-Arizona wonderlands... Today, explorers ride in comfort where once pioneers blazed the trail,” the intertitles explain. The film goes on to refer again and again to park formations and landmarks, which evoke none-too-subtle Christian imagery: “Great cathedrals and Gothic towers as seen from Sunset Point,” we are told, and “This

majestic peak was named ‘Angel’s Landing’ by devout pioneers.” Other features, we are told, are called “The Divine Abyss” or were “known to the Indians as ‘the road to heaven.’” Meanwhile, we see happy visitors enjoying these divine views while sharing binoculars, riding horses, and relaxing beneath a tree to do some sketching.

In “Falling Waters of Yosemite,” a 1950s “Travelette” short, the first title gets right to the point: “The valley of Yosemite. Nowhere else on earth can there be found such a glorious array of waterfalls in so concentrated an area.” This place is not just beautiful, the film tells us it is also unique. Remarkable. As images of the many waterfalls appear onscreen, the titles give each one a character. One is “Staid, orderly, graceful, easy-going.” Another is “a vision of loveliness, power unrestrained.” Poetic and liberal with the superlatives, titles take us from one beautiful waterfall – in exciting color! – to the next. As often as not, a lone hiker or horseman will appear in the frame, gazing reverently at the mighty waters.

Preserved here and there in online archives, there is little record of the circumstances under which these early national park films were made. Amber Kodges, a National Park Service film and video technician, suggests that these early films “were often produced to ‘market’ a park and may have shown at movie theaters to encourage the public to make the trek to the resource” (personal communication, April 20th, 2015). In other words, the films sought mainly to inform Americans about the beauty of the parks, and attract them to visit. They were dynamic travel brochures, showcasing not only the impressive natural beauty of their subject matter, but also the ease and comfort with which visitors could access these incredible places. The parks were wild and beautiful,

and they were ripe to be enjoyed. During World War II, when “Bryce-Zion-Grand Canyon” was produced, park visitation was in decline (Keiter). It was in the parks’ interest to attract visitors by making the parks as appealing as possible.

This approach is very much in keeping with the park agendas and policies of the day:

“To attract visitors to these out-of-the-way venues and to accommodate the arrival of the automobile, the Park Service was intent on taming, not preserving, the wilderness, which meant building new roads, lodges, campgrounds, and the like. In short order, the Park Service transformed these wilderness settings—in roughly equal measures—into inviting tourist destinations and outdoor playgrounds, places where people came to view stunning natural wonders and to play among them. Wild nature was tamed, rendered accessible, and put on display.” (Keiter, ch. 11)

Stephen Mather, the first director of the National Park Service, believed the best way to maintain the new parks was to “invite the public to visit these wondrous settings, believing that park visitors would develop a special appreciation for these special places and could then be rallied to defend them” (Keiter). The park system was new not only for the United States, but unique in the world, and Mather was charged with finding a way to make it sustainable. The Organic Act was an extraordinary piece of legislation, but its central mission was a dialectic made law: to somehow both preserve the parks and make them accessible for public enjoyment. In the first fifty years of the Act’s existence, public enjoyment was leaving preservation in the dust. Savvy park managers like Mather recognized that without public investment, preservation of any kind might be impossible to sustain.

A NEW ERA FOR PARKS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Keiter notes, “In the aftermath of World War II, however, a second era unfolded [for the parks], one driven by an emerging appreciation for science and the demands of industrial tourism.” The shift from railroad to automobile, and especially the newfound respect for the sciences, would have direct and indirect effects on the parks and their policies. The culmination of this postwar period, the 1960s, saw a massive cultural shift in American attitudes toward the environment. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, was an eloquent wake-up call based in environmental science. It brought the devastating effects of the pesticide DDT to the public’s attention, but it was much more than a simple case study. According to the Natural Resource Defense Council, “The most important legacy of *Silent Spring*, though, was a new public awareness that nature was vulnerable to human intervention,” and that there was a moral imperative for humans to take responsibility for what we did to the natural world. With her book, Rachel Carson “set the stage for the environmental movement” (NRDC).

It was a time of change for the policies and management of the national parks, as well. Zoologist and forester A. Starker Leopold (son of Aldo Leopold, author of the seminal *A Sand County Almanac* and widely considered to be the father of modern conservation) was appointed to head a Special Committee on Wildlife Management, and the resulting “Leopold Report” would become a seminal document, more influential than any other since the Organic Act of 1916:

“...in response to the influential Leopold report, the Park Service embraced the idea that the national parks should be managed to represent a ‘vignette of primitive America.’ Such management meant allowing fires, predation, and

other natural processes to operate with minimal human interference so as to maintain a more historically representative ecological condition. Paradoxically, it also contemplated more human intervention to achieve restoration goals, including the use of controlled burns, the transplantation of missing predators, and the removal of dams that blocked free-flowing rivers and other natural processes.” (Keiter, ch. 1)

The Leopold Report itself states explicitly, “The goal of managing the national parks and monuments should be to preserve, or where necessary to recreate, the ecologic scene as viewed by the first European visitors. As part of this scene, native species of wild animals should be present in maximum variety and reasonable abundance” (Leopold). This was a revolutionary change for the National Park Service, but only five years later a report of a different sort would make it look tame.

In *Desert Solitaire*, Edward Abbey’s reminiscences of his time as a ranger for the NPS at Arches, Abbey called for:

“No more cars in national parks. Let the people walk... We have agreed not to drive our automobiles into cathedrals, concert halls, art museums, legislative assemblies, private bedrooms and the other sanctums of our culture; we should treat our national parks with the same deference, for they, too, are holy places.”

The NPS has yet to heed this suggestion, but it has overhauled its policies in light of the Leopold Report. *Desert Solitaire*, with its vivid imagery and eco-heathen spirituality, has taken its place in the conservationist canon. Abbey, with Henry David Thoreau, was described by Susan M. Lucas as “two of the most vehement, influential voices to inspire environmental activism” (Schneider).

By the 1970s, Americans were looking at the environment very differently. A decade after *Silent Spring*, the nation had entered an era of Clean Air and Water Acts, the

first Earth Day, and the now infamous “crying chief” public service announcement made by nonprofit Keep America Beautiful (Fig. 1).

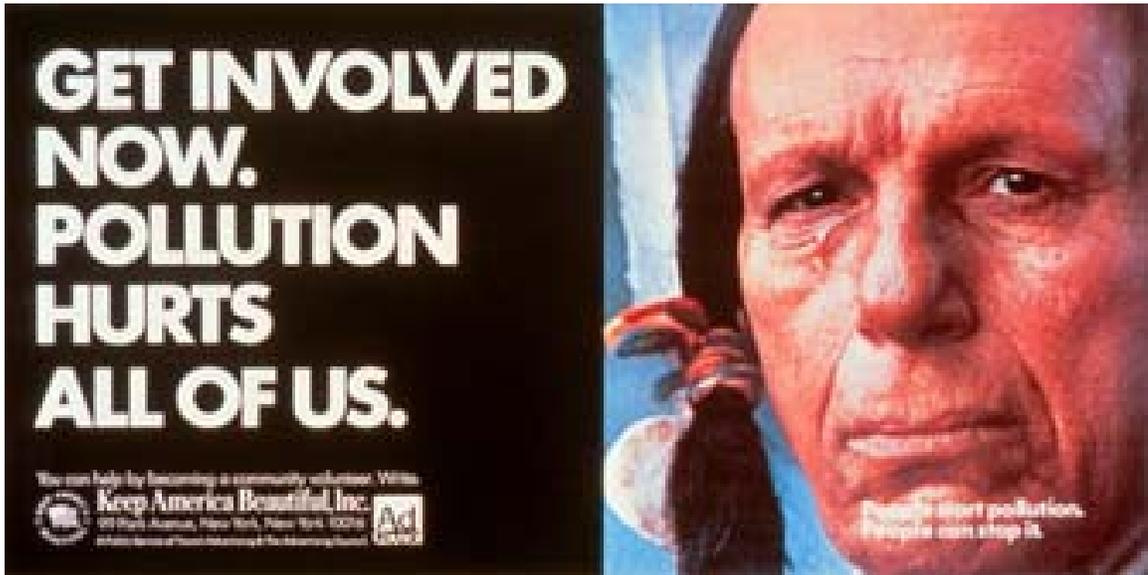


Figure 1, “the Crying Chief” of the Keep America Beautiful PSA. Marsteller, Inc. N.d. Television

Gary Snyder, the “Poet laureate of Deep Ecology,” won a Pulitzer Prize in 1975 for *Turtle Island*, a book of poems and essays on humans living in harmony with wild nature (Kopecký). Snyder was inspired by his own work as a fire lookout in North Cascades and on a trail crew in Yosemite National Park, as well as his study of Zen Buddhism and Native American peoples (Poetry Foundation, web). Concern for the environment was popularly associated with returning to a respectful, intimately connected relationship with the earth and a particular construction of Native American spirituality. The National Park films of the 1970s were no exception.

In *Fantastic Yellowstone*, produced in 1978 by Tim Radford, an omniscient narrator has replaced the intertitles of decades past, but his tone of reverences is

unmistakably the same: “In this unique wonderland, there are countless hot springs of all sizes and shapes. All are distinctly beautiful.” While his references to “scenic wonders” and “phenomenal wilderness areas” could have come from any park film in the preceding fifty years, his focus has shifted.

Where films of years past focused heavily on the pleasures parks offered to visitors, two new themes have taken the place of tourism: conservation and history. There is even a clip, used for comic effect, from a much earlier Yellowstone film, called *Senator Miles of Montana Feeding An Elk*. The playful tone of the film seems to invite us to laugh at the clip, as if to say, Look how far we’ve come!

The narrator intones that, “The early settlers of the New World had little thought for parks or preservation,” but that “Poets and painters realized that America’s scenic treasures were not infinite or inexhaustible.” He goes on to disparagingly recount the suppression of wilderness in the name of “Progress” before noting that at least “Yellowstone, remote and inhospitable, had survived.” At a time when public concern had suddenly caught up with vanishing wilderness, the film positions Yellowstone (and all National Parks) as an oasis, a place where we can actively go and enjoy the thing we are so afraid of losing.

An unidentified Native American voice replaces the narrator, saying, “All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Even the white man cannot be exempt from the common destiny...this we know: The earth does not belong to man. Man belongs to the earth.” On the screen, a lone hiker reaches a summit

and stands there, silhouetted against a blazing orange sunset. The park, we are given to understand, is the perfect place to re-connect to nature on a deep and spiritual level.

Our narrator returns to assure us that the National Parks “continue to reveal the beauty of Thoreau, provide the adventure of Colter, and, as Muir promised, they have become sanctuaries for urbanized America.”² Not only are parks a safe haven for nature, they are also a place connect to our history...at least the most romantic parts of it.

A film from the same era, *Oklahoma Oasis*, features the same Native American voice, but he is identified this time as Chief Dan George (poet, author, and actor nominated for an Academy Award for his supporting role in the film *Little Big Man*). *Oklahoma Oasis*, directed by Kenneth A. Meyer in 1974 tells the history of Platt National Park. “You are the life of all things,” George says, addressing Mother Earth in prayer. The film focuses heavily on the superior land ethic of the native people who came first, and on returning the area to an earlier, *better* state: “While the Indians did not greatly disturb the land, the white man...felt that they must conquer and dominate the wilderness, and that undeveloped land was wasted land...this land was to remain as the Indian had known and loved it. Under careful supervision, the area was gradually restored to its natural state.”

Like *Fantastic Yellowstone*, *Oklahoma Oasis* positions its park as a retreat from the stress of urban life: “As the pressures of the modern world steadily increase, this land is a source of tranquility for people seeking the restoring power of nature,” the narrator tells us, while in the background a soprano has gone into yet another soaring aria. The

² John Colter, a member of the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery and the first European to visit and describe Yellowstone (Duncan, 24).

tone has shifted from the early films, which seemed to say “Come to the rugged National Park and stay in comfort!” to the films from the 1970s and after, which promised visitors would find in the parks a fulfilling, revitalizing respite from the malaise of being urban and removed from nature.

Visitors have appreciated the parks in many ways over the years – as vacation destinations, monuments to nature (to borrow a phrase from Neil Young’s “Natural Beauty”), wildlife preserves, and neighbors both good and bad (Young, 1992). A survey of National Park vacationers from 1975 stated, “The average auto-vacationer considers scenery, a general lack of people-oriented and industrial congestion, and a pleasant climate to be the three most important attributes of an ideal summertime destination area.” (Mayo, p.1). The author notes that, “In terms of scenery, congestion, and climate, the National Parks enjoy a very strong image” (Mayo, p. 3). Very notably, “Attraction to National Parks as a vacation destination was stronger among better-educated and higher-income tourists” (Mayo, p. 4). The study also found National Parks visitors to be adventurous, outdoorsy, impulsive, action-oriented and escapist (Mayo, p. 5).

Visitors continued to see the parks as places of both respite and inspiration, a proud aspect of our country’s heritage...until now. In the last three decades, park visitation has suffered a continuous decline (Pergams, and Zaradic 387-393). With an unprecedented and ever-expanding variety of entertainment options becoming available in our own homes, more people are choosing to stay home and skip the National Park trip every year.

The parks, some of which have seen heavy visitation for over a century, may need the break, but the decline in visitation is troubling because people who have direct contact with nature and wilderness areas has been correlated with environmentally responsible behavior and valuing wilderness (Pergams, and Zaradic 387-393). The decline could also hurt communities near the parks whose economies rely on tourism. When asked what is the biggest challenge the parks will face, Scott Silver, of a nonprofit called Wild Wilderness, said, “The parks have become the anchor stores, so to speak - bringing business to gateway communities. But the parks are not anchor stores; they're an anchor to our traditions, our heritage. National parks are America's equivalent of Europe's cathedrals” (Flax).

Since the 1970s, film technology has evolved tremendously, but the tone and message of National Park films has changed little. It did become passé for non-Native filmmakers to invoke Native American spirituality when describing their own conservation ethics (probably because it was reductionist and offensive), but the mainstays of history and conservation as central themes is unchanged to this day.³

Grand Canyon Adventure 3D: River At Risk uses 3D technology to put a new look on the old model, giving audiences the incredible visuals and conservation messages they have come to expect (as well as perhaps a headache). Interpretive films used in the parks themselves, such as *A Very Special Place* from Assateague National Seashore and *Cataloochee – Center of the World* from Great Smoky Mountains National Park are true

³ For a thoughtfully executed film that gives its full attention to Native perspectives on the land that became Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks, see *Before They Were Parks* by Charles Dye.

to the model as well. The distant, awe-struck tone of every park film since the beginning remains, unquestioned, but this perspective is now presented with an eye to history and conservation, rather than beautiful landscapes, escapism, and tourism only.

Any discussion of national park films would be incomplete without mention of the Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan project *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*. Burns and Duncan's miniseries for PBS is a departure from the national park films that came before it in many ways, most notably breadth. Twelve hours, divided into six episodes of two hours each, allow for an almost encyclopedic retrospective on the national park system's founding and development, the people who influenced it and the ways it has become a part of America's continuing legacy.

America's Best Idea expands on the national park film model in Burns' trademark style. He combines the by now familiar majestic live footage of parks with art works from the early days of the parks, as well as his characteristic pans and zooms on archival photographs. Writer, actor, and sometime anarchist mime Peter Coyote serves ably as the obligatory omniscient narrator, but his is not the only voice telling this story. A whole host of actors, including Tom Hanks, Andy Garcia, Sam Waterston, and George Takei lend their voices to the words of the artists, naturalists, presidents, and park leaders who played important roles in the history of the national parks.

Where other national park films have primarily been travelogues, Burns and Duncan's series is an account of the park system's history. "We were most interested," Burns writes, "in following the individuals and ideas that have created this uniquely American thing called the national parks, an invention we now take for granted like the

air that we breathe, the water we drink.” In telling the story of how the parks came to be and what they represent, Burns and Duncan remind viewers of how passionate people from all walks of life have helped to shape the park system that is so integral to American identity. They allow the audience to see, through the lives of these millionaires and immigrants and everyone in between, that the national parks are precious because they speak to something kindred in all of us, however different we may appear.

America's Best Idea is impressively successful as a series. It is engaging and informative, was wildly popular and won two Emmy awards. It was invaluable in research for this thesis, and is an inspiring work in its own right. I do not contest its value, nor the value of informative films about the national parks. I do propose that the value of the parks is multidimensional, and that films that reflect the less tangible, more intuitive appeals of the parks would be equally valuable, if only someone would make them.

INTERPRETATION VS. ART

The purpose of the Organic Act was as follows: “The fundamental purpose of the parks is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” History and conservation are central to the mission of the NPS, but if future generations are to enjoy them, they have to *want to*.

Every film that I surveyed was in the same tone: authoritative and somewhat impersonal toward the viewer, while reverent toward the parks themselves. While I find the attitude of respect and appreciation in the films to be entirely appropriate to their sublime subject matter, it risks keeping visitors from feeling empowered to form a closer personal relationship to these places which, after all, belong to all of us. Worse yet, the punctilious, lofty, and old-fashioned tone of a classic natural history documentary may alienate or bore viewers, especially younger ones.

To keep people engaged with their National Parks, with all the wildlife, natural and cultural history, and recreation that come with them, the parks need to stay relevant. Too often when a park makes the news, it is because of disputes with civilians who live just outside of its borders (as with wolves and bison in Yellowstone), or worse yet, because of visitors dying in one grisly manner or another. Some parks, however, are finding other ways to keep us interested. Several larger National Parks have created video podcasts in which we can meet rangers and learn about the kinds of scientific research they are doing.

There are several strategies which might make interpretive national park films and short videos more appealing. Humor could make them more accessible and appealing, especially to young people. A decade of YouTube has taught me that animals make the best comedians, especially because they take themselves so seriously. Almost as ripe for comedy is the behavior of park visitors, which I think could be used – *very gently* – in a film about how to safely and respectfully enjoy the park.

Delta Airlines has created an extremely successful model for such a video, with a series of inflight safety videos so funny they have become popular on YouTube. The important point here is that people are, in their leisure time, *choosing* to watch an inflight safety video. For entertainment. It might be important to remember here what Mike O’Toole of Forbes advises would-be innovators:

“Conventional wisdom and not-supposed-tos exist for a reason. But beware of being cowed by them. We’re all habituated to communications borne of conventional wisdom. As study after study shows, we literally don’t see things—workplace safety signs, ads, in-flight videos—that look like everything else. Our brain shuts them out. So take a look at the Delta video and think about how you can be the one to do something unconventional in your company, or in your industry.”

I would like to see films that delight by subverting expectations screened in visitor’s centers, where they could set up travellers to see the parks not just spectacular, but also *fun*.

Parks are also an amazing place to learn about science, and park rangers tend to be almost as charismatic as the other megafauna, and much more accessible. Science lessons, taught by the rangers who know them well, could be adapted into films that are

suitable to be used in school science classes, allowing students to begin to understand and appreciate parks before going to explore the parks for themselves.

Beyond finding ways to make interpretive park films more effective, I propose that national park films need not *be* interpretive at all, at least in the sense that they have been in the past, that is, films that have told rather than shown why their audience should value and visit a national park. For my purposes I have attempted to apply the ideas of *Against Criticism* to national park films as if the parks, themselves, are works of art, and the films interpretations of that art. I am not actually convinced that the national park system is a vast, collaborative, constantly-evolving art installation (performance and mixed media), and if it is, that is someone else's thesis⁴. I do find that the principles of *Against Criticism* apply rather elegantly anyway. For example, Sontag writes:

“Interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there. This cannot be taken for granted, now...What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more. Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all. The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art - and, by analogy, our own experience - more, rather than less, real to us.” (Sontag, 7-8)

At one point or another, John Muir, Edward Abbey, John Muir, Ken Burns, and Gary Snyder have all gotten around to describing the national park experience in spiritual terms. To make that experience, as Sontag says, more real, a film would have to be radically different. One way to accomplish this is to forego narration completely.

⁴ Possibly James D. Proctor's *The Social Construction of Nature: Relativist Accusations, Pragmatist and Critical Realist Responses*

The wonderful thing about the National Parks is that the scenery really can speak for itself. Ansel Adams wrote, “A true photograph need not be explained, nor can it be contained in words,” and this is nowhere truer than in the national parks. These are some of the most gorgeous natural landscapes in the world, but beyond that, the appeal of a park to many people is the space, the quiet. A film can respect that, and I have attempted to make one that does.

MY THESIS FILM

My thesis film, *The Smell of Cedars Steeped in Rain*, has no words. In the tradition of *Samsara*, *Baraka*, *Winged Migration* and *Microcosmos*, this portrait of a park in its off-season repose invites the viewer to make his own conclusions, to invent her own story, and in so doing to begin to form a personal connection to the film's subject, Olympic National Park. I cannot overstate the importance of this personal connection. The father of conservation himself (and father to the author of the Leopold Report), Aldo Leopold, wrote in *A Sand County Almanac*, "We abuse the land because we see it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see the land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect." Simply put, a deep personal connection to the natural world is the foundation for a lifetime of conservation.

Sontag asks, "What would criticism look like that would serve the work of art, not usurp its place?" She answers, "What is needed, first, is more attention to form in art. If excessive stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more thorough descriptions of form would silence...Equally valuable would be acts of criticism which would supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art...which reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it"(Sontag, p. 6-7). In making this film I have tried to answer the question, what kind of film would *serve* this national park? I have tried to make a film that gives respect to the beauty found in nature by simply showing it, without excuse or explanation.

I chose to make my thesis movie without any words for several reasons. First, I find that an authoritative narrator may actually be an obstacle to a viewer forming a

personal connection to a place. Even an excellent narrator still functions as an intermediary, interpreting the place for the viewer rather than allowing her to make up her own mind. What happens when they disagree? Part of the transcendent nature experience is the ‘transparent eyeball’ phase described by Emerson in his *Nature Addresses and Lectures*: “Standing on the bare ground, - my head bathed in the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all...” This total erasure of the self is hard enough to achieve alone; it would take a very practiced mind indeed, not to mention the will to do so, to erase not only oneself, but another person as well.

I also chose to forego words in order to allow the audience to focus more on the languages of music and cinematography. Words are so much less ambiguous (relatively speaking), a viewer could easily allow himself to be lectured by a narrator and experience the film in a very passive, disengaged state. To understand a story told only with music and images, on the other hand, is a bit more of a challenge. Better than that, it is a novelty. It is my hope that a wordless movie will be intriguing enough to engage viewers.

While studying *Baraka*, *Samsara*, *Microcosmos*, and *Winged Migration* was invaluable in preparation for making a nonverbal film of my own, these films are themselves built on the foundation of the “city symphony” films of the early 20th century. *Man With A Movie Camera*, *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, and *Manhatta* are examples of this genre, and are characterized by a poetic montage structure (*City Symphony*, Santos). A city symphony film is a wordless filmic portrait of a specific

place, not at all unlike what I have attempted with my own film. It is my hope that bringing together this focus on place with techniques like those found in more modern nonverbal documentaries, as I have done in my film, will be a new chapter in the evolution of the national park film.

Although it is unusual enough to be novel, mine is not the first film to attempt a wordless portrait of a national park. In 1978, Michel Bouchard, who would go on to work as art coordinator on *The Score*, starring Robert DeNiro in 2001, among other films, made a short called “A Day in Forillon” for Forillon National Park, Quebec, Canada. “Scenic Glacier Park,” described earlier in this paper, is another lovely, meditative nonverbal film on a national park, but all films of its era were silent so we can only speculate as to whether the filmmakers would have made this choice had sync sound been available to them.

Because I knew from the outset that I wanted to make the communication between my film and my audience nonverbal, I have been very deliberate about the music for this film. I chose to work with a band called Wild Rabbit, made up of musicians who grew up and still live in coastal Washington State. They have an enthusiastic and fast-growing following in the Pacific Northwest. Olympic National Park is very familiar to the members of Wild Rabbit. Their musical style, which they describe as “Folk-Stomp Americana,” is heavily influenced by the natural landscape of the Pacific Northwest.

Just as Wild Rabbit’s music is inspired by the beauty of the mountains, coast, and rainforests of western Washington, I drew inspiration from their music while filming these places. The structure of the film, which I have designed to recapitulate the

experience of going into nature and finding personal renewal, is also the structure of many of their songs, starting tentative, gaining momentum and excitement, and ending on a note of confidence and peace.

Just as I took particular care in choosing the music for this wordless film, I also paid extra attention the cinematography language that I used. The film opens with very wide shots held for a long time, containing mostly shades of gray, to convey a sense of distance, isolation, loneliness, and expectation. From there, the subject-distance very gradually becomes shorter and shorter, and the shots themselves feature more and more color, to encourage the viewer to feel closer to the landscape, and excited by it. As the subject-distance becomes very close, a series of shorter macro shots encourage the viewer to experience the textures and colors, notice the intricacies and patterns. Finally, wider, longer shots in tones of pink, purple and blue create a sense of peaceful resolution and confidence.

I studied several well-regarded nonverbal documentaries in preparation for making one of my own, including *Baraka*, *Samsara*, *Winged Migration*, and *Microcosmos*. The absence of narration of these films was intriguing to me as a viewer and as a filmmaker. I felt invited, as I believe many viewers do when watching these films, to treat the film as puzzle, deciding for myself what connected one shot to the next, and what those connections might mean, teasing out what themes or story the film might be showing me. Paradoxically, I also felt free to simply absorb the sounds and images, enjoy the beauty of a light changing on a sandstone arch at sunrise, or crowds of people flowing through a busy street. These films, particularly *Baraka* and *Samsara* are most

famous for being among the first to use timelapse photography heavily. In my thesis film, I attempted to imitate their techniques to show the passage of time and natural processes in action, such stars moving across the sky behind a sea stack, light and shadows of branches in the rainforest as the sun moves through the sky, or fog rolling through a valley.

Other techniques that I found effective, and have chosen to emulate, include a slow push in – a physical movement through space, not a zoom – which evokes a sense that the viewer is a ghost, floating through space, or Emerson’s “transparent eyeball.” These films also matched, from shot to shot, colors, shapes, and analogous movements. They did not shy away from shots which feature interesting abstract textures and shapes, in which the audience may not be able to actually identify what the object is, as if to suggest that concrete definitions are not important here, it is more important to merely let your senses explore. I recreated this technique in my film with close shots of the rippling surface of a lake and the delicate pink gills of a mushroom, matching these shots with other images with similar shapes, textures and colors. There are long crossfades from a still scene to one of motion. They are masterful at using moments of stillness to create a sense of something just about to happen.

From my study of *Microcosmos* specifically I was inspired to emphasize minute, beautiful details: mossy micro-landscapes, spider webs trembling in the wind, and countless drops of water. By focusing on nature on a scale that usually goes unnoticed, and juxtaposing macro shots with shots of much larger natural objects and landscapes, I

hoped to suggest endless patterns and communities are there to be found, when the viewer takes the time to notice them.

These nonverbal documentaries also feature long shots of subjects holding eye contact with the camera. The subtext of such shots is, for me, a sense of recognition and of being recognized, making the audience feel acknowledged by the subject and invited to relate. I tried to make use of eye contact at the beginning of the film, in which a deer and a seal gaze directly into the camera, and then, dismissing it, turn away and move on. With these shots of, as I wrote in my notes, “animals being dismissive of you,” I hoped to encourage the viewer to feel herself fading into the landscape, erasing herself and simply observing. Later, with shots of a banana slug and a bull elk who hold unbreaking eye contact with the camera for extended shots, I hoped to encourage the viewer to feel accepted into the natural community he has been exploring through the film, and allowed to relate to it, personally and directly.

Musical choices are unmistakably crucial in these nonverbal films. In *Baraka* and *Samsara* in particular, music interweaves with diegetic sound. There are human voices, but they sing and chant without using recognizable words. The spell of wordlessness allows the viewer to assign whatever meaning feels truest to him. Wild Rabbit’s lead vocalist has a beautiful singing voice, and I encouraged her to use it to convey the mood of each section of the film: lonely, encouraged, self-assured, using tone and dynamics rather than words.

By design, the progression of *The Smell of Cedars* recapitulates my own (and I suspect many people’s) best experiences in national parks and other special natural

places: I go somewhere feeling alone, distant in my relationships, depleted in my focus and creativity, cut off from my best self – like an Elliott Smith song, “I’m burning every bridge that I cross, to find some beautiful place to get lost” (Smith, 2004). There in solitude, in nature, it feels appropriate to erase myself completely and simply *notice* things, as in the Emerson passage quoted above. “I am nothing; I see all...” And the more I “see all,” the more I take notice, the more inescapably exquisite I find the things around me, their endless patterns and minute perfections, their connections to each other and to everything, and to me, too. And then I feel stronger, part of a miraculous natural community, replete with certainty that alone or not, I am standing on solid ground. It’s not at all unlike the sublime rightness that John Muir, and many champions of parks and nature since, have recognized, as Terry Tempest Williams describes: “What I know in my bones is that I forgot to take the time to remember what I know. The world is holy. We are holy. All life is holy. Daily prayers are delivered on the lips of breaking waves, the whispering of grasses, the shimmering of leaves.”

THE FIND YOUR PARK CAMPAIGN

Production of my thesis film coincides, fortuitously though quite by coincidence, with the unveiling of a sweeping new strategy for public engagement with the national parks, a joint venture of the National Park Service and National Park Foundations called the Find Your Park campaign. In an article on the campaign at nationalparks.org, website of the National Park Foundation (the nonprofit partner of the national parks), National Park Service Director Jonathan B. Jarvis is quoted as saying, “Our campaign will encourage Americans to ‘Find Your Park’ – to discover a personal connection to a place or a story that provides inspiration or enjoyment, and to then join us in our second century of stewardship of America’s most treasured places” (nationalparks.org). The same article goes on to quote Neil Mulholland, President and CEO of the National Park Foundation, as follows: “Together, and in concert with many partners around the country, we will set the course for the next hundred years with an engaged citizenry who love their national parks and proudly show their support through visitation, volunteerism and philanthropy.”

What Jarvis and Mulholland hint, but do not say, is that the future of the parks depends on making young people become invested now. Another article, from *Adweek*, states explicitly that the Find Your Park campaign is “meant to expose the national park system to millennials and multicultural communities” (Castillo). On April 2nd, when Find Your Park launched, the National Park Service debuted a redesigned logo, hosted a Reddit AMA, or “ask me anything” session, and parks throughout the system will be, in the parlance of their new target audience, stepping up their social media game with new

or increased presence on platforms including Instagram, Twitter and Facebook.

Mulholland observed, “Looking at the continued relevancy of the parks, it was obvious we needed to bring awareness to a younger generation, to reintroduce the parks to those [who] have been enjoying them and to those who did not have an awareness of them.”

Ken Dowling, a partner at New York advertising firm the Grey Group, which the NPS has contracted to handle this rebranding, puts it even more plainly: “I don’t think it’s been on the millennials’ radar.”

The Smell of Cedars does not have a target audience more specific than those inclined to enjoy a beautiful wild place, but I do believe it could be used effectively in a campaign like Find Your Park to appeal to the young people of the “millennial” demographic, i.e. born in 1980 or later, particularly those living in the Pacific Northwest. This group - my coevals – tends to be a bit anxious, drifting, and self-reflective (Tsintziras). A film like this suggests that a place like Olympic has the potential to soothe some of that aimless existential dread, and is close enough to drive to and reasonably priced (we are also underemployed). Olympic, they will find, is the perfect place not just to take pictures for your Instagram and look adorable in flannel, but also to feel soothed and fortified in nature.

Ultimately, though, appealing to a younger audience is far from my primary goal. I have striven to recreate an experience which dates at least to the transcendentalists (though probably much, much earlier) and which I believe can be profoundly appreciated by most, if not all, people. I would be tremendously pleased should anyone, of any age,

see *The Smell of Cedars Steeped in Rain* and find something in it that is valuable, resonant, or moving for them personally.

The soundtrack for *The Smell of Cedars* is written and performed by folk-stomp band Wild Rabbit, which brings with it an enthusiastic and fast-growing audience in the Pacific Northwest. In a film without words, the languages of music and cinematography are allowed to speak more clearly. These languages, used deftly, engage an audience on a subtler level, inviting without *telling* them to find in Olympic something that is personally meaningful for them.

CONCLUSIONS: OLD MODEL, NEW MEDIUM

In the century since the Organic Act, the national park system has been both expression and inspiration for our national character. America created national parks because wild places are a part of who we are as a people, and we continue to protect and celebrate them as those values stood the test of time.

Artists have celebrated the national parks passionately in painting, photography, poetry, and prose. Whatever their media, their work is immersive, sensory, immediate. One can be shut inside an office building, or walking through a city where skyscrapers block out the horizon, and still viscerally respond to reading the words of John Muir: “Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.”

Films have been the exception to this trend in national park art. The vast majority of national park films are interpretive, enticing or educating viewers through the godlike voice of an authoritative narrator. Many are beautifully filmed and written, but few if any are appreciated as works of art in the same way as the photography of Ansel Adams or the writing of John Muir. And in an era of digital information, video is the medium to use if the parks wish to reach a younger generation.

Perhaps it is counterintuitive to attempt to reach a new, young audience by emulating the artistic approaches of artists from generations past. I would argue it is more logical to adapt those techniques which have consistently made national parks attractive and immediate for the medium most popular with one’s target audience.

To that end, I have chosen to make a national park film without narration. Susan Sontag writes, “Transparence is the highest, most liberating value in art - and in criticism - today. Transparence means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are.” (Sontag, p. 7) I hope that my film will allow the viewer to connect more directly to the park without the distracting presence of a narrator who tells her how and why. There is something of the holy about the experience of the national parks. National park films have said so countless ways. I hope that mine will be one of the first of many to show it instead.

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