

ENVIRONMENTAL FILMS AND THEIR AUDIENCE:  
CAPTIVATING THE VIEWER

by

Jonathan Edward Spear

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

April 2019

©COPYRIGHT

by

Jonathan Edward Spear

2019

All Rights Reserved

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. ENVIRONMENTAL FILMS AS A GENRE.....	3
3. MISSOULA: TO THE MAX.....	16
4. CONCLUSION.....	25
5. REFERENCES CITED.....	27

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how films concerned with environmental issues can add more elements to achieve a greater impact on the viewer than classic “blue chip” films such as *Planet Earth* do. For the viewer’s attention to be truly engaged and for information to be retained so that it can lead to social change, the story, music, and cinematography must all strongly reinforce each other for the film to be an unforgettable experience. I will discuss and compare three films: *Return of the River* (2016), *DamNation* (2014), and *The Art of Flight* (2011), and then discuss how they influenced my film *Missoula: To the MAX* (2019). This discussion will detail to what degree we are drawn into the films based on the elements of a genuinely memorable viewing experience, and what lessons we are able to take away because of them.

## CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

Environmental films have the power to move audiences into social action, or they can simply lull them into a peaceful, beautiful viewing experience. Based on the elements employed such as the story, soundtrack, and cinematography, environmental films can be critical tools in conveying a lasting message to an audience.

Environmental films tend to be documentaries, but not all documentaries can be considered environmental films. As Michael Rabiger points out, “If you creatively organize pieces of recorded reality into a narrative, you have made a documentary film” (Rabiger, 19). As time progresses and novel ideas emerge, new and different methods of impacting the audience are necessary so that they are not lulled into complacency by the standard model of “blue chip” environmental films. Nevertheless, the goals are typically the same in environmental films and documentaries: make the viewer hear and see something impactful. If the film is effective enough at laying out its message- the viewer will then feel something as well that may lead to a change in belief or social action.

Film communication, especially in regards to science film, is very complex. Like orchestral music, it is a combination of different elements that seamlessly blend together to create a new whole. The stereotype with many “blue chip” films is that the audience gets distracted by the many wonderful images or becomes bored and does not come away from the experience learning anything. Beautiful cinematography of fascinating animals only brings the audience so far, but when combined with a gripping story and a unique soundtrack, the audience’s attention is piqued, and is then drawn in. Ingmar Bergman was

so intertwined in film and music that he had this to say: “Film and music are almost the same thing. They are means of expression and communication that go beyond human wisdom and that touch a person’s emotional centre” (BIS Records AB).

Speaking further about the audience, critic Carl Plantinga says:

. . . A film is not only a way of seeing, but also a way of hearing, feeling, thinking, and responding. It presents not just a mental universe (of perception and cognition), but a holistic experience connected to the emotions, affects, and the body. It offers a particular experience of what it displays, of the fictional world presented. This way of experiencing mimics the phenomenological contours of conscious experience generally, and thus is complex and multifaceted (Plantinga, 48).

When it comes to environmental films, it should be more of an overall experience than just a simple film viewing. One must watch an environmental film with an open mind and a willingness to learn from the experience. The best learning outcomes happen when multiple senses are engaged. As Torben Grodal states:

The film experience is made up of many activities: our eyes and ears pick up and analyze image and sound, our minds apprehend the story, which resonates in our memory; furthermore, our stomach, heart, and skin are activated in empathy with the story situation (Grodal 1997; 1).

By making environmental films more complex by enhancing the soundtrack and story with the already visually stunning cinematography to which we’ve grown accustomed, filmmakers can create works that become more memorable to the audience.

## CHAPTER TWO

## ENVIRONMENTAL FILMS AS A GENRE

Just as Bergman, Plantinga, and Grodal believe this is the best way for fiction narrative films to impact their audience, so too is the case for environmental films, perhaps even more so. There is the stereotype with animal behavior-type environmental films like the *Planet Earth* series that people turn them on to take a nap on the couch. This is understandable, as you are at the mercy of beautifully colored, serene nature images, set to the soothing voice of Sir David Attenborough while the BBC Concert Orchestra lulls you into a calming mood. The narrative connection is really how “cool” or fascinating this all is, and the films are really an extended montage of extraordinary scenes linked by the fact that they are all showing exotic animals engaged in unusual or exciting behavior. This model of nature program works well for the casual viewer who is merely looking for entertainment and beautiful animals on screen, but, as a filmmaker trying to convey an environmental message in your film, this simply will not work. If the audience is supposed to be drawn into your film and come away with learning a memorable lesson, then the classic *Planet Earth* approach can no longer be the primary approach to the subject.

To discuss in more detail, the distinction between environmental film and nature documentary needs to be addressed. While *Planet Earth* and similar films might represent the quintessential “nature documentary” series, or, more specifically, animal behavior series, films like *Food, Inc.* must be differentiated as “environmental films.” *Food, Inc.* is by no means a nature documentary, but exposes the harmful animal rights

and environmental factors caused by factory farming and genetic modification of our foods. *Planet Earth* seeks to initiate wonder and amazement of our natural world, not drive us to change it.

Especially with younger audiences needing constant stimulation, I no longer believe the *Planet Earth* style environmental education film is very effective. Younger audiences need action, adventure, and music that draw them in and pique their interest. They are bombarded with sensory stimulating imagery and sound everyday. For them to absorb more information, a different production logic needs to be employed. For example, action-packed and visually stunning films such as the *Transformers* and *Marvel* superhero movies are popular among children and families. Other movies that have risen in production value and popularity these days are extreme sports documentaries such as *The Art of Flight* (2011). Although not your typical “environmental film,” it does share similar elements with that genre. Extreme sports films often have an environmental message, rely in part on first-person POV camera angles (especially with the use of GoPro cameras) and have the similar run-and-gun style shooting that many small crew nature documentaries share. We also see footage shot from helicopters and drones, which is a common theme in action sports films.

The message is often something to the effect of “We need to care for the planet so we can have enough snow to ski and snowboard.” Younger audiences are drawn to the fast-cut editing style, the jaw-dropping slow motion footage of skiers, snowboarders, and mountain bikers flipping through the air, and the modern, often electronic and rock music that goes hand- in- hand with adventure sports films of today.

Speaking on the attention of the audience, Sheila Curran Bernard writes:

And so nonfiction films that work-that grab and hold audiences through creative, innovative methods-are set apart by their makers and audiences as being somehow more than documentaries: they're movies. Like Hollywood fiction, these films may emphasize character, conflict, rising stakes, a dramatic arc, resolution. They bring viewers on a journey, immerse them in new worlds, explore universal themes. They compel viewers to consider and even care about topics and subjects they might previously have overlooked. And yet, unlike Hollywood fiction, they are based on a single and powerful premise: These stories, and the elements with which they are told, are true (Introduction).

One of the films that I used as an inspiration for my project that I think encompasses the fine art of combining a compelling story, beautiful soundtrack, and stunning camera work is *DamNation* (2014). Produced by Yvonne Chouinard (the famous mountaineer and founder of the Patagonia clothing company) and directed by Ben Knight and Travis Rummel, the film has wonderful elements of a catchy, modern soundtrack, emotional interviews, beautiful cinematography, and a gripping story. Its narrative has an accessible and inspiring environmental message. There are even exciting elements of danger in the film, both to the interview subjects and to the camera operators. There is GoPro footage of salmon swimming in rivers, beautiful aerial shots from drones, time lapses, and scenes at night of trespassing eco-warriors painting protest signs promoting the removal of dams, and other such nonviolent acts of civil disobedience caught on camera. It is truly a captivating spectacle with a message of conservation and hope for the future.

This film starts out in a similar way to mine in that it shows lovely river footage put to beautiful music. It then leads to scenes of rust, dead fish, and crumbling dams in the background. It sets up the story well early on that we have a problem. The juxtaposition of footage from the first few shots is very jarring, and we are drawn in to

learn more about why this change in scenery occurs. It is visually jarring and leaves us wanting more.

The premise of *DamNation* is that the majority of dams in the U.S. are outdated and often times no longer functional as hydroelectric power producers, and it make sense from an environmental standpoint to have them removed. They block native fish species such as salmon and trout from migrating upstream to their historic spawning grounds as well as preventing sediment transport downstream. Both of these results negatively impact the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems in which the dams have been placed. The movement to try to dam every river in America for cheap, hydroelectric power also created the need for fish hatcheries. When fish could not go beyond dams to reproduce, their numbers plummeted, thus the need to raise large numbers of trout and salmon in artificial, man-made conditions. Upon release, they are not suited to survive in the wild as they have been raised in a sheltered environment.

Recreation is also hampered, as dam-free rivers are conducive to kayaking, rafting, canoeing, etc. Where these dams have been constructed, reservoirs are created that flood an area, often bringing about negative effects to native fish species. Often the dams bring about breeding grounds for non-native fish like introduced pike into reservoirs, reducing the numbers of native trout species. As will be discussed later, this negative ecosystem effect happened in the Clark Fork River in Missoula, with the creation of the Milltown Dam.

Technically, *DamNation* is a very good work of filmmaking. There are helpful animations that are cleverly inserted throughout the film. The interviews are well lit and the audio quality is excellent. The different uses of various kinds of cameras (GoPros,

drones, RED cameras) offer a plethora of views as well as variations in zoom and focal lengths throughout the film. We have first person GoPro kayak footage, beautiful drone footage over forests, rivers, and dams, slow motion shots of kayakers and rafters, and time-lapse cinematography of dams being dismantled as well. It gives the viewer a well-rounded view of each scene and you are further drawn in by this diverse use of cameras and filming techniques.

The story is certainly an interesting one as well and has an environmental takeaway: the U.S. had a penchant for damming its rivers in the late 1800s and early 1900s because it was a source of cheap hydroelectric power. Sadly, even though dams were seen as a driving force for the local economy, the detrimental effect on native peoples and the environment were not taken into consideration. Little did the people know back then that the immediate effects of damming rivers would have lasting and large-scale impacts on the ecosystems in which they were placed. Migrating fish species like the iconic Pacific Northwest salmon were blocked from making their annual spawning runs up the rivers.

Most notably, these dams directly impacted Native American communities, as the rivers were the source of their food in the salmon. Without the salmon, the Native Americans' way of life slowly faded, and they were pushed away from the dams as white settlers developed railways, roads, and towns due to this new-found cheap form of electricity production that bolstered local industrial jobs.

In *DamNation*, we meet many heroes along the way such as Mikal Jakubal, the man who painted the large crack in the Hetch Hetchy dam in California, promoting its removal. We also meet Katie Lee, an activist and author who explored and photographed

the caves and wind tunnels that are now submerged under Lake Powell on the border of Utah and Arizona, created by the building of the Glenn Canyon Dam. We meet people who love the rivers and the salmon, and who recreate in those rivers. These are people who deeply care. These are wonderful, enlightening interviews because the characters open up to the camera and are excited to share their story. In *Producing with Passion*, Dorothy Fadiman and Tony Levelle write: “A good interview will feel to the viewer like an intimate conversation” (138). One man interviewed basically sums up the film by saying:

When I first started this and got involved in dam removal, and asked myself the question, “You know, what is it that makes a dam removal happen?” And you might think that it’s you know policies, or politics, or maybe it’s the guy with the plunger. But when it comes right down to it, it’s people who are passionate about the river. And it’s the people who are out there kayaking, it’s the people who are out there fishing, it’s the people who are out there, just sitting on the banks of the river enjoying the place. And it’s the passion of those individuals who makes it all real and makes it all happen.

Thomas O’Keefe, *American Whitewater* (White Salmon River, Condit Dam Removal, Oregon)

These are powerful words spoken by a powerful character in the film, but, again, without the accompanying beautiful soundtrack and excellent cinematography, we are left with simply a poetic recount of the trials and tribulations involved in the push to remove dams in the United States.

The second film that I used as additional inspiration was *Return of the River* (2016). This film, similar to *DamNation*, is about promoting the removal of dams in the United States. The basic synopsis is that the Elwha River, which runs through Olympic National Park in Washington State, was a wild and free river until two dams were built on it, blocking wild salmon passage and displacing Native Americans. With enough local

support, however, and national attention as well as environmental policies on their side, the dams were removed and the river is slowly being restored. But unlike *DamNation*, this film is solely about the removal of two dams along the Elwha River in the Pacific Northwest: the Elwha Dam and the Glines Canyon Dam.

Much like the start of *DamNation*, *Return of the River* starts out with soothing music and beautiful, flowing river imagery. We see salmon swimming by peacefully, as well as wide-angle drone footage from above. We hear the calm voice of a female narrator speaking in first person as if she is the river. We then see shots of the two dams, and her voice changes to a tone of sadness and grief, as she explains what the river was before the dams and how the dams transformed the river. It is very compelling filmmaking, and the viewer is drawn in as the narrator is giving us the personal account of a struggling river and the salmon that inhabit it.

Similar to *DamNation*, *Return of the River* shows the struggles involved with decommissioning and removing old dams in the U.S. Focusing primarily on the Elwha and Glines Canyon Dams, a documentary film crew interviews people, both private citizens and government officials, about the long process to remove these two dams and once again allow passage of salmon to their historical spawning grounds further up river.

*Return of the River* uses GoPro cameras, drones, time-lapse cinematography, hand-held cameras, and animation throughout the film to give it a well-rounded aesthetic.

The camera work is not as technical and beautiful as in *DamNation*, and does not make you feel the same type of wonderment. The interviews, of which there are over a dozen, are often shot indoors with less than ideal lighting conditions and at times sub-par audio. The outdoor interviews are fine, but seem to be haphazardly shot, with little

thought about the framing or background. The indoor interviews are often poorly framed as well, being either too pushed in or too pulled back from the subject. We see lighting on the face as being random, and not well thought out. Although the subjects do offer interesting insight into the debates over dam removals with their dialogue, I was often distracted by the lighting, framing, and audio quality of the interviews. For a film made in 2016 and on such a high-profile subject, I expected better.

Despite these weaknesses, I used this film as an inspiration for my film in the sense that both films rely heavily on interviews and corresponding b-roll to tell the story. My film lacks a central narrator, whereas *Return of the River* uses an off-camera woman's voice as the river's voice, but we still see and hear over a dozen people interviewed to help the film's story progress. Sheila Curran Bernard points out that:

. . . the concept of telling a story for greatest emotional impact and audience participation is perhaps the most difficult. It's often described as "show, don't tell," which means that you want to present the evidence or information that allows viewers to experience the story for themselves, anticipating twists and turns and following the story line a way that's active rather than passive. Too often, films tell us what we're supposed to think through the use of heavy-handed narration, loaded graphics, or a stacked deck of interviews (Bernard, 27-28).

While not having a central narrator walk the viewer through the story, I instead let the interviewed subjects take turns telling the story, and the audience can then decide for themselves.

The majority of people interviewed in *Return of the River* were members of the Port Angeles community, dam workers, or local officials. I used this idea for my film in that I wanted to hear from those most directly impacted with the proposed wave structure in the river, and not bureaucrats thousands of miles away who would be less affected by the decisions made at the local level.

As mentioned earlier, much of this film has to do with the rights of the Native Americans (the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe) who lived along the Elwha River prior to the arrival of white settlers. When the dams went up, without their permission, they were displaced, and the salmon they so heavily relied on were no longer running up the rivers like they once did. Since they did not have lawyers, they had no representation and could not fight the dams' construction. Eventually, the dams were built, and subsequent reservoirs were made, essentially flooding the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe out of house and home.

An argument that was made by the pro-dam interview subjects was that the dams helped industrialize the town of Port Angeles, where the Elwha River flows out to the Puget Sound. With this cheap, hydroelectric power, the pulp mill in Port Angeles was built, providing jobs to many in the community. From there, the economy grew to support the construction of roads and new businesses for the town. The dams could be thanked for the rise of the town of Port Angeles, but this economic boom for the area had a negative effect on the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe.

Although this film started out telling the back-story of the dam and the controversy behind it, it did show that public opinion could be changed over time. When environmentalists and Native Americans were allowed to have their voices heard, the community of Port Angeles and, eventually, the entire state of Washington got on board to have these dams removed. It was a huge win for the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, fishermen, and environmentalists, as the salmon would return, almost immediately, even though their passage was blocked for nearly 100 years. This is a story that you will

remember due to the impact it had on both the local and national level. In this instance, the story compensated for some of the technical weaknesses of the film.

Lastly, the third film I used as an inspiration for mine was Red Bull Media House's *The Art of Flight*. This pseudo-documentary follows world-renowned backcountry snowboarder Travis Rice on his quest for the biggest and newest backcountry lines to snowboard around the globe. A group of fellow snowboarders and a film crew join him while they attempt new and dangerous stunts. From Alaska to Chile, and British Columbia to Colorado, we follow the crew performing insane stunts and dodging avalanches all in the name of snowboarding glory. All through the movie, modern electronic and rock music is set to slow motion, beautiful footage of the world's best snowboarders at the peak of their careers, performing tricks that have never been attempted before to backdrops of some of the most beautiful mountain environments on the planet. We hear songs from electronic producers Nero and Deadmau5, and beautiful electronic indie rock from M83. A haunting scene involving an avalanche, which nearly wipes out a snowboarder, even features a solemn Sigur Rós tune. We also hear pop-rock songs recognized from the radio back in 2011 from The Naked and Famous. This eclectic blend of bands creates a soundscape that appeals to many and matches the moods of the corresponding scenes in the film.

In regards to the use of music, Alan Rosenthal points out that "Documentary films tend to use less music, since it can break the illusion of reality. However, when used well, music can lift a film tremendously" (Rosenthal, 219). Or, as Montana State University MFA graduate Kristin Lynn Glover has written:

In all practicality, stimulating all the senses while learning is not always feasible, but the more senses engaged, the more a student is likely to initially learn and ultimately remember. The unique platform of film makes activation of multiple senses, and multiple brain regions, feasible. Engaging as many sensors as possible also maximizes interest, which leads to improved learning. Recognizing music's role in memory, attention, and enjoyment helps to maximize the potential of film, particularly when viewing film as a learning tool (Glover; 15-16).

Curt Morgan, *The Art of Flight's* director, did a fantastic job of providing an engaging and epic soundtrack. The music matched the scenes and the overall film was subsequently enhanced. As Rosenthal also states: If the music is appropriate, the film takes a quantum leap forward in effectiveness (Rosenthal, 496).

Breaking with my examples of films that have the trifecta of amazing cinematography, a beautiful soundtrack, and a captivating message, I do have one serious critique of *Art of Flight*: it fails to deliver a lasting impression as far as the story. The main draw for this film is obviously the eye-popping stunts, often involving helicopters and huge, man-made and natural jumps to launch their twirling bodies off of. It is hard to look away from the colors of the snowboarder's outfits against the white walls they maneuver down. The music does fit the mood of the film. Often intense, and never dull, the soundtrack adds richness and a deeper layer than just beautiful camera work to grab our attention. The film, however, does lack a gripping story line. We basically follow Travis Rice and his crew of snowboard enthusiasts around the world in planes, helicopters, and snowmobiles, but we struggled to find a reason why they are doing all of this. One obvious reason could be the crew is finding and hitting the "freshest lines" and "shredding the gnarliest pow" all around the world for glory and for the progression of the sport. I propose that this film could have been more memorable had there been a deeper, richer story. Perhaps they could have set up the international travel by stating that

the polar ice caps are melting and humans need to do all they can to prevent that from happening so that they can continue to perform unbelievable tricks with snowboards on snowcapped mountains.

Sadly, without a concise and provocative storyline, this is just another snowboard film, which will be remembered for its breathtaking stunts and amazing camera work. The *Art of Flight*, funded by Red Bull, intends to simply provide the audiences with vicarious visual thrills. With a better purpose, some of the elements used could be more effective. This is the definition of “snowboard porn.” As the years go on, the stunts get bigger, the slow motion gets slower, and the helicopter-mounted camera footage gets smoother, but still there is no environmental lesson to be learned. We are simply watching a progression of human talent and ingenuity. There is no educational lesson to be gleaned from these kinds of films. It is a great film for what it is, but sadly, even though the audience is transfixed on the screen, there is little left at the conclusion except the memory of the momentary thrills.

The takeaways I remember from *The Art of Flight*, and why I used it as an inspiration for my film, were not about the environmental elements or storyline aspect, but the use of clever cinematography and an emotionally moving soundtrack. The slow motion action sports shots of snowboarders and helicopters I translated to kayakers, river surfers, and fishermen. I remember watching *Art of Flight* for the first time and being pulled in by the combination of amazing cinematography and the modern, emotion-evoking soundtrack. I was transfixed by the raw athleticism of the athletes in their colorful outfits performing mind-bending stunts in high-resolution slow motion images. We could watch the same scenes in slow motion and in real time, but the effectiveness of

showing the emotion and raw talent of the athlete is personified when slowed down. Slow motion adds drama and finesse that you might miss watching a scene in real time. It adds more depth to the action. I also borrowed from the idea of modern electronic music for my film from *The Art of Flight*. I feel like these two elements, combined with my environmental lessons to be drawn from my film, will make mine much easier to differentiate from your average action sports film. It could be said that mine is an environmental film with action sports film elements.

## CHAPTER THREE

*MISSOULA: TO THE MAX*

For my film, *Missoula: To the MAX*, elements from the three above mentioned films in the earlier chapter were borrowed, using ones I believed were effective and avoiding those I thought were weak. The goal was to create a film with an environmental message in a style that was my own.

The film starts out with various prominent Missoula residents describing Missoula's draws, most notably the Clark Fork River which flows through downtown Missoula. We hear from Missoula Mayor John Engen, two members of the Clark Fork Coalition, and Kevin "KB" Brown, founder of Missoula-based Strongwater Surf, and learn why they think Missoula and the Clark Fork are special. Mayor Engen's narration and subsequent B-roll then tell us about the history of the town and river, which includes significant industrial abuse. We learn about the environmental catastrophe that the mines in Butte and Anaconda caused to the watershed below it. We learn that just as in *Return of the River* and *DamNation*, the Clark Fork was dammed in the early 1900s for the purpose of producing cheap hydroelectric power. Due to flooding and sediment transport, the mine waste from the activities far upstream travelled down and were trapped behind the Milltown Dam, just a few miles east from downtown Missoula. Over the years, the confluence of the Blackfoot and Clark Fork Rivers, where the dam was located, was cleaned up and removed. Eventually, the dam was deconstructed in 2008. This was seen as a huge step in the remediation of the area. Trout can now travel further upstream to spawn, and the numbers of fish in the river have greatly increased.

Fast forward to today, humans have again altered the river by straightening its banks and putting up concrete barriers to direct the flows away from houses and businesses to prevent flooding. Missoula has also added Brennan's Wave, a man-made wave structure just west of the Higgins Street Bridge, where river surfers and kayakers can practice their sport in the river. What was once an old, crumbled irrigation ditch is now a useful play wave. The trouble is that the wave structure is so new that scientists still don't know how it affects trout migration. A new wave structure, The Max Wave, has been proposed a few hundred yards downstream from Brennan's Wave to increase recreational use, but further complicates the issue.

The proposed wave structure, like Brennan's Wave completed twelve years ago, hopes to solve the problem of taking a broken and non-functioning irrigation ditch and turning it into another useful recreation tool in the form of an artificial, wave-creating structure. The Max Wave proponents see it as an asset to further Missoula's growing river surfing and kayaking community and to bring new tourists to town. Other users of the river, such as some anglers and Missoula fish biologist Pat Saffel, who is interviewed in the film, have environmental concerns.

The film raises the question of "how much human alteration is too much, considering what humans have demanded of this river in the past?" Interviews of Missoulians who have a personal and/or financial stake in the river are relied on to drive the story, and corresponding B-roll helps to further illustrate their arguments. Like *The Art of Flight*, there is a modern, electronic soundtrack. Epic whitewater action shots are shown in slow motion to further draw the viewer into the story. This is an environmental

film with extreme sports filmic elements that, it is hoped, will leave a lasting impression on the viewer.

Typically, environmental films start out with a problem. This helps draw the viewer in and creates some tension, and often excitement as well. *Missoula: To The MAX* starts out showing some beautiful, slow motion scenes of the Clark Fork River in Missoula, Montana. It then segues to Missoula's mayor, John Engen, talking about the history of the river. The audience learns that it was not always a sanctuary for birdwatchers, fisherman, kayakers, and river trail users. Back in the day, it was a hard-working and heavily degraded river due to human activity that negatively altered the landscape. In the past, one could not and would not even think about fishing in the river. It was polluted, it smelled, and fish could barely survive in it. Extensive logging took place in the Blackfoot Valley, which meant logs were fed into the Blackfoot River, eventually meeting up with the Clark Fork, piling logs up and along its banks for decades to come. The old town dump was located next to the river, so when the spring floods came, the high waters would often take garbage from the banks and wash it down into the river. Aside from the floods, it was commonplace for people to throw their garbage in the river. In fact, one of the film's main characters, Kevin "KB" Brown says during an interview that throwing garbage into the river was thought of as "out of sight, out of mind." It was truly not a place where you would want to go to recreate, unlike the Clark Fork River of today.

The problem in this film, which Mayor Engen goes on to talk about further, is essentially that humans have caused irreparable damage to the western Montana ecosystem, most notably creating the environmental disaster-turned largest EPA

Superfund site in the country, the Berkeley Pit and the surrounding Butte mine and its watershed. Around the turn of the century, Butte was a mining boomtown, providing thousands of jobs and offering the get-rich-quick idea to the early settlers of the area. It was capitalized on, and went on in excess. Wastewater from the mines would seep into the upper Clark Fork drainage, and run downstream to Missoula, poisoning the water and killing off fish and aquatic invertebrates as it went.

Another mining town further downstream of Butte was Anaconda, which had similar negative environmental impacts on the land. In 1908, a large flood, referred to as a “100-year flood” came through the area and washed away tons of mining waste and contaminated water down the Clark Fork from Butte and Anaconda. As years’ worth of heavy metal laden water, most notably copper and arsenic flowed down the Clark Fork into Missoula. That sediment was trapped behind the Milltown Dam, built between 1906 and 1907 (Missoula County, Montana). The dam, located four miles east of downtown Missoula, was built to generate hydroelectric power. Unfortunately, besides blocking trout migration, another negative impact the dam had was stockpiling decade’s worth of that poisonous sediment from its headwaters in Butte and Anaconda. The Milltown Dam, as a result, created the Milltown Reservoir at the confluence of the Blackfoot and Clark Fork Rivers. The depth of the heavy metal contaminated sediment behind the dam ranged anywhere from one to twenty-five feet (Missoula County, Montana).

After years of degradation, the dam no longer functioned as a hydroelectric power producer and in 2008 the process for the removal of the Milltown Dam began (Missoula County, Montana). Before the dam was removed, tons of contaminated sediment was eliminated from the reservoir above the dam so that as little pollutants as possible would

be released downstream when the dam was removed. When the dam was finally gone a year later, the completion of the dam removal was a major victory for the environmental movement and for recreators, anglers, and conservationists alike. It was a large step in righting the wrongs caused by humans in the past.

Since the dam was removed and the confluence of two rivers was restored, trout were then monitored going above and beyond the former dam site for their historic migration routes up the Blackfoot and Upper Clark Fork Rivers. This was very similar to what eventually ended up happening in both *DamNation* and *Return of the River*, when the wild Pacific salmon were seen swimming past the former Elwha River dams on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. The Elwha River had been damned for one hundred years, much like the Clark Fork and Blackfoot confluence, for hydroelectric power. The only difference between the dams in Washington and the Milltown Dam was that the Elwha dam was still functioning. It took a lot of public discussion and court cases to dismantle an existing and still-functioning dam so that salmon could return to their native spawning grounds and continue their historic journey in the Pacific Northwest. It took a lot less convincing to remove the Milltown Dam, since it was no longer an active hydroelectric production facility.

Unlike *Return of the River* and *DamNation*, *Missoula: To The MAX* is not about the removal of dams but rather about humans further altering an already human-altered river. The stretch of the Clark Fork that runs through Missoula has been so altered by humans in the past that it is impossible to restore it to its pre-industrialized condition. Early settlers began building houses and businesses right up to the river. The infrastructure that was being created was choking and eroding the banks of the river. The

Army Corps of Engineers had to even straighten the river banks, removing eddies and building concrete barriers along the river to prevent flooding. This made the river flow more streamlined, so it moved straighter and faster than it had in pre-dam times.

Unlike the way dams were removed from the Elwha River in Washington, allowing the reservoirs to drain and the river banks and forests to return, the urban corridor of the Clark Fork has no such possible way to recover, because roads, houses, apartment complexes and business are built in close proximity to the altered riverbanks. It is no longer possible for the river to return to the way it naturally flowed and meandered.

In 2006, a group of passionate Missoula river kayakers and surfers decided to turn an old, broken concrete and rebar irrigation ditch into a functioning play wave. Created and named in honor of Brennan Guth, a world-class kayaker and Missoulian who died while kayaking in Chile, the wave would turn a dangerous, unsightly, broken concrete slab into a man-made wave feature that would bring locals and visitors alike to the river. Although this was further alteration to the river by humans, it was seen as a necessary move to make the best of the current situation with the river.

No permits were needed, and very little money was actually put into the project. Various Missoula charities and construction teams donated a lot of the materials and labor. Although some Missoula residents were against this idea, the overwhelming majority of the public was for it, so it received the go ahead from the local government to be constructed.

Now, in 2019, another man-made feature, The Max Wave, is being proposed for the urban corridor of the Clark Fork- just a few hundred yards downstream from the

current Brennan's Wave. It is another memorial for another Missoula kayaker, Max Lentz, who died while kayaking in West Virginia in 2007. Some see it as humans further altering the river, potentially negatively impacting its fish and aquatic habitat. Others see it as a chance for Missoula to expand on its growing river surf and kayak scene, putting the town more solidly on the map for visiting river recreators and a place to host mountain surf and kayak competitions. The proposal of this second wave structure is to clean up a broken down concrete ditch diversion structure, much like what happened with Brennan's Wave, and create another play wave while reviving a stretch of the river and improving fish passage.

This debate over public opinion is reminiscent of the public debates over dam removals in *DamNation* and *Return of the River*. In this case, however, some of the environmentalists are in fact the river recreators that would be benefitting from further alteration of the river. Also, the fundamental issue is the same in my film and in *DamNation* and *Return of the River*: the question of the trade-off between environmental impact and economic impact based on the uses of the river. Will Missoula reject the proposed second wave park because it could potentially have negative impacts on the river's trout numbers, therefore drawing less tourists to fish in the river? Or will building a second wave park increase river recreators and bring more non-fishing tourists to town to spend money and boost the local economy? There are trade-offs in both scenarios, but as in my film and the other two mentioned river films, public perception goes a long way. Having open dialogue and public discussion is key to making changes in the local community, as was seen in both *DamNation* and *Return of the River*. The more opinions

and points of views that were shared, the more the public was educated and better able to make an informed decision.

Aside from the similar story line, *Missoula: To The MAX* was inspired by the styles of each of the three aforementioned films. I tried to accomplish the slow motion, often times quick editing, extreme sports-style film techniques from *The Art of Flight*. That element would certainly appeal to the younger crowd who want to see epic shots of kayakers and surfers braving the waves.

Also borrowing from that film, I tried to infuse modern electronic music to match the mood of the film. The original soundtrack is kept upbeat and interesting, to help propel the story and add another layer of complexity to the cinematography. As Michael Rabiger has said, “Good music can prompt the audience to investigate emotional dimensions to the film that otherwise would pass unnoticed” (490). Although “good music” is subjective, I like to think of it as relative to each individual film, and what you decided is a fitting soundtrack for the mood you are trying to convey. Rabiger also states:

Music can also function as a key to the viewer’s memory. By repeating a theme or musical texture, music can unite a discussion with the mood of its original event, and reinforce the drama in human states of emotion (490).

Music is a powerful tool in a film, and I tried to harness that power in mine.

I try to juxtapose characters with each other as is done in *Return of the River*. We hear members of the public saying why they’re pro-dam, and then we hear others tell why they’re anti-dam. This back and forth adds tension and the viewer is further drawn into the story, waiting to hear what happens next. Lastly, my film has an environmental message that leaves the viewer wondering if every river user can get what they want out of the river.

Since the Max Wave is still in its proposal stage at the time of the completion of my film, we are left to wonder whether or not trout fisherman could ultimately benefit from the addition of a second wave structure, or if it would certainly lead to lower trout numbers in the area. We base our thoughts and feelings towards the proposal of a second wave structure on the contrasting interviews of Pat Saffel, the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks fish biologist and Stephen Gaskill, a Max Wave board member. As the effects from Brennan's Wave are still being studied, we have yet to hear conclusive evidence about how the fish of the Clark Fork River have been affected by the addition of the waves, so we have little impartial data to go on for what might happen when a second man-made wave structure is added.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## CONCLUSION

What I feel worked in my film was my attempt to blend extreme sports-style cinematography with a modern, catchy soundtrack and an environmental lesson that audiences will remember. I tried to keep all three elements in mind while writing, shooting, and editing the film. I feel that this will be an effective way for people to learn more about the past, present, and future of the Clark Fork River by combining elements of multiple genres of nature films that are sure to grab the attention of surfers, kayakers, fisherman, and all other river users alike.

I feel that I conveyed my message and made my point in the film that we need to think about how we affect our environment to learn lessons from our past mistakes. I feel that I used my interest in cinematography, music, and story to share an important message to Missoulians as well as others who face similar situations in their community.

Where I could have gone a bit deeper with the story was interviewing a Missoula fishing guide. I made multiple attempts to interview a member of the Montana Chapter of Trout Unlimited, but to no avail. It would have added yet another dimension to the shared use of the river, but this time someone with a monetary stake in the trout population of the river. As it is, I interviewed seven people for my film, cutting a Clark Fork Coalition lawyer out entirely. Adding that seventh person would have been a challenge for a 20-minute student film, so maybe it is best that I kept them out. I feel that Pat Saffel did a good job covering the fish habitat issue and, speaking generally for the Missoula angling community.

Overall, I feel this film is successful in informing the local community, and country as a whole of what is going on with today's Clark Fork River. There is a diverse user group, all wanting different things from the river, but, as we've seen in the past, open discussion and public discourse is the best way to get opinions out in the open and for people to make informed decisions about such situations. In keeping with my theme of combining eye-catching cinematography with an interesting soundtrack and a thought-provoking environmental message, I believe I have presented an aesthetically pleasing strategy for success that will separate a truly environmental film from a typical "nature" film. Dorothy Fadiman and Tony Levelle address this well: "A film that reflects your true passion will carry with it a special energy, a vital sense of purpose that can have an impact for generations" (xiii). I feel that I have accomplished that with my film *Missoula: To the MAX*.

## REFERENCES CITED

Bernard, Sheila Curran. *Documentary Storytelling: Creative Nonfiction on Screen (Third Edition)*. Taylor & Francis, 2011.

BIS Records AB. "Ingmar Bergman – Music from the Films" *BIS Records AB*.  
<http://bis.se/performers/pontinen-roland/ingmar-bergman-music-from-the-films>

Fadiman, Dorothy and Tony Levelle. *Producing with Passion*. Michael Wiese Productions, 2008.

Fothergill, Alastair. *Planet Earth*. British Broadcasting Corporation, 2006.

Glover, Kristin Lynn. "Connections: Making Sense of the World Around Us (The Use of Music in Documentary Films). *Kristin Lynn Glover, 2009*.  
<https://scholarworks.montana.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1/1343/GloverK0809.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

Grodal, Torben. "Moving Picture: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition." Oxford Press, USA, 1999.

Gussman, John and Jessica Plumb, directors. *The Return of the River*. Passion River Films, 2016.

Knight, Ben and Travis Rummel, co-directors. *DamNation*. Felt Soul Media, 2014.

Missoula County, MT. "Milltown Dam and Reservoir" *Missoula County, MT, 2019*.  
<https://www.missoulacounty.us/government/health/health-department/missoula-valley-water-quality-district/cleanup-sites/milltown-dam>

Morgan, Curt, director. *The Art of Flight*. Brain Farm Digital Cinema, 2011.

Plantinga, Carl. *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press  
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/montana/reader.action?docID=837157>

Rabiger, Michael. *Directing the Documentary (Sixth Edition)*. Taylor and Francis, 2015.

Rosenthal, Alan. *Writing, Directing, and Producing Documentary Films and Videos (Fourth Edition.)* Southern Illinois University Press, 2007.