

SLOW MEDIA Community:
Decolonized Media,
The Camera as Witness

by

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of high definition video cameras in 2000, videographers were provided with a tool that could capture and convey the detailed essence of natural settings. The jump from four hundred and eighty lines of resolution, to one thousand and eighty lines signaled a revolution in the potential of the video image. Indigenous filmmakers in locations around the world took this opportunity to feature their homelands in extended narrative works that won large and enthusiastic international audiences. These Indigenous media artists used the evolving video medium to convey their unique sense of time in relation to their surroundings, within the stories they had adapted from their ancestors. The swamplands of northern Australia and the ice floes of the high Arctic began to emerge as evocative characters, rather than as just inanimate backdrops.

In this thesis the author investigates the evolution of a cinematic, Indigenous sense of time and space, primarily through the work of Inuit master filmmaker, Zacharius Kunuk. Based in Canada's high Arctic, Kunuk and his collaborators at Isuma Productions developed a unique production approach that featured a style of "re-lived" cultural drama. This, in essence, is community based storytelling. The author identifies the enduring Inuit cultural traits of community health and survival as the key criteria in the development of a peculiar and brilliant Inuit media aesthetic. This Indigenous, cinema aesthetic is now practiced by a growing number of Indigenous filmmakers globally, especially in Australia and New Zealand.

The author then asks; can components of this popular style of filmmaking employing extended takes of the natural environment, be adapted, repurposed, and utilized as a both a disruptive and a positive component of our evolving media lives? And is there a place in the current media market for SLOW MEDIA Community, a decolonized form of media that ignores the commercial imperative of high impact programming?

It is clear that there is an ongoing adaptation of hybrid forms of SLOW MEDIA in the contemporary media market place. Can SLOW MEDIA Community, and its particular promotion of "real time" in nature distinguish itself as a component of media awareness and health?

Lay Summary

This thesis explores the history and aesthetic of Indigenous media production, and its community based roots. Based on the international popularity of Indigenous feature films, most notably, *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, the author, Gregory Coyes, explores the potential of adapting this Indigenous video aesthetic, featuring long form shots of natural terrain, into other forms of media. Over a fifteen-year period, Coyes, a noted Indigenous documentary filmmaker, researches and launches SLOW MEDIA Community, a long-form, contemplative video alternative to the high impact programming that dominates the contemporary media landscape.

Coyes' evolution and launch of SLOW MEDIA Community poses the question: Can we look beyond the commercial imperative of high impact media and utilize our media to nurture and revitalize our audience?

Preface

The identification and design of the research contained in this thesis on SLOW MEDIA Community is solely the work of the author, Gregory Coyes.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to the memory of my mother Lillian Coyes (L'Hirondelle). She was a dedicated student and a wonderful teacher, right through to her last breath. She encouraged me in my educational pursuit and taught me that education is a true gift to be shared with younger generations.

I would also like to dedicate this work to the late Rolf Cutts, a remarkable friend and an outstanding cinematographer.

1. Introduction

SLOW MEDIA Community is a specific approach to both the production and presentation of high definition images of natural environments, and the elements at work in those environments. It promotes the concept of “real time” in cinema, a temporal reference utilizing the sun as a primary lighting source, and minimizing any sense of compression in the editing process. SLOW MEDIA Community has been developed over the last fifteen years of my career as an Indigenous filmmaker based first in Alberta, and for the last twenty years, here in Vancouver, Canada.

Prior to beginning my career in media production, I pursued my studies and passion for alpine and glacial environments. My bachelor’s studies took me to various sites in the mountains of Alberta, Montana and Wyoming, as well as two, full research seasons on the Juneau Ice Field Research Project in southeastern Alaska. My bachelor’s thesis at Yale (1978) focused on a dynamic glacial ice feature, “wave-ojives”, which were brilliantly expressed at the base of the Vaughn Lewis Icefall on the Juneau Ice Field.

I note my long standing fascination with glaciology and geomorphology, and the dynamic elemental processes that have shaped and continue to shape the Earth, as a temporal reference. There are numerous learned references in one’s life that contribute to our both our personal and collective sense of time here on this planet. My upbringing in a Metis/Cree family setting, and our four season relationship to nature, as well as my scientific studies in glacial and alpine settings have been major reference points for me personally. And all of this has provided me with a deep appreciation for the incrementally, but constantly evolving beauty of the nature of our planet, and ourselves.

In the mid-eighties I caught the film-bug and left the vocation of glaciology behind after being cast in the feature film, *Running Brave*. This was the true story of Billy Mills, the Lakota Sioux runner who won Olympic gold in the ten thousand meters in Tokyo in 1964. I was cast and played the role of his Tunisian, silver medal-winning competitor in the big Olympic race, the climax of that film. The casting process proved that I was a much better runner than I was an actor! This quirk of casting got me hooked on the power of film in relation to Indigenous narratives. Over the next twenty-five years I wrote and produced award-winning programs for the Smithsonian, the NFB, and most of the major networks in Canada.

In 1999-2000 I was actively producing and directing both animation and documentaries based out of Vancouver, Canada. The previous ten years had seen me apprenticing with some of the best emerging and established filmmakers in western Canada, including Gil Cardinal, Anne Wheeler, and Sandy Wilson. My personal focus evolved, and became the facilitation and production of the outstanding knowledge keepers and storytellers from both our First Nations and Metis communities for television. This resulted in more than forty hours of primarily series broadcast, with subjects ranging from Indigenous prison populations, to cutting edge, contemporary music. I brought the best craftspeople and technology to the stories that my budgets would allow, and that meant collaborating with a variety of camera and production sound specialists.

1.1. From Standard to High Definition

One of those camera specialists, Bill Weaver, organized a conference of media innovation at the Hollyhock Institute in May, 2000. There, Bill demonstrated a new Sony high definition video camera with shots of the surrounding North Pacific coastal forest on Cortes Island, British Columbia. It was my first experience of high definition imagery and I recognized, almost immediately, that the clarity and resolution of the HD images was having an unprecedented effect on this audience of filmmakers. The increase from 480 to 1080 vertical lines of visual data was creating a media

experience of the surrounding forest that was unprecedented and remarkably engaging. I was having an emotional reaction to the images of nature on the screen in the conference room.

With more than twice the visual information being delivered, the “hi-def” images of the surrounding forest were speaking to me, and others in the room, through the technical medium of video. Suddenly, the forest was a living and breathing media entity, rather than a relatively muddy, low definition representation of that same forest. Many of us there that day recognized that our craft and our

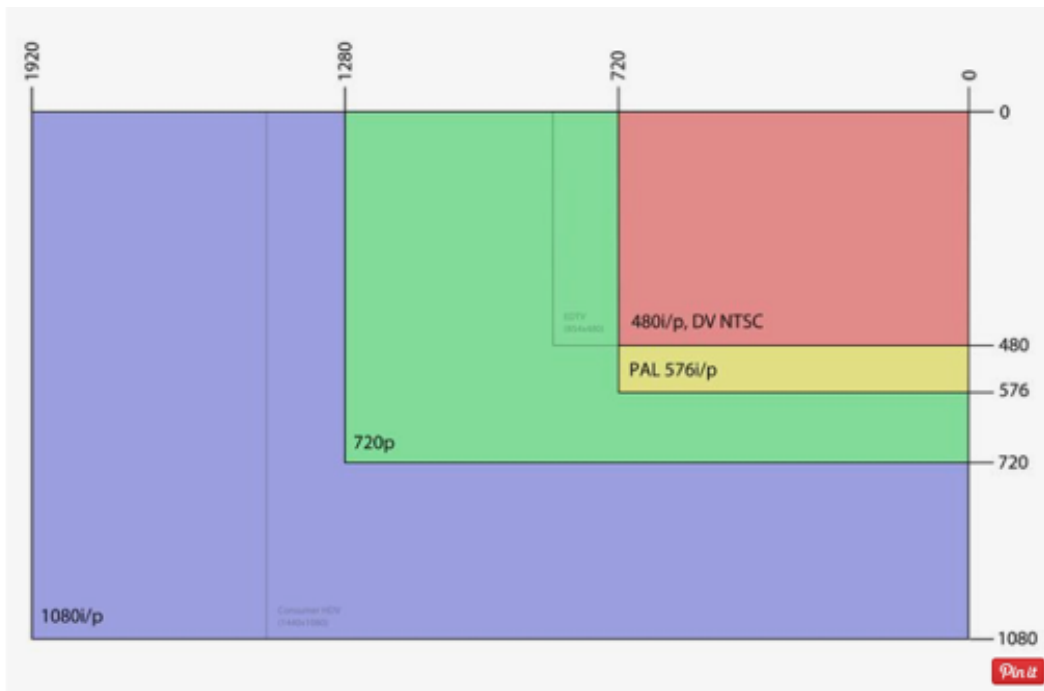


Fig. 1 Comparison of 480 versus 1080 Vertical Lines of Information

business had taken a pivotal step. We had been given the potential to begin delivering our stories in a more immersive and arresting visual form. The potential impact on our audiences was wonderfully exciting, but largely unknown. What might we do with this gift of technology?

2. The Emergence of Indigenous Cinema in Canada's Arctic

At the same time, unbeknown to the rest of the world, a young Inuit film maker, Zacharius Kunuk, was using similar, hi-def technology to shoot his first feature length narrative in Canada's high arctic.

Zach Kunuk, born in 1957, was raised in Igloolik in the central Arctic, a place that was largely insulated against the early European influence of the whaling expeditions that began in the seventeenth century. The further away a community was situated from the outer coast, the less contact they had with both whalers and wayward adventurers from across the water.



Fig. 2 Map courtesy of: <http://ultima0thule.blogspot.com>

Prior to his family moving to this government-created, centralized community, Zach spent the first eight years of his life living on the land, wintering in an igloo with his extended family. The intuitive knowledge that he gained of the land, the snow, and ice of the high arctic and the extraordinary adaptability of his Inuit ancestors was both deep and profound. He speaks of it as an adult:

“I remember as a child lying on a bed of caribou skins in an igloo on my back and looking at the spiral construction of the blocks of snow. Now, as an adult,

I look back at that experience and recognize that I was looking at the brilliance of my ancestors. “

Personal Interview, July 2015

In his late teens, in the mid nineteen seventies, Zach was working as an artist and whale bone carver. He was carving the skeletal bones of bowhead whales that he was finding on local beaches and in abandoned community sites, some of which had been hunted by his ancestors centuries earlier. The Arctic environment, a giant deep freeze that is almost completely dark for almost three months every year, creates an extraordinary shelf life for a variety of organic matter, and especially endoskeletal remains.



**Fig. 3 Zacharius Kunuk with Whale Bone Carving, July 2014
Photo Credit: Gregory Coyes**

Zach's home of Igloolik was a community that was committed to a traditional way of life. They regarded all new innovations that were delivered by plane, or the annual supply ship, through a critical lens. This was the lens of Inuit survival, one of their keys in adapting into a culture that could not only survive, but thrive in this extreme climate. It was also a culture that valued the strength and the security of the collective. It is impossible to survive multiple winter seasons on one's own.

In 1975 the community of Igloolik faced an unprecedented import.

In the late nineteen seventies the federal Department of Communications launched a program to test satellite applications, using the newly launched **Anik B** satellite.

(Roth 2009,89)

The result was the first distribution of English language television into a number of Inuit communities, including Igloolik. Their first reaction was clear and strong.

Some communities, such as Igloolik, initially voted to refuse television through a series of hamlet plebiscites, fearing irreversible damage to their lifestyle. Many national and regional Aboriginal organizations voiced the same fear, and insisted that native people had the right to define and contribute to any broadcast service distributed in their homelands.

(Roth 2009,89)

Zach Kunuk recounts that the Elders of his community first looked at this new device and then looked to neighbouring communities to see how it was being used, and what effect it was having. Their observations and their dialogue with these Inuit communities told a story of increased social isolation, and a lack of meaningful time spent with Elders. This decreased the opportunities for the essential exchanges of the Inuktitut language and the culture embedded there. Based on these observations, Igloolik refused the delivery of the first satellite signals broadcast in the Arctic.

Inuit have successfully adapted to technological innovation several times throughout their history. Neither firearms nor snowmobiles are indigenous to the North, but both have become central elements of contemporary Inuit hunting culture. It was clear that television in the North was not going to go away; the challenge for Inuit was to find a way of adapting to this technology to

their own ends, using television as a vehicle for the protection of their language, rather than as an agent of its destruction.

(Inuit Broadcasting Corporation website, 2017)

In 1981 Zacharius Kunuk decided to make a trip to the art markets of Montreal to personally promote his whale bone carvings. This was his early entrepreneurial spirit shining through, as the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative had been established twenty years earlier and was already marketing Inuit art in the south. On that first trip to Montreal Zach purchased a video camera and brought it home to Igloolik. His initial projects were simple documentaries with Elders. He set up his camera and conversed with them in Inuktitut, listened to their stories, and asked questions about the old traveling and hunting techniques on the land and ice. Initially, he was skeptical of the reaction from those same Elders in his community that had rejected the satellite signals from the south.

“They didn’t say anything. I just worked with some of them. And then one of the old ones died. That’s when they realized the power of the camera. We had this person’s words and stories, and they were in our language”

Personal Interview, July 2015

2.1 Inuit Media – An Ancient Practice

For the Inuit, their concept of media and their intuitive ability to communicate across time and distance is a craft that has been practiced in the high Arctic for millennia. Their inuksuit, set in stone eons ago at very specific places on the Arctic landscape, serve various communication functions depending on both their location and their construction.

Some would indicate the location of a safe harbour or a dangerous passage. To a hunter they revealed where food was cached, where migrating animals tended to at certain times of the year, or where preferred routes had their beginnings. Some stone markers placed on the landscape pointed the way to a spring hidden from view, to the entrance to a narrow pass or to a natural

shelter that could be used in a time of dire need. And some were objects of veneration.

(Hallendy 2000, 22)



Fig. 4 Inukshuk - Photo Courtesy of arounddeglobe.com

According to Hallendy, the primary function of this ancient form of communication was survival. The primal needs in the extreme climate of the Arctic all revolve around the survival of the community, and the individuals that make up those communities.

So it is no surprise that the earliest radio production out of CBC North in Frobisher Bay (now known as Iqaluit, Nunavut) in February, 1961, consisted of local programming in English and French, as well as Inuktitut.

Emphasis was on local and national news, regional weather, road and flying conditions ... and personal messages – like health reports on relatives who are hospitalized down South.

(Roth 2005, 67)

Roth goes on to write that for the Inuit, early radio production “set the attitudinal context for the coming of television.” Inuit radio broadcast consisted of essential community information. The movement of caribou herds, ice conditions, as well as

news on births and deaths were common programming priorities for the Inuit broadcasters.

Once the production of Inuit language video programming had begun, the practice spread quickly throughout the eastern Arctic. This was community based programming, free of commercial interruptions.

Rudimentary television production facilities were installed in Pond Inlet, Baker Lake, Iqaluit (Frobisher Bay), Cambridge Bay, Igloolik and Arviat (Eskimo Point), and teams of newly-recruited Inuit trainees began to learn the fundamentals of TV production. Video playback equipment was installed in communities which had barely begun to receive television. Funding for the training, production and distribution of Inuktitut language television programming was provided by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. The first Inukshuk videotapes circulated among communities and were locally screened in community halls, council chambers, and classrooms. In 1980, the Inukshuk Project began broadcasting via the Anik B satellite from Iqaluit.

(Inuit Broadcasting Corporation website, 2017)

While the initial technology was rudimentary for the time, the results, the response in the communities to Inuktitut programming, was very positive. Community and Arctic government leaders recognized the inherent value of the initiative and lobbied the federal government for even more support. In 1981 the Canadian Radio and Telecommunications Commission granted a network television license to the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, and the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) was formed.

2.2 The IBC – the Roots of the Inuit Cinema Aesthetic

Over the next fifteen years the IBC, the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, focused on training and production in the Inuktitut language. This was Inuit programming, made by Inuit producers, for an Inuit audience. In essence, they used many of the same adaptive techniques that had been employed with radio decades earlier.

The first video programs exchanged between Igloolik and other communities in the IBC network were free from the commercial imperative that was the driving force of the large majority of broadcasting in the rest of North America. The IBC utilized the medium of television to exchange information and opinions valued by the Inuit of the eastern Arctic over the vast distances that defined their Arctic territory.

The IBC has a range of offerings, including a children's show and historical, current affairs, and cultural features, which are broadcast by satellite to a widely dispersed audience spread over 3.3 million square kilometers. The corporation has become the largest producer of Aboriginal programming in Canada.

(Canadianhistory.ca 2018)

In this very specific Inuit milieu the evolving sense of Inuit cinema was not dictated by a predetermined pace of delivery. Free from the dominant, high impact agenda of commercial television, the Inuit aesthetic of video began to incubate. Over a twenty-year period, from 1980 until 2000 the Inuit of the eastern Arctic utilized the IBC to tell the stories that they valued in a style that spoke directly to the communities. Rather than beating one another up with the medium, they chose to inform one another, entertain their adults and Elders, and educate their youth, all in the Inuktitut language. At the IBC there was no commercial incentive attached to the concept of video production or distribution, nothing to sell one another, so there was no motivation for high impact, tightly edited commercials, or dictated lengths of programming.

IBC developed and implemented a series of comprehensive in-house training programs, which combined technical instruction, journalism, and language and cultural workshops with practical hands-on experience in production. The principles and programs developed by IBC refined over the decade have

become the basis of training for most of the aboriginal television broadcasters in Canada.

(Inuit Broadcasting Corporation Website, 2017)

Through the 1980's the IBC's concentration was on current affairs and the politics of the day with Aboriginal rights, coverage of first minister's conferences, and land claims and resource development being hot topics. In addition, the IBC continued producing the cultural programming that Zach Kunuk had initiated in Igloolik with his Elders years earlier.

IBC's cultural programming has taught traditional skills to younger Inuit, entertained older Inuit, and provided valuable video documentation of myths and legends of the Inuit culture. In a 1988 survey, over half of IBC's audience confirmed they had learned about both traditional skills and improved the quality of their language by watching IBC.

(Inuit Broadcasting Corporation Website, 2017)

3. Igloolik Isuma Productions

For Zacharius Kunuk, cultural programming was the lifeblood of the Inuit. The rapid change that was flooding into the Arctic in the 1980's and '90's was a threat to the traditional knowledge base that was embodied in the Inuit Elders and the language. Zach made a conscious decision to concentrate his efforts on cultural programming and in 1990 he co-founded Igloolik Isuma Productions with minority partner, Norman Cohn, a New York bred producer and cinematographer. This was Canada's first Inuit-owned independent production company.

Norman Cohn travelled to Igloolik in 1985 to meet Zacharias Kunuk and Paul Apak after seeing videos they had made while working for the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation. In 1990, assisted by a Guggenheim Fellowship, Cohn moved to Igloolik, where, with Kunuk, Apak and Pauloosie Qulitalik, he

co-founded Igloodik Isuma Productions, and helped develop Isuma's style of "re-lived" cultural drama by adapting the authenticity of video observation to the art of Inuit storytelling.

(Isuma TV Website, 2018)

This "re-lived cultural drama" style practiced by Isuma Productions, was a collaborative concept between the filmmakers that drew on the resources of the community.

"Isuma's "unique style of re-lived drama", highlights key aesthetic elements that can be found in most of Kunuk and Cohn's films: a focus on oral history and mythologies, authenticity in depicting Inuit traditions, and a slow paced editing style that allows for scenes and scenery to gradually unfold and linger."

(Baltruschat 2015, Chapter 13)

When Isuma first pitched Telefilm Canada in 1998 with a concept for a dramatic feature film, they were turned down and told there was a \$200,000 ceiling on Indigenous features. Kunuk and Cohn were not deterred and used the press in Montreal, and a letter writing campaign to raise awareness and support. Through a tenacious, multi-step financing campaign they eventually raised \$1.96 million. They then employed many Inuit in Zach's home community of Igloodik to spend a full season designing, building, and sewing all of the wardrobe and props needed for the feature length drama. Working with sealskin and caribou hide they constructed and sewed tents, mukluks, parkas, and dog harnesses. They finally went into full production in late 1999, completed the edit, and released *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* at the Cannes Film Festival in 2001. This was the first feature film ever to be written, directed, and acted entirely in the Inuktitut language.

Atanarjuat won the *Caméra d'Or (Golden Camera)* at Cannes, and six Genie Awards, including Best Motion Picture. *Atanarjuat* was also a commercial success ... it grossed more than US\$5 million worldwide. In 2015, a poll of filmmakers and critics at the Toronto International Film Festival named

Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner, the greatest Canadian film of all time.

(Wikipedia, 2018)

When I first viewed this break-through film in 2001 I was astounded that a film of almost three hours (2 hours and 52 minutes) scripted wholly in an Indigenous language, could attract an international audience. Yes, it had many of the essential components of good drama (love, betrayal, lust) but I felt it was clearly speaking to its audience in other, very powerful ways.

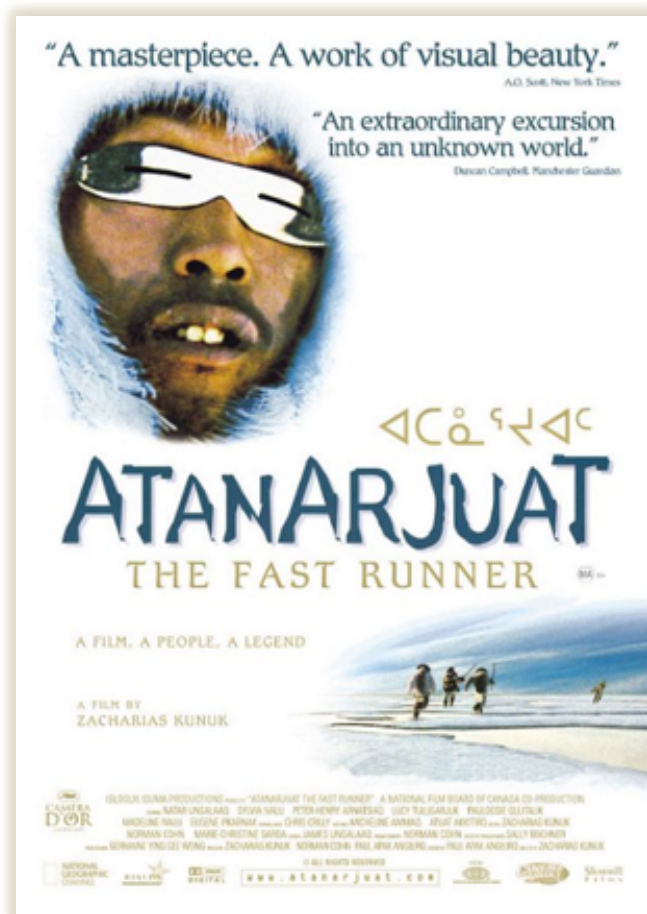


Fig. 5 - Poster Courtesy of Isuma Productions

A substantial component of the Isuma “re-lived” dramatic style was to employ extensive, unhurried shots of both the tundra and the ice. From a neophyte, southern viewer’s perspective, this substantially slows down both the narrative pace

of the film, and the sense of cinematic time in this Inuit story. A still frame, wide shot of the expansive tundra might be held for as long as thirty seconds while a human form first appears on the broad Arctic horizon and then travels, at a walk, towards us. While we experience this very measured, very dramatic entrance and slowly recognize the specific character, we are also being given the time to simply 'be with the tundra'. We sense the mild summer wind and sun coaxing the life forth from the newly thawed Arctic surface soil, and we actually get a sense of the light on this land. This is what I refer to as "real time". It is a cinematic, Inuit sense of time and space. It is a welcoming of the audience, an invitation into both the Inuit way of seeing, and being with the land and ice. Its references are the sun, the specific season, and the elements at work on the landscape. This aspect of Inuit cinema aesthetic imbues much of the film, and my sense is that this is one of the major gifts of this film that the international, largely urban audience has embraced.

4. Collaboration and Success Down Under

Atanarjuat, the result of the remarkable Inuit, cinematic incubation, was just the first example of an Indigenous aesthetic in a feature length form. In 2006, *Ten Canoes*, a ninety minute long film directed by Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr was released in Australia.

Ten Canoes was the product of a deep, immersive collaboration between the Australian producer/director, Rolf de Heer, and Aboriginal co-director, Peter Djigirr, and his community. These are the Yolngu people who inhabit the wetlands and floodplains of Arnhem Land in the lush Northern Territory of Australia.

One of the factors that made it work, was that the people in Ramingining had no capacity to make a film by themselves, and I had no capacity to make a film there, or about there, without them ... The key, however, was one of trust, and it lay in the area of creative control. I was from the dominant culture and very obviously in charge of the film making ... I did the writing of the script, and raised the money, and brought in much of the crew. But from the beginning, I

had ceded creative control to the Yolngu subordinate culture. Unless I could convince them otherwise, what they wanted in the film, they got, and what they didn't want, they didn't have to have. And so they genuinely, and correctly, felt that *Ten Canoes*, as it came to be known, was their film as much as it was anyone's.

(De Heer, 2015)

The initial collaborative process and the scripting was largely driven by a collection of black and white photographs taken in 1936 by the Australian anthropologist, Donald Thomson. The Yolngu people were fascinated by Thomson's photos of their ancestors, their only hands-on, graphic reference in their largely, oral history. And one particular photo depicting ten Yolngu men poling their bark canoes across a wooded swamp was the nexus for the collaboration, and the subsequent traditional

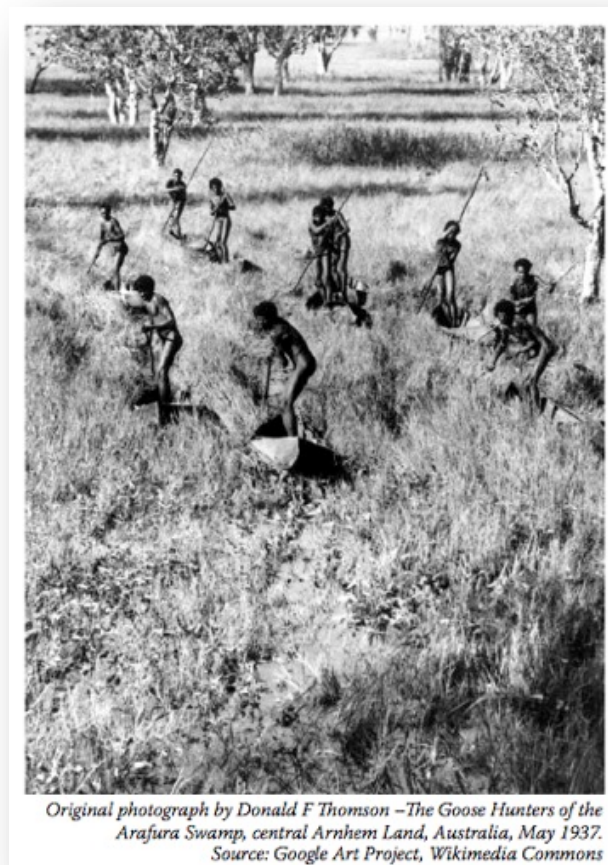


Fig. 6 Goose Hunters, Photo by Donald F. Thomson, Wikimedia Commons

narrative style that evolved into this award-winning feature. Described as a “docu-drama” the film is a story within a story, rich with Aboriginal humour and nuance. De Heer and the team of technicians and Aboriginal storytellers employ a visual style and pace that both settles and informs the audience.

To further capture the essence of Thomson’s photography in the goose egg hunting scenes, there is very little camera movement. Shots are either static or the camera movement is extremely slow and gentle. The camera never gets too close to the subjects either, and most shots of the goose egg hunting expedition are from a distance, never getting much closer than a medium shot. This slightly detached and cinematically traditional style of cinematography certainly heightens the documentary feel of these sections ...

(Caldwell, 2009)

Like *Atanarjuat* before it, *Ten Canoes* had a profound effect on Australian cinema, as well as its domestic and international audiences. It won six major prizes at the 2006 Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts Awards including best film, direction, and cinematography, as well as a Special Jury Prize at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival. And like *Atanarjuat*, there is substantial written analysis of the narrative that refers to the moral tale embedded in this traditional Yolngu story. This is another film about lust and a young man’s journey to understand that desire within the context and complexity of his community. And while there is universal appeal in the telling of this story, the setting, the landscape, and the Yolngu way of being on and with their land is also a major component to the widespread appeal of the film. The following commentary is excerpted from a guide for secondary school teachers in Australia.

In terms of the film’s semiotics ... the landscape *is* the narrative ... The Storyteller takes us back to the time of his ancestors (two brothers, Minyngululu and Dayindi), whom we now view in the black-and-white frame narrative. We soon learn that the narrative is about a narrative; that is, the whole culture is saturated with storytelling, just as Ian Jones’ cinematography and Tania

Nehme's editing takes us back even further ... via a tracking shot in startling and realistic colour. That is, the most abstract, remembered and imagined setting in the film is presented as a colour landscape.

(Strange 2015, 40)

De Heer, in consultation with his Yolngu collaborators skillfully uses the transition from the black and white, to colour, to symbolize an even richer age of both story and meaning. The mainstream Australian reaction, and the level of analysis brought to this multi-layered, Aboriginal story within a story, is quite profound.

... beneath the remembered and imagined landscape is the thing itself: a spiritual womb housing ancestor spirits, tribal lore and its inherent law. Bula. And the tribal lore, like the trees in the landscape, is slow to grow, projects many branches and provides shelter and sustenance to its people. The real landscape is a canvas upon which to read, interpret and remember the tribal lore, and thereby imagine its deeply rooted connection to the tribal law beneath its soil.

(Strange 2015, 42)

Ten Canoes provided an accessible, cinematic window into Aboriginal culture for white Australians that previously had not existed in this particular form. When the first British sailors landed two hundred and forty years ago, and witnessed the lifestyle of the Aboriginal people, they mistook a deep and intimate knowledge of the land and its rhythms, for primitivism. The resulting racism was acute and far reaching. Unbeknownst to these early British explorers, this remarkable Aboriginal knowledge was based on sixty-five thousand years of continuous occupation.

What Ten Canoes shows is not only a way of living that the white invasion has tried to destroy but also the highly sophisticated ethical system of Indigenous groups, a binding factor for communities which is integral to their morale and sense of belonging. Popular misconceptions about Indigenous Australians tend to ignore their ability to function as successful groups and convey complex

philosophical lessons in their storytelling. The positive message of this film, namely that despite the abuse by white people many stories have managed to survive, demonstrates the strength and resilience of Indigenous culture in the face of overwhelming persecution and exploitation.

(Hartog, 2006)

5. An Indigenous Sense of Cinematic Time

The impact of the settings in both *Atanarjuat* and *Ten Canoes* is largely dependent on the specific use of the camera in depicting and communicating the Indigenous relationship to the land. And this view is fundamentally related to time. Both of these films featured Indigenous concepts of time demonstrated by extended shots of natural landscapes. Arctic tundra and lush northern Australian flood plains grow from simple settings, to something closer to characters.

In recent years Zacharius Kunuk's continued work in feature length narratives, as well as the work of the celebrated Australian Aboriginal filmmaker, Warwick Thornton, have continued to push the sense of Indigenous cinematic time and space. And last year the release of *Waru*, a ground-breaking Maori feature, raised the bar yet again. Here, eight different female, Maori directors depict the same morning following the tragic death of an eight year old boy in the care of his dysfunctional parents. Each of the eight films is one shot, combined into a seamless, eighty-eight minute feature film. Riveting! And yet another innovation of Indigenous cinematic time and space.

Within this context, this continuing examination of the evolution of the aesthetic of Indigenous cinema led me to begin to question the dominant, North American mainstream applications of the medium of video.

6. The Origin and Evolution of the Commercial Imperative

In May of 1941 the first legal television commercial played to approximately 4,000 televisions in the New York City area.

In the United States, television ads generate tens of billions of dollars every year and reach their pinnacle at the Super Bowl. As with every powerful force, though, there's a humble origin story behind today's polished spots ... On July 1, 1941, the NBC-owned station WNBT in New York aired the first legal commercial in television history. Advertising was banned on TV until the Federal Communications Commission gave commercial licenses to 10 stations on May 2, 1941, to go into effect July 1 ... WNBT was the only one to air an ad on that day. The commercial played before a Brooklyn Dodgers-Philadelphia Phillies game at Ebbets Field.

(businessinsider.com, 2016)

It was a nine second spot called the "Bulova Time Check," which showed a watch face with the second hand ticking while a voice-over read, "America runs on Bulova time." It cost fifteen dollars to be placed on the air. In contrast, today's Superbowl ads, referenced above, go for five million dollars for a thirty second spot. That is more than the budgets for both *Atanarjuat* and *Ten Canoes* combined.



Fig. 7 - Photo courtesy of Youtube

On this continent the American model of advertising is dominant. While in 1960 an hour of television used to run fifty-one minutes, today an hour runs forty-two

minutes, leaving eighteen minutes for commercials. And those commercials are constantly getting shorter, with the ultimate goal of having more impact.

When television began as an advertising medium, the standard commercial length was 60 seconds. Thirty-second spots began running not long after cigarette commercials left the airwaves in 1971 ... The 15-second commercial began to appear in the late 1980's as a way to compensate for the rapidly rising cost of 30-second spots.

(Elliot, 2005)

In 1903, editing, introduced in *The Great Train Robbery*, was a brilliant cinematic innovation that drastically increased the filmmakers ability to bring drama, pace, and anticipation to their narratives. In the last thirty years the evolution of our high impact programming, driven by the commercial imperative, has driven both the production and the editing process into a suspect digital hinterland of fractured media. Today, ads as short as six seconds are being broadcast by experimental marketers, on both television and the web. And these innovations of compression are creeping into every aspect of our media, and our lives. One result is that we are starved for anything resembling “real time” in our media lives. Anything with a reference to the sun, the turning of the seasons, the elements.

While this seems to be the nature of digital cinema, my examination of the growing popularity of the Indigenous cinematic aesthetic, and the Indigenous sense of cinematic place and time, suggests that there is an audience, and perhaps an evolving need for alternative approaches to both our media production and exhibition. It certainly raises the question: Is tightly edited, high impact programming serving us as a society that values awareness and well-being?

7. SLOW MEDIA Community – Initial Research

My research and exploration into SLOW MEDIA was initially motivated by the brilliant output and clarity of the constantly improving high definition cameras first introduced in 2000. This evolved into a personal desire to explore a practice of

awareness in both the production and screening of my own work. Could I work with a camera in way that would begin to communicate the essence of a specific setting? My sense was that the camera was now technically capable of achieving this goal. So it seemed that my approach to the scene with the camera might be the variable in determining success.

My initial experiment with a SLOW MEDIA approach featured the broadcast-quality gear and substantial skills of my long-time director of photography, the late Rolf Cutts. Being relatively new to Vancouver I was still completely charmed by the spring blooms and pacific nature of English Bay. Rolf and I rose one morning prior to sunrise in early May, 2010, and set up his camera overlooking the shore on Beach Avenue near Davie Street. It was a beautiful frame with a lacework of blue Forget-Me-Nots below a clutch of orange tulips in the foreground. Mid frame was the walkway and deserted beach, and that led to English Bay and a view from Jericho frame left, and Lighthouse Park, frame right. As we waited for the sun to rise over the buildings directly behind us a few early risers wandered along the water's edge. It was an exemplary Vancouver morning! We rolled for more than twenty minutes.

But when I got the shot up on my editing screen in my studio I quickly realized that the composition was much too broad. The emphasis of all the visual components, with the exception of the tulips, was in the horizontal axis. This wasn't working! There was simply not enough dynamic in the frame to keep the eye motivated. There was too much dead space in the frame occupied by the static nature of the ocean and sky in the mid ground and back ground.

While I didn't have daily access to broadcast quality camera gear, as that spring bloom progressed I secured a less expensive Canon camera and began looking around my own neighborhood in North Vancouver for outstanding locations. I also brought both my expectations and my frame of reference down to a more manageable level.

7.1 The Flower Beadwork People

In my Metis heritage there is a long-standing appreciation of flowers. I feel this harkens back to the pre-contact period of my Cree ancestors and their knowledge of medicine plants. My Metis Kookum (grandmother) Lena L'Hirondelle, told me stories of her mother-in-law, Madeline Calihou, a Cree midwife and medicine woman who had substantial plant knowledge. While this knowledge was not passed on to my mother, Lillian L'Hirondelle, her appreciation for blooming plants, both wild and domestic, was celebrated in our family. Her garden was a testament to that. And floral designs have always been a major component of Metis beadwork, so much so that the Metis have been called 'the floral beadwork people'.



Fig. 8 Celine Kleingast, Ft Vermillion, AB



My Kookum's Craft: Lena L'Hirondelle, St Albert, AB

7.2 The Butterfly Garden Artist

And I was also reminded of the work of celebrated Mi'kmaq artist, Mike MacDonald (1941-2006). While I never met the man, I became aware of his passion for traditional medicine plants, and the teachings that he passed on regarding the role of butterflies in showing us the medicines through his video

work. In the 1980's he began experimenting with video as a powerful cultural tool, and he went on to plant eighteen butterfly gardens in numerous locations across the country, beginning in the early 1990's. And he was widely lauded for his video installations, perhaps most notably *Touched by the Tears of a Butterfly* (1994). This installation included a set of rocking chairs placed directly in front of the monitor. Clearly, a direct invitation for his potential audience to both sit down, and slow down.

It occurred to me that it would be easier to photograph and videotape butterflies if I studied and grew the plants that they liked. As regards the style of my work, I do long shots compared to those used in Broadcast television. A 30 second commercial will use many shots but most of my individual shots are thirty seconds or longer. I want people to slow down and think about things. In fact each of my shots is like a commercial for nature.

(MacDonald, 1995)

7.3 My Neighbour's Garden

On a summer morning in July I set my tripod in my neighbor's garden, where the Yellow Iris were in full bloom. It was a mild, partly cloudy morning with a bit of wind, and there was some volatility in the sky. The light surface wind was magnified at altitude, and the winds were moving the light cumulus clouds along at a fairly good clip. As I placed my camera and found my frame on a single bloom, I recognized that the wind was a positive factor. It was moving the long, green spears of the Iris leaves, and perhaps more importantly, it was constantly changing the lighting from above. I checked my frame and focus, adjusted the audio level, and pushed the record button. I hung around for a few minutes and then walked back into my yard to tend to my own garden. When I returned fifteen minutes later I found that the camera had rolled for twelve minutes, and then an automatic shut-off had occurred. There was lots of room on the SD card, so I checked the framing and hit the record button for the second time.

Final later that morning when I got the coverage up on my editing screen, I recognized that this full frame shot of the Yellow Iris bloom had substantially more dynamic than I had anticipated. The relatively light wind was a major factor in both how it moved the plant, and the effect it had on the clouds and the overall lighting of the shot. My auto-iris setting accommodated all of these lighting fluctuations.



Fig. 9 - Still From: Yellow Iris – SLOW MEDIA Community

What was even a greater surprise was the ants that began to crawl out of the bloom thirty seconds into the roll. There seemed to be a period of time when they would lie dormant, but then they seemed to gain some level of comfort with the glass eye observing them, and they began to show themselves to the camera. This was a significant revelation. I was now documenting 'real time' utilizing insects as animate characters! My camera was acting as a witness in my absence, and producing some gorgeous images.

YELLOW IRIS 23:06

<https://vimeo.com/80664584>

Later that morning I found another beautiful frame on a Purple Foxglove. The long stem and soft background further accentuated the vertical axis in the frame, and the light wind provided just enough movement. Again, leaving the camera as my witness, I walked away. Later, up on my editing screen, I was again thrilled to see the ants provide yet another layer of dynamic to the shot. This was working!



Figure 10 - Still from: Purple Foxglove – SLOW MEDIA Community

PURPLE FOXGLOVE 20:11

<https://vimeo.com/80858158>

I was beginning to perceive the potential of these shots as a ‘living canvas’. My task was to find and set the frame, with nature as my subject. I was learning that the natural dynamic in the frame was a key component. But did the high definition format have the capacity to capture the essence of the resource that nature was providing? And what was the potential of that resource in reaching and impacting an audience that was increasingly hooked on the accelerated concept delivery of the large majority of contemporary media?

8. Creating Structure in the Practice – Scenic as Ceremony

In July, 2011 I had the opportunity to travel to Quebec, “la belle province.” My destination was the modest “chateau” of a friend near Lac Cola, two hours north of Montreal in the heart of the Laurentian Mountains. My first attempt at shooting on the shore of the lake was an evening shoot. The results were encouraging. The stillness of lake in the calm of the evening, that then stretched into an extended dusk, were very painterly in both colour and tone.



Figure 11 - Still From: Lac Cola, Evening – SLOW MEDIA Community

The only thing that broke the reverie was the unexpected passage of a beaver slowly paddling through frame, and the incessant mosquitoes which were sometimes visible, crawling across the lens.

The extended dusk and twilight allowed for an extended shoot that allowed me to capture more than one sequence longer than twelve minutes. That raised an interesting and formative question: If these establishing shots (let’s call them ‘masters’) are a minimum of twelve minutes, and I’m motivated to shoot additional details, what is the minimum length of those insert shots?

My motivation in answering this questions was: I wanted to maintain a sense of “real time” even if I was employing edits that revealed other details or features of the master shot. My clear intention was to maintain or even expand the timeline in the edit, rather than compress it. I initially experimented with two-minute insert shots. In the edit room, when I found that two minutes was more than ample, I decided on one minute and twenty seconds as the minimum length of the inserts. This was partially because I liked the look of the numbers:

MASTER: 12:00
INSERTS: 1:20

And, an insert of one minute and twenty seconds was well beyond most viewer’s expectations for an insert edit. In combination with a twelve-minute master, it seemed to be a length that was adequate in allowing me to avoid any sense of time compression. My goal was to maintain a sense of “real time”, that natural pace that honours the arc of the sun in the sky, specific to every season. These time parameters would become the keys to my temporal practice of SLOW MEDIA for the next three years of shooting. This discipline, while initially providing clear minimum boundaries, also provided other gifts that would reveal themselves over time.

The next morning I rose before dawn, had a quiet cup of tea, and attempted to mosquito-proof my wardrobe. When I arrived at the lakeshore the sun was still obscured behind the wooded mountains to the northeast, but the light looked promising. I set up looking directly north across the lake to a stand of birch, their white trunks barely visible through the early morning mist against the backdrop of coniferous green. And the outline of the arc of a wooded ridge on the horizon was just visible through the fog. Birds, bugs, and the odd frog were all that I could hear.

I set my frame and pressed record. Unbeknownst to me, my camera was set on autofocus. As the air heated a few degrees directly above the surface of the lake,

the mist on the surface began to form in whorls and spin upwards. It was a fascinating sight. But when I looked down at my monitor I realized the auto focus function was on and my camera was having real difficulty finding focus. I made the adjustment to the manual setting, and then had more than twelve minutes to observe the movement of the whorls rising from the lake. Initially it was eerie, as if there were entities actually coming from the water and leaving the lake as they moved towards the sky. As the temperature warmed and the light increased this phenomenon dissipated somewhat. And with the oncoming light, I was getting a better look at what was going on.

There was a tremendous beauty in this process. I recognized again, that my camera was my witness. As the temperature continued to warm and the shore



Figure 12 - Still From: Sunrise at Lac Cola – SLOW MEDIA Community

birds and frogs came alive around me, I realized that from an empiric, scientific point of view, on this particular morning in July it was the specific air temperature, humidity, and lack of wind that had created the perfect atmospheric conditions for these whorls to occur.

But from a more spiritual point of view, I felt that my camera and I were witnessing a ceremony. It was the ceremony of the lake giving itself to the sky. And the power of that was beyond the science, and beyond the lake itself. There was something else at work here, as if with the light of day, the moon and stars dimmed, and finally disappeared. And then the power and breadth of the sky opened and accepted the offering from the lake.

How many mornings in a year would this occur ... just the right conditions? Perhaps twenty, or thirty? And how many mornings in the ancient past had the people of this region, first the Montagnais, and then the Metis and the Quebecois that dwelled here on this shore, witnessed this same ceremony of the lake giving itself to the sky?

SUNRISE AT LAC COLA 33:02
<https://vimeo.com/80529660>

9. The Practice of Observation - Presence Through the Camera

In the edit room I decided to take a linear approach to the assembly:

- The sequence opens with the master. The wide shot of the lake runs to 14:31, with the distant arc of the ridge showing itself briefly, beginning at 9:18.
- This is followed by a two shot sequence that brings us closer to the shoreline to 21:14.
- I pan to the northeast and widen out to catch the rise of the sun to 25:49.
- And then reach to the long end of the lens to catch a detail of the distant shore to 27:53.
- The sublime reflection of the clouds on the water in the breaking light is the focus through 30:00, with the exception of the bug walking directly across the lens at 28:32!

- And I conclude with the master, looking across the lake with the mist now completely gone, and the white birches in plain view on the distant shore.

I point out this edit sequence for two reasons. The first is that it's a 'Coles Notes' guide for you readers here. While it is somewhat blasphemous from a purist SLOW MEDIA Community point of view, it is perhaps a welcome reference.

The second is that as this is early in my 12 minute master, 1:20 insert practice, it serves as a window into the process of observation. This was the beginning of my SLOW MEDIA experience of truly being present to my subject and my surroundings through the camera. The minimum of a twelve minute master gives ample time to truly drop any expectations, to become present, and simply, 'be with the environment'.

Some might say that this is a reflection of a personal pace that I employ on an almost daily basis. But I contend that in my thirty years of filmmaking, the discipline of this SLOW MEDIA practice has given me the opportunity to truly be present with and through the camera in a way that no other documentary project has afforded me. I have become more aware of the details of each scene, and how and where the light is playing, both in relation to the master, and in any potential inserts.

10. In Situ Magic – The right Place at the Right Time

Early February, 2014, was an unusually clear and crisp month in North Vancouver, usually one of the wettest and darkest locations on the south coast of British Columbia. The night time lows dipped as far as minus eight, and daytime highs struggled to get past the freezing mark.

As an old hockey player (I've been playing the game for fifty five years) I was aware that these rare, freezing temperatures prompted tales of impromptu shinny games up on Rice Lake at the top of Lynn Valley. I had never had the pleasure of

skating outside in North Vancouver, but to stay in shape for the indoor hockey season I had taken to biking to maintain my fitness. This twice-weekly practice would hopefully provide enough energy to do something with puck once I caught up to it in our local beer league.

On the chilliest morning of that clear and cold snap, I was on my usual bike path crossing a small bridge over Hastings Creek in Lynn Valley. As I looked to the upstream side I was surprised to see that there was ice. Not ice on the surface of the water, but every rock that had been splashed by the current over the last twelve hours was completely covered in a thin sheath of ice. A bejeweled creek!

I completed my training circuit and on the way down I took a few photos with my phone and posted them to Facebook. In this evergreen bubble of Vancouver, these rare images of ice got a lot of likes, and I was drawn back to the partially



Figure 13 - Gregory Coyes – Hastings Creek, North Vancouver

frozen creek. I grabbed my video camera and my high top rubber boots and headed back to the stream with my son, Jackson, documenting with a still camera.

After scouting the creek bed I chose a collection of rounded boulders that stepped down and created a bit of a falls, and then I went to work on this extraordinary afternoon.

The winter light in the southern sky was filtering through the mature, mixed forest behind me. As I secured my tripod mid-stream and set the frame for my master, I recognized that the highlights on the ice covered rocks that were most appealing had relatively short windows of light on them. These were dependent on the slowly moving shadows of the trees. I would have to shoot in a strategic manner to get the most out of the continually changing light.

Over the next four hours I was constantly gauging the limited light and deciding on a variety of close-ups supported by the master of twelve minutes. This process had now become second nature to me, and I decided to work with a number of tight close-ups. The tighter I got, the more accentuated the interface between the liquid and crystalline water became. I was reminded of growing up in Alberta winters and the crystalline beauty of the big snowfalls there.

Ice, the precise, solid form of water is not only beautiful, it's powerful. It has the ability to freeze time, literally and figuratively. Today, the accelerating melt of the circumpolar glaciers and ice sheets, and their slow reveal of our ancestors and their artifacts from tens of thousands of years ago is a most dramatic example. These historic ice sheets, sometimes miles thick, had the power to shape, what has become, our contemporary landscapes throughout Canada.

And, come to think about it, the butchered buck carcass in my home freezer was yet another reminder of the incredible power of ice to lock time.

The closer I placed my camera to my subject, and that specific interface between the liquid and crystal, so beautifully rendered on the rocks, the more mystical it became. It was only when I got back to my editing studio later that day and checked the timeline of my shots that I recognized that I had spent a full four



Figure 14 - Close-up From: Icy Creek – SLOW MEDIA Community

hours in the stream. As I began to work with both the video and the sound of the stream, I began to gain a sense of both familiarity and intimacy with this very natural subject. Not unusual for any editor, but this experience was magnified a few days later when I was again training on my bike.

There are steep banks on both sides of Hastings Creek. Over the last ten thousand years, since the last major glaciation, the velocity of the run-off from the North Shore mountains has carved down so that the stream bed is ten to fifteen meters below the lip of the bank. These steep inclines were just one of the many challenges that I relished on my twice weekly bike training circuit, and they required both speed and momentum to overcome. But as I approached the stream on my first ride after my filming session, the flow and the sound of the stream coaxed me to a complete stop. As I paused, and looked and listened, I realized that the four hours in the creek with my camera had exposed my ears to the language of this stream. There was a certainly a familiarity here, if not some level of understanding. What I came to realize on subsequent crossings was that

the stream did have a language, and it varied on a daily basis. It told the story of the precipitation and temperature, the details of each season, higher on the mountain. That is what streams do. They inform us.

ICY CREEK 25:11
<https://vimeo.com/111704535>

11. Nurturing Our Audience

As I have developed my documentary film making practice over the last thirty years, I have come to recognize that subjects that nurture me as a producer of media, most often nurture my audience as well. The process of documenting and sharing the environments, the points of view, and stories of remarkable human beings is a rich, collective endeavor. As is the purely creative endeavor of creating dramatic stories.

What I was now beginning to ponder was – could this same type of nurturing, perhaps a somewhat similar exchange, or communication of information, occur between the natural world and a human audience? Does high definition media have the potential to allow nature to speak to an audience? What are the factors, both technical and creative, that might affect the potential for this outcome?

My initial interest in designing clinical tests of SLOW MEDIA focused on the concepts of well-being and productivity as it relates to shut-ins of every description. This includes the infirmed and/or disabled of every age, but also those workers or students, especially those in cold climates that are confined to interior locations for extended periods in the winter months. I've have been giving more thought to the specific concepts of well-being and productivity. Perhaps well-being and proficiency, or adeptness is a more apt term. My sense is that if we can bring the natural environment into these shut-in locations through the installation of SLOW MEDIA, we can create nurturing media environments that will contribute to the overall health and well-being of the people that dwell there.

12. SLOW MEDIA – Into the Urban Environment

As 2016 unfolded I was looking for venues to mount installations of SLOW MEDIA where I could begin to gauge the public's response to this disruptive style of media programming. My first opportunity to do so was at the 2016 Talking Stick Festival in Vancouver. This would be a single screen installation backdrop for the staging of, *A METIS TIME AND PLACE*, essentially a variety show featuring both traditional and contemporary Metis cultural performance.

My intent was to create a sensory envelope that the audience would enter the moment they stepped into the theatre. I chose the wide shot of Sunrise at Cola Lake described above, and that was rolling 12 minutes prior to the opening of the show. For the next ninety minutes SLOW MEDIA acted as a visual bed for a variety of performing artists including a couple of singer/songwriters, a poet, a spoken word artist, and an Elder storyteller. They were all backed by a full Metis fiddle band, with a small troupe of traditional Metis dancers.



Figure 15 - Still From: *A Metis Time & Place*, Talking Stick Festival, 2016

I had each of the artists forward me an audio version of their presentation in advance, and I then composed SLOW MEDIA accompaniment in my editing

studio for each of them, primarily from my existing library.

For the stage show my opening address as the host included welcoming remarks, an introduction of the performer's line-up, and a brief explanation of the SLOW MEDIA concept. When the first group of singers began, the stage tech pressed 'play', and we were off. The video ran continuously for the next ninety minutes as the performers made their way to the mic and performed in succession. This was by no means an exact science, but the response from the audience was encouraging!

I conducted a survey following the performance and there were two comments that stood out. The first was that, "the SLOW MEDIA videos broke down the fourth wall." This respondent felt that because the video was playing when the audience entered the theatre, and because the video was referred to by the performers, the evening became a "community experience", rather than a pure audience experience. This completely resonated with the community focus of SLOW MEDIA. The second was from Jessica Lea Fleming, Producer/Director with Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto. She described it as, "one of the most uplifting shows I have ever seen! I felt so proud of my heritage and full of my culture!" This was a significant statement coming from this experienced, Metis theatre professional.

My second installation in 2016 was a commissioned, five-screen project for the opening night of Renae Morriveau's, Aboriginal Artist in Residence celebration at the Vancouver Public Library. This was a two hour presentation which required ten hours of coordinated programming.

In consultation with my colleague, writer and dramaturge, Renae Morriveau, the intent of the programming was confirmed. We were going to bring the beauty and power of the natural world that surrounds the city of Vancouver to the five screens in this conference room at the central library that seats two hundred.

Renae requested projections of large cedar and fir trees high in two corners of the room. My concept for the remaining three screens was to begin three, separate visual narratives; one in the mountains of North Vancouver, and the other two along the ocean shores of Ambleside and Kitsilano. We would establish the beauty and wild nature of these three areas, and then follow the commuting flow of travelling citizens across the Second Narrows, the Lionsgate, and the Burrard bridges into the downtown core. We would connect the wild nature that surrounds the city, with this celebratory gathering in the basement conference room of the VPL. And we would not avoid the harsh realities of the Downtown Eastside as we made our way from the Second Narrows to the downtown core.

The winter fog and mists that hang in the forests above the Lynn Valley Headwaters were a rich start to the project. And the shorelines provided both beauty and grace in the form of a large Squamish welcoming figure at Ambleside, and bald eagles nesting near the Burrard Bridge. The surprising revelation came in the shooting of the late rush hour on the Second Narrows.



Figure 16 - Still From: Urban-Iron Workers Memorial Bridge – SLOW MEDIA Community

The evening magic hour provided a rich, warm light in spite of the mid-winter date. I approached the bridge traffic as a stream, a river of movement, and set my frame for the twelve-minute master. Given this time to contemplate the flow of traffic, the dynamic of the shadows along the east side of the bridge were my next concentration. The low angle of the light had them moving in opposition to one another, like two conveyor belts running in opposite directions. Lots of dynamic here! And I felt a similar, but perhaps less picturesque, urban dynamic a couple of days later as the pedestrian and bicycle traffic made their way south in a light rain.

This production and exhibition experience raised the question; could SLOW MEDIA have applications, beyond surveillance or security cameras, in an urban setting? And is SLOW MEDIA Community related to ambient video?

13. Is SLOW MEDIA Community Ambient Video?

While the SLOW MEDIA Community projections were only referred to briefly in the course of the evening at the library, they did provide strong visual context for this historic gathering. And they successfully connected us to the wild nature that Vancouver is surrounded by, and situated in. Rather than using media as a gathering place, the installation was more indicative of a gathering place surrounded by media.

One conversation that resulted from that evening's gathering was with Chris Yakimov, the Associate Director, Digital Community Engagement at Simon Fraser University. Chris introduced me to the work of a colleague at SFU, Dr. Jim Bizzocchi, a professor in the School of Interactive Arts and Technology, and a widely exhibited video artist working in the genre of Ambient Video. This was one of my first opportunities for a comparison of the SLOW MEDIA Community concept with an existing practice.

I was intrigued by De Bizzocchi's media channel on Vimeo, a noteworthy

collection of video focusing on nature, as well as a good deal of descriptive writing. His writing on the subject of ‘ambient video’, and his theory, as stated, gives substantial credit to Brian Eno’s early theoretical work with ‘ambient music’. Here are Bizzocchi’s three interrelated criteria:

- First, it must not require your attention at any time.
- Second, whenever you do look at it, it must reward your attention with visual interest.
- Finally, because ambient pieces are designed to play repeatedly in our homes, offices and public spaces, they must continue to provide visual pleasure over repeated viewings.

(Bizzocchi, 2018)

The resulting online video collection features largely still frames, or creeping tilts and pans, with extended, often matched dissolves that transition us from one scene to the next. Water, mountain peaks, and combinations of the above are favorite subjects.

In my own search for widely recognizable media that is similar in production and presentation to SLOW MEDIA Community, I often refer to the “Christmas Fire”, or the “Yule Log”. It is nature, in this case fire, still frame, and in the best versions it avoids loops, or utilizes extremely long takes that make the edits invisible.

Bizzocchi does not hold as high an opinion of this media staple:

The most well-known ambient video trope is the venerable “yule log”, which has been burning in video screens on television sets since its introduction at WPIX New York in 1966. The log thrives: it has adapted to every cultural video form since its inception: broadcast television, cable television, satellite TV, VHS tape, DVD, Blu-ray, webcasts, digital files, and executable code. It shares its niche with similar works – such as the many versions of the “video aquarium”, or any number of video websites such as the “eagle-cam”

sites dedicated to watching eggs. All of these are indeed ambient video, and they do meet the basic requirements of the form. However, they are kitsch, not art.

(Bizzocchi, 2018)

This is our first point of divergence in our individual approaches to our practices of video production. And, perhaps, it is a commentary on our very different approaches to nature as a subject. I regard fire as one of the elements of nature, along with water, wind, and vaporization.

For me, personally, there is true value and a certain type of information, or even knowledge that can come through a well-composed, high definition frame of dynamic nature. And I don't get bored! It is asymmetric, dynamic, and constant in its delivery of new information. That is the focus of my practice in SLOW MEDIA Community.

When I look back at both art and art history we seem to be, most often, attempting to reproduce the textures, the colours, and the shapes and patterns in nature. In addition, there are intrinsic cadences there that are simply not reproducible within the binary limitations of the digital realm. We now have the ability to capture or harvest this significant natural resource and deliver it to our audiences in high definition images.

While we agree on the value of composition and strong cinematography, Dr. Bizzocchi's approach and definition of 'ambient art works' seems to dictate an additional requirement of technical manipulation:

I argue that I – and often other ambient video artists – rely on three aesthetic interventions to create ambient art works.

The first is a reliance on strong composition, lighting and cinematography.

Since ambient video is slow-paced, the form needs visual compositions that

will sustain over exceedingly long screen durations.

The second aesthetic intervention is the direct manipulation of cinematic time. Ambient artists thrive on subjects that present motion in a fixed spot without requiring a camera move to track the subject. Water, clouds, and fire are perfect examples. However the motion of these subjects provide more visual interest if the time base is altered. I typically slowed down water or fire, speed up clouds. In some of my shots, I do both – slow down the water at the bottom of the frame, and speed up the clouds at the top. Cinematic time is therefore treated as plastic – a malleable parameter to be shaped by the artist.

Cinematic space is treated as plastic in an even more intensive fashion. This third aesthetic intervention is far more complex and difficult to achieve – the aggressive use of video layers and layered transitions.

(Bizzocchi, 2018)

It is the second of Bizzocchi's, "three aesthetic interventions" that is most disconcerting. With the "direct manipulation of cinematic time" stated as an artistic imperative, it is absolutely clear that I am not an, "Ambient Video Artist". I feel that SLOW MEDIA is more of a collection of moments, some of those collections being substantial (20-40 mins). I'm not interested in manipulating the time line because I do not feel that I can improve on the finished product by doing so. I want to maintain the natural sense of the timeline, or even expand it. As noted above, this is a disruptive concept in relation to the traditions of cinematic editing, to be sure.

There is a process, a component of both the approach to and the production of SLOW MEDIA Community that requires awareness and clear intention. As practitioners, our intention is to recognize and build a familiarity with the landscape. The setting is approached as a place that has a specific but constantly evolving spirit. The technical capability of our media now has the power to harvest, to capture that elusive spirit. SLOW MEDIA employs and

practices this approach, rather than perceiving the setting as simply another manipulable editing component. Our setting becomes, or is established as a specific place, with specific qualities by simply being with it, with the camera, utilizing a static frame treatment, in real time.

We don't have to manipulate the frame, or the contents of the frame. We simply need to be with the space, and bring a sense of presence to our view of that space, to expose ourselves and our audience to the essence of that space. The SLOW MEDIA treatment has no desire to manipulate time, or our perception of nature. Nature provides the resource, a potentially powerful and sustainable resource. It is our task as SLOW MEDIA Community practitioners to collect that resource and present it to our audience in its natural form, in real time, honouring the arc of the sun in sky.

14. Tides and Streams: Innovation

In early June of 2017 I found my way back to the 19TH annual, Media That Matters conference at the Hollyhock Institute on Cortes Island. This was the site of my first glimmerings of what had become SLOW MEDIA Community, and I was looking forward to meeting up with colleagues, both old and new.

Six hours and three ferry rides north of Vancouver, Cortes island is the shared territory of the We Wai Kai, Kwiakah, and Homalco First Nations, and the Klahoose Band have their tribal offices there. The Hollyhock site is set on a charming, shallow, south facing bay with a good-sized beach, and lots of oysters in the vicinity. The Klahoose say the site was always a meeting place for the Indigenous people of the region, and it still holds that welcoming spirit.

One sunny afternoon, on a break from the conference, I was inspired to set my tripod and begin exploring the SLOW MEDIA potential of this bay. Hollyhock's hand-built dory, the 'Intrepid', was anchored in the shallows of the low tide. Small tidal streams were draining down the beach, and the sandpipers were busy

scavenging the shallows for stranded seafood. I became fascinated by these small, freshwater streams. There was a remarkable amount of sand moving down, towards the saltwater, in their currents. Some of the moving sand patterns were incredibly animate, not something that could be repeated in any digital studio. But the rising tide was not interested in waiting for any twelve minute masters! I was slowly chased higher, up the beach, never in any one spot for more than a few minutes. The next day, in the edit suite 'SLOW MEDIA – Shorts' was born.

Now we were down to two minute masters, and thirty second inserts. The result was finished programs that were coming in between five and six minutes for total length. Perhaps this length would be more attractive, more palatable, for the younger Youtube audience?

15. SLOW MEDIA & Music – Lyrics and Tempo

With these shorter clips, I decided to try and pair a SLOW MEDIA Shorts treatment with a popular piece of music. The Vancouver based duo, Twin Bandit, released their first album in 2015 to wide acclaim, and their silky harmonies and lovely tempo on a track entitled, "Tides", was my first choice. I employed shots both from the beach and from the other side of the island, a shell-strewn mouth of a series of tidal streams that the locals call, "Manson's Lagoon".

The dory anchored in the bay, and a distant, passing sailboat personify two conflicted lovers, drawn together and apart by the tides. Close-ups of the shifting sands in the creek beds emphasize the transitory nature of love. This piece was all about tempo and tone, but could I maintain the thirty second rule of the "Shorts' version?

TWIN BANDIT - "TIDES" 4:03
<https://vimeo.com/248275440>



Figure 17 - Still From: "Tides" – SLOW MEDIA Community

In an analysis of the final edit for this four minute and three second composition I recognize that I was motivated more by the song structure and the narrative in the lyrics, than by the thirty second structure of the 'Shorts' designation. Overall, the length of the ten insert edits ranged in length between eleven and forty-two seconds, with the average being twenty seconds. Obviously, these are still very conservative numbers in relation to visual pace, especially for a music video, so I was able to maintain a relaxed tempo in relation to both the music and lyrics. The addition of the ambient wind noise and wave ripples in the opening strains, as well as the sandpiper cries in the final moments of the piece were the only additions to the audio.

This leads to additional questions of camera dynamic in relation to both audience perceptions, and the audience experience. Clearly, one of the major tenets of SLOW MEDIA is the extended length of both the masters, and any insert edits, when they are employed to create a sense of 'real time'. The other visual principle that has been utilized and maintained from the outset is the still frame. I decided on this essential feature to bring extra attention to both the framing of,

and the dynamic in each individual shot. Could the single frame maintain viewer interest and stand up to extended scrutiny on their own? And as noted above, the original, twelve minute masters also allowed for a detailed examination of the setting, the light, and the dynamic within the master. It gave me time to slow down and really begin to be present, both with and through the camera in deciding on any additional, more detailed shots.

I believe that contemporary film grammar imprisons the viewer in expectation. This is not a negative characteristic when one is trying to build tension in a dramatic narrative. Whenever a filmmaker decides to move the frame, to employ a pan or tilt, they are immediately creating anticipation in the viewer. What's coming? What is the reveal? I believe this detracts from our ability to simply be with the subject, any subject that the camera is focused on. Hence the still frame choice for SLOW MEDIA.

The same can be said for edits. The moment that you expose the audience to anything more than one edit, you have established an expectation of more edits in a similar pattern that detracts from their ability to be truly present to the image.

So it is with great interest that I analyze the overall effect of the camera dynamic in "Tides". While there is a complete lack of a true master, and the insert edit lengths are the shortest I have employed in any SLOW MEDIA composition, the still frame provides the steady presence that creates and supports the slower tempo of both the music and the narrative in the lyrics. The intent is to simply hold the frame and let the dynamic in the frame transport and entertain the attentive viewer.

16. If Nature Has a Voice ... How Might that Sound?

In August of 2017 I was invited to participate in an outdoor screening in Kitsilano Beach Park as part of the Vines Art Festival. The festival stages free, public events and they promote work that focuses on the environment so that

audiences will “happen upon public art”. I was thrilled to part of the program, especially because the projector was wired to a bicycle-powered generator, a first in my film career!

I chose *Icy Creek* (described above) from the SLOW MEDIA Community library with its focus on water and ice, a refreshing visual treat on a warm August evening. The film was well received, and the program curators juxtaposed it with a dance film set along a quiet, wooded river in the blonde hills of northern California. In this setting, and within this program, I was struck by the beauty of the human form on the land in the dance film. Here was a short film by Heather Lamoureux concentrating on six female dancers and their reflective, almost meditative expressions of appreciation for both the land and water. As a lover of dance and the human form, it was natural to identify with this beautifully choreographed expression of love for Mother Earth.

That led me to a consideration of SLOW MEDIA Community and the expressions that might dwell there. To date, the human form was intentionally and conspicuously absent, and I had yet to experiment with any vocals. My sense was that these rich, visual beds of the natural landscape and the intimate details exposed there, were ripe for the addition of voice. But what might that voice be? Was it a voice of the land, or the water? The voice of nature? What did that sound like?

The shooting of *Icy Stream* had taught me that if one were attentive you could learn the language of the movement of a specific stream. That it communicated its camaraderie with, and knowledge of the mountain slopes above it. And a few years ago, on the third evening of a four day fast in the boreal forest of Alberta, I felt that the flickering, evening patterns of leaf shadows on the white trunks of quaking aspens was a language in itself. Certainly a pattern that many generations of my ancestors had lived and grown old with. But these were the organic expressions of the natural world, a sustainable resource, recordable and

reproducible with our media technology. But was anyone in this contemporary audience listening? It felt as though I would have to, in some way, enhance any voice that I might choose to work with in relation to SLOW MEDIA in an attempt to break through the digital din.

Months later in my editing suite, it was pure serendipity at work when I reviewed a sequence that I had shot in the forty year old, organic garden at the Hollyhock Institute. It was a sublime setting on a bright morning with a variety of early vegetable plants and glorious blooms greeting the day. And with four different types of poppies in full bloom, the bees had inexplicably decided to have a party in almost every white poppy in the garden. Back lit and translucent, it was a cinematographers dream.

And then, from off-camera right, I heard a voice. It was Dana Trueman, the long-serving, Hollyhock gardener who had just arrived to begin his work day. He walked into the background of my shot, partially obscured by the new growth, and then turned to address a colleague off-camera. He enthusiastically remarked on the beauty of the morning and exited frame left. A few seconds later he reappeared and purposefully strode through the background and exited frame right.

I had already edited a twelve-minute program of this splendid morning scene, playing with the SLOW MEDIA Shorts concept. It featured an extraordinary sequence of medium shots and close-ups of the congregations of honey-bees in the white poppies. There were as many as ten bees in one flower in some of the close ups. This was a honey-bee convention! I emailed that video link to Dana Trueman, secured a signed release, and got his permission to script an alternate dialogue for this scene.

I had been aware of the worldwide decline in the bee populations for some time,



Figure 18 - Still From: *Queen Bee*, *The Gardener's Entrance* – SLOW MEDIA Community

and I was alarmed at the correlations with the widespread use of neonicotinoids in agriculture. This scene, with its slow transition, deep into the world of the honey bees, was a potent vehicle to address the awareness around neonicotinoids. My approach would be to utilize the power of juxtaposition, and contrast a discussion between two fictitious characters; an established, organic gardener/bee keeper in the community, and a newcomer, the immigrant owner of this executive property and garden. Based on research into the cultural significance of poppies, and specifically white poppies, “the owner” character developed into a bereaved, forty-three year old widow from Hong Kong. While the discussion escalates into a full-blown disagreement, the camera slowly gets deeper into the world of the bees, who are oblivious to the machinations of the humans around them.

Entitled, “*Queen Bee*”, the script was recorded in August 2017, and released online in February, 2018.

QUEEN BEE 5:45
<https://vimeo.com/256729131>

While there have been some questions around my choice to characterize the home owner as Cantonese speaking, this choice was partially based on research. In Chinese culture poppies, and specifically white poppies, represent “loyalty and faith between lovers, and also remembrance”. The female, Cantonese speaking, Singapore-born, voice actor relished the role of the Queen Bee. She enthused, “I like the idea of Queen Bee bustling around her ‘home’ and trying to make it the best, while ignoring that the larger home/nature needs equal care.” The key, from a dramatic point of view, was to create two passionate characters with strong personal ideals, who were willing to fully engage in these contrasting views.

17. The Bigger Question: What Is Our Relationship to Our Media?

Late in the fall of 2016 a colleague, Cheryl L’Hirondelle, who happens to be my cousin, contacted me from her home base in Toronto. In a couple of months she was on her way to Ireland to conference with her PhD cohort at the University College Dublin. She was looking for an assistant to help her in mounting an installation of her ‘Light Tipi’ in the coastal town of Caherciveen to open the conference there, and she invited me to come. Having never visited Ireland, my immediate response was a big, “Yes”! There would also be an opportunity for me to make a short presentation to the PhD cohort on my SLOW MEDIA Community research to date at this February, 2017 gathering.

The “Light Tipi”, an innovation of sage smoke and high beam flashlights, was well received by the local people and significant as it was held within a megalithic, circular, stone fort dating back at least one thousand years. The PhD program, known as SMARTLab, concentrates on the intersection of technology and community and Caherciveen is hoping to benefit after suffering a drastic emigration of their youth over the last few decades.



Figure 19 – “Light Tipi” - Photo Courtesy of the Irish Examiner

The southwest coast of Ireland is rugged and beautiful, and I did steal away from the conference on one partially sunny afternoon to shoot a SLOW MEDIA sequence. And I also presented a Powerpoint to the SMARTLab cohort, which was well received. I then had most of the week to listen to these scholars as they summarized their work to date into one succinct question that they would be answering in their PhD theses. This gave me pause, and the opportunity to reflect on my own motivations with my SLOW MEDIA Community research. What would the one question that I would be most interested in answering if given the opportunity to continue on with doctorate studies?

My creative space was dominated at that particular point by a binge screening of the Netflix series, *Black Mirror*, just prior to departing Vancouver. Lots of food for thought there, with a good dose of dark foreshadowing. And I was certainly aware of immersive media and its growing popularity with younger media makers. This all prompted this question: Can we nurture a healthy awareness of our relationship to our media today, and in the future as we enter into increasingly immersive media environments?

As we finished up the week in Dublin and headed our separate ways, I began to

recognize that the SLOW MEDIA research that I had been immersed in for the past few years was prompting larger questions about our relationship to our media. I thought of my late mother, Lillian, having spent the last two years of her life in an assisted care facility. The television monitors in that facility were most often tuned to CNN! Who was making that decision, and why? It certainly wasn't contributing to the health of the infirmed seniors that lived there. Could hi-def video expressions of an Indigenous sense of time and place be applied in settings like that to produce healthier human environments? What was the potential for SLOW MEDIA Community installations in both private and public settings? And what was the business model for this type of media? And would that need to be a disruptive model?

There were definitely lots more questions than answers, but I was comfortable with the direction of this enquiry.

18. Clinical Testing

Through a reference supplied by my thesis advisor, Professor Tom Scholte, I approached Dr. Alan Kingstone at the Brain, Attention, Reality (BAR) Lab in the Psychology Department at the University of British Columbia. Exploratory discussions resulted in a confirmation of their interest in designing tests that might determine if the viewing of SLOW MEDIA would create measurable increases in wellbeing and proficiency.

The tests, designed by the team of scientists at the BAR Lab, compared reactions to a series of still photographs (screen grabs) from two SLOW MEDIA Community programs, versus the actual five minute SLOW MEDIA videos. A series of cognitive tests; backwards digit span (BDS) tasks, as well as eye tracking, and anecdotal surveys were completed.

While there were no significant results from these tests, other research has confirmed that, “looking at images of natural landscapes as a form of natural restorative environment intervention is found to benefit sustained attention”. (Jung, M. et al. 2017, 464-479)

Further tests of SLOW MEDIA at the BAR Lab are being planned.

19. Decolonized Media

In November, 2017, I attended a performance of Arctic song and dance entitled, *From the North*, which featured the Juno Award winning duo, Quantum Tangle. Tiffany Ayalik is Inuk from Yellowknife, and Greyson Gritt is Ojibway/Metis from Sudbury. They are a dynamic pair on stage. The spirit of the northern landscape came through very strongly in their music and I knew I wanted to introduce them to SLOW MEDIA as a potential component for their shows. They utilize both traditional throat singing and contemporary folk/blues, and they address contemporary issues in their music, including gender fluidity. Greyson came out as transgender in 2014.

While waiting to speak with them after their performance, I stood and listened to a young web producer pitch them on her concept for a series on gender fluidity. With SLOW MEDIA Community images on my mind, the tone and spirit their conversation struck me as very powerful. These were young people that were making informed, sovereign decisions in relation to their sexual identities that had nothing to do with the mainstream, binary understanding or expression of sexuality. As their bio states on their website, their intent is, “to challenge, educate and encourage audiences to be socially aware.” (Quantum Tangle, 2018)

My intent with SLOW MEDIA Community is to challenge our perceptions of our media, and to educate both producers and users on the benefits of a more considered approach to both production and delivery. And, as stated above,

SLOW MEDIA has nothing to do with the commercial imperative that has been driving our sense of our media since the first commercials emerged on television seventy-five years ago. It is a disruptive and decolonized expression of media that is based on an Indigenous aesthetic that emerged in Canada's Arctic, and is now being employed by a variety of Indigenous practitioners globally.

20. SLOW MEDIA Community – The Future

While SLOW MEDIA is a significant visual component of a growing number of long-form, Indigenous, dramatic narratives and documentaries, broken out on its own, it is often not recognized or appreciated. That raises a host of questions for Slow Media regarding fiscal viability and how one promotes a disruptive model in the current marketplace:

- What are the venues?
- What are the applications?
- Who is the audience?
- What is the commercial model?
- Is it a commercial model, or do we need to re-think our sense of what “commercial media” looks like?
- How disruptive are we willing to be in regard to our relationship with our media?

In the past year I have engaged in discussions with the David Suzuki Foundation, promoting SLOW MEDIA as a visual bed for their message: “One Nature. We are nature. All people, and all species.” (DSF, 2018) As a first step they have adopted SLOW MEDIA Community programming into their boardrooms in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, with strong, positive response from their staff.

I am also in discussions with the First Nations Health Authority, the Indigenous led and managed provider of health services in the province of BC. I am promoting the concept of “media health” for our communities, and especially our Elders. SLOW MEDIA harvests a valuable and sustainable natural resource that

can be delivered to various venues within a community, to promote both health and well-being. And there is also the potential to create site-specific programming that could speak directly to the Elders and shut-ins in communities throughout the province in intimate and nurturing ways.

21. Final Thoughts

Early in 2017 this thesis was in its formative stages when I sat down for a conversation with Professor Tom Scholte in his office at UBC. Tom was engaged in an ambitious forum theatre project at the Firehall Theatre in Vancouver entitled, “Home”. Its goal was to address reconciliation, and I could see that Tom was both engaged and challenged in his role as the only non-Indigenous male in the cast. Our conversation touched on the theatre, the media, and the larger questions of reconciliation that we continue to grapple with in this country called Canada. Tom asked me: “Is SLOW MEDIA a form of Indigenous media?” The question gave me pause, as I had never considered the origin of the concept, but based on the original inspiration, the Inuit feature, *Atanarjuat*, and my Metis/Cree ancestry, I had to answer in the affirmative. Tom’s response was: “Well, maybe it’s an Indigenous component, an Indigenous offering towards reconciliation.”

At its essence, SLOW MEDIA Community invites both producers and viewers to be more conscious of the process of making and viewing media. It asks us to slow down and be present to the process of gathering and then sharing a sustainable and dynamic resource, the power and beauty of the Earth, and the elements at work on the Earth. This depiction of “real time” in nature is offered as an alternative to the compressed timelines and accelerated concept delivery of the majority of mainstream media. SLOW MEDIA Community has applications in healthcare and educational settings, Elders homes and lodges, and executive settings. Anywhere people are shut-in and in need of the enlivening and nurturing qualities of Nature. This is decolonized media. SLOW MEDIA is an Indigenous expression of cinematic time and place.

This SLOW MEDIA Community journey has been a long road that stretches back more than seventeen years. It's definitely been a slow build! I am both encouraged by recent developments that put more financial resources and decision-making power in the hands of Indigenous media makers, and challenged by the charming nature of the oncoming immersive media onslaught.

SLOW MEDIA Community provides an opportunity for both producers and users to consider our relationship to our media. Perhaps that will be its greatest benefit.

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