

Forest Ecology and Bioregional Identity in Pacific Northwest Film

For my part in this evening's program, I have selected three films that explore the liminal space of Pacific Northwest forest ecosystems:

Madison McClintock's 2014 documentary, *Fungiphilia Rising*

Kurtis Hough's 2011 experimental film, *Mossgrove / Bed of Moss*

Vanessa Renwick's 1998 found footage avant-garde film, *Food is a Weapon*

The Pacific Northwest contains many environments, from the lush Palouse and sparse high desert to mountain meadows, misty beaches, and many more. In selecting these films, I was inspired by Matthew Holtmeier's notion of "bioregional subjectivity." In a paper at the 2014 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in Seattle, Holtmeier argued:

As a theoretical framework, bioregional thinking has prompted a new way of thinking about the politics of place, apart from the tradition of nation states. Looking to both documentary and fiction film, I argue that these so called Cascadian Films contribute to the production of a Cascadian cultural imaginary through promoting the intersection of Felix Guattari's three ecologies: social relations, psychology, and the environment. While film and television produced in the Pacific Northwest often places the setting 'elsewhere' -- such as *Battlestar Galactica* remaking Vancouver, BC into Caprica City on a distant planet -- 'Cascadian Films' relish in the real equivalent of their settings by depicting particular landmarks, environments, and people.

Each of the films selected for this program relishes in depicting Northwest forests and their power to shape our regional identity. Though but a scant percentage of our old growth forests remain, their shadows loom over our lives here in the Northwest. With an eye to the theme of this year's ASLE conference, I have also sought to meditate on the space where topsoil meets and mixes with air and water, that porous, permeable meeting space of mushrooms, slugs, and saplings. Finally, I sought to mix three genres of independent film that speak to the promise of Pacific Northwest film, a largely neglected area of study among scholars.

North of Hollywood, things work a bit differently. Making money and reaching audiences remain a top priority for media producers, but cultivating friendships, reflecting on the climate, and interrogating the area's historical complexity are just as important to many media producers, both those who have left Hollywood seeking a more relaxed atmosphere and those born and raised in the area. Apart from two books on the Vancouver, BC film industry published around 2000 (Mike Gasher's *Hollywood North* and David Spaner's *Dreaming in the Rain*), the Northwest has been almost entirely neglected by film and media scholars, a shocking discovery for anyone interested in all the area has to offer. From early films like Buster Keaton's *The General* (1926) and blockbusters like *Animal House* (1978) to more recent independent fare like Mina Shum's *Long Life, Happiness, and Prosperity* (2002) and Kelly Reichardt's *Wendy & Lucy* (2008), the Northwest has made enormous contributions to film and media history and deserves the greater recognition events like this will bring.

Many thanks to the Northwest Film Center and Portland Ecofilm Festival in Portland, Oregon for suggesting a number of terrific films as I planned this event.

The Films

Fungiphilia Rising (Madison McClintock, 2014):

An ode to nature's often forgotten alchemists and their allies, *Fungiphilia Rising* is an invitation to explore the fascinating world of mushrooms throughout the American West. By attending mushroom forays and fungus festivals, talking to scores of individuals from mycologists to artists, businessmen to locovore chefs, *Fungiphilia Rising* paints a vivid image of the secret life of mushrooms and its admirers. In addition to revealing the multifaceted role mushrooms play in our culture, the film aims to bring awareness to the important ecological functions they perform in our world's ecosystems and in human environments. *Fungiphilia Rising* is a classically structured documentary film combining footage shot on location with 'talking head' interviews with folks like mushroom foragers Larry Evans and Jim Stillwell, leading figures in the mycology movement, Cathy Cripps, Peter McCoy and David Rust, and renowned chef Anthony Strong.

Directed by Madison McClintock, the film was produced by her small Bozeman, MT production company Nestbox Collective, a collaborative space for Madison and collaborator Roshan Patel to share stories about the curious ways people connect with their environments. *Fungiphilia Rising* is currently screening at festivals throughout the U.S. and is featured on National Geographic's "Short Film Showcase."

Mossgrove / Bed of Moss (Kurtis Hough, 2011):

Lovers of high definition and time lapse experimental documentary films like *Microcosmos* will feel right at home in Kurtis Hough's *Mossgrove*, an audio-visual meditation on the kinetic expressions of slugs. Hough's cinematography and Rachel Grimes' lush musical score open up space for the viewer to experience the forest floor's rich detail. In *Bed of Moss* the camera shifts from its focus on slugs to the moss itself; opening a doorway of perception into the lines, colors, and shapes of the forest. As ecocinema scholars, we often think about the differences in the way viewers interpret and make use of cinematic texts. For example, experiencing the world of a wordless documentary like *Mossgrove / Bed of Moss* is an adventure in perception different from that of a classical documentary like *Fungiphilia Rising*. What do you think of this difference?

Directed by Kurtis Hough, the film was produced by Hough's Portland, OR studio KH Studios. It has screened at festivals throughout the United States and Canada.

Food is a Weapon (Vanessa Renwick, 1998):

Vanessa Renwick's description of her short found footage avant garde film helps explain why I selected this film for the denouement of my program:

“Haunting NW logging footage from the 1940's reveals old growth treasures looted for the war effort. A Eulogy for trees.”

Set to music by Lara Mulvaney, Renwick's film serves to remind us how the Pacific Northwest soil has been exploited from the beginning of its discovery by Euro-American settlers. Renwick's terms “haunting,” “looted,” and “Eulogy” indicate her intention with the film. And when you see the size of the trees hauled off by semi-trucks in the film it is easy to understand Renwick's point. Perhaps the most poignant image in the film, however, is the shot of the young saplings, which are shown off as if to suggest that the soil will continue to give and give for mankind's benefit. Yet when seen in the context of Renwick's film, the image resonates with the films' title to suggest that the saplings are the food of the earth, exploited by humans as a weapon in our war.

Food is a Weapon is comprised of found footage from 1940s documentary films, originally filmed on 16mm and Super-8 and transferred to 16mm. The film is included on Renwick's DVD, *North South East West*, a compilation of short films produced over her 30+ year career as an independent filmmaker and artist. Renwick's work has been featured at numerous museums and galleries across the Northwest.

Acknowledgments

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