ON NATURE AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN CANADIAN SHORT FILM AND VIDEO

By

JOSEPHINE M. MASSARELLA

Integrated Studies Final Project Essay (MAIS 700)

submitted to DR. MICHAEL GISMONDI

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts – Integrated Studies

Athabasca, Alberta

APRIL, 2015
ABSTRACT

This essay examines representations of nature in a selection of short Canadian film and digital video. It discusses ontologically problematic (Hessing, “Fall” 288) aspects of nature, drawing largely on ecocinema and eco-aesthetics, as well as cinema studies, ecology, ecocriticism, ecoaesthetics, and (post)colonialism. Through these disciplines, it also explores the materiality of visual media and the impact of these media on the environment. Many of the difficulties such a project poses are exacerbated by the incipience of ecocinema, of which numerous and often contradictory interpretations exist. While such heterogeneity raises challenges for scholars wishing to isolate meaning, it provides a degree of versatility in the analysis of film and video. In this paper, several interpretations are brought to bear on a selection of short Canadian films, variously examined from within different critical paradigms.
On Nature and its Representation

in Canadian Short Independent Film and Digital Cinema

The communicative power of moving images has long excited my creativity and fueled my professional life as a Canadian independent filmmaker. With this power I have conveyed personal perspectives that would otherwise remain silent and cultivated new ones that bring light to otherwise dusky regions of my mind. These perspectives often point towards nature, and look upon it with feelings of humility, reverence, and respect. It is from such vantage that I now seek to explore filmic representations of nature through ecocinematic and eco-aesthetic lenses, hoping to broaden understanding of a subject I love and complement my private appreciation with the expansive rigour of academic research. In particular, I will examine and interpret representations of nature in a selection of short Canadian independent film and digital video. What are the relationships between the depiction of nature in Canadian independent film and video?

This paper comprises three focal areas: ecocinema (definitions and understandings), eco-aesthetics (systems of domination, and postcolonialism), and praxis (examples of Canadian independent films). While drawing predominantly from ecocinema and eco-aesthetics, I have incorporated an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach to cinema studies, ecology, ecocriticism, ecoaesthetics, and (post)colonialism.

This paper will focus primarily on Canadian independent productions. Independent, in this sense, refers to works whose primary motivation is not commercial exploitation or monetary gain, or works which are independently produced. Such constraints reduce an otherwise immense and variegated field, and also allow me to integrate my professional experience with Canadian independent filmmaking. There are excellent examples of Canadian ecocinema, such as the feature length documentaries *Manufacturing Landscapes* (Jennifer Baichwal), *Waterlife*
(Kevin McMahon), *Watermark* (Jennifer Baichwal and Edward Burtynsky), and the shorter, Greenpeace documentary *Petropolis* (Peter Mettler). However, the selection of works for this paper is limited to short (under twenty minutes in length) and independently produced Canadian films and videos.

Ecocinema is an inherently interdisciplinary field. It comprises a broad spectrum of disciplines, including cinema studies, ecology, ecocritical theory, the materiality of visual media and its impact on the environment. The term ecocinema was coined by Scott MacDonald in his 2004 essay entitled “Toward an Eco-Cinema” (MacDonald, “Toward” 107; Rust and Monani 5). This term, however, is still evolving, as the need for new definitions of it emerge (O'Brien n. pag.).

The variations and sometimes contradictory interpretations and definitions of ecocinema offer a challenge for scholars wishing to isolate meaning. For Scott MacDonald, ecocinema signifies the “retraining of perception” (“Towards” 104) and the project of “provid[ing] new kinds of film experience that demonstrate an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship and help to nurture a more environmentally progressive mindset” (“Ecocinema Experience” 20). This offers a fresh approach to spectatorship, and reflects the experience of viewing experimental and avant-garde film and video. Techniques such as long duration and the repetition of shots bring about some of the perceptual changes MacDonald refers to. The formalist work of American filmmaker James Benning is exemplary of extended duration cinematography, a technique also employed in Josephine Massarella's desert film, *One Woman Waiting*, which uses a fixed camera for its entire nine-minute duration. According to MacDonald, such sustained shots challenge the viewer's perception of nature and counter normative views “of landscape and place as ephemeral and comparatively insignificant” (“Ecocinema” 21).
Repetition poses a similar challenge to viewer sensibility, as in Dana Claxton's *Buffalo Bone China*, which employs the technique throughout the five and a half minute opening sequence. It also features heavily in Christina Battle’s, *buffalo lifts*, as well as Louise Bourque's aesthetically stunning *Jours en Fleurs*. These films are paradigmatic examples of ecocinema, in that they are “a depiction of the natural world within a cinematic experience that models patience and mindfulness” (MacDonald “Ecocinema” 19).

Avant-garde and experimental film can be seen as ideal examples of ecocinema for their ability to offset “the damaging psychic and environmental effects of the commercial media” (Rust and Monani 5). Nourishing the spirit, these works linger in our minds. MacDonald rightly acknowledges the gifts these films give us (“Toward” 107).

Ecocinema edifies and exhorts us to act in the face of environmental injustice and challenges (Willoquet-Marcondi, “Shifting Paradigms” 44), as demonstrated in *The Tree*, *Uprooted*, *Flow*, *Buffalo Bone China*, *Tell Me Why*, and *Green Dream*. It makes us think about environmental issues, practices, and relationships to nature (Willoquet-Marcondi, “Intro” 10), as shown in *The Tree*, *Uprooted*, *Flow*, *Buffalo Bone China*, *Tell Me Why*, *Green Dream*, and *Light Study*. Ecocinema heightens our perception of and appreciation for nature (Willoquet-Marcondi, “Shifting Paradigms” 44), as witnessed in *Light Study*, *Green Dream* and *Flow*. It comprises films that make nature and its representation “a primary focus” (Willoquet-Marcondi, “Intro” 9), for example, *Light Study* and *Green Dream*, *Landscape #1*, *The Tree*, *Flow*, and *Uprooted*. It inspires a philosophical approach to thinking about nature, our existence on this planet, and our relationship to other life forms (Willoquet-Marcondi, “Intro” 10), challenges anthroparchal perspectives toward nature. It addresses the effects of colonialism on the environment and living beings. Several of Dana Claxton's works address this theme, namely *Tree of Consumption*,...
Buffalo Bone China, and The Red Paper, as does Shirley Niro's The Shirt and It Starts With a Whisper. Ecocinema challenges conventional approaches to the representation of nature and landscape, as illustrated in Light Study, and Jours en Fleurs. It expands our perception of what it means to watch a film, as exemplified in buffalo lifts, Light Study, and Jours en Fleurs.

Paula Willoquet-Marcondi posits a decentering, a shift from an “anthropocentric” to an “ecocentric” perspective (“Shifting” 46). This perspective is reflected in Flow, Uprooted, buffalo lifts, and Light Study.

Some theorists cite cognitivist film theory, in opposition to Macdonald and Willoquet-Marcondi's approach to ecocinema. In response to this, David Ingram analyzes three stylistically different feature films using MacDonald's approach of retraining viewers' “perception of ecological awareness but also being completely indifferent in this regard, depending on the audience's prior predisposition and training” (Rust and Monani, “Intro”, 5).

Other scholars warn against defining ecocinema too narrowly (Hageman 66). Adopting too rigid an approach fails to provide critics with an adequate mechanism “for identifying and analyzing” film's inherent contradictions (Rust and Monani, “Intro” 5). Hageman values these contradictions, positing that a “dialectical ideological critique … [enables us] to think irreconcilable elements together … and to analyze their significance” (83). This critique illustrates cinema's “ecological agendas as … [steeped] in the ideology they … mean[] to oppose” (Hagemen 83).

Ecocriticism has been used to analyze a wide range of different forms and genres, including commercial and Hollywood feature films (Ingram, “Aesthetics” 43; Rust, “Hollywood” 192; Brereton, “Appreciating” 217), and even Disneynature (Molloy 177). Unlike MacDonald, who implicates Hollywood cinema in “implicitly promot[ing] consumption”
(MacDonald, “Ecocinema” 20), Stephen Rust contends that any film can be analyzed from an eco-cinematic perspective. He sees Hollywood cinema as a useful tool in effecting ecological change, in part, through its capacity to reach vast audiences (Rust and Monani 7).

In a newer approach to ecocinema, Sean Cubitt advocates the presentation of “visual data” in films, using charts and maps to illustrate ideas that are presently conveyed through photorealism (Rust and Monani, 5; “Data Visualization” 295). Adrian Ivakhiv finds that traditional definitions of ecocinema fail to do justice to either cinema or ecology (“Toward an Ecophilosophical” n. pag.). Rather, he suggests an ecophilosophical approach to film analysis, incorporating “the aesthetics, ethics, and 'ecologies' of film...” (Ivakhiv, “From Environmental” n. pag.).

Film is an ecologically embedded material medium (Bozak 11; Rust and Monani 2; Ivakhiv). Aptly referred to as fossilized light (Bozak 31), its impact on the environment leaves a trail of degradation in its wake, from the resource extraction to the manufacturing and distribution (Ivakhiv, Ecologies 34; Bozak 11).

The shift from analogue to digital created mountains of electronic waste. As Nadia Bozak states, proponents of the “green” aspects of digital cinematography tend to ignore the hardware, “the energy requirements, economy of obsolescence, and, subsequently, lingering afterlife of digital technology” (12). From two inch analogue videotape recorders to HD digital camera, the list of now electronic recording equipment is ever growing, as each new model renders the previous obsolete. Technical standards change constantly. Professional digital motion picture cameras are now capable of shooting in 4K resolution (theatrical quality). Yet none of these formats is compatible with the others. So, if your video was recorded on a now obsolete system, you will require the original camera or deck in order to play it or even transfer it to a different
medium. Perceived in this light, the disposable nature of digital filmmaking raises questions about this medium's inherent sustainability (Bozak 12).

One means of rendering film and video production more ecologically friendly is to employ low environmental impact practices. These include reducing the size of the production crew, reducing or eliminating non-reusable / renewable materials and resources, reducing the shooting ratio (the amount of exposed footage versus the final length of the film / video), and shooting with available light or natural light (Bozak 34). To this end, Bozak suggests as a model for “sustainable filmmaking” (34), as it demonstrates how “natural sunlight is managed and manipulated and ... [and] embedded in the very form and aesthetic of all films” (34).

The notion of nature can be perceived as ontologically problematic (Hessing, “Fall” 288). For Susan Hekman, all knowledge about nature is a social representation and therefore, a form of representation (Cudworth 117). Ecofeminist Erika Cudworth situates nature as a social construct within systems of human domination (11). Philosophers have considered ecological thought as a means of decentering the human (Code, “Ecological” n pag.), while others argue against human exclusivity in the natural world (Ivakhiv, Ecologies 34). Western ideology promotes a dualism which separates humanity from nature (Hessing, “Fall” 287; Hessing, Raglon, and Sandilands, “Intro” xiii).

The concept of humans as distinct from and superior to other life forms is culturally based (Clark 23; Cudworth 63; Hessing, “Fall” 288; Ivakhiv, Ecologies 34). According to philosopher Arne Naess, this mentality enables people to abuse the natural environment with impunity (Clark 23). He proposes an inclusive approach to identity that comprises other animate beings (Clark 23). This deep sense of interconnection denotes a philosophy of symbiosis,
whereby harming or “kill[ing] another creature is in some sense an act of violence against oneself” (Clark 24). A common example is animal husbandry, which ignores their capacity to “experience oppression” (Cudworth 64). Works such as *Buffalo Bone China* attest to this form of abuse.

Theories about the domination of nature and its effects on our environment abound (Cook 121, 2; Merchant “Environmentalism” 3; Merchant “Violence” 737; Merchant, “Radical” 180; Zuidervaart). For Cudworth, nature is a socially constructed, “interrelated … system of natured domination or 'anthroparchy'” (63). Anthroparchal culture is cited as a key culprit in domination systems, as it establishes a hierarchical system of “human superiority, and of inferiority of other animals and the natural environment” (Cudworth 171). Humans have the unique capacity to “form hierarchies of group dominance and inclusion / exclusion”, which does not occur among other living beings (Cudworth 63).

In her adaptation of Niklas Luhmann's paradigm of complexity theory, Cudworth develops a theory of systems of human domination over nature (156). She perceives society and culture as ecologically embedded “in systemic relations of human domination … involving the exploitation and abuse of the environment” (Cudworth 63). She connects “social ecology ... to intra-human social hierarchy and difference based on gender, race and class amongst other formations” (Cudworth 101).

Term such as “wilderness” and “wild” have been identified as problematic, as they elicit notions of “a dualism through which the wild becomes the 'other' of Western culture, ... filtered through class, race, privilege, and culture” (Hessing, “Fall” 287-8). Wilderness is also perceived as “dangerous” and thereby “subject to domination”, as illustrated in clearcutting practices, and the “killing or regulation of wild animals” (Cudworth 171). Here, nature becomes a capital asset,
exploited for economic gain (Cudworth 169; Hessing, “Fall” 284, 290; Plumwood, “Environmental” 128; Kovel 86, 1, 95; Cook 2) in a culture that justifies the depletion of natural resources (Cudworth 171; Hessing, “Fall” 284; Kovel 37; Merchant “Reinventing” 24, 82, 189; 211; Merchant “Radical” 179, 211-2, 225).

These systems of domination are interconnected, and intersect with our socio-cultural perception of nature (Adorno in Nelson n. pag). Adam O’Brien posits that nature “is always framed within multiple discourses of unequal power” (186). He rightly states that, “in a postcolonial critical context, nature could never be read as natural” (O’Brien 186).

Alastair Pennycook correlates the expansion of empire, the marginalization of Aboriginal people (28), racism (22), and the creation of a false dichotomy between Self and Other” (24). Ties between colonialism and racism against First Nations communities in Canada abound (Kalafatic 114). The deterioration of the land is reflected in the degradation of First Nations people. In her video, I Want to Know Why, Dana Claxton addresses “colonial imposition, obligatory assimilation, political co-optation” during first contact (Eisner 408). Shelly Niro speaks to the deleterious effects of colonialism on the land, and on Aboriginal culture in her film, The Shirt. In Just Dandy, Thirza Cuthand offers a queer perspective on the invasive nature of European colonization on First Nations culture and land. Filmmaker Loretta Todd connects colonialism to land through film: “Our purpose as Indigenous peoples is guided by our historical relationship with our territories and lands that, as artists, we carry in our languages of colour, light, rhythm, and word” (Kalafatic 116).

In The Colonizer and the Colonized, Albert Memmi discusses the origins of the concept of Other in the context of colonization (Cere 3; Pennycook 24). He addresses the psychological consequences of colonialism and “the long-term outcome of their relationship of dominant and
dominated: a relationship which protracts itself into contemporary post-colonial relations and representations with former empire nations” (Cere 3). Many First Nations filmmakers, including Dana Claxton, and Shelley Niro, challenge notions of Terra Nullius, and “Other” in their work.

Throughout the colonial and post-colonial period, a series of interventions was designed to assimilate, acculturate or integrate Aboriginal people in Canada (Burton and Point 42). Shelley Niro's *The Shirt* overtly challenges these interventions. In *The Red Paper*, Dana Claxton “categories of savage and civilized and destabilized binaries of the 'colonial' and the 'Indian', ... exposing the constructedness of race and identity” (Eisner 410). Marie Battiste talks about “reconstruction and transformation” in (post)colonial theory, “operating as form of liberation from colonial imposition” among Aboriginal people (2). In this regard, the political work of First Nations filmmakers can be seen as a step toward this liberation.

The third section of this paper will focus on film practice, analyzing actual films through ecocinematic and eco-aesthetic lenses such as systems of natural human domination and colonialism. Although I may refer to other works by these filmmakers, the main discussion will be limited to these six films and videos: Dana Claxton's *Buffalo Bone China*, Christina Battle's *buffalo lifts*, Isabelle Hayeur's *Flow*, Louise Bourque's *Jours en Fleurs*, Shelley Niro's *The Shirt*, and Josephine Massarella's *Light Study*.

Dana Claxton is an interdisciplinary artist working in film, video, photography, performance art, and video installation. She has made a significant impact on First Nations culture and history. Her work screens primarily in art galleries, including the Museum of Modern Art (NY), the Museum of Contemporary Art (Sydney), the 17th Biennale of Sydney Biennale, de Biennale Montréal, Biennale d’art contemporain du Havre, France, and is held in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Canada, Vancouver Art Gallery, the Winnipeg Art Gallery
(V-Tape; Claxton). She is the recipient of numerous awards, including the VIVA Award and the Eiteljorg Fellowship. She is assistant professor in visual art at the University of British Columbia. Dana Claxton is from the Lakota First Nations Reserve in Wood Mountain, Saskatchewan.

Recurring themes in Dana Claxton's work are issues of colonialism, the Lakota culture, and the human impact on the environment. In an early work, *Tree of Consumption*, Claxton links the destructive effects of colonization to women and the environment. She connects the degradation of women to the deterioration of the environment. In *The Red Paper*, she confronts colonization from a First Nations perspective (Eisner 408).

*Buffalo Bone China*, a video installation by Dana Claxton, presents a unique example of ecocinema. It conveys the destructive effects of colonialism on nature and on First Nations people. It challenges anthroparchal perspectives, addresses issues of colonization, and systems of human domination of nature. The senseless massacre of “hundreds of thousands of buffalo” (WAG) by colonial interests took place in order to clear the way for the construction of the railway. The British exported the buffalo bones to export back to England for the production of fine china, while carcasses were left to rot. This horrific act conveys the anthroparchic attitude of colonialists, indifferent to both non-human life (the buffalo), and the 'Other' (First Nations). The buffalo were indispensable to the Lakota and prairie First Nations people, who relied on them for food, clothing, and utilized every part of the buffalo. The colonial exploitation of this natural resource illustrates a lack of respect for the buffalo and the First Nations.

*Buffalo Bone China* begins with a slow motion sequence of buffalo charging across an open expanse. The black and white images are looped, playing three consecutive times. Over a period of five and a half minutes, the sequences becomes progressively faster, culminating in
what appears to be “real” time. The effect of watching the buffalo, in a series of images, toward
the lens, in full shot, in close up, and away from the lens in a wide shot, becomes mesmerizing.
Scott MacDonald refers to a “retraining of the perception” as one of the functions of ecocinema.
The variation in motion and speed, and the repetition of shots trains the viewer to see the buffalo
from a number of perspectives. For the first five and a half minutes, we see only the buffalo. The
sudden introduction of a close up of a sinister looking gunman pointing a rifle, hand on the
trigger, eyes trained on the scope, is unexpected, if not shocking. This close up of the gunman is
intercut with a close up of a buffalo. This is repeated four times, in a rapidly edited sequence.
After the fourth image of the gunman, we see the dirt flying, in front of the buffalo's face as it is
shot. An extreme close up image of a fracture on a skull, is juxtaposed with a close up of a First
Nations man, looking up and screaming a silent rage. This sequence is also repeated four times,
as the fractured skull slowly zooms out to reveal a buffalo skull. The use of repetition here is
another technique employed in experimental work, challenging the normative approach to
watching film.

   After a series of colour pans across cups and dishes, we see a black and white hands
gently caressing the dishes. In a wider black and white shot, we see the man at a table with the
fine china. He looks up and screams a silent scream.

   This video installation is part of a performance piece, in which Claxton smashes the
plates with a rubber mallet, then places the pieces into “four bundles” in a “sanctified” circle,
while the video installation, Buffalo Bone China plays in the background. The smashing is a
response to the crushing of the buffalo bones, and to the near “decimation” of the buffalo
(Willard).

   Claxton's Landscape#1, a dual channel video installation, urges an appreciation for
nature, while obliquely addressing colonialism. Claxton “subverts the Canadian tradition of landscape painting by Indianizing her relationship to it and by bringing a new understanding to the land, creating a decolonized landscape” (Willard). Using an aesthetic of “starkness” and “minimalism” (Willard), Claxton politicizes the notion of landscape, by depicting the prairies from her distinctly Lakotian perspective. The relevance of the sky in Claxton's work refers to her “Lakota teachings” (Willard). The sky features prominently in Landscape #1, where the many of the wide shots of the prairies are composed of two thirds sky.

The first channel involves a static shot of the plains, with golden grasses in the foreground and hills in the distance, rolling beneath cumulus clouds dotting an expanse of blue sky. We see a mixture of wild prairie and farmland, punctuated by salmon coloured rocks, sage green grasses, and brightly coloured algae. Sporadic signs of human civilization are present, such as an abandoned cabin with broken windows, some farming implements, a tractor, and a wooden fence in the grasslands.

The second channel comprises a “painterly” (Claxton) wide shot of prairie against a deep blue cloud studded sky. Grassy hills appear in the distance. At the bottom of the frame, a text appears, then fades out: “Walk each step as a prayer”. After a few moments, another message fades in: “I give you these offerings”. This sequence repeats throughout the video. The imagery is breathtaking and meditative, evoking serenity and peace. For Claxton, this beauty signifies her Hunkpapa Lakotian culture. The extended viewing of landscape in this video reflects the ecocinematic “qualities of consciousness crucial for a deep appreciation of and ongoing commitment to the natural environment” (MacDonald, “Ecocinema” 19).

Originally from Edmonton, interdisciplinary artist Christina Battle works in film, video and installation art. Her works have shown internationally, including the Whitney Biennial, Day
for Night, White Box, the Rotterdam International Film Festival, the London Film Festival, the Foreman Art Gallery at Bishops University, YYZ Artists' Outlet, and Nuit Blanche, Toronto (Battle website.

*buffalo lifts* demonstrates a number of ecocinema qualities. It inspires the viewer to think about nature and our relationships to the planet and other living beings, addresses anthroparchal issues, challenges conventional approaches to spectatorship, and represents a shift from anthropocentric perspectives to ecocentric ones.

The film also evokes a respect for nature in the viewer, its hand-made beauty both fascinating and humbling. Battle lifted the emulsion from the found footage, dyed it, treated it, manipulated it, and optically printed it. As the buffalo gallop across the frame, they are repeatedly drawn back, continuing the cycle in a seemingly endless loop.

Evoking issues of human domination of nature, *buffalo lifts* presents us with an image of an extinct specie, the wild buffalo (or American Bison), roaming freely. The multi-coloured, treated, manipulated, optically printed, hand-processed, hand made film is like a mirage, much like the notion of wild buffalo. The buffalo have been slaughtered by humans. One of the major consequence of the colonization of North America has been the near eradication of several species, notably the buffalo. The image of the brutalized buffalo has, in many ways, become synonymous with western colonization. Battle is able to transform colonial violence to the environment (systems of human domination of nature), violence toward non-human beings, greed, and exploitation through the medium of film.

*buffalo lifts* is a hand made, materially oriented film. It employs techniques such as hand processing, working with dyes, bleaches, filters, manipulating the emulsion (the light-sensitive layer on top of the film base, the acetate), and optically printing. Battle refined her skills while
working at Niagara Custom Lab in Toronto, learning colour processing and manipulation techniques there that she later used in her films (Marchessault, “Christina Battle Spotlight Series”).

Louise Bourque is a prolific artist, working primarily on celluloid film. Her films have been exhibited over five continents, in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, in D.C., the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in N.Y., the Whitney Biennial, the Musée de la civilisation and the Galerie nationale in Québec. Bourque received the Experimental Film Award from Athens Int. Film and Video Fest., the Director’s Choice Award from the Black Maria Film and Video Fest. in Ohio, and the Programmers’ Choice Award from Cinematexas in Austin. She has had solo shows at the Cinematheque Ontario in Toronto, the Millennium Film Workshop in New York, and Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center in Buffalo. After teaching at universities and colleges in the USA, Bourque has returned to her home town of Edmonstun, New Brunswick, where she teaches film and resumes her filmmaking practice.

*Jours en Fleurs* forms new connections in the representation of nature on film. Inspired by her “coming-of-age in Acadian French where girls would refer to having their menstrual periods as ‘être dans ses fleurs’”, Louise Bourque conceives a radical interpretation of this expression. Fusing the concept of menses to springtime foliage and blossoms, she soaks film footage in her own menstrual blood, and buries it underground. After months of immersion in menstrual blood, Bourque unearths the film. The original springtime blooms have decomposed, having sustaining “violent alterations” (Bourque). This is a brilliant depiction of the junction between nature and film.

*A cameraless film, Jours en Fleurs is a perception-bending example of ecocinema. It is exemplary of Scott MacDonald's description of the power of “experimental cinema ... to retrain
perception by challenging our viewing habits and expectations” (Willoquet-Marcondi, “Intro”12). It challenges conventional expectations in spectatorship, and no written description can replicate the visual experience of watching *Jours en Fleur*. Optically printed onto 35mm film, the colours in *Jours en Fleur* seem to burst off the screen. Brilliant emeralds, blood-oranges, and deep blues intersperse with bursts of yellow over a background of leaves, blossoms, and trees. Different planes of view emerge amid the mutilayered textures of trees in bloom.

Acclaimed interdisciplinary artist Shelly Niro works in film, video, photography, installation, beadwork, and painting. Her work has been exhibited internationally, including at the Venice Biennale, Sundance Film Festival, and the Smithsonian, and is held in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the National Museum of the American Indian, the Banff Art Collection, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the Royal Ontario Museum, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, the Eiteljorg Museum, the Woodland Cultural Centre, the Castellani Art Museum. Niro is the first recipient of the Ontario Arts Council Aboriginal Art Award. Shelley Niro, a Mohawk member of the Turtle Clan, grew up on the Six Nations Reserve in Brantford, Ontario.

Her film *The Shirt* can be analyzed from a number of ecocritical perspectives, such as (post)colonialism, systems of human domination, and environmental degradation. Shelly Niro overtly confronts the damaging effects of colonialism on Aboriginal culture and the environment. She engages the viewer in a discourse on colonialism and the land from an Aboriginal perspective.

*The Shirt* incites the viewer to take action. A series of pans (horizontal rotation of the camera) of the Niagara river and falls and surrounding landscapes, repeatedly end on an First Nations woman, with arms across her chest, staring directly into the lens. There is a bold
message both in the woman's stance, and on her t-shirt, the text of which changes every time we see her. Each text addresses an aspect of colonization, a system of human domination – over Aboriginal people and over nature. The land has been exploited and abused. First Nations culture has been all but supplanted. Gender issues foreground the embedded domination (of First Nations and of nature). The final expression on the T-shirt brings the systems of human domination back to the beginning: the way we treat the land is reflected in the way we treat Aboriginal women and culture.

Displacing the original inhabitants of Niagara Falls, colonists eventually degraded it, rendering it an over-exploited tourist site. Niro subverts the tourist slogan “And all I got was this shirt”, appropriating it by printing it on the Aboriginal woman's T-shirt, and in doing so, re-appropriates Aboriginal culture and land by bringing the message back, full circle. The woman remains standing, facing the lens. Although she has suffered through a system of human domination, as a result of colonization, racism, and oppression, she stands strong.

Images of the Niagara Falls, and the surrounding landscape continue to intercut with the woman, whose shirt “comprises a discourse on colonialism” (National Gallery of Canada). These provocative statements address the pernicious effects of a system of human domination on First Nations and on the environment.

Using irony and humour, Niro challenges the colonial government's attempts to assimilate, acculturate and integrate Aboriginal people. *The Shirt* compels the viewer to perceive land and nature from an Aboriginal perspective. It challenges and informs, metaphorically and overtly, through the colonial discourse on the shirt, and visually, through the woman's stance. With her feet planted firmly on the ground, she faces us, staring directly into the lens.

In *The Tree*, Niro confronts the degradation of the environment through the
personification of “Mother Nature.” Emerging from the water, she appears on the shore. In a series of jump cuts (an abrupt transition, often a cut from the same shot), she approaches the land. We see perspective of the city – a sprawling, soulless site. She weeps for the land and the way it has been ill-used and abused. She wanders, almost ghost like, through the concrete maze of the urban core. Filmed in stark black and white film, mother nature appears alienated in the bleak, overdeveloped surroundings.

The personification of Mother Nature in The Tree employs affective techniques. We “feel” what she experiences. Degradation and destruction are the fruits of a system that keeps humans in the centre, using nature in whatever ways it can, exploiting the natural surroundings, as we, as a colonized nation, have exploited women and First Nations.

The Tree incites the viewer to take action by empathizing with nature. It is also a political statement, as it posits a First Nations woman as mother nature. The parallels are clear. She was displaced through colonization, as nature is becoming rapidly so. The Tree makes viewers aware of the environmental abuses inflicted upon nature. Mother Nature eventually becomes a tree, literally growing branches until she is fully formed. Trees cleanse the air through photosynthesis.

Isabelle Hayeur is a digital image artist working in large-scale photography, high definition video, and installation art. Her photographs and videos are held in over twenty permanent collections, including the National Gallery of Canada, the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, the Fonds National d'art contemporain in Paris, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago (V-TAPTE; Hayeur).

Hayeur's works are framed by environmental concerns, and the effects of human domination. Her recent video, Uprooted, concerns urban sprawl and the displacement, if not
eradication, of natural ecosystems by excessive over-development. Opening with a serene, idyllic image of a forest flanked path, the image zooms out to show the forest image placed over the outline of a house in the centre of the frame. This site-specific work creates “an impression of reality” (Hayeur). She refers to the use of “trompe-l'œil[s]” in the environment, much like the illusion of a green space in the midst of a suburban site. This work explores the relationship of humans to “nature”.

*Flow* is part of Hayeur's series of videos about waterways and our relationship to water. It accentuates the incongruity of “two parallel worlds: a small river with rapids and oil refineries. There is flow in both, but in different senses, with opposite consequences” (Hayeur). The video examines the effect of “environmental disasters” (Hayeur) on our water system through the flow of energy, specifically, the flow of water and the flow of a fossil fuel from an oil refinery. Water is essential for the survival of all animate beings, while oil from refineries is injurious to life on earth. Indeed, its flow, when mixed with water, poisons the water, the ecosystems, and the source of survival on this planet.

*Flow* is an example of ecocinema, in Paula Willoquet's definition, as it inspires viewers to think about issues that affect our environment. And yet, *Flow* is not didactic. Hayeur does not use text, spoken or written in this piece. It is the power of the images, and their careful positioning that evokes certain concepts.

The flow of the water directs our gaze, as we follow the river, absorbed in the beauty and the stilling sounds of the water. The autumn colours permeate the flow of water, from a river, cascading over rocks, and plunging to the river bottom all evoke an atmosphere of serenity. Yet this peace is soon disturbed as ethereal looking clouds part to reveal the smokestacks of an oil refinery. When a freight train gently passes through the frame, carrying away the fossil fuel from
the refinery, as though in a dream, the image deliquesces into water, in a close up of the river's current. The flow has completed its cycle, from the serene river scape, to industrial refineries, before returning into the river's current. These two substances have become now inextricably linked – the polluting fossil fuel, and the life-sustaining water of the river.

*Flow* embodies different aspects of ecocinema, including viewer encouragement to appreciate nature. It educates us, and incites us to take action. While no humans appear onscreen, their ecological presence and influence are symbolized by the refinery. Our water, a life-preserving element for all members of our ecosystem, is contaminated by the very structures and systems we construct. Thoughtful and engaging, *Flow* informs and subtly challenges the viewer to consider the effects of human domination of the environment. The film itself, like others mentioned, is an example of low impact fossil-fuel production, having been produced with a small production crew, consisting of Isabelle Hayeur and two assistants.

I am an independent filmmaker, currently based in Hamilton, Ontario. My short films have been exhibited in film festivals in Canada, the USA, Australia, Malaysia, India, South Korea, Italy, Britain, Germany, Bangladesh, Spain and Japan. I also teach introductory filmmaking and screenwriting.

Nature and environmental issues are interwoven into many of my previous films. In *Green Dream* images of Minke and Beluga whales along the St. Lawrence Seaway are intercut with images of smoke stacks, refineries, and congestion along the Queen Elizabeth Way. Stark images of clear cutting on Vancouver island contrast with the beauty of the island's ancient forests.

Living on the Niagara Escarpment has had a significant influence on my work. This has been expressed, in part, in my most recent film, *Light Study*, a poetic examination of the
wetlands, forests, and ecosystems along the Bruce Trail. Here, nature presides over an ephemeral human element, its primordial essence both medium and agent of light's eternal change.

Nature and its representation are a primary focus of *Light Study*. Composed primarily of human-uninhabited nature, *Light Study* is punctuated by sporadic sightings of a woman walking through the forest, some hikers and a dog by a waterfalls, and a fleeting image of a young man in a meadow. Infused with a proliferation of lakes, wetlands and a multitude of waterfalls, water is a recurring theme in the film. *Light Study* begins and ends with images of water – opening with an ancient waterfalls, and ending on a glass-like surface of a thriving marshland.

Embodying the life-sustaining power of sunlight, *Light Study* was filmed entirely in natural light. It inspires reflection on our existence on this planet, and our relationships with other life beings. In this sense, it illustrates Stan Rowe's concept of equality among all of earth's elements (Willoquet-Marcondi, “Shifting” 44). A shot of the Devil's Punchbowl (a thirty-seven metre waterfalls in Hamilton) reveals multicoloured layers of fossilized life, primarily Queenston Formation red shale, and Cabot Head grey shale (HCA). Reflecting on this image takes us back, over 440 million years to the early Silurian age.

*Light Study* instills an appreciation of nature, partly through the abundance of wildlife imagery. Among myriad species of birds are egrets, emerald herons, blue herons, night herons, red-winged black birds, chickadees, woodpeckers, cardinals, kingfishers, Osprey, bald eagles, loons, mallards, geese and swans. Sparkling emerald waters, brightly coloured rocks, sun bleached rock faces, intersperse with animate life forms. Minnows, young and adult snapping turtles, snakes, wild rabbits, abound. The insectivorous pitcher plant, ferns, mosses, wild flowers, caterpillars, grasshoppers, centipedes, bees, moths, dragon flies, and monarch butterflies flicker across the screen.
*Light Study* presents an eco-aesthetic viewing experience. Through a variety of techniques, including time lapse, flicker, and light paintings, it challenges the viewer by “retraining” the perception of watching wildlife imagery. This experience was described by a film festival viewer as “hypnotic and mesmerizing.”

*Light Study* may also be seen as an example of “an unplugged cinema, filmmaking off the grid” (Bozak 34), like the early cinema that Bozak recalls (Bozak 34). Filming one frame at a time embodied a practice of patience. Many of the frames are not even visible to the naked eye, as the film plays at 24 frames per second.

We live in an interconnected environment. Each of our actions impacts the environment and all its life forms. Since cinema, like all cultural products, is ecologically embedded, the representation of nature on film is a reflection of this environment. I have explored a few of the intersections in ecocinema, eco-aesthetics, and the representation of nature on film in this context. I have identified connections between cinema theory, ecology, ecocriticism, race, class, systems of human domination of nature, and colonialism in the context of nature and its representation on film.
Works Cited


Battle, Christina. Website. [http://cbattle.com/about/](http://cbattle.com/about/)


CFMDC. Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre.

http://www.vtape.org/video?vi=3809


Cubitt, Sean. “Everybody Knows This is Nowhere: Data Visualization and Ecocriticism.” 


Hamilton Conservation Authority. http://www.conservationhamilton.ca/passive-areas


Marchessault, Janine. “Christina Battle Spotlight Series”


Plumwood, Val. *Environment Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason.* London: Routledge,


V-TAPE. http://www.vtape.org/


Print and video sources:

CFMDC 245, 401 Richmond St W, Toronto, ON M5V 3A8.

http://www.cfmdc.org/

V-TAPE 401 Richmond Street West, Suite 452 Toronto, Ontario M5V 3A8 Canada

http://www.vtape.org/