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Documentation and Myth:
On Daniel Janke's *How People Got Fire*

The Mountain

Recently, I streamed a sixteen-minute piece of digital nonfiction, an animated documentary, from the National Film Board of Canada website. In it I recognized the Carcross Mountain drawn in rough, shifting pencil. I leapt at this sense of recognition, and recalled the last time I drove through Carcross, Yukon: the gas station was closed that summer. Awkward, because the Carcross pump is the only one on the 110 miles of road between Whitehorse, Yukon and Skagway, Alaska. Also awkward because the hand-written note taped to the inside of the gas station window suggested no fuel alternatives, no rescue plans. I called out to the kids circling on their too-big bikes. They shrugged. I'm sure I wasn't the only one expecting to fuel up in Carcross, forced instead to shoot for the Canada-Alaska border mostly in neutral, coasting as much as possible down the pass to Skagway.

The Carcross Mountain is remote by outside standards, but it's a familiar feature in my part of the North. Yet while Yukoners and Southeast Alaskans may recognize the mountain depicted in Daniel Janke's animated documentary, *How People Got Fire*, most other viewers won't. Prior to the film's credits, the place is only referred to as "the village," and the tribe isn't explicitly identified, either (only their relatives and neighbors are named, and even then it's as "coast people," with tribe and language group unnamed). Finally, the elder character is simply called Grandma Kay. But to viewers who recognize that mountain, it is clear that the village depicted is Carcross, and so the people are probably mostly inland Tlingit. And those familiar with the region's oral histories and oral historians will understand that Grandma Kay likely

represents Kittie Smith, one of the three individuals to whom we owe virtually our whole written record of the region's oral tradition. In other words, Janke's nonfiction film, *How People Got Fire*, is set in a specific place and features a specific person. But the film broadcasts the names of neither. And since the film is animated, viewers might assume its visual elements are fictional constructions, or composites at most. Why is this film so silent on the subject of place names and historic figures while retaining strict visual loyalty to the Carcross Mountain? In other words, why set the film in a specific, existing place—one eminently recognizable to insiders—without situating outsiders?

A simple answer: *How People Got Fire* refuses to be held accountable to mainstream viewing expectations. It carves out a space in which to make meaning on its own terms.

Animated Nonfiction

From the perspective of nonfiction studies, Janke's decisions nevertheless remain intriguing. By reflecting on *How People Got Fire*, I am working to broaden understandings of the role played by imagination and abstraction in the expression of truth and reality. Might this film reveal some of the ways in which documentation and its associated nonfictionality can gain, rather than suffer, from departures and complications of "factual reporting"? And might nonfiction's most essential form, the essay, provide insight in the discussion? Since the first radio entertainment broadcast in the mid-twentieth century to early video essays of the 1980s, the twenty-first century in particular has seen a flourishing of digitized nonfiction. This includes not only an expansion of audio and video essays, but also hyperlink essays and social media essays, as well as digitally interactive essays and cinematic essays. John Bresland points out the common thread here is not medium at all, but the particularities of the essay as a form that makes an inquiry, pushes toward an insight, yet tends to ask more questions than it answers. In his comments on video essays, Bresland thus argues "that asking—whether inscribed in ancient mud, printed on paper, or streamed thirty frames per second—is central to the essay, is the essay" (2010). Reading Janke's film as an

essay, and investigating its blend of abstraction with realism as one of its essayistic elements, thus means paying attention to the question(s) the film is asking.

The film, in calling itself a documentary, invokes definitional considerations within the field of cinema studies as well, for the concept of “documentary” is in flux. Film critic Sybil DelGaudio maps the poles of documentary discourse as follows: “whether one defines documentary as John Grierson’s ‘creative treatment of actuality’, or accepts Trinh T. Minh-ha’s position that ‘there is no such thing as a documentary’, the term, always dynamic, has undergone continual scrutiny and re-consideration throughout film history” (189). Standing at the more open and all-inclusive end, the *Film Studies Dictionary* submits as documentary “any film practice that has as its subject persons, events, or situations that exist outside the film in the real world” (Steve Blandford, Berry Kieth Grant, and Jim Hillier 73). But as Jane Gaines points out, “the ‘creative treatment of actuality’ describes fiction as well as nonfiction film” (84). Imagination is intimately bound to both fiction and nonfiction, in other words—though (we hope) on different terms.

The debate is familiar to readers and writers of the nonfiction essay, as definitions of truth in the art of nonfiction draw much of the field’s discursive attention. Here is the angle I propose for now: when a viewer’s particular sensitivity to “actuality” and “the real world” is activated, then that viewer might arguably be reading a film for its documentary potential. The realism of the southern Yukon landscape and the specificity of Carcross Mountain suggest this film’s relationship to the real world is crucial; in order to register the film’s meaning, its argument, or its thesis, it’s also crucial we understand it as true. But the film represents at least two real worlds: a nonfiction distant-time and a nonfiction present-time. As a documentary film, what is the production documenting about each? Or as a digital essay, what is the film asking about each? How do distant-time and present-time relate? How do the mixed approaches of abstraction and realism knit these two worlds together without defining one as more true than the other?

The Film

The premise of the film's present-time frame narrative entails immediately accessible political insinuations: after the credits, the film begins by juxtaposing a lumbering yellow school bus with an elder's teaching by storytelling: "Hey, you kids," Grandma Kay calls from her doorway. "Come here. I'm gonna tell you a story. More than you learn in that school." She makes the kids a snack. And she tells them how people got fire—it involves Chickenhawk and Crow (though "coast people call him Raven"). The frame narrative thus expresses explicit skepticism about institutionalized western education, and functions not only as a present-time story and a frame for the distant-time narrative, but also as a critical intervention in education discourse, the present status of which is deeply marred by Canada's vicious legacy of boarding schools.

However, Janke's film also transcends its political and anthropological ramifications, and it does so beginning with its opening sequence of un-narrated, animated charcoal-drawings of Crow swooping through the air in a boreal forest and mountainscape to the tune of Janke's spare, contemporary classical composition. At the outset, the soundscape is modern while the mountains are ancient; also, the soundscape makes explicit auditory reference to classical training, while the animation style is simple black and white sketching, mixing a musically formal aesthetic with a visually rustic one. It's in this opening pastiche that the Carcross Mountain first figures in to the film, morphing from charcoal-drawn to colored-in, and thus works as the visual transition from the distant-time of Crow to the present-time of Tish, Grandma Kay, and the village. So within the film's first minute, the Carcross Mountain is already a two-sided coin, the voice of liminality: it suggests the hybridity of totemic time and human time, embodies the fluidity of an ancient past and a contemporary present, and distills, to my mind, the film's unstated thesis: the past is here, present; just overhead, just underfoot. And, just as a mountain, the past is structurally integral, the world's very foundation.

Aesthetics do much of the speaking in Janke's film, which uses animation to blend realism with abstraction throughout the documentary. Two issues drive the critical discourse on animated documentary.

One is reflexivity: critics seem to share a general agreement that animation operates as metacommentary on the mediation of reality (DelGaudio 192). Because animation foregrounds the involvement of the artist's hand, its forms are always already self-reflexively aware of their own interpretive—and not authoritarian/objective—relationship to what they portray. The second issue is embodied indexicality, or proximity of representation to truth, for animation is uniquely positioned to visually capture kinds of truths not available to literal photographic representation.

Part I: Embodiment in Animated Documentary

Maureen Furniss outlines three arguments for animation's unique capacity to embody, or render visual, what photography cannot. They are: (a) animation can visually depict, and not just imply, an individual's internal processes, (b) animation can "film" material things that are unfilmable because of legal or historic (or biochemical/geologic?) absence of cameras, and (c) animation can manipulate character, either to protect someone's identity or to create a composite character when the film's documentary emphasis lies elsewhere than with the individual. Andy Glynn, filmmaker and writer, calls this list reasons for which animation and documentary make "a logical pairing" (75).

Most challenging to my reading of *How People Got Fire* is part (c). Consider Glynn's comments about the composite characters in his *Animated Minds* series, a sequence of films addressing specific mental health conditions like bulimia, Asperger's Syndrome, etc.: "if we'd made these as live-action films," notes Glynn, "and had seen one person talking, then suddenly the film becomes more about a particular individual rather than a 'condition.' ...The difference is perhaps subtle, but nonetheless important; animation helped shift focus onto the experiences rather than the individual" (75). Similarly, having recognized the Carcross Mountain in *How People Got Fire*, I knew that the elder was one of three possible southern Yukon women: Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, or Annie Ned—the three elders so dear to anthropologist and oral historian Julie Cruikshank. But while the credits acknowledge Kitty Smith as the

model for the character in the film (no surprise by the time the credits roll, for the elder character's name in the film is Grandma Kay) there is an important sense in which Janke's work is not a story about Kitty Smith, her life, or her oral authorship. Using a composite character, or a non-historically specific character, shifts the film's focus: there is extant ethnography and oral history on Kitty Smith, and while this film acknowledges its debt to her, *How People Got Fire* works in a different valence. Abstracting the characters prevents the film from being "about" a historically-specific transmitter and an individual receiver, and focuses meaning in the alternative areas of philosophic and cosmological transmission and the content transmitted.

Yet as a counterpoint, the Carcross Mountain in *How People Got Fire* is unquestioningly identifiable as such. The setting is not a "composite location"; it's geographically exact. Still, this specificity is subtle: if you don't know the Carcross Mountain, it won't announce itself. So while *How People Got Fire* does use animation to shift the focus away from historic individuals, it is not for all that forced by animation to abstract all of its physical elements—that the artists chose to preserve geographic specificity and not individual human specificity might be construed as one of the film's ontological theses, which I interpret as follows: landscape is fixed, mythological/elemental characters are fixed, but human individuals are more fleeting, temporary, or interchangeable.

Animism in *How People Got Fire* might be construed as embodying some kind of internal truth to the extent that animism might be understood as a spiritual phenomenon, and spirituality is often understood as individual and internal. In *How People Got Fire*, the teacup images move, the flowers on Grandma Kay's nightie blossom and wilt and grow anew, Tish's notebook flaps about with a life of its own (which she tries to hide from the other kids), and the members of framed photographs react to the kitchen scene, offering unworded and (to me) often inscrutable commentary. Animism here might be construed as internal because the film's characters all have individual reactions; Grandma Kay sees nothing out of the ordinary but simply responds to the teacup that calls her hand, whereas Tish has a bit of guilt and

embarrassment over her notebook's movemented agency. The other kids don't seem to see any of this—I suppose they aren't attuned the way Tish and Grandma Kay are.

Or perhaps animism in *How People Got Fire* is better understood as a project of filming the materially unfilmable. Maybe notebooks really, cosmologically, are animate, but photography can't capture this in much the way mirrors can't see vampires. In this sense, abstraction is a useful tool: through it, the filmmakers access what their cameras cannot. Additionally, distant-time in *How People Got Fire* also fits quite neatly into the unfilmable category: there were no cameras in distant-time, so animation might be as indexical a representation as we can get of it. It is here that digital nonfiction becomes, as DelGaudio puts it, “both a practical and a philosophic concern, directly challenging [falsehoods], not only about the ‘knowability’ of the world but also about cinema’s capacity to represent it” (193). And it is because animated documentary stretches the cinematic bounds of the filmable that certain critics see animation as inherently self-aware. In other words, animated digital nonfiction may well be understood as a form invested in examining its own boundaries.

Part II: Reflexivity in Animated Documentary

The act of documenting the “undocumentable” is either incoherent, or it is a radical overturning of whatever entrenched epistemological structure has defined the undocumentable as such. Perhaps eventually we can approach *How People Got Fire* as a blueprint indicating how, exactly, a film might exert pressure on cinematic bounds of representing the knowable. But for now, who's in charge of drawing the knowable/unknowable line? Who's right about where reality ends and imagination begins? Any school of thought that has already rejected the notion of objectivity, registering it as nonsensical at best (and Fascist at worst) is already primed to digest Paola Voci's ideas about a genre she calls quasi-documentary, which supposes authentic reality is always already subjective, fragmented, and altered by the very impulse to document it (70). Animation, necessarily a departure from observational realism, can aim to bear witness

not only to reality but to *this element* of reality—its fundamentally subjective and mediated nature. It is in this sense that animation can itself be read as an epistemological theory: one emphasizing the role of expressivity in knowledge and perception of the real. Now, if animation theorizes knowledge, what exact theory does *How People Got Fire* set forth and what kind of knowledge does it theorize? Studies in animation's reflexivity might lead to an epistemological reading of *How People Got Fire*, and perhaps create a philosophic and cosmologic platform from which to interpret the film's realism/abstraction blend.

Indexicality is a key notion undergirding much of documentary criticism. Martin Lefebvre distinguishes between direct (e.g. a fingerprint) and indirect (e.g. a painting) indexical relations; accordingly, indexicality is generally understood to be higher in photographs than in drawings, because photographic indexicality visually implies one-to-one correspondence with reality or “the real world.” But in the so-called digital age, the photographic image is, in the hands of a digital artist, as physically malleable as acrylics and canvas to the painter. Scholars like Nea Ehrlich and Steve Fore agree that in such times, we doubt all images and question all representations. Indexicality, a core concept to documentary studies, is thus as fraught a notion as “authenticity,” and photographic status is not a universalizable stipulation in establishing either an image's authenticity or indexicality.

Nea Ehrlich writes, “animation's constructedness and break with naturalistic representation and visual ‘realism’ ... makes animation seem suspect and un-objective as a documentary language” (n.p.). Why? Ehrlich explains: animated documentary “evokes an assumed conflict in that documentation involves notions of authenticity and authority to provide reliable evidence. However, animation's formal language emphasizes its own constructedness...” (n.p.) In other words, because animation makes the visually-explicit statement that it is a mediated, interpretive, artists' representation, authenticity (in its simplest and most material sense) might appear fatally compromised. But, because animation isn't involved in “tricking” the viewer, the transparency of its interpretive qualities might actually be understood to increase indexicality (Steve Fore and Paul Wells are among those advancing similar arguments). Animation,

then, is visually and aesthetically attuned to reality as constructed; it's a tacit, yet visible, rejection of Cartesian objectivity. The Carcross Mountain, for example, offers both the authenticity and authority of indexicality not because it is a photographic image (it's a charcoal drawing) but rather because it is rendered in simplified realism (like certain caricatures, minus the exaggeration) and is immediately recognizable, albeit interpreted by the artist.

Yet there are a variety of approaches to animation and a resulting spectrum along which to interpret the indexicality of an animated work, and *How People Got Fire* does not use exclusively the visual approach I've ascribed to the Carcross Mountain. As critic Karen Beckman points out, it's hard to assess indexicality in animation, especially when techniques like rotoscoping are involved (261). Indeed, *How People Got Fire* utilizes rotoscoped characters in the present-time narrative thread: these characters are visually somewhat abstracted, and thus somewhat visually fictionalized, but not so far as outright cartoons. They're a tracing over of live, photographed bodies. The tracing is mediated by the artist's hand (or the computer program), but is also anchored to the photographic image. Abstracting the characters into softened representations of the individual actors on whom they're based blurs the line between *historic individual* and *actor representing historic individual*.

I find a complication here when I consider "real-life" actors. An actor is never *really* the person they portray. As critic Orly Yadin claims, however convincing an actor may be, viewers don't wholly forget that they are actors standing in (170). This would seem to be to function in much the same epistemological current that Voci has pointed out: real-life actors, because they are always standing in for whomever they represent, might actually be understood to operate like animation does—foregrounding subjective mediation. But Yadin takes this logic and turns our previous understanding of animation inside out. She argues that "perversely, a strange thing happens with the so-called non-realistic medium of animation: once we, the audience, accept that we are entering an animated world, we tend to suspend disbelief and the animation acquires a verisimilitude that drama-documentaries hardly ever achieve" (170). In other words,

where Voci finds in animation an explicit statement of reality-as-subjectively-mediated (implying a simultaneous plurality of realities), Yadin find immersive qualities and a kind of contained reality. In contrast, the distant-time narrative deals with the “elemental” characters Chickenhawk and Crow (Bringhurst 69) and renders them in rougher, rustic charcoal or pencil drawings. The rougher penciling here not only denotes distant-time by signaling a deep chronological shift—more importantly, it signals an ontological one. I take it as axiomatic that the distant-time world led to the one in which we live but is not commensurable with it in crucial ways; for example, right roles and relations were not yet set. Rougher penciling, then, is not just about history: it’s about a more malleable reality in which aspects—which are fixed in our present reality—were not yet so.

Rather than softening present-time photographed people through rotoscoping, the distant-time portion of the film roughens totemic figures we’ve grown accustomed to seeing portrayed in polished, streamlined, and highly stylized traditional Native and First Nations visual arts. I find an aesthetically-hinted-at philosophic middle ground, here. Visually softened present-time characters (when we might expect photographic indexicality) combined with visually roughened distant-time characters (when we might expect traditionally-etched symbolic representation) might be read as an overall narrowing of the ontological chasm between present- and distant-time.

DelGaudio argues the result of animation’s self-reflexivity is that “animation prompts the viewer to a heightened consciousness of his or her relation to the text and of the text’s problematic relation to that which it represents” (189). In the case of *How People Got Fire*, the present-time visuals represent contemporary culture, portraying a sort of “how it is here,” emphasizing what the narrator, Tish, makes explicit: “us kids play in all the houses.” While there is plenty of artistic precedent when it comes to illustrating the general via the particular, the animation highlights this leap from particular to general. And the rough charcoal-looking drawings of the distant-time narrative emphasize, through their stylized roughness, (a) the sheer impossibility of photographing the figures driving this thread of the story, and (b)

the elemental aspect of the characters—the drawing, while highly sophisticated, are understated and appear almost primal, scrawled and scratched out, unfinished, signaling that among the building blocks of reality, it is a few of the most basic that are represented here.

Ehrlich argues that animation sparks the viewer to contemplate truth-claims, factuality, and statement of information (while material presenting itself as factual, and not as argument, operates covertly to foster complacency and unexamined acceptance in the viewer). The simultaneous exposure and disguise of animation, however, prompts the viewer into a more mentally sensitive and agile space, one marked by continual uncertainty, reflection, and questioning. “Creating an attentive, questioning and critical viewer is no small by-product,” Ehrlich notes (n.p.). Beckman comes to a similar conclusion. She writes, “our conscious knowledge of the absence of the photo-indexical image and the camera’s role in the production of it results in a far greater awareness of the visual effects of the ... camera’s framing and movement” (Beckman 264). For both Ehrlich and Beckman, questioning indexicality is about shifting the viewer’s positioning from passive recipient to active, critical thinker. The practical question now is, what does *How People Got Fire* want its viewership to think about?

Something I did not encounter in the reflexive thread of animated documentary discourse, but which might have helped me answer this question, is a discussion of ethical responsibility. When I engage with arguments like those articulated above by Ehrlich and Beckman, I wonder: what is the result of such a shifted viewing position? If animation inherently cultivates critical thinking in its viewership, what does this mean for that viewership? Are they then endowed with a certain form of responsibility toward the audiovisual art that has heightened their thinking? With a certain form of responsibility that transcends their relationship to the film? What is, in other words, the purpose or potential of this critically-attuned viewership and what are the contemporary (or universal) circumstances in which we ought to mold an understanding of that viewer? More specifically, do Ehrlich and Beckman’s claim have an ethical bearing on my reading of *How People Got Fire*?

Likewise, considering the reflexive qualities of animation sparks sensitivity to the aesthetic variations at play within the double narrative of the film, but even here, when the animated documentary discourse takes a conceptual turn to explore the significance of reflexivity, I lose traction in my reading of Janke's film. Without a more concrete framework in which to understand the implications of a critically-minded viewership, how am I to interpret what exactly *How People Got Fire* cultivates among its viewers, and the particular bearing of this film on those who see it?

While studies in animated documentary have left certain among my questions unanswered, sustained attention to the film's assumed/argued knowability of the world has caused me to notice a structural element of *How People Got Fire*. In Janke's film, I find a structure of concentric circles pressing the bounds of the documentable, which introduces a practical angle on cinema's capacity to represent the knowable. To explain, I'll linger on the film's depictions of animist worldviews.

In each case of animism in *How People Got Fire*, a frame or material (outer circle) ostensibly contains an image (inner circle), but the images are oddly unburdened by the rules we expect such frames to impose. For example, photos on the wall depict animate (whispering and giggling) and not static individuals; they stay within their picture frames, but are oddly unconstrained by the photographic convention of stillness. Furthermore, the chickenhawk on the mug crouches and takes flight, flapping into its ceramic distance. Again, it stays in its world of the mug, but is uncontained—the chickenhawk flies into a depth of distance, growing smaller as it recedes, even though the surface of a mug is plainly two-dimensional; in this sense, the image on the mug refuses the dimensional bounds of its ceramic frame. Additionally, the flowers Grandma Kay wears bloom and wilt, bloom and wilt. And Tish's notebook gets restless; it flaps about and she has to pounce on it.

This last example is particularly pleasing in its complexity: patrons of the literary arts notwithstanding, text is sometimes scoffed at as inert, static, or dead. Since *How People Got Fire* voiced, through Grandma Kay, a paradigmatic perspective critical of book-learning ("more than you learn in that

school”—a perspective that, by extension, is also critical of the hegemonic western institutions that coincide with said book-learning), the life and agency of Tish’s notebook interrupts any didactically postcolonial anti-literate-culture read of the film. Indeed, the book—home of written language and icon of non-oral knowledge systems—is animate, operating on the same metaphysical terms as the photos on the wall, the image on the mug, and the pattern on Grandma Kay’s clothing. It would have been easy to leave the film with the simple thought, *the traditional education paradigm is better!*, but Tish’s notebook troubles such a neat, indigenous-versus-colonial read on knowledge.

Each of these examples might be understood as a microcosm of the film’s overall narrative structure, in which a similar frame-displacement also occurs. *How People Got Fire* involves a story within a story: inside the smallest center circle is the distant-time story of Crow and Chickenhawk. Outside it is the frame narrative, or present-time story of Grandma Kay and Tish. But formally, the film neither opens nor ends with this frame narrative. There is one more layer, the largest, encircling both the story and the story-within-a-story. The present-time frame itself is bookended by un-narrated, musically-rich distant-time animation of Crow swooping and coasting along in the boreal forest mountainscape characteristic of southern Yukon / northern British Columbia. It’s thus distant-time that is the real frame, the real vessel, the real horizon of the film’s (un)containment. In a sense, *How People Got Fire* is a documentary nearly exceeding its own bounds, formally pushed to the brink of its own cinematic frame. Is it possible to take this reading just a hair over that edge?

Part III: Myth

The questions of ontology and epistemology belong, for scholar and poet Robert Bringhurst, to the purview of mythology: humans formulate questions about the nature of being and meaning as stories—ones that “*think about the nature of the world* instead of (like a novel) about the nature of human society or the workings of the human heart and mind” (Bringhurst, *Everywhere* 168, emphasis in original). Yet while

all cultures hatch hypotheses and theses about the nature of the world, Bringhurst emphasizes a major conceptual difference in the approach of literate versus oral cultures. In short, highly literate cultures record their theses about reality in abstract forms like propositions, definitions, and equations (analytic philosophy, mathematics, physics, etc.). But in oral cultures, theses about reality unfold in story form. However, it's not only a question of theses getting jotted down as equations in literate societies and performed as stories in oral ones. It's also a question of abstraction and concreteness, for stories deal with living things, and the essential tool of metaphysics in oral cultures is not abstraction but personification (Bringhurst 168). As DelGaudio, Voci, Yadin (and others) find in animation an inherent activation of epistemological and ontological inquiries, I propose we also align with Bringhurst's ideas which consider mythology in the same light. When we do so, Janke's film becomes something of a double-whammy, for it deals with the nature of the world in both its form (animation) and its content (an inland Tlingit myth).

What else deals with the nature of the world? In western culture, science. Let us not, Bringhurst argues, misconstrue myth as a kind of misinformation for which science is the cure, because myth is actually "an alternate *kind* of science. ...It aims, like science, at perceiving and expressing ultimate truths" (64). And because it aims at "ultimate truths" and is "so perceptive of reality," Bringhurst holds the contentious position that myths ring true cross-culturally and outside the bounds of historic specificity ("like any law of nature, in almost any culture at almost any time," he stresses (64)). Myths transcend the bounds of cultural specificity because their cultural specificity is only one of the components in play; alongside that specificity is something humanly—and not just culturally—compelling. "As soon as [such stories] are heard," writes Bringhurst, "they are seen to enrich human experience. That is why they are incessantly retold" (64).

While Bringhurst compares mythology to science, he does so with care. They do not share, for example, basic starting assumptions: science tends to assume that everything it deals with is dead, but again, a myth assumes all existents are alive (64). It is fitting, then, that as scholar Joanna Hearne argues, we

should look at animation as a form well-suited to mythic storytelling for in its most literal sense, the form of animation entails an enlivening, vitalizing dimension akin to the assumption myth makes about its existents (92). Perhaps the stakes of animation's reflexivity might be rooted here.

There might be reason to pursue this thought, for Bringhurst posits morality as exterior to science but core to mythology. He argues not only that the context of a myth is always a world of living entities, but that they are all linked imperfectly, yet powerfully, by moral obligations. A scientific statement, on the other hand, usually seems to discuss material objects devoid of moral concerns (65-66). I think here of my own travels: it's important to me to tip my hat to the Carcross Mountain when I see it, as I would to anyone else when recognition (or surprise, or convention) compels me to give a greeting. But there's also a weighted sense of how little I really know that mountain, and dismay that what I do know is somehow unearned and is irrevocably a product of my nonNative heritage. *How People Got Fire* does not, in form or content, let me off this hook. And so Bringhurst's statement about imperfect yet powerful moral obligations resonates: my relationship to the mountain may be imperfect, but obligation prevents me from freezing in my tracks.

Obligation is like a suturing, reconnecting pieces that have been separated. Bringhurst thinks in terms of a continuum of unifying and parsing: mythology and science mark those poles respectively. "Science," writes Bringhurst, "tends to distinguish much that mythology tends to conflate, and one of the mythteller's tasks is reassembling things and relationships that analytical study and the practical demands of daily life are prone to parse" (66). Bringhurst's example is helpful:

a hunter may butcher his prey...then tell a story which symbolically restores the animal... There may be plenty of real science in the hunter's understanding of animal behavior and in his knowledge of comparative anatomy—but in oral cultures, myths, not scientific theorems, are the customary way of reuniting concepts that experience has severed. (66-67)

If we are to understand truth as something deeply lodged within mythic structures and practices, this may not be a bad place to invoke it. “Symbolic reunification” reestablishes coherence when, as Yeats puts it, the center does not hold (a bewildering kind of pain far from unique to modernism).

And what are the constitutive elements of mythic truth-telling? Bringhurst writes,

unlike the characters of history, fiction, or legend, the creatures of myth are as a rule elemental. The Raven, for example, is as mutable and complex as plutonium or sulphur, air or blood, but he is fundamental in the same sense. ... His status in the mythworlds of the North Pacific Rim is something like the status of an element in chemistry or an axiom in mathematics. He is, within these worlds, a familiar, trusted theorem, not a new hypothesis. Yet the old, accepted elements and theorems are precisely where new revelations come from. (69)

Raven, and other such elemental characters, might be understood as integral building blocks in Victor Masayesva’s “language of intercession” with the spiritworld. What, in *How People Got Fire*, is symbolically reunified, or placed back into communion with the spirituality of distant-time? I can think of at least three severances the film heals. First, education: *How People Got Fire* obscures the compartmentalization of school and home by depicting teaching and learning occurring not at school but in a domestic space. Second, fire, heat, and internal energy: in the school bus opening, we see over Tish’s shoulder that she’s been assigned to write an essay on hydrothermal vents. Then Grandma Kay invokes Crow and Chickenhawk to tell, with a completely different grammar, about the very same subject—how the inner fire of the world was brought out and distributed to its residents. Here, the elemental energy of the earth is reunified with the life-energy of those who live here. Third, past and future: Crow, like the Carcross Mountain, is present in the distant-time narrative and the present-time one; it’s not clear the past is gone, at all, for it not only marks the present, but (at least in the case of Crow) hops about with its own agency in both. As Masayesva writes: “the indigenous aesthetic ... is the language of intercession through which we

are heard by and commune with the Ancients” (n.p.). Aesthetically speaking, then, *How People Got Fire* implies that this communing is not exclusively the stuff of ritual. It’s going on all over, any time of day.

When Ehrlich and Beckman gesture toward animation’s reflexivity, claiming the form itself hones a more critically attuned viewership, I asked, what are the stakes? Cinematically, I still don’t know. But with Bringhurst’s ideas on the table I can say this: *How People Got Fire* starts out with a landscape many northern outdoor-recreating lover of the backcountry can recognize, and then enters a village—something closed, mostly, to outdoor recreators (frequented instead, and problematically, by government officials and social sciences researchers)—and tells a story about distant-time not in the village, but on the land. Yes, the village is the site of the telling; *How People Got Fire* doesn’t propose a rosy tribe of all humanity. But the site of the story is the world, so there is no excuse to treat the story as undecipherable. Tentatively, and as a resident of the world, *How People Got Fire* proposes I adopt—alongside my consciousness as perpetual non-villager—an actively interpretive relationship with the story, treating it as vibrating, animate, relevant, playful, and wise. Not that it is accessible to me in the fullness of its cultural references as it is to Grandma Kay, but that it is fundamentally a story “so perceptive of reality” as to make plenty of meaning both inside or outside the theatre of the village, if we have the agility of mind to pay attention.

In Conclusion

The Carcross Mountain is not the only thing that marks those of us passing through. There is also the Carcross Desert, and it might have a place here. The Carcross Desert, also called the smallest desert in the world, is a set of sand dunes (about one square mile’s worth) sitting in a rainshadow not far from the village. It is good to pull over next to it, throw off your shoes, forget about bears, and race up the dunes. Pick up what you find there; there’s a good chance that at least once, it will be a small plastic soldier, the kind with a helmet and rifle, feet soldered at a set distance to a piece of plastic earth. Later it is good to

resume the drive with sand in your hair, eyes stinging. Get where you are going. Don't worry, the soldier will make his own way.

But wait: *How People Got Fire* suggests I ought to place the emphasis elsewhere—nothing wrong with the immediacy of human experience, the idiosyncrasy of a memory, or a puzzling found object, but *How People Got Fire* says *look. Look for the thread of continuity first*. And it comes in all shapes: that of a mountain, of a lack (fire) now filled (if you feed it), of the elements, those basic building blocks that are Crow, Chickenhawk, the storyteller, the listener. *Look for the thread of continuity first*, says Janke's film, and I think it says this not because continuity is the only way to access the real that is actuality, but because "actuality" was always from the start relational: something existing in contrast to the past and the future, something existing in contrast to the expected, the intended, or the imaginary. Look for the thread of continuity first, because that is the real context of the story's truth. When it comes to telling you about the Carcross Desert I am not, perhaps, so prepared as I thought: it will take more reflection to find the continuity framing its significance.

So the question remains: what kind of documentary is this and what is it documenting? *How People Got Fire* is documenting a contemporary iteration of an ancient practice, storytelling. It's documenting an epistemology that percolates up from a particular place. And it's documenting the active presentness of an ancient past, a presentness that is sometimes goofy, sometimes eerie, but either way, continual. The kind of documentary this is, then, is cosmologic. Tish is well-equipped here, as she is in the film, to have the last word: "there's only one story. It's big: now. ...Now."

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