our city

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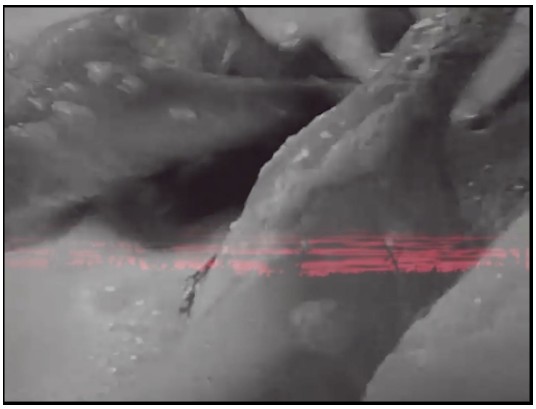
Description of the project

our city is an experimental video that was conceived and created over the course of a year. At the beginning of the process I knew I wanted to intertwine environmental and film studies, but was unsure how. My original idea was to produce a short horror film with subtle environmental themes. In this early iteration I was interested in focusing on the construction of information and discourse, and the media's role on creating trust or distrust and spreading information or misinformation within societies. Media outlets decide what is talked about in their papers and on their networks. Moreover, the media frames how issues and topics are discussed. For example, data points can be presented out of their original context or a news broadcast can give more credit to one side of a story than the other by choices of language and imagery. Media bias can then lead to a polarized or misled population about any number of issues, ranging from police brutality to climate change.

In the process of working on the initial idea, I made a short video entitled *Entropy* (https://vimeo.com/306295284). The one-minute experimental video starts with archival footage that illustrates an idyllic view of humans interacting with nature, and moves towards an expression of the destructive nature of human activity. *Entropy* employs audio of Donald Trump denying climate



change and ignoring science and scientists. This type of messaging, from the President of the United States, constructs the narrative discourse for many U.S. citizens around a topic or idea. Through the work on this video, I thought more about the construction of ideologies, and the subsequent construction of physical environments because of these ideas. Education, media, and discourse disseminate ideology throughout a social group. Ideas about the treatment of the environment, the motives for economic actions, or the use of space are all ingrained in a societal set of ideas. The social set of ideas will lead to a set of space building principles, from building architecture to city parks. Therefore, the way a society thinks leads to the way physical space and ideas about space are constructed.

After *Entropy*, I continued with an idea to incorporate archival footage to portray a gradual decline into physical and cultural disorder through visual and audio montage. However, I did not want to present a black and white view of nature as good and humans as bad, as *Entropy* and my previous iterations of concepts came across. Instead of a spiral into total decay, I wanted to present a cacophony of imagery and sounds of the city, an obviously human made space (both physically and ideologically) to create a representation of the conflicting relationships between humans and the environment around them.

My current work evolves out of this earlier thinking as a representation of my feelings about Burlington, the only city I have ever lived in, and the complicated relationships between all of the spaces and ideas that make it up. I worry about environmental and social complacency when it comes to cities that are called ‘green’ like Burlington. I think it is important to constantly question the way we live, and why it became that way. There is not a right or wrong way for a city to look, but the ever present conflict within the spaces in existence deserve further attention.

our city is an 8 min 48 sec experimental video that presents a view of a city as a microcosm of the human interaction with and construction of space. It consists of shots taken around the city of Burlington from the fall of 2019 to the early spring of 2020. The video questions the dominant view of Burlington, VT as a sustainable and green city and uses Burlington as an example of a greater commentary on the interaction of ideas, spaces, humans, and the physical environment in cities.The title, "our city," is presented without capitalization to remove ownership over the city stated as 'ours,' to allow the project to be viewed and interrogated in a variety of contexts, in any urban environment. The title gives the film's viewer personal attachment to the urban landscape, but not ownership. All humans, whether living in a city or not, navigate a relationship between manufactured and natural landscapes. The video illustrates the inevitable connection between manufactured urban landscapes and the natural environment.

our city explores the relationship between humans and physically and ideologically manufactured spaces through its two 'chapters.' The first five minutes of the project presents Burlington from a neutral, objective stance. The video starts with long-take shots from a variety of locations around the city, ranging from Pine Street and Depot Street to Oakledge Park. Long-take refers to an extended run of the camera, allowing the shots to remain on the screen for longer than some more mainstream and conventional documentaries sit with an image. The early shots in the video are meant to give a sense of place, a familiarity with the visual and audio setting. The second 'chapter' attempts to take away the sense of place, and the ability to locate oneself in any given space.

The second half of the video consists of an array of stacked video and audio clips that come together in a montage that feels more sporadic and dislocating. The audio transitions from synchronous with the spaces seen in the first half to dislocated and chaotic. The quick cuts and stacking of one visual on top of another disrupts the single image and creates a montage of multiple images in quick succession, if not at the same time, to challenge the sense of place created in the first part of the video. Images of spaces are taken out of their original context and reconstructed with other images to create new spaces all together, as well as spaces within spaces, illustrating that the places are made up of an array of spaces, both human made and 'natural.'

our city is a personal exploration of 'our' city, which Burlington locals recognize but a wider audience could relate to as their hometown or familiar space. *our city* asks questions about the sustainability (actions that meet the needs of present generations without compromising the needs of future ones) of our current way of life. Are any cities, even a 'green' one like Burlington, really sustainable? Overall, the video disrupts the sense of place established in the beginning in order to ask how humans have gotten to today's landscape, and if it is just or unjust, sustainable or unsustainable, or somewhere in the gray area.

Influences

Over the past few years, I have been exposed to videos that have influenced my own work. Below is an outline of the main videos that influenced the thought process, filming and editing of *our city*.


***Dislocation Blues* (Sky Hopinka, 2017) //** http://www.skyhopinka.com/dislocation-blues

A reflective portrait, *Dislocation Blues* was shot at the Standing Rock protests, and consists of long-take shots of the camp that protesters were set up at and interviews about the past, the protests, and the future. The retrospective interviews include protesters reflecting back on the time.

The Standing Rock protests were a direct display of human development, the Dakota Access Pipeline, changing physical and social space. The physical space changed as protest camps were constructed, and the pipeline developers won access to the area. The social connection with the land and environment was also taken from the Native Americans as their land was further degraded and colonized.

As the final shot of the film pulls out of the established space of Standing Rock to a screening of the film, Hopkina makes the viewer aware of the construction of visual space and narrative. The ability here to make the viewer aware of the construction of spaces heavily influenced both conception and production of *our city.*

***Chain* (Jem Cohen, 2004) //**
https://youtu.be/qRBaykxoFt4

The experimental 'documentary' follows two working women and their struggles to make a living in a deteriorating socioeconomic environment. The film is location-based, with a mall at the visual center point. The mix of audio from interviews and the mall, creates an interesting soundscape overlayed static, long takes.

The sound mix and exploration of capitalism are two main influences I pulled from this film. *Chain* looks at the spaces people operate within, such as malls and rundown apartments, as a result of the capitalist system. The use of synchronous sounds of cities mixed with interview audio led me to think about relying heavily on audio of cities for *our city*.

***Small Farm Rising* (Ben Stechschulte, 2012) //** https://vimeo.com/81276996

The piece uses long takes to force the viewer to sit with the image, and experience the action taking place in front of them. For example, this screenshot is from a multiple-minute uninterrupted take of farmers shooting some of their cattle. The viewer is confronted with the discomfort, and the video does not allow the viewer to escape the situation by not cutting away.

Small Farm Rising inspired my work through the use of sound and long-take. The use of synchronous sound in the film illustrates the potential of using the sounds around you. The long-takes of farms and people manipulating the spaces inspired my shot selection in locations such as the Intervale.

The Inner and Outer Vanishing Point **(Cameron Dean Gibson, 2013) //** https://vimeo.com/54820631

The long-take, deep focus of the video showcases a style that allows for the viewer to sit with and internally explore and think about the image presented to them, eventually making the viewer aware of the construction of the space.

It makes the viewer aware of the construction of space, 'natural' or otherwise, by including a sequence of overacting in front of a green screen.

The long-take shots of municipal environments, such as a parade and a school gym, inspired much of the visual style for the first 'chapter' of *our city*.

My Winnipeg **(Guy Maddin, 2008) //** https://youtu.be/aY9BtROpNQ4

Maddin's "docu-fantasia" combines archival footage and dreamlike recreations to present his hometown in a personal and distorted way. With personal narratives and constructed shots to show the city, Maddin provides a wildly unique look into his connection with place.

Maddin's piece influenced my thought process in the editing and filming of *our city*. *My Winnipeg* contains a lot of montage and visual relationships to convey emotions about the city. It influenced me to use montage to create emotion and conflict in the second 'chapter' of *our city*.

Maddin's technique of returning to images to present new information or feeling about the repeated visual is something that influenced *our city* as well.

***Hub City* (1997, Bill Brown) //**
https://vimeo.com/312620434

Brown's avant-garde look at Lubbock, Texas accompanies footage with narration about Lubbock and stories from his world that interrogate events and places within the town while making a larger commentary on the decay and character of towns.

Hub City's visuals were the most influential part for me. Both of the shots shown here represent examples of showing the presence of humans without human bodies in the shots. On the bottom, there is a human shadow but no body, while the human impact on the environment is less direct but just as obvious in the power lines.

Brown's film influenced my thought process and filming, as I wanted to present clear evidence of human development and creation of physical spaces without showing many human bodies.

***Life on the Mississippi* (Bill Brown, 2019) //** https://vimeo.com/370127106

Brown's essay film is a trip down the Mississippi that uses Mark Twain and river models to discuss environmental degradation and economic transition in the places it touches.

Life on the Mississippi displays physical and digital models of the river. The physical recreation of the river into models represents an obvious construction of space. It is a physical embodiment of the social and ideological recreation of space, as the model acts to stand in for the physical environment.

The use of this technique influenced my thought process about microcosms of a larger environment. Models are a small, physical part of an ideological space's whole.


Context and Contribution

From the advent of film technology and production, filmmakers have been interested in urban spaces. The Lumière Brothers were dealing with cities and human made spaces as early as the late 19th century with *The Arrival of a Train* (1895). Short films like *A Trip Down Market Street* (Harry Miles, 1906) showcased the lived-in urban environment in a raw form as a camera on the front of a cable car travels the busy environment of San Francisco. When analyzing these portraits of life, I began to think more about city spaces and how we present them in video and film. The urban canvas as a visual space, and the ideas that the space recreates and represents, has been explored throughout the history of film and continues to be to this day.

There are endless social interactions everyday in cities, and each interaction holds the potential to reinforce or subvert the dominant social order. The urban environment is one of the most obvious and interesting places to explore when interrogating human and 'natural' world interactions, whether this exploration takes place in film or through another medium. However, film carries great potential to present both audio and visual components of human impact on the environment and urban spaces in a unique way. For example, Bill Brown takes a complicated and unique look at environmental degradation and urban decay in his 2019 short, *Life on the*

Mississippi. The film explores the river while using artificial sites to do some of the visual representation for it. The models, both digital and physical, are literal reconstructions of a body of water. Brown also looks at the decay of some of these models and towns that once economically benefited from the usage of the 'natural' spaces along and on the river.

EARTH (Nikolaus Geyrhalter, 2019) is a recent example that focuses heavily on human manipulation of the natural world, but not as much with the urban environment (directly). The film documents the massive change and removal of natural environments around the world by going to mines and extraction sites. Although the film is not based in cities, it still represents one of many contemporary films interrogating the visual results of human activities in the world. Even without humans in a shot, the evidence of human impact is everywhere humans look, and everywhere cameras shoot. Paved roads, phone lines and parks are marks of humanity on the land. Human bodies can be removed from these environments, but the impacts remain.

our city is within the context of many approaches that explore humans' impact on the natural world in this pressing moment of climate change. More traditional environmental documentaries like *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2005) and *Blackfish* (Cowperthwaite, 2013) to experimental films like *EARTH* and *Chain* (Jem Cohen, 2004) deal with human-made environments and the aesthetics of the manufactured world. The threat of climate change and the loss of many natural habitats are incredibly urgent issues. Films that explore related themes and root causes are important in the process of creating a space for thought and conversation. Films can provide an impetus for the audience to reflect and a starting point for a conversation about destructive habits of humans. This is what I am doing with *our city*. I am asking viewers to question the construction and use of urban spaces, and the systems that made these spaces.

Capitalist ideology and practices, from the exploitation of natural resources and workers to a profit and growth centered economy, are destructive to the environment. The way humans live right now is not sustainable. But, there are spaces within the larger urban fabric, for example Burlington's the Intervale or waterfront skatepark, that operate within systems, rather than in conflict to natural or urban spaces, and show the possibility for coexistence and harmonious interaction of all parts of the environment. It's hard to find a space that is not obviously impacted by humans, and that is not going to change. What might be able to change is the way humans interact with spaces, both old and new, and how they are built, used and thought about.

Natural and manufactured landscapes are constructed both physically and ideologically by humans. Neil Smith, a self-proclaimed Marxist and geographer, theorized that nature itself is produced. It is produced "all the way down" and the social and natural worlds become indistinguishable at some point (Ekers, 2013). All of nature is socially constructed, therefore it is vital to interrogate the social order and ideology that create spaces, and how these thought processes create spaces. The capitalist ideology of the U.S. is focused on production and growth, which is reflected in the layout production of both urban environments and 'nature.' And although i want to avoid black and white comparisons, a system, such as capitalism that simultaneously takes unequal advantage of the environment and people is unsustainable and unjust.

There does not need to be a perfect green space in the middle of skyscrapers or acres and acres of 'untouched' space, but I believe the systems that built the cities of today need to be rethought to be seen as spaces within spaces, as parts of a larger order. Donella Meadows, in *Thinking in Systems*, theorizes a systems thinking approach to recognizing and solving social and

environmental problems. Meadows recognizes that all systems, which exist at a variety of scales, whether that be political, economic, social or environmental, are inextricably linked and impact one another. By looking at systems as a whole, rather than just individual parts, we are better able to identify issues and propose solutions. This approach allows us to see all the impacts that alterations to physical and ideological spaces have, through things like construction, changes in zoning or new environmental regulations. The parts impact the whole, and the way we view whole systems can impact the parts.

our city presents the symphony and the war in the manufactured and natural landscapes, the ideas about them, and everything in between. The parts of a whole conflict and work together to create a different space all together. The perspective on space is altered throughout the experimental video, as the audience is given different ways to view and varying ideas about urban spaces. *our city* asks the viewer to consider their relationship with the environment around them. Are we happy with the spaces we live in? Do we think about the ability to change the way we create and think about space? All space is constructed and produced, whether ideologically or physically, so hopefully the future will be made up of coexistent spaces to create a better whole. *our city* is an expression of these ideas, feelings and questions about the spaces we live in.

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