A Fire To Last Until Morning

Supplemental Master's Project Essay

by

Braedon Lowey

A.A., Langara College, 2022

B.A, University of Victoria, 2024

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of English

We acknowledge and respect the Lək^{w}əŋən (Songhees and X^{w}sepsəm/Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək^{w}əŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

A Fire To Last Until Morning is a short documentary film submitted as an alternative project to satisfy the requirements of my final thesis in the Master of Arts Program (English) at the University of Victoria. This paper is submitted alongside the project for a few purposes, mostly to formally expand on things that the film medium makes less intuitive. The Artist Statement section elaborates on the purpose and medium of the project, and some of the creative choices made. The Summary and Expansions section summarizes the main arguments of the film and expands on some ideas that aren't explicitly spoken in the film. The Conclusions section offers some parting thoughts, and the Acknowledgements section provides a comprehensive list of contributions from those who helped make the film. Finally, the Works Consulted section provides a list of works that have shaped this project, both directly and indirectly over several years of working in environmental humanities. While there is not much work directly cited in either the film or the paper — the interviews, and the planning of, are the bulk of the research incorporated — many works have informed some number of decisions, ideas, and intentions over the course of the project, and I would be remiss not to acknowledge them.

Artist Statement

A Fire To Last Until Morning features authors, scholars, journalists, and artists who all work at the intersection of climate change and humanities to address why their work is important in the ongoing efforts to preserve our natural world for future generations. Rather than a conventional written thesis, I made a film to circumvent an issue I have with eco-humanities, and one that many peers have also expressed: how useful is our work when we engage primarily with written texts, primarily in the written form, and publish our work in academic journals that

perpetuate that exact process, and whose target audiences are people just like us, who already share most of our environmental beliefs? What are we actually doing to make a tangible impact? It's much too easy to be driven to nihilism when we have three final papers due the same week a town burns down. Making a film was intended in part as a way to resist the academic model and appeal to more audiences, thereby pulling academic labour out of the academic vacuum. In addition, the visual medium is a method of connecting on a more substantial level with the land that I am working with. It is one thing to write about Meghan Fandrich's *Burning Sage* and analyze the poetry, or to do a survey on how Okjökull is featured in Icelandic literature, but the work takes on new meaning when it is engaged with in its geographic and environmental context, and with the film, I can translate that directly to the viewer by featuring the land itself.

Despite my resistance to the academic mode, the project took on new forms and ideas as it progressed, and ultimately, its target audience became environmentalists and eco-humanists. I say this with some chagrin, but I do think it's the approach that ultimately needed to be taken. It is not an appeal to the masses that miraculously escapes the academic vacuum, but rather an appeal to nihilistic scholars and artists, and a manifesto about the impacts their work *could* have. I myself was one of those nihilists until I was introduced to environmental humanities, participated in it more, and eventually changed my focus to it entirely. Since then, I have dedicated more and more personal resources and decisions to fighting climate change — lifestyle changes like commuting via bicycle and switching to a plant-based diet, but also much larger, purpose-changing directives like starting a career in wildland firefighting. In the end of the film, I quote Min Hyoung Song's book, *Climate Lyricism,* in which he introduces the idea of "sustaining attention" to climate change. He writes that "The practice of sustaining attention to

climate change . . . refers to a perpetual project of making yourself and others aware of the changes occurring in the physical world in its myriad manifestations. In the process, you and others together physically and mentally work out how to survive, and even flourish ?, in the midst of such changes" (2). I have lived this exact process, and have experienced firsthand the impacts of sustained attention. I have come to reject the idea that the climate movement must find ways to appeal to the masses, and I think that wholly subscribing to such a dogma rejects the possibility of existing environmentalists doing more (and we can always be doing more). Converting people to the cause is important, but the cause must also be bolstered from within. It is just as — if not more — important to empower environmentalists as it is to convert non-environmentalists to the cause.

Empowering environmentalists, then, became exactly what this film seeks to do. By focusing on specific voices in three different locations, *A Fire* highlights case studies of art and scholarship making impacts in the world from individual to generational scales. While the film focuses mostly on literary arts, one segment features scholars discussing their own experiences similar to mine that I described earlier, and making cases for humanists in change-making positions. Whether the viewer is a scholar, a writer, an artist, or any kind of environmentalist who struggles to feel relevant, the message is this: all work that we do is important. As I state in the film's conclusion, "art alone doesn't make the world better, but it does make us better, and we are the ones who have to save the planet." Self-development is a worthy enough goal, because it equips us to do even more impactful work down the line. With a matter such as climate change, no work that pushes us in the right direction can be disregarded. *A Fire* addresses those in artistic and scholarly fields paralyzed by climate-related grief, anxiety, guilt, and shame,

and empowers them by illustrating examples of the impacts that work like theirs has had and can have, and argues for the importance of sustained attention by whatever means possible. In doing so, it hopes to legitimize work that may otherwise be disregarded (by either its author or consumer) by emphasizing the internal and incremental impacts that it can facilitate. The film is an attempt to make the kind of work that would have influenced me on my own journey of becoming an environmentalist and eco-humanist when, without knowing this was my goal, I needed to convince myself that I was not wasting my limited time, which always seems to be decreasing faster than it should.

Summary and Expansions

The film begins by establishing concerns about climate change and asserting that we already know about them and what needs to be done. A montage of graduate students discussing anxieties about climate change follows to illustrate the negative affect that it causes, particularly in young people who are looking at unstable futures. Later, the same students appear to discuss solutions, connecting these feelings to a more hopeful outcome. Finally, I appear on screen to introduce the film, using many of the ideas expressed in this essay.

After the introduction, the first section of the film investigates the town of Lytton, which burned down in a wildfire in 2021, and resident Meghan Fandrich, who wrote her poetry collection, *Burning Sage*, about the fire. When I met with Meghan prior to the interview, she said something that has stuck with me since: “I needed to have gone through this for something.” The work that Meghan did following the fire cultivated a sense of purpose that was lost after the

destruction of her business, Klowa Café, and since then, Meghan has become an advocate for survivors of climate disasters, speaking to those who are "seeking to understand the long-lasting personal impacts of climate disaster and collective trauma" ("Events and Speaking Engagements"). One of the arguments in this section is that creative writing is a means of processing climate trauma, thus arguing its purpose in a world continuously impacted by increasingly intense natural disasters, as well as slower changes in ecosystems and wildlife that we notice over lifetimes. The other important argument in this section is that this kind of work can also facilitate the recovery process for others, as Meghan illustrates with her compelling story about a local townsperson who was only able to speak openly about his trauma after reading *Burning Sage*. As humanists, artists, journalists, et. al, we have an ability to put words on experiences as Meghan did, and the outcomes of her work illustrate good reasons to do so. Even if we're not tangibly advancing the climate movement, creating opportunities for people to process what climate change has taken from them is invaluable work, which must continue as the world faces greater and more frequent challenges.

The second section returns to Victoria and draws on ideas from Song, exemplifying works of art, journalism, and scholarship that all sustain attention in their own ways. Sean Holman discusses the Climate Disaster Project, a teaching newsroom that features testimonies from climate disaster survivors for readers to "better understand how climate change is affecting all of us" ("Home"). Holman and the CDP's messaging emphasizes the importance of storytelling and community, and asserts that shared storytelling can empower us to recognize how we are impacted by climate change and act upon it. Concurrently, Chantal Bilodeau highlights the importance of live storytelling, arguing that theatre engages people in a unique

way that not only sustains attention, but demands and engages with it. Both Chantal and Sean share data that supports the idea that being exposed to eco-narratives in real-time changes the way people think about climate change, proving (on this small scale at least) that sustaining attention is indeed a critical mode of climate action.

The third and final section of the film expands the scope geographically by leaving Canada for Iceland, and expands it temporally by introducing a framework of generational thinking. The argument here is less explicit, relying on examples of how art can connect us with nature and humanity, bridging the gap between the two. Icelandic author Andri Snær Magnason discusses the history of the glaciers, both geologically and within his own family's intimate history of them, and how he draws inspiration from mythological narrative to talk about them. At the same time, Iceland-based musician Néfur talks about her album, *The Water, The Lover,* in which she uses glacial soundscapes alongside her own voice to compose music. Néfur's work shows that we are not limited to making art about nature, and can actually make art *with* nature to connect to it in new ways and facilitate expanded ways of thinking about our world. Furthermore, Néfur's work is a unique means of preservation, sonically archiving landscapes for future generations and raising awareness about dying ecosystems. Placed in conversation, both artists' work show the generational lead-up to the moment we're in now, and prompt one to consider the future generational impacts of the work we're doing right now. Intercut with my own journey to Ok glacier, Iceland's first dead glacier that Magnason and Néfur both discuss, the whole section emphasizes both urgency and agency, prompting us to act soon and assuring, in conversation with the previous section, that our actions do matter.

In my closing statements, I return to the four students featured in the introduction, this time to talk about solutions. The students discuss how their time in the classroom has skewed views in a more hopeful direction, and led them to think more broadly about climate change. They also address the role that humanities can have in governance and decision making. This section illustrates the importance of individual sustained attention, in contrast to the larger scales discussed so far such as communities and generations. Like me, these students have all been engaging with eco-humanities for several years, and have also come to hopeful, productive, and promising conclusions over the course of their work. The implied argument here is that even if we aren't sharing our work, publishing it, or delivering it at conferences (though all of these students have done some of that), doing it is still productive in itself, and refines us as individuals to be more aware and more engaged with climate change.

Despite the negative view of anthropocentrism in the film's opening statements, *A Fire* is inherently and deliberately anthropocentric in nature. In being anthropocentric, though, I invite viewers to ask what is human —after all, glaciers live and die, and sing with us, too. I end with the Bringhurst poem to suggest the same thing the poem does: "we are what we dream of" (Bringhurst 37). Visually, the poem is backgrounded by some of the most beautiful footage I captured of the world as I explored it for this film. I dream of a beautiful world such as this lasting for future generations, and indeed, I am a part of this world, so I must be one who does the work to save it.

Conclusions

It is my hope that others who have shared in my nihilism, frustration, grief, anxiety, and overwhelming negativity about climate change who see this film will come to the conclusion, as I have, that no work is useless. Data and evidence that I and my interviewees have collected assert that the psychological process of creating and studying art about climate change facilitates agency, and the socio-cultural process of sharing that work with others facilitates the same psychological growth in them as they are exposed to it. *A Fire* does not aim to leave the academy and do that, rather, it takes a targeted approach to reach those in the academy to argue that their work is purposeful and worth doing, in an attempt to curb the crisis of purpose in environmental humanities. Informed by years of reading environmental literature, personal experiences, travel, and interviews, its goal is to be exactly what it promotes: a source of incremental change that looks towards the future. It starts, then, with directly addressing the people who I truly do believe can save the planet, in hopes of continuing a butterfly effect that looped me into its chain of connections along the way.

Acknowledgements

While development, production, and post-production were largely independent, there is labour and contributions from people both on and off-camera that formed the final product. I would like to acknowledge those people here in a more comprehensive way than the film credits allow.

Firstly, everyone else who appeared on screen, without whom this film would just be me yapping over pretty wildlife shots: Jeremy Audet, Rowan Watts, Emma Dove, Tilda Bron, Meghan Fandrich, Sean Holman, Chantal Bilodeau, Néfur, and Andri Snær Magnason. Special thanks in particular to Meghan, for charitably offering her guest house to me for my filming in Lytton, and to Andri, for connecting me with Néfur.

Two people deserve recognition for the time and labour they contributed directly to the film. My friend Emily-Jayne Smythe enthusiastically volunteered to create the soundtrack, and did an exceptional job with very little direction. I hope to some day have a soundtrack budget, so her work can be compensated the way it deserves. For the time-being, the least I can do is plug her Spotify: https://open.spotify.com/artist/1G3ptwG8UaBvWoEgYaSjBT?si=5cw5UNBWS8G4vyR3M83c6A.

My partner, Hannah Henry, picked up the second camera for some B-Roll recording, helped me self-tape many of my own talking heads, patiently worked with me to bounce ideas around, and was my much appreciated co-pilot in Iceland. She also hiked Okjökull with me, which I cannot apologize enough for. She's the best.

On the subject of Iceland, my thanks go to Richard and Margaret Beck, who financially facilitated the international excursion by means of their student travel award. The opportunity to work with Icelandic literature, artists, and landscapes massively increased the scope of this project, and is entirely thanks to them. While in Iceland, I also interviewed Margrét Hugadóttir, the Leader of Science Communication at Elliðaárstöð, a decommissioned power-station-turned-museum. The work happening at Elliðaárstöð is a great example of the local and incremental

outcomes that I wanted to emphasize in this film — unfortunately, I had to cut this segment for time, but Margrét's interview was highly informative and deeply appreciated.

On the administrative side of things, I am excited to shout out Dr. Nicholas Bradley and Dr. Stephen Ross, my supervisory committee. Without their buy-in, this could not have even gotten off the ground. Nick in particular has been, without a doubt, the biggest influence in my conversion to eco-humanist. Without his presence over the years, who knows what I'd be working on instead. I've never had the pleasure of taking a class with Stephen, but the time travel anecdote I share in the film comes from a talk he gave, and has profoundly nestled itself in my brain. Both Nick and Stephen have been helping make this film for years without their knowledge, and have been even more help once it was brought to their attention.

Our departmental graduate advisor, Dr. Alison Chapman, and the faculty of graduate studies facilitated the project by approving it in the first place. Dr. Jaipreet Virdi co-ordinated, promoted, and hosted the film's first public screening in UVic's Critical Humanities Commons. I'm very grateful to all of these parties for supporting an out-of-the-box project.

Lastly, thanks to my dad, for no reason in particular, but I like to thank him when I get chances!

Thanks for reading, and for watching. Now go hug a tree!

Works Consulted

Albrecht, Glenn. "Solastalgia: A New Concept in Health and Identity." *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature*, no. 3, 2005.

———. "Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change." *Australasian Psychiatry*, vol. 15, no. 1, Feb. 2007, pp. 95–98. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1080/10398560701701288.

Beaton, Kate. *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands*. Drawn & Quarterly, 2022.

Bilodeau, Chantal. *Sila: The First Play in the Arctic Cycle*. With Megan Sandberg-Zakian, 1st ed, Talonbooks, Limited, 2015. The Arctic Cycle Series, v. One.

Bladow, Kyle, and Jennifer K. Ladino, editors. *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*. University of Nebraska Press, 2018.

Bradley, Nicholas. *Before Combustion*. Gaspereau Press, Printers & Publishers, 2023.

Bringhurst, Robert. *The Ridge*. Harbour Publishing, 2023.

Campbell, Rebecca. *Arboreality*. Stelliform Press, 2022.

Caracciolo, Marco. *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty: Narrating Unstable Futures*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2023.

DeSalvo, Louise A. *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Stories Transforms Our Lives*. Beacon Press, 2000. *K10plus ISBN*.

Edwards, Peter, and Kevin Loring. *Lytton: Climate Change, Colonialism and Life before the Fire*. Random House Canada, 2024.

Emmett, Robert S., and David E. Nye. *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction*. The MIT Press, 2017.

"Events and Speaking Engagements." *Meghan Fandrich*, https://www.meghanfandrich.com/speaking. Accessed 26 Oct. 2025.

Fandrich, Meghan. *Burning Sage: Poems from the Lytton Fire*. Caitlin Press, 2024.

"Home." *Climate Disaster Project*, https://climatedisasterproject.com/. Accessed 26 Oct. 2025.

Johnson, Ayana Elizabeth. *What If We Get It Right? Visions of Climate Futures*. First edition, One World, 2024.

Magnason, Andri Snær. *On Time and Water*. First edition, Biblioasis, 2021.

Malm, Andreas. *How to Blow up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire*. Verso, 2021.

Not Ok (a Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World). Documentary. Directed by Dominic Boyer and Cymene Howe, mingomena, 2018.

Rigby, Catherine. *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times*. University of Virginia Press, 2015.

Service, BC Wildfire. *Wildfire Averages - Province of British Columbia*. Province of British Columbia, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/wildfire-status/about-bcws/wildfire-statistics/wildfire-averages. Accessed 11 Nov 2025.

Sjón. *From the Mouth of the Whale*. 1st ed, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013

Song, Min Hyoung. *Climate Lyricism*. Duke University Press, 2022.

Vaillant, John. *Fire Weather: The Making of a Beast*. Vintage Canada edition, Vintage Canada, 2024.

———. *The Golden Spruce: A True Story of Myth, Madness, and Greed*. Vintage Canada Edition, Vintage Canada, 2023.

Wharton, Thomas. *Icefields*. Fifth printing, NeWest, 2000. Nunatak Fiction.

Whetter, Darryl. "Bitumen, Bit of Me, Bit of You: Climate Change, National Literatures, Peak Oil, and Canada's Tar Sands." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 27, no. 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 128–49.

———. *Our Sands*. Penguin Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2020.

Zwicky, Jan, and Robert Bringhurst, editors. *Learning to Die: Wisdom in the Age of Climate Crisis*. University of Regina Press, 2018.