

LIVING IN THE ARCTIC LANDSCAPE

Gary Hoffman

NATURE AS CREATIVE INSPIRATION

Perhaps one of the most clichéd questions that established artists have been posed in various fora throughout the ages is, “Where do you get your ideas/inspiration from?” The various answers to the question are often so ethereal that the ancient greek saw it necessary to create the Muses in order to answer the question. The word muse likely stems from the Proto-Indo-European root *men- meaning “put in mind” (Smith, 1873). Ironically, the lack of a concrete answer to the question on the essence of creativity was the inspiration, or muse, for creating the Muses! One might therefore argue that creativity springs from the lack of answers to various questions. To muse, or contemplate, over possible outcomes leads to creativity and thus, creation.

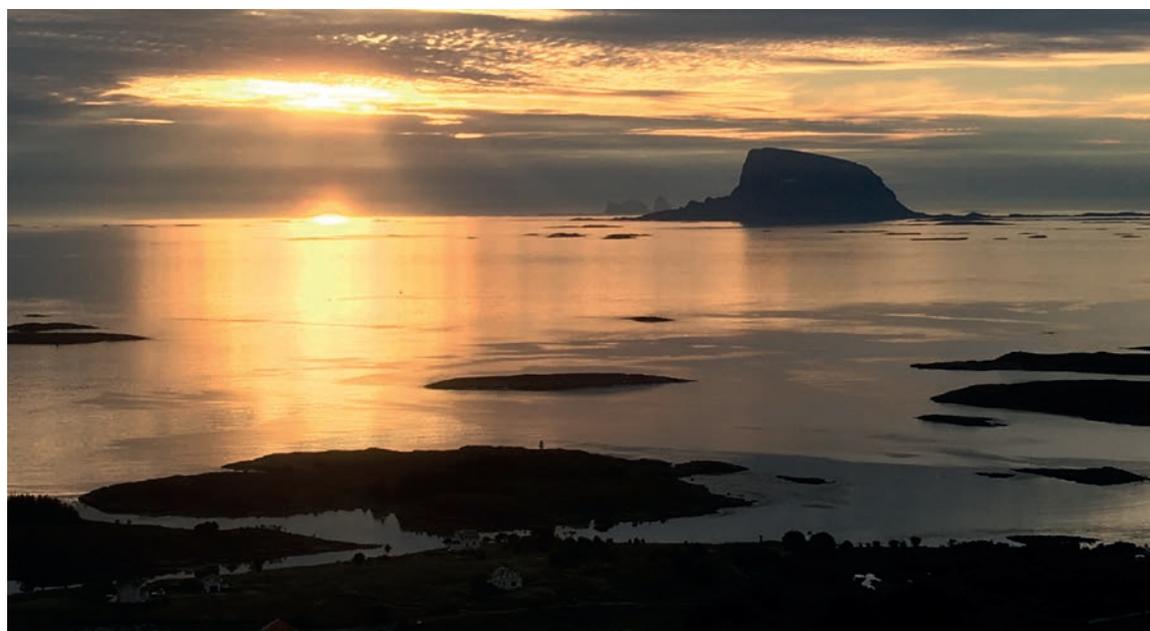
THEORY AND INSPIRATION – PART 1

As a student participant in the University of the Arctic (UArctic) course, Living in the Landscape (LiLa 2021), I was invited to participate in an exhibition, originally to take place in Reykjavik, Iceland, but moved online due to the pandemic. Therefore, development of an artistic product that had to be exhibited digitally needed to be taken into consideration. As a composer/musician, I immediately thought of a music video as an obvious solution. At this point, it was not the composing that concerned me the most, but the video content. What should the visual subject matter be?

At one stage of the LiLa course, we were asked to select a previous visual essay from the publication, “Relate North-Practising Place, Heritage, Art & Design for Creative Communities” and give a summary presentation. I selected the essay,







Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4.
The coast of Helgeland, Norway.
Photos: Gary Hoffman

Take Me Somewhere: A Timeless Sense of Place in the Shetland Islands (Waage, Macdonald, Jónsdóttir, Jóhannesdóttir, Finnbogadóttir) wherein the Iceland based authors, with backgrounds in art, philosophy, teacher education, educational and natural sciences invited residents of the Shetland Islands to a collaborative project “to consider how collaboration and artistic practice can enhance understanding of a place through a participatory art-based approach” (Waage, Macdonald, Jónsdóttir, Jóhannesdóttir, Finnbogadóttir). The participants living in the Shetlands wrote letters to the Icelanders that were the inspiration for the artistic expressions. The collaborative aspect of this interesting project turned out to be the inspiration for the video portion of my project.

The LiLa course began with the reading and discussion of Tim Ingold’s essay, *The Temporality of the Landscape*, where he postulates that the inhabitants of all species, or “dwellers”, are preoccupied with their working, living and being, or “taskscape”, which in turn makes up a part of, and is inextricably linked to, the landscape. Upon contemplating the groundwork for our course I arrived at my eureka moment for a solution to the video portion.

According to Duncum, everyday aesthetic experiences have a profound impact on people’s daily lives and their “identity and view of the world” (Duncum 1999, 295). Perhaps if I could capture some of these aesthetic experiences, I could use them as a source of compositional inspiration and, in turn, find common threads within our culturally separate communities. I asked the LiLa course participants, each living in either Norway, Finland or Russia, to send me three photographs; a portrait of themselves (dweller), a photo of them doing an activity they enjoy (taskscape) and lastly, a wide angle landscape photo. In addition, I wanted them to give me a recorded

word or phrase, in their own language, describing something they love or that has special meaning. I would then use these contributions to create a photo collage to which I would then use as inspiration to compose a soundtrack, thus creating a collaborative, participatory artwork that would also, at a deeper level, seek to find cultural similarities and differences within our Ingold-based landscapes.

THEORY AND INSPIRATION – PART 2

Having received the photos from my collaborators, it was time to confront the work. I began by retitling each photo submission with the name of the contributor and the number 1 for dweller photo, 2 for taskscape photo and 3 for landscape photo. I then dragged each group of photos into Apple’s video editing software, Final Cut Pro X, where I then had an overview of all the submissions and could easily enter them into the timeline editor in the order I felt appropriate. In addition to the photos, I received a charming short video of lambs. I decided to add several of my own short videos in order to give a balance between the photos and videos in the film.

This new twist of adding video, in turn, gave me the sudden inspirational idea for the opening of both the video and the composition. Luckily, it was a gorgeous spring day, so I grabbed my GoPro camera and my partner wife and headed up the mountain behind our village that has a wonderful cliff with a rather spectacular view of the village and surrounding fjords, mountains and islands. The plan: I would slowly walk through the crunching snow towards the cliff, camera at foot level, until I came to the edge where the vast view would be revealed. The music played inside my head as I filmed and I

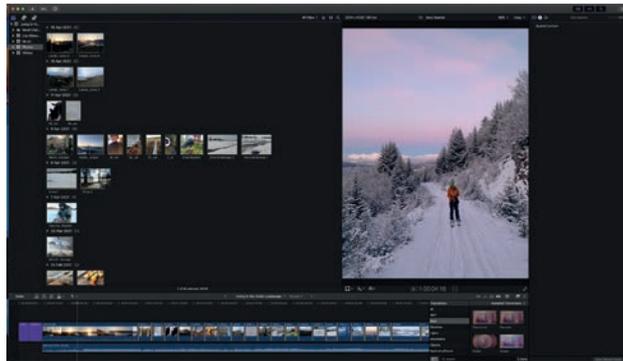


Figure 5. Gathering and arranging the photos in Final Cut Pro X.

Photo: Gary Hoffman



Figure 6. The opening shot on the cliff.

Photo: Gary Hoffman

rushed home afterwards to plot out the opening at the piano.

COMPOSING AND REFLECTIONS

Having arranged the photos in an order I felt appropriate, I set to composing the score. The intro would have a soaring quality reflective of the vastness of the Northern Norwegian coast in the opening sequence. Thereafter, it would fall into a relaxed, folky waltz in a major tonality (A section), using a melodica as the lead instrument, that would convey the more relaxed lifestyle of the Arctic region, especially for those of us living in more rural areas. Then, I would transition to a faster, hurried tempo in a minor tonality (B section), using the piano as the solo voice, that would reflect both the harsh winters and uncertainty for those dwelling in the arctic as we face things such as centralisation, destruction of nature through wind farms and deforestation, global warming, ocean pollution and geo-political uncertainties. Following that, I would repeat the A section with variations including a few of the spoken word submissions in order to provide contrast and interest. After that, I would compose a peaceful, wash-like ambient section inspired by the Aurora Borealis to reflect the soul of the dwellers in the Arctic. Here again, I would insert the spoken words, gently echoing into the aether of sound. Then the finale would arrive, reprising the opening theme, again with variations to provide more drama to the closing. Having thus plotted out the overall form, I sat down and got to work.

The video was completed first, as is usual, so as to have a set flow and timeframe from which to compose. I used the “Ken Burns effect”, made famous by documentary film maker Ken

Burns, to provide movement and life to the still photos and to help draw in the viewer. I then rendered the video and transferred it to my recording platform of choice, Apple's Logic Pro X. At this point, I started to compose. In doing so, time loses all meaning. An idea comes from nowhere. Somewhere. Experience and fantasy dance together and something (hopefully) arrives and manifests itself on the musical canvas. "Oh! That worked well! What if I then do this? Hm.. Maybe save that bit for later. Ah! That's nice! Eh.. Perhaps not. What if I did this instead? Yes!" A streaming barrage of "what ifs" push the composer forward until he or she stares at the finished work. To quote myself from the introduction, "To muse, or contemplate, over possible outcomes leads to creativity and thus, creation."

The video, Living in the Arctic Landscape, may be viewed at the following link:

<https://youtu.be/CXVsUBcDccw>

Cage, J. (1969). *Notations*, Something Else Press; First Edition (January, 1969)

Smith, W. (1873). *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, London.

Duncum, P. (1999), "A Case for an Art Education of Everyday Aesthetic Experiences," *Studies in Art Education*, 40 (Summer), 295–311.

Ingold, T. (1993). The temporality of landscape. *World Archaeology* Vol. 25, No. 2, Conceptions of Time and Ancient Society (Oct., 1993), pp. 152-174 Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Waage, I. Ó., Macdonald, A., Jónsdóttir, Á. B., Jóhannesdót-

tir, G. R. & Finnbogadóttir, G. Ý. (2018). *Take Me Somewhere: A Timeless Sense of Place*. *Relate North: Practising Place, Heritage, Art & Design for Creative Communities*, Ed. Jokela & Coutts (2018), pp. 164-175 Lapland University Press; 2nd revised edition ISBN 978-952-310-951-3



Figure 7. Scoring the film in Logic Pro X.

Photo: Gary Hoffman