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# Feeling and Healing Eco-social Catastrophe: The "Horrorific" Slipstream of Danis Goulet's Wakening

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## **Abstract**

Cree/Métis filmmaker Danis Goulet's science fiction short *Wakening* (2013) is set in Canada's near future, yet the film reveals a slipstream of time where viewers are invited to contemplate the horrors of ecosocial crises—future, past, and present. I argue *Wakening*, as futuristic ecohorror, produces horrific feelings in the moment of its viewing that are inevitably entangled with the past, inviting its audiences to experience the monstrous contexts of Indigenous lives across time. To articulate this temporal dynamism, I overlay two key conceptual understandings: Walter Benjamin's critiques of Western progress and historicism, and Indigenous notions of a Native slipstream. When brought together in *Wakening*, which is inspired by the First Nations movement *Idle No More*, these concepts not only help expose the horror of Indigenous ecosocial crises wrought by colonial and neocolonial occupations but also draw our attention to the timelessness of Indigenous resistance in the face of such ecohorror. Ultimately, there are two significant implications in understanding *Wakening* as ecohorror of dynamic temporality. First, such a reading continues the important work of revisioning the theoretical and critical boundaries of Western cinema. Goulet's play with audiences' familiar expectations of horror's invitations to the weird challenge us all to recalibrate our sense of generic cinematic representation and its purpose. Relatedly, such readings highlight film's politics of emotion: its ability to generate "affective alliances" that can potentially help us all re-imagine our temporal and spatial engagements with the world at large.

## **Keywords**

Indigenous Studies, Affect, Emotion, Ecocinema, Ecohorror, Science Fiction

## **Disciplines**

Environmental Sciences | Film and Media Studies | Indigenous Studies

# Feeling and Healing Eco-social Catastrophe: The “Horrific” Slipstream of Danis Goulet’s *Wakening*

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## *Abstract*

Cree/Métis filmmaker Danis Goulet’s science fiction short *Wakening* (2013) is set in Canada’s near future, yet the film reveals a slipstream of time where viewers are invited to contemplate the horrors of eco-social crises—future, past, and present. I argue *Wakening*, as futuristic ecohorror, produces horrific feelings in the moment of its viewing that are inevitably entangled with the past, inviting its audiences to experience the monstrous contexts of Indigenous lives across time. To articulate this temporal dynamism, I overlay two key conceptual understandings: Walter Benjamin’s critiques of Western progress and historicism, and Indigenous notions of a Native slipstream. When brought together in *Wakening*, which is inspired by the First Nations movement Idle No More, these concepts not only help expose the horror of Indigenous eco-social crises wrought by colonial and neocolonial occupations but also draw our attention to the timelessness of Indigenous resistance in the face of such ecohorror. Ultimately, there are two significant implications in understanding *Wakening* as ecohorror of dynamic temporality. First, such a reading continues the important work of revisioning the theoretical and critical boundaries of Western cinema. Goulet’s play with audiences’ familiar expectations of horror’s invitations to the weird challenge us *all* to recalibrate our sense of generic cinematic representation and its purpose. Relatedly, such readings highlight film’s politics of emotion: its ability to generate “affective alliances” that can potentially help us *all* re-imagine our temporal and spatial engagements with the world at large.

*..No one would ever describe what it looked like except that it had chewed off its own lip, and that it had a heart of ice.”*

—Danis Goulet (personal interview)

*This is how one pictures the angel of history... Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet.*

—Walter Benjamin (*Theses*, 257)

A woman carrying both a gun of futuristic design and a bow and arrow runs down a trash-strewn alley. As we hear the sound of machine guns firing, the woman ducks into a doorway, breathing heavily. In the blurry grey background two soldiers walk by, the sounds of their boots heavy. The woman waits fearfully until they have passed, then peers out of her hiding place. While loudspeakers broadcast laws regarding marriage and land ownership, we see what the woman sees: a scene of urban devastation.

This is the opening scene of the 2013 short film *Wakening* by Cree/Métis filmmaker Danis Goulet. While billed as a science fiction (SF) story set in Canada's near future, *Wakening* also draws its viewers into the realm of Stephen Rust and Carter Soles's expansive critical concept of *ecohorror*. The film presents complex imaginary renditions of the "horrific events" of "global climate change, the sixth extinction, and environmental injustices" that are currently unfolding (Rust and Soles 1-2), and, in this case, have been unfolding for over five hundred years of Indigenous-colonial contact. *Wakening* features the legendary Cree characters Weesageechak, a trickster presented here as the warrior woman, and Weetigo, the most terrifying monster of Cree legends, presented here as a giant elk-like creature. As "intellectual rivals," these two characters have come head to head innumerable times in Cree traditional stories (interview). In *Wakening's* dystopian future, however, the enemy they face is something much bigger that can consume them both, much as it has consumed their lands; as Weetigo says in Cree, "the forests are all dead."

This essay argues that *Wakening* is a film whose futuristic *ecohorror* is meant to be *felt* affectively by its viewer in the present moment of its viewing. Such horrific feelings are inevitably entangled with the past through the memory of trauma, as I elaborate below, by drawing together the theoretical work of horror film scholars such as Adam Lowenstein and Julian Hanich, Indigenous SF scholars such as Grace L. Dillon, and Goulet's own Cree sensibilities. Through its invitation to experience dynamic interactions of past, present, and future, then, I suggest that *Wakening* invites its audiences to experience the monstrous contexts of Indigenous lives across time. To articulate this temporal dynamism, I overlay two key conceptual understandings: Walter Benjamin's critiques of Western progress and historicism, and Indigenous notions of a Native slipstream. The former helps us perceive, as the epigraph suggests, what "the angel of history" sees—not "a series of events" but a "single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" upon Indigenous lives. "Keeping time together" (interview), Native slipstream works in a similar way, revealing a continuum of trauma experienced by

Indigenous people. When brought together in *Wakening*, these concepts not only help expose the horror of Indigenous eco-social crises wrought by colonial and neocolonial occupations but also draw our attention to the timelessness of Indigenous resistance in the face of such ecohorror (like the contemporary First Nations movement Idle No More, which partially inspired the film).

Ultimately, there are two significant implications in understanding *Wakening* as ecohorror of dynamic temporality. First, such a reading continues the important work of revisioning the theoretical and critical boundaries of Western cinema. Goulet's play with audiences' expectations of horror's invitations to the weird challenge us all to recalibrate our sense of generic cinematic representation and its purpose. Relatedly, such readings highlight film's politics of emotion, its ability to generate "affective alliances" that can potentially help us all reimagine our temporal and spatial engagements with the world at large. Such reimaginings are speculative windows into other ways of being, living, and sustaining healthy relations with the world. They are invitations to decolonize and thus heal the damage that has and is being wrought to human and nonhuman alike through neocolonial occupations that power climate change's accelerating catastrophes.

### *The Politics of Dread in a Dystopian World*

As one of Canada's foremost emerging Indigenous filmmakers, Danis Goulet (Cree/Métis) is well-known for her short films that fit the genre of social realism. *Barefoot* (2012), Goulet's take on Indigenous teen pregnancy on a reserve, won awards at film festivals such as TIFF (Toronto, Canada), the Berlinale (Berlin, Germany), and SIFF (Seattle, U.S.). In *Wakening* (2013), Goulet decided to forego social realism for futuristic SF. She explains that *Wakening* was her way to reach a wider audience and "to free up the heaviness of what can be social realism," while still providing a platform to talk about Indigenous issues. "What I was hoping from this film was a space where we can all imagine Indigenous experiences" (interview).

Here Goulet recognizes cinema's ability to draw viewers into virtual storyworlds. Films, even hyper-fictionalized films like *Wakening*, often immerse viewers in an *embodied* experience. While we are not in the story, we nonetheless often *feel* as if we were. We might choke up watching a tragedy, or, watching a comedy, we might laugh so hard our stomachs hurt, or we jump in our seats during a scary film. As ecocritic Alexa Weik von Mossner reminds us, in watching, not only do "we need

our senses in order to be able to perceive things, but also... our bodies act as sounding boards for our mental simulations of storyworlds and of characters' perceptions, emotions, and actions within those virtual worlds" (2016, 3).

In the scholarship on why, and how, films evoke this embodied state, there is an expanding understanding that *feelings* are not only culturally and socially cued, but also presocial, or evolutionarily based.<sup>1</sup> Films activate and manipulate these socio-cultural and biological wirings. As a number of film scholars have written, we often experience congruent emotions with characters who remind us of ourselves or who exhibit social markers that are valued in our cultures. We can also feel with characters different from us when films put them in situations with which we can relate. Such "affective alliances," as Laura Podalsky describes, can "plug us into emergent subjectivities" as "spectators feel in ways that acknowledge alternative ways of knowing" (8). Cinematic affect and the ensuing emotion we feel<sup>2</sup> can become a site of important social and political work, inspiring awareness of histories, presents, and futures that are not necessarily that of the viewer's but nonetheless felt with similar intensity.

*Wakening* is Goulet's invitation to such a politics of affect. Because we are thrown into the film *in medias res*, we must use our own feelings and reactions to understand the situation unfolding in front of us. The film's formal triggers point us to the anxiety, fear, and unease of being hunted and of being under oppressive surveillance; the evocation of these emotions is a hallmark of successful horror films. In the film's opening scene, Goulet introduces her main character with clear situational prompts of emotional alignment. The hand-held camera literally engages the point-of-view of fleeing alongside her. Through its attention to the protagonist's anxious face, the unsteadiness of the moving camera's field of view, the beat of running feet and heavy breathing, and the quick editing cuts that involve the protagonist looking back, then forward, the

<sup>1</sup> The idea that body/mind and emotion/rationality are entangled entities influencing each other is a rich interdisciplinary field of study. Experiments and studies in cognitive psychology and the neurosciences support assertions made by humanists interested in the emotional power of representation. See, for example, Thomas Essleer and Malte Hagener's *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* (2010) and Alexa Weik von Mossner's *Affective Ecologies: How Environmental Narratives make Us Feel* (forthcoming 2016) as entry points to these discussions in film studies.

<sup>2</sup> As Alexa Weik von Mossner writes in the Introduction of her edited collection *Moving Environments: Affect, Ecology, Emotion, and Film* (2014), affect is the visceral response we have to a film, while emotion is understood as the cognitive awareness of this response (1).

film mimics the evolutionary experience of prey escaping a predator. At the same time, it presents eco-social markers that signify tropes of war and destruction through its washed-out color palette, the sound of machine gun fire, and images of ruined landscapes.

The film heightens our sense of the character's vulnerability through plot action and the continued "mood cues" conveyed by her environment.<sup>3</sup> As the woman steps from the streets into a ruined building with papered-over windows, she stumbles upon an old gaunt man rooting through trash. The man retreats in fear, while our protagonist eyes him with suspicion. Such cues disorient the viewer, leaving it unclear as to whom we can trust.

Goulet further disorients the viewer by making sight unreliable, forcing her audience to interpret the film through sound. When the woman steps further into the bowels of the building, Goulet lights our way in "classic" horror genre style, with shadows and darkness predominating. The woman switches on a flashlight, and its harsh beam swings across our view. Broken items and bits of trash are briefly illuminated and swallowed by the enclosing darkness as the beam swings away. Our sight is unstable. The woman's anxious face is caught in the back-glow from the flashlight. Sound seems diegetic, but is hyper-realized—the woman's uneven, labored breathing is amplified in the silence, punctuated with creaks and clanks. The sound of whistling wind rises. These sonic markers, common to horror films, are both destabilizing for and familiar to viewers. Sound in horror, as scholars such as Michel Chion suggest, is what we have to infer about what we cannot see, and when composed as dissonant and fragmented, as in *Wakening*, it makes the invisible ominous.<sup>4</sup>

In "Judge Dread: What Are We Afraid of When We Are Scared at the Movies?" cognitivist film scholar Julian Hanich argues that such fearful anticipation, what can also be referred to as *dread*, is an affective state in which audience members actually fear for themselves. While earlier scholars argued that because viewers are not themselves in any sort of

<sup>3</sup> The concept of a "mood-cue" is credited to cognitivist film scholar Greg Smith, and refers to the way films generate a background "mood" that functions as diffuse yet often congruent low-lying emotional prompts that offset the more focused and shorter emotional states of plot-driven action. See, specifically, his 2003 *Film Structure and the Emotion System*.

<sup>4</sup> See Michel Chion's *The Voice in Cinema* (1999). In the case of *Wakening*, the idea of disorienting sight and sound, one might argue, is also an important decolonizing tactic, as it helps destabilize our own sense of power as we watch, and, as I describe soon, when combined with Goulet's use of Cree reorients us to voices and language that have been traditionally silenced.

physical danger, such fear cannot be possible, Hanich reminds us that fear stems not only from physical but also psychological nodes. “Since we know from our encounter with previous horror films and thrillers (but also other genres and modes) how these scenes usually end,” he notes, cinematic dread makes us fearful of the “potential of a negative experience *we* might soon have to live through” (30-31, emphasis added). At the same time, cinematic dread can engage what he terms *Angstlust*, a mixed feeling of fear and pleasure—our past archive of the horror genre often reminds us that the outcome of our dread may not be as horrific as we initially imagine. However, he argues that viewers nonetheless fear *witnessing* something shocking because there is no guarantee that we won’t be terrified in the upcoming moments but also in the long term by what we see. Referring to Joanne Cantor’s studies on psychological “scarring,” by cinema, Hanich reminds us that “almost every individual remembers a frightening film with an enduring effect on his or her well-being and behavior” (40).

If we are to take Hanich’s argument of dreading for ourselves to heart, what does *Wakening* cause viewers to dread? The dystopian world Goulet portrays in her opening is itself a trope associated with a standard set of fears. As Anir Kapil Baishya (2011) writes in his analysis of the sci-fi dystopic film *28 Days Later* (2000):

The solitary figure negotiating the desolate space of the city hints at the great underlying fear of this century [the “end” of the world as we know it]... a fear made manifest by the destructive, near-apocalyptic experience of the Second World War whose memories have become “cultural memories” encoded into man’s ontological being by technological modernity and its corollary methods of archiving. (6-7)

Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s work, Baishya describes such memories as part and parcel of modern society’s visual repository of historical events, which can trigger viewers’ “catastrophic imagination”:

where the normal state of being has been destabilized by catastrophe. This is catastrophe in the Benjaminian sense of the term—something that causes an “end” of the world as it is cognized and experienced. (Baishya 2011, 6)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In referencing Benjamin, Baishya is also referencing Adam Lowenstein’s *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (2009), which, to make political sense of horror cinema, grounds its analysis in Benjamin’s critiques of historicism.



The archive of history, containing events such as nuclear destruction and genocide, informs the viewer's experience of *Wakening's* dystopia—and, as I will describe soon, Goulet directs her viewers specifically to the ongoing catastrophic genocide of Indigenous peoples and the devastation of their lands.

*Wakening* feeds on and into these cultural memories. As our protagonist enters a dark theater, viewers are confronted by a wintry darkness filled with drifts of gray powder—snow, or ash, or something else. Trees with frosted leaves stand sentinel over dilapidated seats. In this chilly space the woman stumbles upon two people tied to the otherwise empty seats: a young boy and an old woman. The flashlight swings onto the hunting trap that has snared the boy's bloody foot, then captures the helplessness and terror registered on both faces.

These images depict such unexplained, indirect violence that in their evocation of catastrophic imaginations, they serve as an “allegorical moment” where (as Adam Lowenstein, also drawing on Walter Benjamin's work, suggests) “registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined” (2). That is, we can only make sense of the embodied moments of our present witnessing because the past erupts into view, or in a Benjaminian sense, the cinematic moment engages a “dialectical image”:

It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. (Lowenstein 15, quoting Benjamin *Arcades* 225)

Thus, Lowenstein, following Benjamin, has suggested that the allegorical moment “blasts open the continuum of history” (12), presenting us with “a momentary collision between past and present, when one can ‘seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger’” (13, quoting Benjamin *Theses* 255). Benjamin's allegorical moment comes from his own resistance to historicism—narratives of progress told as a positivist “series of events” that privilege the “victors” and disregard the barbarism that usually accompanies such victories (*Theses*). Contextualized in his own experiences as a Jew living through the turmoil that led to the rise of Nazi Germany, Benjamin argues for a dialectical image that helps retain “the image of the past” as an illumination of civilization's barbarism that extends into the present as “a moment of danger” (*ibid.*). In the case of *Wakening*, this past-present continuum further extends into the future in at least two ways. First, the film deliberately identifies itself as set in the near-future. Second, through the dread it evokes, as Hanich suggests:

First, since we expect a *telos*, we lean forward in time and anticipatorily scan the imminent temporal horizon in search of the prospecting threat. Second, since this delayed outcome is expected to be either shocking or horrific, the time experience in-between becomes more accentuated; the duration of time is both protracted and perceived as denser than average scenes. (32)

In effect, in cinematic dread, we are simultaneously in a moment of time that is backward and forward-looking, but also what Benjamin refers to as *Jetztzeit*, which is “time filled by the presence of now” (*Theses* 261, qtd in Lowenstein 2005, 13). We are afraid now because we anticipate future horror based on recollections of the past. The film’s affective touchpoints prompt the audience into a slipstream of time.

In thus prompting viewers, Goulet primes them to understand the film’s catastrophic world as allegorical of Indigenous experiences and Cree narratives and characters. Viewers soon learn that the woman we encounter in the opening sequence is Weesagechak, and she is looking for the Weetigo. To Cree audiences these names are likely instantly recognizable, which is Goulet’s deliberate aim. Goulet herself remembers these characters from her childhood, explaining that Weesagechak is known as a trickster, while, “from a Cree perspective, the Weetigo is the most terrifying creature there is.” She continues:

It is cannibalistic. It eats people. As a kid there was no description of the Weetigo. No one would ever describe what it looked like except that it had chewed off its own lip, and that it had a heart of ice.

Her point is to activate her Cree audiences’ recognition of the Weetigo as a creature associated with catastrophe: “The Weetigo was related to the fear of starvation on the land and the fear of winter and cold”—as well as a sense of losing one’s mind, or “going Weetigo” (interview).

At the same time, Goulet is also playing with her non-Indigenous audiences’ familiarity with the notion of such a horrific creature. The Weetigo’s cannibalism brings to mind the more commonly recognized Anishinaabe Wendigo, who has often been coopted into mainstream settler horror (examples include Algernon Henry Blackwood’s 1910 short story “Wendigo” and Jim Makichuk’s 1981 *Ghostkeeper*). Yet, in evoking what might be a familiar figure to Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences of horror, Goulet disrupts mainstream, Euro-American cinema’s generic use of this figure. Much as Ariel Smith has argued regarding the trope of the Indian burial ground in horror films,

the trope of the Indigenous cannibal spirit is laden with colonially problematic appropriations. Such representations often make Indigenous peoples both hypervisible, in that the tropes are explicitly identified as sourced from Native North American folklore, and invisible, in that there is little effort to further engage Native issues, thus sidelining the particular histories or dimensions of Indigenous concerns. Nathaniel Thompson's review of *Ghostkeeper* captures such treatment well when he writes: "After some barely relevant text about the Windigo... 'a ghost who lives on human flesh'... we meet our three potential victims..." (56), who, of course, are white (and young). Scholars like Smith, David Christopher, and Sunnie Rothenburg have all argued that in their focus on the "settler gaze," most white Canadian horror film constructs an essentialized "national identity that is still founded on conventional images of indigenous peoples, the appropriation of these people's position in relation to the land, and the stereotyping or ignoring entirely of other races and ethnicities in Canada" (Rothenburg, 2010, 96-97).<sup>6</sup>

As Goulet explains, *Wakening* is a film about Indigenous cultural revival. Significantly, the Weetigo speaks in Cree, while English is subordinated to subtitles. Weesageechak, who speaks in English, must also switch to Cree in her communications with the Weetigo. This move to privilege Cree, one might argue, is a particularly powerful decolonizing tactic. Following the disorienting affect of the earlier sequence—which had no words, just creaks, clanks, and unstable sight—the centering of Cree reframes the audience's sense of the locus of privilege, giving voice to language that was deliberately forbidden by colonial powers.<sup>7</sup> In addition, in emphasizing Cree particularities, Goulet rejects the abstract homogeneity of Indigeneity that often characterizes mainstream horror and refuses the ghost tropes that type Indigenous people as anachronistic and of the past. Goulet instead wishes to draw attention to Cree notions of spatio-temporalities—what she describes as "keeping time together." "Keeping time together," Goulet states, contrasts with Euro-American concepts of linear time, where "the past belongs in a museum and the future is yet to come" (interview). The film's narrative is that of the past erupting into the future. Weesageechak notes that "long ago" the Weetigo's "hunger was feared throughout the land." As Weesageechak escapes from a hunting trap laid by Weetigo, the Weetigo curses, "Weesageechak, you clever devil. Is that you?"—

<sup>6</sup> There are exceptions to this predominant racist stance, as suggested by Aalya Ahmad's 2015 chapter "Blood in the Bush: Indigenization, Gender and Unsettling Horror," which argues that there are some films (for example, the popular cult trilogy *Ginger Snaps*) that do unsettle the tropes.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for providing me with this additional insight.

thus indicating the characters' prior connection. In essence, Goulet pulls viewers into a slipstream that offers a Benjaminian dialectical image, where past, present, and future come together to form a "constellation."

This process works both for audiences familiar with the stories and newcomers to them. The former are invited to such dialectical images because while Weesageechak and the Weetigo have always been intellectual rivals, there is not, as Sophia McCall writes, "a singular Cree interpretation of the Weetigo or Weesageechak [that] may quickly become reductive"(63). Instead, Weetigo and Weesageechak are complex characters with many shapes (literally being shape-shifters) and motives. In the tradition of Cree storytelling, Goulet presents the characters in new ways (Weesageechak as a woman, Weetigo as an elk-like beast) that draw past understandings of them into a dynamic constellation with their future presences. For audiences new to the stories, meanwhile, Goulet plays with horror's affective triggers to ensure that such audiences experience these dialectical images. As Weesageechak interacts with the boy and the old woman, we hear the old woman's frightening words: "It eats us, one by one." When bestial grunts emerge from the darkness of the theater, we see the terrified old woman shaking her head as if warning Weesageechak to flee. Such affective cues, which withhold direct horror, prompt viewers towards dialectical images where past archives (of cinematic and real monsters) flash into the present to help make sense of the dread of anticipated horror.

In pairing affective horror with its narrative, *Wakening* prompts the audience—Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike—to understand these dialectical constellations as specific to a Native slipstream, which, as Grace Dillon suggests, infuses stories with "time travel, alternate realities and multiverses" traditional in sci-fi, but also "models a cultural experience of reality" and "is a reflection of a worldview" (4). In the next section, to articulate such reflections, I show how *Wakening* invites a politics of emotion where the different scales of horror bring the monstrosities perpetuated by colonial and neocolonial worldviews to the fore. Goulet's goal is to encourage an "affective alliance" between her Cree characters and her audiences to help confront and resist such monstrosities—not just on screen, but in "real" worlds of eco-social trauma that thread past, present, and future together.

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*Decolonizing Monstrosities through Invitations to  
“Affective Alliances”*

In the ruined theater, Weesageechak seeks to reason with Weetigo. She points out that “the occupiers have tricked you, Weetigo. This is no palace, this is your prison.” Her words arouse Weetigo’s wrath, and he raves, “I will eat your eyes and suck the marrow from your bones.” While afraid, Weesageechak nonetheless retorts, “The occupiers are more feared than you are, Weetigo,” and switching to Cree, emphatically states, “You are forgotten!”

As the Weetigo roars, the camera follows Weesageechak, fleeing the theater into the lobby from the opening scene. Here she stumbles upon two soldiers. Backlit by sepia daylight, they are faceless, but dressed in outfits that recall the SWAT-gear of militarized authority. Both turn against her (and the camera), flashlights illuminating the aim of their guns as they advance threateningly. In this sequence, quick cuts reveal the fear on Weesageechak’s face, and the camera’s positioning behind her shows her indecision as she moves her raised bow from one figure to the other. Unlike the Weetigo, whom Weesageechak attempted to reason with and who was able to escape, here she is outnumbered and her options seem limited to resorting to violence. As has been the case for most of the film, through maintaining the audience point-of-view with Weesageechak, Goulet invites viewers to feel the protagonist’s vulnerability. In doing so, she prompts her audience to an “affective alliance” (Podalsky 8) with her character. As Goulet states, “*Wakening* was a way to let everybody imagine that horror was not something that is happening over there, up there, to the other” (interview). In the *Jetztzeit* of the moment, the depictions of the soldiers tap into the viewer’s dread of authoritarian terror. The scale of intimidation created by the soldiers aims to overwhelm the terror manifested by the Weetigo; while the Weetigo’s horror appeared confined to the theater, the soldiers speak for the larger power depicted in *Wakening*’s opening. Not only is such power militarized and impersonal but it also epitomizes a larger catastrophe than that inflicted by the Weetigo.

In effect, the affective alliance created with viewers as dread of the Weetigo is besieged by dread of the soldiers. The audience is induced to feel and acknowledge the brutality of settler occupation as felt by Goulet’s peoples. The allegory of occupation is an explicit reference to the eco-social traumas faced not only by Cree, but Indigenous peoples across the globe as their territories and lands were (and are) seized through ruse and blatant theft, and they were (are) targeted for systemic genocide through direct violence or enforced incarceration (whether on

reserves or in prisons or residential schools). The emotional weight of such trauma is meant to coalesce in the film's end-of-the-world ambience and the characters, language, and experiences that Goulet codes as Indigenous. The statement of the old woman in the theater—"The seats were full. We are the only ones left"—is nominally a reference to the deaths typical of a horror movie, but is coded with the history of Indigenous genocide. Goulet's narrative points to how such trauma is both externally inflicted, by the occupiers, and internally expressed: the empty seats are due to the Weetigo's eating its own people.

In our interview, Goulet refers to the crisis of suicides that one Cree community, the Attawapiskat First Nation in Northern Ontario, was struggling through even as we spoke. The reserve had seen at least 30 suicide attempts by young people in March 2016 alone.<sup>8</sup> Drawing attention to such tragedy, Goulet contextualizes *Wakening's* slipstream of horror:

Dystopian future is a way for authors and artists to imagine what the future is like—a cautionary tale. For me this wasn't a future cautionary tale; this was saying horror is what has already happened to our people. It is what is happening now.

The circumstances leading children as young as nine to attempt suicide, like the allegorical crisis of the Weetigo eating its own, lie in the collision of past and present. As the 2015 United Nation's Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, urging countries to acknowledge past in present describes:

Suicidal behavior and self-harm are directly linked to historical injustices by colonial powers, such as dispossession of lands and resources and denial of human rights, combined with the loss of self-identification and a departure from the roots of traditional culture and ways of life. (paraphrased in UN Department of Social and Economic Issues)

<sup>8</sup> This horrific event made the national headlines, and was also reported in international news outlets like *The Guardian* (e.g., Maurice-Léger and Ashifa Kassan's "First Nations Community Grappling with Suicide Crisis: 'We're Crying Out for Help'"), *Indian Country Today* (e.g., Daniel Mesec's "Attawapiskat First Nation Declares State of Emergency After 101 Suicide Attempts"), and NPR (Camila Domonoske's "Canadian First Nation Declares State of Emergency Over Suicide Attempts.").

Attawapiskat, like *Wakening's* Weetigo and its victims, is one of Canada's many Indigenous communities dispossessed of its ecological and social resources. From settler treaties that legitimized land theft (for example, erstwhile Attawapiskat lands on which De Beers diamond mines now operate) to Canada's inhumane residential school system, to the continued lack of basic infrastructure, health, or social services in the community, Attawapiskat's present horror is inseparable from colonial legacies that tear Aboriginal families apart and systematically devalue Indigenous identities, personhood, and their relations not only with all those around them, but also with themselves. As Dillon writes, "It is almost commonplace to think that the Native Apocalypse, if contemplated seriously, has already taken place" (8), and such an apocalypse is perpetuated by what Audra Simpson might argue are the "conditions of colonial occupation, its disavowal, and its ongoing life, which has required and still requires that they [Indigenous peoples] give up their lands and give up themselves" (2). *Wakening's* evocation of Native slipstream—this future world, whose terror is felt in the present moment of viewing—is aimed to awaken its audiences to the colonial monstrosities that frame the horrific contexts of Indigenous lives. This extended slipstream is what marks *Wakening* as not just generic horror, but ecohorror, in Rust and Soles' terms.

But, through this slipstream, Goulet does more. As Dillon writes: "Native apocalyptic storytelling [then] shows the ruptures, the scars, and the trauma in its efforts ultimately to provide healing" (9).<sup>9</sup> This form of healing is directed first and foremost towards Indigenous communities. As Goulet emphatically states, *Wakening* is for Indigenous youth, those at the forefront of such lived horror. The hyper-fictionalized SF space of *Wakening*, she suggests, provides this audience "a little distance and freedom from the real world" (interview), but its allegorical moments are distinct invitations to practice a process of decolonization. Dillon's concept of "returning to ourselves" speaks to *Wakening's* decolonial agenda:

...discovering how personally one is affected by colonization, discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried by its impact, and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt to our post-Native Apocalypse world. (10)

<sup>9</sup> While Dillon draws specifically on the Anishinaabe concept of *bimaadiziwin*, which is "a state of balance, one of difference and provisionality, a condition of resistance and survival" (9), like Goulet she extends the idea beyond her specific First Nations identity affiliation to consider its usefulness to all Indigenous communities.

By inviting her audiences to face the monsters alongside Weesageechak, Goulet simultaneously puts all three of Dillon’s decolonizing “returning to self” criteria into play. The narrative helps audiences familiar with Indigenous stories to recognize Weesageechak’s capacity to triumph over colonial monstrosities, even if the character often resorts to trickster and sometimes-disreputable means of doing so. For those unfamiliar with the traditional stories, *Wakening* provides clues to Weesageechak’s potential—for example, in the hopeful words of the boy trapped in the theater, who on hearing her name says “You are going to save us.”

Yet Weesageechak cannot triumph alone—she needs the help of Weetigo, which is why she has traveled so far to meet him. Symbolizing the terror that eats a community from within, Weetigo nonetheless comes to her aid. In the climactic scene, where Weesageechak must face down the soldiers, Weetigo appears behind them, a looming, brutal ally in a moment of desperate need. The camera cuts to Weesageechak’s look of absolute horror as the soldiers’ screams and sounds of evisceration (the ripping of flesh, the gushing of blood, the guttural groans of predator effort) flood the film’s soundscape. In the subsequent reverse shot instead of seeing the bloody remains of soldiers, we get our first stable view of the Weetigo. In medium shot, the camera lingers on his antlered and disheveled form, revealing a giant elk-like beast with large brown eyes. The imagery is coded to affectively generate a cognitive dissonance as viewers’ past impressions of such herbivorous creatures invite a re-calibration of the Weetigo’s previous horror. Here, in contrast, to the faceless authoritarian voice on the loudspeaker that intrudes into the scene, he appears “human”—a fellow creature, caught in the drama of living. Goulet’s explanation of her rendition of the Weetigo lends to this understanding:

In this future land, I imagine that no one was on the land anymore; they were all trying to survive, but there is nothing sustaining out on the land, where my people would mostly be. Thus, the Weetigo has nothing to inhabit and nothing to eat. The Weetigo himself must move. Much like the dislocations Indigenous people have had to deal with, the Weetigo is dislocated from Northern Saskatchewan. I imagined him traveling all this way to this theater in downtown Toronto, and somewhere along the way he found a sick deer to possess.

Goulet says that she has never seen the Weetigo depicted as a deer. However, playing with traditional understandings of him as a shape-shifter, she adapts the ancestral story to invite this allegorical moment.



As she explains, Weesageechak draws the Weetigo's attention to its own sickness, and the larger force of occupation that has contributed to its sickness. In facing these realities, Weetigo is willing to join forces with Weesageechak; instead of turning its hunger on its own, it confronts the larger foe. As Peter E'rrico suggests, healing is a recovery process, which acknowledges individual sickness as part and parcel of the colonial contexts. Such healing decolonizes when it faces up to the colonial "monster" along with internal maladies. E'rrico, Dillon, the UN's Permanent Forum on Indigenous People, and myriad other Indigenous activists and scholars argue that this decolonization includes the active retrieval of Indigenous language, culture, and traditions.

Goulet's goal with *Wakening* is this retrieval: "At the core of the story is that Weetigo and Weesageechak are staging a comeback. They are going back out into the world" (interview). The film ends with this literal "going out into the world" right after Weetigo demolishes the soldiers and the ensuing wordless exchange between Weetigo and Weesageechak. In medium shot, the camera focuses on Weesageechak; we see the terror leave her face, replaced instead with a sigh of relief. As the shadow of Weetigo departs, her face is illuminated. She allows herself a hint of a smile, before resolve takes over. Weetigo has left the theater, and Weesageechak is similarly ready to head out into the light to confront the occupiers. As Goulet states: "This is about Cree culture coming back to life; *Wakening* is a metaphor for Cree resurgence. Weetigo and Weesageechak are staking a claim" (interview).

The message is directed at the Cree youth who inspired her to make the film in the first place. These are youth who, like Weetigo and Weesageechak, are "staking a claim" for Indigenous visibility, voices, and life-ways against the occupiers on their lands. Goulet points to the Idle No More movement as her own "wakening" to the possibilities of community, collaborative, and Indigenous resurgence in the face of present-day horrors of Canada's neocolonial occupations. As the manifesto of the movement states:

Canadian mining, logging, oil and fishing companies are the most powerful in the world due to land and resources... The taking of resources has left many lands and waters poisoned—the animals and plants are dying in many areas in Canada. We cannot live without the land and water. We have laws older than this colonial government about how to live with the land. (Idle No More)

Like Idle No More—which "invites everyone" to join a movement that considers Indigenous laws as an alternative means to "live with the

land” (ibid.)—*Wakening*, through its invitation to affective alliance, invites everyone to waken to Indigenous life-ways, and to be an ally in resurgence and resistance. Goulet explains that the worldviews of settler states which disregard Indigeneity rob “everyone, not just the Indigenous people, of a deeper understanding of the land that we are on and what it means to live on it. I believe there’s a reckoning to be had, if we don’t pay attention. For all of us” (interview).

The youth participating in the Idle No More movement in the malls of Saskatoon that inspired Goulet were protesting federal legislative action (bills like the conservative government Stephen Harper’s infamous C-45) that sought to further erode the environmental and sovereign foundations on which many in Canada’s Indigenous reserves and rural areas depend. The ongoing teach-ins, rallies, round-dances, and marches of the Idle No More movement are part of grassroots activism across Canada, the U.S., and the globe that is conducted against occupation and oppression in the “real” world that all too often makes real the catastrophic imagination of *Wakening’s* fictional spaces.

Specifically, Idle No More is at the forefront of the climate justice movement. It draws attention to settler state activities such as the Alberta Tar Sands operations in Canada that generate eco-social disaster to local environs and their inhabitants (human and nonhuman alike) at a scale which is fast becoming an icon of modernity’s catastrophic imagination.<sup>10</sup> The “reckoning” of such horrific devastation is, as Goulet suggests, “not just for Indigenous people” but “for all of us.” For example, David Bellio reports in a *Scientific American* article, quoting John Abraham, a signer of a Keystone protest letter from scientists: “If we burn all the tar sand oil, the temperature rise, just from burning that tar sand, will be half of what we’ve already seen—an estimated additional nearly 0.4 degree C from Alberta alone.” The catastrophes of such rising temperatures are being felt all over the world as burning wildfires, drought-parched lands, mega-storms, melting ice-caps, drowning islands, and the antecedent unrest and displacement of humans put at risk become part of our everyday realities.<sup>11</sup> Climate change, in essence, is no longer a future

<sup>10</sup> Imagery from the Alberta Tar Sands such as photographer Louis Helbig’s renditions in the coffee-table book, *Beautiful Destruction* (2014), which includes essays from activists including those from Native communities, have been reported and reproduced in major news sources like *The Guardian’s* Environment section (“Canada’s Tar Sands Landscape from the Air—in Pictures”). Other popular sources like *The Atlantic* have similarly published stories with accompanying imagery that captures the destruction (Ann Taylor’s “The Alberta Tar Sands”).

<sup>11</sup> Alberta’s tar sands’ communities were themselves in trouble as Canada experienced one of its worst wildfires in history, the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire (also called the Horse River fire), which burned from early May to early July. It is

catastrophe, but one that witness accounts of people like Goulet's Cree communities (who are on the frontlines of such catastrophe) and natural and social scientists studying such phenomena are attempting to raise the alarm about today. As Naomi Klein writes in *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, at the heart of climate injustices are the economic engines of neocolonial resource abuse, which, in turn, are embedded in the practices of colonial expansion and occupation. That is, the eco-social catastrophes of climate change have been a long time in the making.

Yet, as Goulet wishes to remind us, through her attention to the characters of Weetigo and Weesagechak, Cree resistance to catastrophe, has also been long in the making. In the *Jetztzeit* of this future world, *Wakening* quite literally seeks to waken its viewers (like the wakened Weetigo) not only to the brutality of the systems that perpetuate such intergenerational violence and resource abuse, but also to the timeless vigilance required to confront, resist, and perhaps even overcome such horror.

### *Slipstreams of Alterity*

*Wakening* was one amongst a select few films commissioned for the hundredth anniversary of the locally famous Elgin and Winter Gardens theatre in downtown Toronto, Canada. As Goulet states, established in 1913, the theater and its various screenings over the years were very much part of Canada's colonial enterprise. When offered the chance to make her film, "as a Cree person I wanted to infiltrate that space with Aboriginal stories of the land" (interview). In her agenda of infiltration, Goulet pushes back against national and Western narratives that marginalized her people, and actively uses her film to counter a Benjaminian truism: "Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (*Theses* 255). *Wakening* unapologetically prompts its viewers to recognize images of the past, as one of its own concerns.<sup>12</sup>

Canada's costliest disaster to date and its rapid and persistent spread is blamed in part to high temperatures, that may in turn be part of the new "normal" of climate change events (*CBC News Staff*; Hampton, Johnson and Lou).

<sup>12</sup> In fact, this was the only film of the commissioned ones that did not default to the genre of "historical period piece." A list of films can be found at the Ontario Heritage Trust's website: <http://www.heritagetrust.on.ca/News-and-Events/2013/Aug/Stage-to-Screen-short-films-celebrate-100th-annive.aspx>

Through futuristic SF and her use of horror's affective triggers, Goulet dynamically evokes a slipstream of time that invites a politics of emotion.

When understood within the context of Goulet's own inspiration from *Idle No More*, this politics is aimed to conjure viscerally the horror of colonial and neocolonial worldviews that have long subscribed power to some at the expense of all others, human and nonhuman alike. *Wakening's* apocalyptic world refuses to underestimate the monstrosity of this continuum of systemic brutal power.

Yet in doing so, it also refuses to succumb to what Gerry Canavan terms necrofuturism—"the endlessly rehearsed landscape of death and disaster that dominates contemporary visions of the coming decades" with a sense of resignation at the inevitable "reality" of capitalism (43). Necrofuturism, as Canavan writes, is often the vision of dystopic SF, such as Hollywood's 1973 *Soylent Green* or the more recent 2009 *The Road*. However, as he, as well other SF critics write, presenting such inevitability is politically not enough. For example, in their Introduction to *Paradoxa's* special issue, *SF Now* (2014), Mark Bould and Rhys Williams state that:

The cracks in capitalist reality must be forced wide open by any means necessary, and representational impossibilities left behind. Hope must become radical, not merely tearing down the fantasy of what is currently thought to be real but also *making the fantastical real*. (9; emphasis in original)

In its entirety, *Wakening* seeks to reveal the cracks in colonial and neocolonial power structures. Weesageechak and Weetigo, characters who are of traditions stomped on by such powers, still exist. They might be afraid and sick (respectively), but neither is dead. Most importantly, *together* they present alternative ways of living that thrived before Western capitalism intruded. The ending, which involves their collaborative "going out into the world" and Weesageechak's momentary smile, is Goulet's invitation to hope, to think of how the *fantastical* of challenging occupation may be *made real*. As she discusses in her interview, for her, *Idle No More* helped make real the fantastical. She marvels, for example, at the fact that "you have youth standing up in malls in Saskatoon and 16-year-olds walking *hundreds* of kilometers to Ottawa" to protest capitalism's oppression (interview).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Bould and Williams acknowledge that academic "theory is only playing catch-up" to social movements that are critiquing capitalism (9). While they don't list *Idle No More*, they point to a number of related movements, such as the Occupy movement (ibid.).

Importantly, though, in inviting hope, Goulet rejects a naive romanticism of Indigenous alterity as utopic answer. Instead, she aims for a tension that acknowledges in a Benjaminian sense that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin *Theses* 256). Weetigo is part of the Cree archive of barbarism. His horror might be undermined in relation to the occupation, but he symbolizes a chilling terror nonetheless. As Goulet says, “freeing the Weetigo is a really dangerous thing to do” (interview)—and yet in *Wakening*, she does not flinch from doing so. Instead, the film is her way of acknowledging that barbarism brushes up against heroism in all societies, and to help her viewers pause to think about how given this tension, protest must be engaged.

Benjamin writes: “Thinking involves the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it give that configuration a shock....” Such a shock, he continues, is a “revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” (262-263). The oppressed past, for Benjamin, is ignored in optimistic narratives of progress. This is Goulet’s Cree past. It is the past of Indigenous peoples globally. *Wakening’s* shock—as the *Jetztzeit* of affective and emotional horror—one might argue, invites all its viewers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, not only to this “revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” but also for a chance to fight for presents and futures. When embraced as a film of horror (which most viewers watch both for the pain and pleasure of dread and shock), but also as a film of ecohorror that acknowledges its contexts of inspiration, *Wakening’s* slipstream of experience thus reveals “moments where a genuine alternative is [can be] glimpsed, where pleasure is taken in the willed confusion of boundaries and in the conscious responsibility of constructing something new and different” (Bould and Williams 9). Through feeling horror, Goulet welcomes us to “navigable streams” (Dillon 3) of Native slipstream healing.

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