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The Accidental Sea

Throughout mankind's existence, they have built empires to build the thriving nature of humanity, and over time these empires have fallen by both human error and the ever-unpredictable nature, which remains constant and persisting. Even now, there are places that rot unseen due to the mishandling of nature by mankind. While humanity remains on this earth, though, they are doomed to continue building, adapting and expanding, an issue Ransom Riggs faces in his short documentary, "The Accidental Sea." Riggs' video addresses the greater encompassing argument that humanity goes beyond its means, which creates dystopian-like societies where nature dominates, but the most redeeming part of humanity is the ability to rebuild despite the odds stacked against them. The fact that it might not work is a chance that humanity is willing to take in order to not just live, but flourish.

The first element that really grabs your attention in this video is the music and the atmosphere it creates for the video. The music playing throughout the video plays one of the most important parts in the story and fits perfectly with the tragedy of the Salton Sea place before and after. The video begins with a guitar strumming on a procession of low-note chords as well as eerie violins in the background. By contrast, the music in the old videos from around the time it was established is upbeat and promises something greater. When the videos end, though, the shots of the Salton Sea as it is now replace them and the music becomes eerie and foreboding

Though this does not involve the rhythm of a poem, the music definitely gives the video a very distinct rhythm, and it follows closely to the events of video. This sets a certain mood that, much like rhythm in a poem, draws the audience in.

once more. At the end, the music fades out like the happy ending of an old movie, contrasting the dystopian-like landscape of what a once-thriving place had become.

Another striking element is, especially in the beginning, Riggs' weaving of colors. Ransom begins his video by saying he'll probably never go to the moon or walk on Mars, and that the closest place to another world is in California. Within this dialogue, he transitions from older footage of astronauts working outside a space station talking about walking on Mars to the sunset-orange desert sands of California, truly creating another world within something so familiar. In mentioning the desert's stark desolation, he shifts from the orange shrubless sand bright in the sun to a landscape of dark dead shrubbery under a stormy purple sky, whose colors are representative of the two very different personas of the desert. These seemingly unlike transitions really speak to his dialogue in showing the Salton Sea as a wasteland and as a place of wonder. The bright orange sand is reminiscent of the surface of Mars, which he had talked about never walking on, and the purple skies tell of a coming storm, which could symbolize either that of mankind's destruction or simply to cast darkness on the hot glowing sand that had promised so much. It is also under the purple sky that we see desert shrubbery, displaying the dryness of the desert under ominous storm clouds that refuse to break, much like the thriving Salton Sea that never quite took off.

Riggs also weaves together the past and the present, which shows how mankind thrives on innovation but also creates destruction if gone unchecked. He quickly delves into a short history of the Salton Sea, where he uses old videos to give a visual to the story. There is even an advertisement for the area during the time it had been at its most popular, which is accompanied by old big-band music and a voice announcing "the Miracle in the Desert; a Palm Springs with water. A place for you to take charge of your future." It seems that the main point made by this

The imagery at the beginning of the video is one of the things that originally drew me in. The gorgeous contrast between the purple and the orange of the dirt and sand of the desert really spoke to what the rest of the documentary would be about.

advertisement was that miracles in a place devoid of hope is a place to begin your future, making it seem like some sort of blank slate, which has been the general consensus of most expansion projects. As is the case with most expansion projects, though, this one did not turn out as planned. In these scenes, the documentary transitions from what the buildings looked like at the height of the town's popularity to what they looked like years after its desertion, which are at complete opposite ends of the spectrum. These images of the past and present give a quick sense of a post-apocalyptic land, and how easily it is for mankind's overzealous nature of expansion to create this effect.

Even the images of what the Salton Sea looked like just after it was abandoned and how it is now are in blatant contrast. The reason people left was that the sea became saltier than the ocean, and the effect was that "botulism poisoning killed millions of fish, and massive die-off's during the height of 120-degree summers made the air almost unbreathable." This disturbing fact is made disgustingly real when he adds a still of floating dead fish in the Salton Sea, and then later when he shows that the "beach is made out of the bones of dead fish." These images and videos from the past really demonstrate how quickly something that mankind thought could have been a great enterprise and have a fruitful future could go so wrong. The fish, which had once been a thriving part of the Salton Sea, had been the main reason for people leaving, but even in death, the fish themselves never got to leave and became part of the disaster that had been created by humans.

One of most important elements of this video is the language. At the beginning of the video, Riggs says that he loves the desert, calling its "empty spaces... vast and alien." This comes soon after his mentioning being unable to walk on Mars and knowing he won't travel to the moon. He further calls the desert landscape "beautiful and vaguely menacing, making all

There is a bit of irony that I found with the fish and their fate. The Salton Sea was created by people, which brought the fish there, but then it was the death of the fish because of the saltiness of the sea that drove the people away. Not only that, but the now-dead fish could not escape and instead became part of the dystopian landscape.

human endeavors seem comfortingly trivial, where sublime landscapes... are framed against a scene of the apocalypse come early.” Comparing the California desert to be both beautiful and menacing, vast and alien, lends to the world’s history of finding new frontiers and claiming it for their own; where a place is so new that it’s difficult to decide whether to be afraid of its potential or profit from it. He also mentions that, after developing the area, “the sea turned on them,” as if the sea, even nature itself, is a physical being with a consciousness, and it was not happy.

The main idea of the above paragraph spans the entire documentary, bringing together so many blatantly dissimilar images that it’s difficult to believe that the Salton Sea could have been the same place now as it was then. Developing on the land around the Salton Sea created these contrasts, where “boomtowns turned into ghost towns,” and he found “streets with named signs but no houses.” Where there was the potential of long-lasting civilization, there remained only the idea of a thriving city and “a landscape out of science fiction.” Often, science fiction novels involve some sort of post-apocalyptic event to cause the events of the book to happen.

Comparing a place very much a part of the earth to the kinds of places in science fiction makes it seem as if it can’t be real, as if this place is only a story created inside mind and not meant to be reality. It makes the familiar, unfamiliar.

The final combination of stark contrasts so prevalent in this video incorporates a final hope for the Salton Sea, and has probably the most noticeable camera movements in the entire documentary. At first, all Riggs sees is “shambles of houses falling into toxic-looking pits,” in which the image of this pit truly does look toxic and right out of a science fiction movie. He claims that he goes to the Salton Sea “to catch glimpses of what the world will look like without us,” where he uses a traveling camera angle moving forward through a window. This is symbolic of how the forward movement of mankind leads to destruction of the places they forcibly inhabit.

Another scene shows houses not nearly as gutted and have photos hanging up, which he says are “pieces of the puzzle of what happened to these families, some of them surrounded literally by puzzle pieces,” with another close-up of an address book actually surrounded by puzzle pieces. This is one of the most symbolic stills because the fact that these puzzle pieces surround an address book show the confusion the people living there may have felt when they were forced to leave the home they’d just settled into. There is hope, though, for the Salton Sea.

The majority of the scenes in this documentary have been dark and gray, usually devoid of bright colors, but this changes in the last couple minutes of the video. At the edge of the Salton Sea, there is “a shocking burst of color,” where Riggs shoots the empty road to the left, a colorful, hand-made sign that says ‘God Never Fails: Salvation Mountain’ to the right and the unending desert in the background. The symbolism here is just what he called it; it’s a shocking burst of hope in the gray nothingness of the Salton Sea. The mountain is “made from mud and straw, telephone poles and truck tires, and a hundred thousand gallons of paint”. It is here where Riggs uses the most forward camera movements. He decides to use a moving shot through the inside of the mountain, where the walls and plaster beams are painted with an array of colors. The most startling realization is that the entire thing was created by one man over thirty years. In the only interview of the entire video, the old man says that he ““spent eighteen years maybe putting that big God is Love sign out there, and twelve or fourteen years building this.” He is the only person in this video besides the narrator who is still alive. This shows the perseverance of mankind despite nature lashing back at them and forcing them from their homes.

In the final handful of seconds of the video, Riggs brings the stark contrasts to a highpoint, asking, “is this strange place a heaven,” where he shows the web-like structures of color inside the mountain, “or a hell?” with a shot of an abandoned house slipping into the

sludge. He asks further if it was, “A tragic failure,” with a shot of an abandoned trailer in the middle of the day, “or a sort of post-apocalyptic wonderland?” where he pans from a dirty tub to a bright yellow balloon with a smiley face on it. Again, these contrasts seek to point out how expansion is a double-edged sword, and that it can lead to destruction but also makes room for something new to take its place. Expansion is a cycle, because as much as mankind has seen it fail, there are so many instances of it succeeding, and therefore humanity will never stop trying to reach farther, often beyond their means.

Riggs in his last few words, says that it’s “easy to look at a place like the Salton Sea and think, ‘of course it failed; of course it ended up that way’, but when I look at it, I think, ‘There but for the grace of God go the rest of us.’” The original idiom is, “There but for the grace of God go I,” which basically means that something bad that happened to someone else or many other people could also transpire in another’s life. This again comes back to how expansion will remain a cycle because, though places like the Salton Sea can work as lessons to those who didn’t invest in it, it remains that those not involved could not have learned from it, and any day, one of their own decisions could lead to this desolation. Still, the cycle of building and destroying continues, and out of the ashes is born opportunity.

Much of the narrator’s own thoughts are kept to himself, but at the end he gives his opinion outright, and shows a true passion in wanting to know what makes these places (both the Salton Sea and the mountain) exist.

Works Cited

Riggs, Ransom. "The Accidental Sea." *YouTube*. YouTube, 12 May 2011. Web. 03 Feb. 2014.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otIU6Py4K_A&list=PLftDyi4hI4Jy_kXMANSeSC1iYbWKVR620&index=3>.