

BIG SKY FILM INSTITUTE

NATIVE FILMMAKER INITIATIVE FILM CLUB



Jonathan Thunder: Good Mythology



Directed by Sergio Rapu

FILM SYNOPSIS

Follow Anishinaabe artist Jonathan Thunder as he dives deep into the inspirations behind his surrealist paintings and animations. From the killing of an iconic American hero to critical perspectives of how Indigenous people were portrayed in early children's cartoons, Thunder's art prompts viewers to reexamine our shared mythologies.

BSFI CURRICULUM

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USING THIS GUIDE

This educator guide is intended to provide context and background to the film *Jonathan Thunder*, offering a range of viewing activities that underscore educational benchmarks of Montana Core and National Core Content Standards. This guide aims to provide a framework for teachers to encourage active engagement before, during, and after viewing the film in an effort to engage in a deep dive into the content and craft of the filmmaking process and the stories they bring to life.

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THE TEAM BEHIND THE FILM



Sergio Rapu
Director



Jonathan Thunder
Subject



THIS FILM SPOTLIGHTS:

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Big Sky Film Institute acknowledges that we are in the aboriginal territories of the Salish and Kalispell people. In addition, we honor the twelve Montana Tribal Nations that have cared for and honored the distinct and multifarious region we now refer to as Montana.

We pay our respects to the Red Lake Band of Ojibwe (including Anishinaabe, Anicinape, Nishnaabe, Neshnabé and Anishinabek/g), of which Jonathan Thunder is a member. They are a group of culturally and linguistically related First Nations that live in both the U.S. and Canada, spanning from Manitoba to Quebec and concentrated around the Great Lakes region. They are speakers of Anishinaabemowin, and in their language, the word Anishinaabe is not a substitute for Ojibwe, but has a deeper, cultural meaning stemming from their oral history, where some say anishinaa was the first word uttered by their Creator.

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MAKING IEFA CONNECTIONS...

KEY CONCEPTS FOR ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDING 2

• There is great diversity among tribal nations and Indigenous individuals as identity is developed, defined, and redefined by entities, organizations, and people. Criteria for establishing an individual's identity as Indigenous has dramatically changed over time, but historically membership in an Indigenous community was inclusive and based on kinship, marriage and adoption.

☀️ *Jonathan Thunder called himself an “urban Indian” because he grew up in the city, away from his Ojibwe community. As an adult, he identified with his Ojibwe heritage through his artwork and connection to Ojibwe oral history and storytelling.*



KEY CONCEPTS FOR ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDING 3

• Indigenous ideologies persist into modern day life as Indigenous cultures, traditions, and languages are still practiced by Indigenous people and are incorporated into how Native Nations govern and manage their affairs.

The Residential school system across Canada banned cultural ceremonies and nearly destroyed Indigenous languages, causing ongoing political, economic, and social impacts for the Ojibwe and several other First Nations.

☀️ *Similar to many others in Indigenous communities, Jonathan Thunder has used a variety of artistic ways to transmit knowledge and teach young people their Ojibwe traditions, incorporating oral histories and creative methodologies.*

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KEY CONCEPTS FOR ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDING 5

• Many federal policies throughout history have affected Indigenous people in the past and continue to shape who they are today. Many of these policies conflicted with one another. Negative impacts continue as Indigenous communities across the Americas still suffer from Colonization, Assimilation, The Residential School System, Discrimination, Intergenerational Grief and Trauma and Treaty-Making.

☀️ *The Anishinaabeg signed a number of Treaties surrendering millions of acres of land in Canada and are still impacted by the 1876 Indian Act. First Nations communities couldn't file land claims against the government and their movement off the reserves was restricted. Generations of children were stripped of their identities, cultures, and languages. Jonathan Thunder addresses personal experience and social commentary as subject matter in his surreal paintings, digital film animations and art installations.*



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- What are some similarities and differences between the Anishinaabeg and the American Indian tribes living in Montana?
- What is the importance of mythology – does it serve a particular purpose? How about oral history and storytelling?
- What are some of the ways people connect with their histories, traditions, and place – and communicate their values?
- Why is cross-cultural communication important in today's society, and can it be used to create change? How so?
- How does documentary film spotlight stories and histories, and what is its role in underscoring diverse representation on the screen?

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PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

1) Film Trailer – Identifying the Hook & Theme

Before you begin...ask students, “What is the **role** of a film trailer?”

- One main purpose is to give a feel for what the full film is about without giving away the plot.

WATCH the **trailer** for Jonathan Thunder: Good Mythology (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pispmLzRLfc>) and...

- **ASK:** What does the subtitle, *Good Mythology*, suggest?
- **ASK:** What is **mythology** and how is it depicted in the film?
- **ASK:** What is a **possible theme** of the film, just based on the trailer? Are there any conflicts or issues presented?

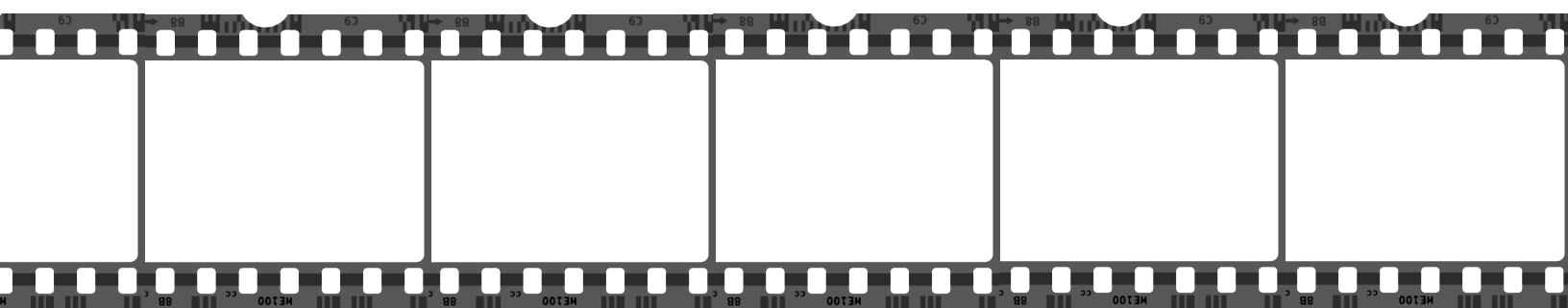
2) Film Trailer – Reflect & Discuss

Have students discuss the effectiveness of the trailer as a hook to the film’s story.

- **ASK:** How effective was the trailer in hooking you?
- **DISCUSS:** Themes that arise from the trailer (*a theme is a recurring idea that illuminates an aspect of the human condition – the basic “lifeblood” of the film, telling what the film is about*)
 - What are the universal ideas behind the film from the trailer?
 - How does the theme give the story and the subject focus and depth?
 - Does the theme have multiple layers: personal, political, and/or spiritual?

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These activities explore EUs 3 & 6 of OPI’s [Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians](#)



WATCH THE FILM!



Film Still by Sergio Rapu
JONATHAN THUNDER, 2022

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VIEWING ACTIVITIES

EXPLORING ORAL STORYTELLING & VISUAL IMAGERY

VISUAL IMAGERY

● **CONSIDER** the following quotes from the film:

“Images are a timeless and universal language”

“For centuries, Indigenous artists have chronicled their histories using pictures.”

1. **COMPARE AND CONTRAST** the [Red Lake Nation Flag](#) with one or more of [Montana’s Tribal Seals](#).
2. **CREATE** your own design to depict a specific location and a place that holds cultural value.
3. **TELL** a story using only pictures and present it to the class. Use [The Art of Storytelling](#) or this article on [Ledger Artists](#) and those at the [Yellowstone County Museum](#) for inspiration and additional resources.

“We understand poetry to be a living language.”

1. **WRITE** a poem using Joy Harjo, the first Native American Poet Laureate here at Living Nations, Living Words at the Library of Congress or other poets’ work in this collection, as inspirations.
2. **SPEAK** to a current issue: Write a newspaper article to create awareness of a more serious issue, such as this, “Speaking in support of the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act, U.S. Secretary of the Interior and the first Native American to hold this office, Deb Haaland says the story behind the federal Indian boarding schools is “a part of America’s story we must tell.””

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CONNECTING TO ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS

1. **REVIEW** key concepts of MT OPI’s Essential Understandings (EUs) #4 and #7 to familiarize students with treaties, reservation lands and the concept of sovereignty.
2. **RESEARCH** the issues with the above topic in mind: “Who owns the water and how should it be determined?”
3. **READ** the articles linked below and compare the two maps.

● **Article 1:** “[Explore the Boating, Fishing, and other Outdoor Activities Available at Flathead Lake, MT](#)” by Pat Piper, Boat US Magazine, April 2014.

● **Article 2:** “[Red Lake Nation Takes Steps to Restore East Boundary of Upper Red Lake](#)” by Daltyn Lofstrom, The Bemidji Pioneer, March 2023.

This activity explores EUs 4 & 7 of OPI’s [Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians](#).



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POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

EXPLORING QUOTES & KEY IDEAS

"Good Mythology is so far-fetched that there's no way you could have made it up, so it has to come from somewhere... which makes it amazing."

– Jonathan Thunder [00:01:24-00:01:31]

"I never knew about the living, breathing, storytelling world that exists for the Anishinabe culture...that was something that I was introduced to in my artwork."

– Jonathan Thunder [00:02:09-00:02:23]

"...all culture (ya know) evolves and exists in contemporary time – which is what I'm interested in."

– Jonathan Thunder [00:12:49-00:12:54]

"Animation wasn't always friendly to cultures outside mainstream cultures."

– Jonathan Thunder [00:08:07-00:08:11]

"Paul Bunyan is, in my eyes, sort of this character that was created to make the land grab and resource grab that has happened historically in Minnesota – and displaced tribes – to make it look noble, to give it a noble face."

– Jonathan Thunder [00:04:30-00:04:44]

"It was almost like – through my artwork, I became a productive member of my tribe."

– Jonathan Thunder [00:02:24-00:02:30]

"There's a certain responsibility that I feel to say something about our time, not to say anything profound, to at least say this is how it was when I was here – hopefully that will leave a better place for my son to stand when he's my age... and all those building blocks will leave a much better place for his kids to stand."

– Jonathan Thunder [00:13:03-00:13:29]

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Film Still by Sergio Rapu
JONATHAN THUNDER, 2022



THE OJIBWE, LAKE SUPERIOR & MISHIPESHU

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - OJIBWE

- The name "Ojibwe" may be derived from the phrase ozhibii'iwe, meaning "those who keep records of a vision." In Lake Superior Provincial Park, white granite cliffs of Agawa Rock contain Indigenous archeological pictographs hundreds of years old, painted in animal fat and red hematite (iron-oxide) along the banks of Lake Superior. In Ojibwe, the place name where Agawa Rock is located is called Mazinaubikiniguning, which translates to "the adorned rock." (Osborne, 2020)

★ VIEWING ACTIVITY A - Reflect & Write ★

1. REVIEW the Quotes (pg 7) and Guiding Questions (pg 4).
2. READ the Lake Superior Provincial Park article on Agawa Rock.
3. Select one of the quotes from the film to focus on.
4. Select one of the questions from the Guiding Questions page to answer or use in an opening thesis statement.
5. WRITE a short essay exploring how Jonathan keeps, "records of a vision," and perpetuates his Ojibwe heritage and language.

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EXPLORING CONNECTIONS: OJIBWE, LAKE SUPERIOR & MISHIPESHU

LAKE SUPERIOR & MISHIPESHU

“Mishi Peshu is an Ojibwe water creature, also known as the underwater panther (or, ‘the Great Lynx’). The creature is also affiliated with the Algonquin, Ottawa, Menominee, Shawnee, and Cree tribes. Mishipeshu has many names and pronunciations: Mishibizhiw, Messibizi, Michipichi, Michipichik, Msipessi, Missibizi, Michi-Pichoux, Gichi-anami’e-bizhiw, Nampeshiu, and Nambiza.” In JONATHAN THUNDER, it is listed as Mishu Bizhiw.

Mishi Peshu dwells in the depths of Lake Superior, the largest of the Great Lakes. In terms of surface area, Lake Superior is the biggest lake in the world, holding more water than all four of the other Great Lake combined. Often referred to as an inland sea, the lake can produce waves over 9 m tall.”

“The water spirit travels through underwater tunnels, speaking in a roaring hiss that sounds like rushing water.... Some say Mishi Peshu has the head and paws of an enormous cat, the horns of a bison, the scaly body of a snake (or the feathered body of a bird), a spikey back and tail, and any other number of contrasting characteristics. Some say he is about the size of a lynx or mountain lion; others say he is unfathomably large. Mishipeshu is described as a cross between a cougar and a dragon, though descriptions vary. His shape is feline, and he is amphibious, but he is reptilian as well.” (Osborne, 2020)

☀ VIEWING ACTIVITY B - Reflect & Draw ☀

1. CREATE a drawing or painting of Mishi Peshu, the Ojibwe water creature, based on the descriptions above.
2. COMPARE with similar creatures from other cultures/places (such as the Loch Ness Monster (Scotland) or the Flathead Lake Monster (Montana).
3. DESIGN your own mythological creature/character from your cultural background that may be used to “teach” a lesson and answer one or two questions, i.e., why is this important and what purpose does it serve?
4. Include a written description of your creature and list why you chose to include certain characteristics and why it possesses the specific elements you chose.

SOURCE INFO:

*For more information, look into: Osborne, L. Oct. 16, 2020. [Meet Mishipeshu](#), the underwater panther in Lake Superior. Great Lakes Guide online.
URL: <https://greatlakes.guide/ideas/visit-the-agawa-pictographs-in-lake-superior-provincial>.

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EXPLORING CONNECTIONS: OJIBWE, LAKE SUPERIOR & MISHIPESHU

LAKE SUPERIOR & MISHIPESHU *Continued...*

☀ VIEWING ACTIVITY B - Example ☀

For example, Mishi Peshu wreaks havoc, is cunning and tricky, but can be helpful too. Some say he passes his time, “guarding copper on Michipicoten Island,” and that he is especially dangerous to children. (Osborne, 2020)

- Mishipeshu loses his temper
- Causes death and misfortune
- Creates violent, powerful storms
- Creates big waves, rapids, and whirlpools
- Breaks the winter ice, causing people to fall through and drown
- May allow safe passage over the lake if offerings of tobacco are made
- Brings medicines and healing
- Is considered a protector
- May grant a bountiful harvest of food from hunts or fishing

SOURCE INFO:

*For more information, look into: Osborne, L. Oct. 16, 2020. [Meet Mishipeshu](#), the underwater panther in Lake Superior. Great Lakes Guide online.
URL: <https://greatlakes.guide/ideas/visit-the-agawa-pictographs-in-lake-superior-provincial>.

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Film Still by Sergio Rapu
JONATHAN THUNDER, 2022

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✧ EXAMINING THE ARTWORK- Viewing Activity ✧

- 1. CONSIDER the name of Jonathan Thunder’s art installation featured in the film: ‘Manifest’o.’
- 2. MANIFEST’O - based on three stories that Jonathan heard in Northern Minnesota, which he wanted to adapt. This art installation includes:
 - a) Mishu Bizhiw Awakens
 - b) Supernaut Becomes the Water Lily
 - c) Gold Finch Courts the Leaves

The word “manifesto” is related to manifest – Something that is manifest is easy to perceive or recognize. A manifesto is typically a statement in which someone makes his or her intentions or views easy for people to discover.

- 1. Have a class discussion about why you think the artist chose “Manifest’o” for the name of his installation and where he gets his inspiration.
- 2. Does it communicate his heritage and/or values? How so?
- 3. Consider the titles and content of some of the other paintings in the film in relation to the following terms below:
 - CONNOTATION – inference (reasoning), suggestion
 - METAPHOR – representation, symbol, comparison
 - MYTH – legend, allegory (story), creation
 - MYTHOLOGY – tradition, folklore
 - VALIDATION – confirmation, justification, proof

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Double Entry Viewing Sheet

NOTICE	WONDER
Write down details, or quotes from the film that stand out to you. Who's being interviewed? Are there animations? Is this happening now or is it recounting something from the past?	What does this make you think? Write down observations, questions, or comments you might have related to what you wrote down in the NOTICE column.

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