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Through the woods

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“Through the Woods”

A Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letters
James Madison University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by Riley Joseph Hanlon

August 2014

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of SMAD, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts.

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

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Assistant Professor, SMAD

Barry Falk, Ph.D.,
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Reader: Meyers, Chris
Video Producer, University Marketing

Reader: Hinshaw, Joseph
Associate Professor, SMAD

Riley Hanlon

SMAD Honors Thesis

“Through the Woods”

Artist’s Statement

Documentaries are dangerous. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from this process, it’s that. I originally steered clear of making a narrative film for fear of not getting a perfect script, having trouble finding and dealing with actors, and too many other concerns out of my hand. I assumed heading down the documentary route left more creative control in my hands, and would be a more intimate and productive experience with just me and the runners. What I did not realize is that this connection with the runners and creative control I had led me to an obsession of coming up with the most perfect way to tell their stories, with endless revisions and additional shooting.

The process started simple-I found my runners and discussed plans for the project and found out enough about them to conduct an on-camera interview. For each of the 3 runners, I filmed a 30-60 minute interview, led by me, with 2 or 3 cameras. After extensively cutting and tweaking the interviews down to attempt to get each runner’s story out within three to five minutes, I started to film the runners in their process. I wanted to get the process as natural as possible, which led to multiple pre-sunrise shoots, or even shoots out on top of mountains.

I originally intended, and initially cut, the film to be a continuous ~15 minute film that intercut between all of the runners. With advice from my advisor (Shaun Wright) and one of my readers (Chris Meyers) I decided to split the film into three mini documentaries, highlighting each runner individually. I cut each film individually, found music, and colored and finalized each piece. They all came out as relatively strong individual pieces that I was proud of. There was something missing though. My advisor said I was not challenging my self enough through these stories-that I should go out and try a new approach.

After racking my brain of how to change or add to the films, I came up with the concept. I wanted to go lyrical; to find a visual and artistic way to show the story the runners were telling, without explicitly telling their story. I found the poem “The Way Through the Woods” by Rudyard Kipling, as read by Tom O’Bedlam, and knew that would be the poetic backing. I could use some of the running footage I already shot, but needed a good deal more content to make the video flow. Two more sunrises, an entire night of time lapses in DC, a day shooting an HVAC equipment testing facility, a night in an art studio, a night in a painted garage, and a waterfall later I had all the content I needed.

Editing was the best part. I simply followed the flow of the music and the poetry, trying to perpetuate the idea of humanism vs. technology and how the runners break from the structure. The piece took endless tweaking and painful amounts of color correction, given the massive variety of shoots. All in all, the 4 pieces back to back convey a lyrical and literal sense of what it is like to live as an Ultra Runner, and I am massively proud of the work that I have created. Enjoy!