

Mandy Henshaw

Kirmser Undergraduate Research

Reflective Essay

Indigenous Film: The Effect of Production Design

Film has always been an integral part of my life and fascinates me with its ability to create beautiful, impactful stories. As I progressed through the Interior Architecture Program at K-State, I started to notice how design influences every aspect of our lives, including film. I realized there is someone behind the scenes of every film designing the aesthetic, setting, props, and visuals that aid in the storytelling, which piqued my interest in production design. With this realization of film's significance in design, I decided to incorporate film into my studies by pursuing the Film Studies Certificate and enrolled in English 420 Indigenous Film in the spring semester of my sophomore year. I was initially apprehensive about taking a higher-level English course, but still enrolled, eager to learn more about Indigenous Film, wanting to challenge myself by expanding my knowledge on a topic I was unfamiliar with.

As a class we viewed a variety of movies, television shows, and short films. Something that left an impact on me from these forms of media was the production design. Once it was time to start working on our final projects my instructor, Dr. Tatonetti explained that we would create a research project in the form of a paper or propose an equivalent project idea, pertaining to a subject we learned during the course. I was nervous at first as I had never done a research project to this scale before. With everything I learned in my semesters prior, I was enthusiastic about using my abilities of model making to reflect my topic of choice. I proposed the idea to Dr. Tatonetti of a research paper on the importance and role of production design in Indigenous film and incorporate impactful designed elements of the media from the course into one diorama. She

was enthusiastic about the idea and provided constructive feedback and direction throughout the project's completion.

In class, we watched “*Reservation Dogs* Showrunner Sterlin Harjo Answers Our Burning Questions,” an interview with Sterlin Harjo, the award-winning Seminole and Muscogee Creek filmmaker, who is the co-creator and showrunner of the series. In this interview, he discussed the importance of choosing the correct location for the series and creating a sense of place.

Regarding a question on his decision to film the series in Oklahoma, he stated, “There is so much history of character...I had to shoot it here.” Harjo strongly believed that the location was essential to the character of the story, emphasizing that he would either rewrite the show or not make it at all if filming took place in another location. The concept of location and production design playing an important role in Indigenous media, specifically in *Reservation Dogs*, became the main focus of my research.

From this interview, I searched the internet for articles on the other design decisions of the series. The internet was important to use in addition to K-State Libraries’ resources given the show's current popularity. Using this resource, I found an interview with the production designer Brandon Tonner-Connolly. The article covered Harjo’s decision to film in Oklahoma and his collaboration with Tonner-Connolly to create sets that tell the story of the characters.

Moving forward with my research, I decided to use the databases provided by K-State Libraries. A research technique I used was applying a subject filter of art through the databases, helping me find O’Reilly for Higher Education. This database led me to my next source, *Shoot on Location*. The chapter, “Location as Characters” was particularly beneficial in backing up Harjo’s emphasis on the importance of filming in Oklahoma.

With the sources I compiled from class and research, I had a good start to my project on the importance of production in Indigenous film. As a non-native person, I wanted to ensure I had a variety of sources and information from professionals in the field, but was unsure how to move forward with my search. I then consulted Dr. Tatonetti. She pointed me in a new direction by advising me to look into Faye Ginsburg's work, an American anthropologist. Searching through K-State Libraries, I found Ginsburg's works discussing the role Indigenous media plays in self-representation which supported the claims I started to outline in my research plan. These sources were useful in providing information on the entire production of Indigenous media and led me to other Indigenous media referenced in the footnotes of Ginsburg's work.

At this point in the research process I created an annotated bibliography to summarize each source and how it would be useful to my final paper. This allowed me to organize my thoughts and format the research to begin creating my multimedia project.

The visual component, a diorama, was created to encompass important designed elements from the Indigenous media we watched throughout the semester. This material element reflects the knowledge I gained from my research and conveys the importance of production design in Indigenous media. The diorama is set in the abandoned building where the "Reservation Dogs" meet in the series. Within this location, I placed objects from other films such as the Buick Wildcat from *Powwow Highway*, the shared ashes in a coffee can and mason jar from *Smoke Signals*, a dandelion from *Rustic Oracle*, a broken rope from *Whale Rider*, and a sparkler from *Boy*. As an Interior Architecture student, I was able to use the College of Architecture, Planning and Design resources to make this diorama by modeling the 1964 Buick Wildcat in *Rhino7* which I cut out on the laser cutters in Seaton Hall. Using this tool, I enjoyed applying these architecture skills in my pursuits in film studies.

When Harjo stated, “I had to shoot it here,” he emphasized the integral role production has on Indigenous film. After hearing this interview, I knew I had to base my project on this concept. Being a non-native person researching production design in Indigenous film, it was important to do informed and ethical research. With the use of K-State Libraries’ resources, course materials, online research, and the guidance of my instructor, I developed my final project “Indigenous Film: The Effect of Production Design,” and in the process, I became confident and skilled at using the resources offered by K-State Libraries.



Indigenous Film:
The Effect of Production Design

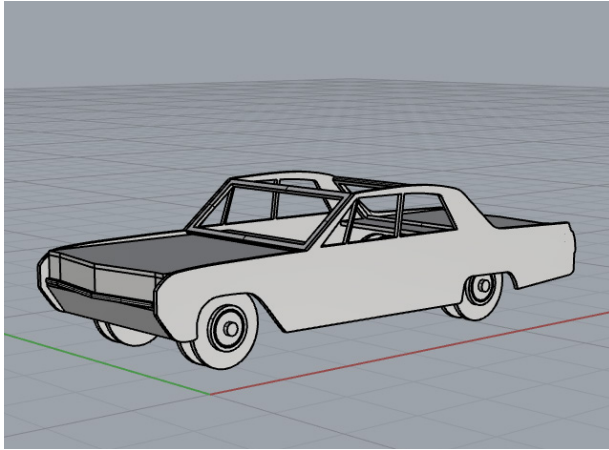
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Process

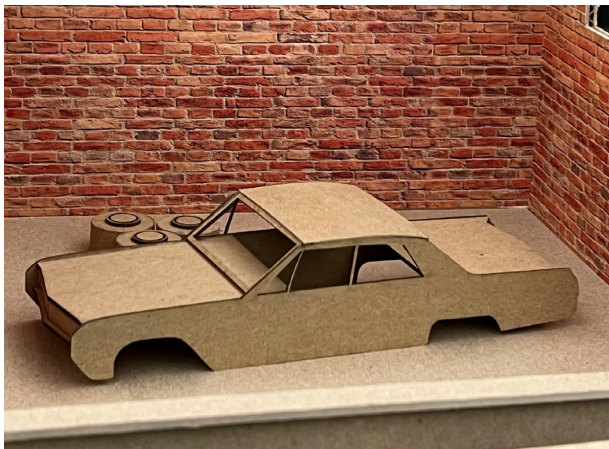
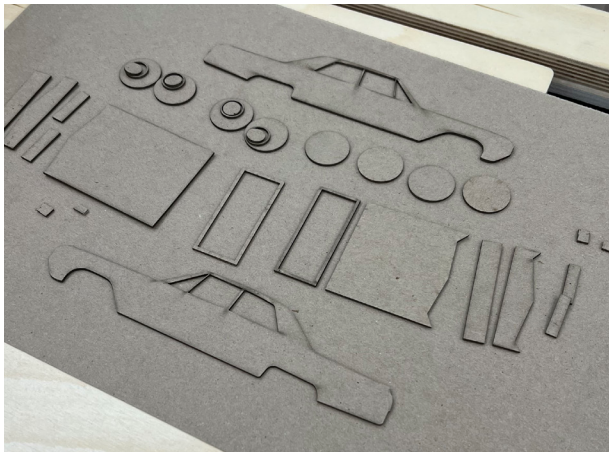
Reservation Dogs

Structure made of chip board finished with spackle, acrylic paint, blended turf, with addition of plywood and printed brick.



Powwow Highway

The 1964 Buick Wildcat was modeled in Rhino 7 as 2D pieces which were cut out using the APDesign laser cutter. Once the pieces were glued together, the car was painted using many layers of acrylic paint to achieve a rusted look.





Smoke Signals

Jars of shared ashes made of chip board, a small glass jar, paint, and flour.



Whale rider

Frayed rope made out of twine.



Boy

Sparkler made of a gold pipe cleaner and wire.



Rustic Oracle

Dandelion made of construction paper, wire, paint, and a cotton ball.



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Kirmser Undergraduate Research Source List

Indigenous Film: The Effect of Production Design

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