

## *The Burn*



Every summer, forest fires burn wildly across the mountains. As destructive as they are, they have a purpose and beauty that often goes unappreciated: When winter arrives in these charred forests, so do skiers. This short film produced by Salomon Freeski TV is the collaborative work of director Jeff Thomas and visual effects supervisor Blair Richmond. The film was shot over four seasons in British Columbia and used both CGI (computer-generated imagery) effects and stop-motion photography to create the stunning visuals throughout.

### **Discussing the Film:**

*The following questions are intended to be used post-film screening, to spark discussion and activities related to both the content and storytelling elements of this particular film.*

1. What were some of the most interesting images from the film *The Burn*? What do you remember most about the film?
2. How is narration used in the film to tell the story? Do you think it works? Why or why not?
3. The filmmakers used visual effects, or CGI (computer-generated imagery), to make it look like the forest is still burning. Why do you think they did that?
4. Do you think this film is more about forest fires or skiing? Explain using examples from the film.

5. *The Burn* deals with both the destructive nature and the necessity of forest fires in the natural cycle of a forest. Can you think of other natural processes, of both plants and animals, that are both destructive but necessary to life on this planet?
6. Pretend you are a director and Salomon has hired you to shoot their next film. What environment would you shoot, what themes would you use and what story would you most want to tell?

### **Extensions:**

1. In the film, they give the following statistic: "2012 was the second largest wildfire season on record in the United States with wildfires burning through more than 36,000 square kilometers of land." Go online and research the main causes of wildfires, how we can help prevent them and the most effective methods of fighting them.  
<http://www.dosomething.org/actnow/tipsandtools/11-facts-about-wildfire>
2. Invite a professional firefighter or ranger to visit your classroom to talk about their work, firefighting techniques and to answer students' questions.
3. Take the students into the forest to do free-writing exercises with them to discover the "narrative voice" of the forest.
4. Watch a short nature video with the sound off and have the students narrate as if they were speaking from the perspective of the natural environment or animals in the video.

## **Filmmaker Conversation:**

**Jeff Thomas (Director) and Blair Richmond (Visual Effects Supervisor) from *The Burn***

### **Where did you get the idea for *The Burn*?**

**Jeff:** For the last 10 years, I skied through multiple burn zones. It had a different kind of vibe than skiing in a normal forest. I wanted to tell the story of that burned forest, 'cause it felt like it was never fully dead.

**Blair:** That's really our process. It starts from a single idea and grows and grows. We sit and talk and brainstorm. For *The Burn*, we knew that we needed to focus on the forest, and not the skiers. The forest is always around them. It's always there. The forest plays as much of a role as the skiers do in the film. It's such a positive process, because it's a group effort. You need that. The ability to step away and think about the process from multiple angles.

### **Had you done this type of visual effects before?**

**Jeff:** Initially, when I was talking about the idea, it was going to be a four-season cycle. Blair came up with the embers burning. I thought a great way to portray that original idea I had when skiing in the forest. Never fully dead, never fully out.

**Blair:** I had done film work before where I created this burn effect for another project I was working on. It was a perfect opportunity to compliment Jeff's idea and it really turned it into a living thing. It's not just a regular forest. Something happened here.

### **Did you face any challenges? What was the filming process like?**

**Jeff:** It took a while to film, but it was pretty smooth. We shot the skiing scenes at Monashee Powder Caps in British Columbia. We just went there and happened to have really great snow. Then we had to gather some burn footage from friends and wait till spring to set up those time-lapse shots of tree growing. The editing was less streamlined. We had the whole thing laid out and then we added the CGI (computer-generated imagery) visual effects piece-by-piece.

**Blair:** Most people don't know this, but most CGI effects you see — the burn shots in our case — are added when the film is almost completely edited. The reason for this is time. Visual effects are done by shot-by-shot basis. Shots can run anywhere from 2 to 10 seconds long and include hundreds of frames. On *The Burn*, I would work on a single shot anywhere from a couple hours to a couple days. Jeff had to get the edit 75% of the way done. That's the same process that works with Hollywood filmmaking. If you see a trailer for a big budget movie like *Transformers*, their visual effects are only halfway done. It's kind of the only way you can do it efficiently.

### **That seems complicated. What are some specific techniques you deal with in visual effects?**

**Blair:** With visual effects, especially in sports movies, you have to deal with things like "tracking" and "masking." Any time there is motion in the shot or the camera is panning or tilting, you have to match that movement perfectly with the visual effects, frame by frame — that's tracking.

For more information on the film, the filmmakers, or to see other tour destinations and films, visit [www.mountainfilm.org](http://www.mountainfilm.org)

Masking is a technique where you have to cut out something in the image. Like when you see a rider skiing through fake smoke in *The Burn*, we had to cut out that smoke based on the rider's shape. We then had to create "masks" of that smoke to match that rider's shape and overlap them to make it look real. It seems tedious, but if you think about it like solving a problem, it makes a lot of sense.

**What is the narration in the film supposed to represent?**

**Jeff:** It's really the voice of the forest. The four paragraphs represent the four seasons. I saw an episode of National Geographic and wanted the narration to be simple but effective. I came up with cryptic lines mostly by myself, thinking on long rides or hikes in the forest. The first line I remember looking around and thinking I was in a "kingdom," which became part of that opening line in the film. Originally it wasn't even part of the film!

**Do you think the film is successful? What do you hope your audience will take from it?**

**Jeff:** We just want people to like it. When we showed it to people, they seemed to understand the story we wanted to tell. Visually it came out better than we could've expected, especially with the snow we had in B.C. It was one of our biggest episodes last year and we've been asked for it a lot by film festivals and individuals mostly because of its online presence.

**What piece of advice would you give to a student who wants to get into filmmaking?**

**Jeff:** I was in grade 9 or 10 when I started. When I graduated high school I knew I wanted to go to film school and I eventually ended up there. I was really passionate about it and was also trying to be a pro skier, so I made a lot of connections that way. I would make films and keep hassling all my pro skier friends to be in them. Then I got as many people to see it as possible. People will give you great feedback and that really kept me going. I've seen quite a few people come and go from this business. Having a good attitude and working hard is really the key.

**Blair:** Do it if you're passionate about it. Success will come through your passion. Film what you know. Seize opportunities when they're there, even if you're scared. Meet people doing the same thing you're doing and don't be afraid to show what you've done. A lot of people think that their work is terrible, but you always have room to get better.