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## Rooftop

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**Underground movies outdoors.**

## ROOFTOP FILMS @ SUNDANCE: O'ER THE LAND (REVIEW)

By Rooftop Films on 01/19/2009

Filed under: [Documentary](#), [Environmental Films](#), [Rooftop News](#)



Deborah Stratman's film [O'er the Land](#) is not likely to get a multi-million dollar deal out of Sundance. There is no hot-button issue, no unbelievable scenario, no celebrities, crazy characters, or even much dialogue at all. But to me, this is the type of film I'm most pleased to see at Sundance, the type of film that keeps festivals vital. Stratman's experimental documentary explores America's relationship to nature, technology and violence in a way that is smart, poetic and darkly humorous.

At the start of the film, man drifts fleetingly through the landscape. A static shot of the woods is pierced by a small wash of men in Revolutionary War costumes. They are

dangerously invasive, exuding a minor negative energy, but they also appear slight, and the woods seem to close in behind them, to swallow them up. The fact that the camera never moves creates a sense that the woods are vast, thick, and imperturbable. But a small puff of gun smoke from off screen (evoking Bunuel's [Land Without Bread](#)) begins to hint at man's destructive force.

From there, man intrudes more and more on nature's domain -- RV farms ("Now 30 Acres!" the night sign proudly proclaims), isolated desert fire-fighting trucks (why?), birds in cages being recorded for unknown audio recreations (couldn't we just listen to them in their natural habitat? Or do we claim that this imprisonment is somehow for the betterment of their species?) A beat-up truck ridiculously tugs tires through the desert dust to help "tracking sign" on the US-Mexico border, where one set of people patrol the barren and deadly wasteland to keep another set of people out. The deftly framed and edited images provide an eerie amusement that I personally found disturbingly laugh-out-loud funny.

The mostly wordless film is then pierced by the story of an Air Force pilot who was forced to eject from his plane at 48,000 feet, wearing nothing more than lightweight cotton flightsuit. The temperature was -70 degrees, and immediately his body was burned by the cold. He was traveling at such speed that he couldn't tuck his arms or legs in, and was spun wildly. He noticed that there was blood on his hands, and only later learned that the lack of air pressure was causing him to bleed out the ears and eyes. When finally he dropped to 10,000 feet, his parachute deployed, but he was dropped into a vicious thunderstorm that tossed him up and down for another 30 minutes. Amazingly, he eventually crashed into a pine forest, and walked to a logging road.

The message seems startlingly clear: for all our technology, nature will not easily be conquered. But god knows Americans will try. The final sequences include a large rural gun show, a massive display of amateurs playing with professional firepower. Uzis, flamethrowers and Gatling guns, shot off by motley packs of coldly unenthusiastic enthusiasts. The devastated landscape that they leave behind would be described as other-worldly if it wasn't simultaneously (sadly) so familiar from footage we've all seen of wars, mines, and other scenes of man-made environmental terror. Yet for such a serious and challenging film, *O'er the Land* (of the free, and the home of the brave) is startlingly invigorating and enjoyable, and I highly recommend it.

- Mark Elijah Rosenberg, Founder & Artistic Director of Rooftop Films