

Snow falling on
cedars and miss
smilla's feeling for
snow



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Both Scott Hicks's film *Snow Falling on Cedars* and Peter Hoeg's novel *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* create images of natural beauty and purity and also of power and destruction with the same motif: snow. The snow obviously shapes Smilla's world in a very conscious way, it is her ally in her struggle; whilst Ishmael's world is under attack literally and symbolically from this powerful natural force. The flickering lights of the courthouse capture the fragility of human reason and decency as the snow beats against the roof.

Yet in both endings the snow comes to represent freshness and purity, and it is through the stories of Smilla and Ishmael that Hoeg and Hicks explore this transition. The snow falling in Smilla's world is quiet, large, light and magical and the fog obscuring Karl's world, possesses an equally mysterious quality. From these points of departure, both Hoeg's novel and Hicks's film begin to create worlds characterised and shaped by formidable weather. Both stories are powerfully conveyed by the vivid imagery of their settings.

Hoeg opens his novel with a powerful prologue, set at a funeral; Smilla instantly informs us that weather, the seemingly limitless "December darkness", has influenced her mood. Smilla's connection with her environment is stressed throughout the novel and is strikingly apparent in the conclusion. She is left alone on a pure-white glacier, in the freshly fallen snow. The natural order has returned, inviting her to a new beginning. Ishmael's journey also concludes with falling snow, he walks away as the snow falls gently around him, the storm has been confronted and he survives, he walks away a free man.

Hoeg begins his novel with explicitly detailed descriptions of Smilla's surroundings. The language effectively captures the play of light off the snow, the freshness in the air, the coldness of death is observed ironically with the funeral for the boy, " who will never again feel the cold. " 1 This description then leads into Smilla's reading of Euclid's Elements which further establishes Smilla's affinity with the natural world and galvanises an image of Smilla as a natural ice-queen in the heated hustle and bustle of the modern world.

This juxtaposition of elemental images is also used effectively in Snow Falling on Cedars to define the world of San Pietro. The strong natural emphasis in the wording of the title Snow Falling on Cedars establishes the fact that nature and natural events will be vital to the story. Most obviously the opening credits draw the viewers' attention to the power of nature, present in the fog and the power of accident.

The cut from this surreal green fog to a beautiful snow storm hanging over the deep-rooted and strong Cedar trees establishes the theme of the film in revealing that the resilient Japanese community (and the broader American society) is under threat from this natural, but disastrous menace of racial prejudice. This understanding of the elements is pivotal in Smilla's and the reader's unravelling of the mystery: the real story begins when Smilla takes one look at the snow on the rooftop and instantly is aware of an unnatural occurrence.

Smilla's meandering path toward the truth highlights to the reader the inexplicable and random course of events that make up our world. Smilla

interprets her world through snow, it is her maths and it is her religion. In snow, Smilla discovers a clash of past and present and a sense of purpose, she uses snow to read people, places and events and Hoeg reveals this intuition in stark contrast with other characters who rely on religion or the fire of ambition.

Hoeg's references throughout the novel to religion and maths (Smilla constantly refers to "irrational number systems" 2) reveals an idea of a search for "truth" in life, not simply in the hunt for Isaiah's murderer, but in a broader philosophical consideration of the meaning of life. The apparent randomness of human existence is similarly present in Hicks's film, most powerfully and explicitly expressed by the line of the wise defence lawyer, Nels, after Ishmael's pivotal decision, "accident rules every corner of the universe, except, perhaps, the chambers of the human heart.

This is implicitly reinforced by the randomness of events; the freighter passing as Karl climbs the mast, Ishmael stumbling across the all-important radio records, and broadly World War Two, the enormous unnatural storm that cataclysmically reshapes the world of San Pietro. The use of memory to frame the present is crucial in *Snow Falling on Cedars*, in which the chronological is replaced by the emotional logic of Ishmael. Hicks cuts from scene to scene with apparent randomness; the typewriter inspires Ishmael's memory of the war, his father's spectacles reminds him of the strawberry princess parade.

The images within the flashbacks are often spasmodic and quickly spliced; the flashes of children, the waves, the dead fish and a sensually bitten

strawberry powerfully imply the loss of innocence in the relationship of Ishmael and Hatsue as it becomes sexual. The fact that the cuts appear arbitrary and the scenes they lead to and from almost disconnected is Hicks recreating human memory, which follows a different pace to time.

Sometimes fast sometimes lingering, the film, in contrast to Hoeg's novel, is driven not by facts but feelings. Ice and cold shape Smilla's world, her view of the world, but also the reader's view of Smilla.

The connection with snow inherently shapes Smilla with adjectives such as inhospitable, uninviting, enchanting and unique. Hoeg gives Smilla's voice a clinical tone, which is first apparent in the description of Smilla's father's life which lacks any emotional attachment. " He earned his money giving injections. " 3 is Smilla's simple and precise assessment, she has the voice of a private eye in an old noir film. The faceted image that Hoeg creates of Smilla is of an isolated and uninviting protagonist who is imbued with a natural but unusual, enchanting quality (remarkably similar to snow).

Hicks uses cinematographic techniques to separate Ishmael from his society. He positions Ishmael behind the bars of the courthouse balcony for the majority of trial. This shot implies not only his isolation but also his confinement in his past, which is further supported by the use of cuts which repeatedly return from flashbacks to this image. This technique denotes Ishmael's oppression by his past and by his relationships with those around him. The constant references to his father and Nels' comment that he's " starting to sound a bit like your father" 4.

After Ishmael frees Kazuku, confirms that Ishmael had been struggling with his relationship with his father and that his discomfort with his past was isolating Ishmael in the present, just as the islanders' preoccupation with Pearl Harbour was hindering their development as a community. Memories of natural images and particularly personal experiences of nature are used by both author and director to explain their protagonists' isolation. Ishmael discovers a dead red-snapper (the Japanese symbol for auspicious and fortunate society) on the beach, an image which graphically foreshadows the war scenes to follow.

Similarly Hoeg fittingly describes Smilla's past through a Greenlandic myth. This myth incorporates Smilla's connection with the elements as well as her understanding of the role of the sexes; this reliance on myth is incongruous with Smilla's otherwise logical personality. Thus, Hoeg conveys that Smilla has a connection to the past which is similar to Ishmael's. In contrast to the snow imagery, fire and warmth, are used by both Hoeg and Hicks to illustrate passion and destruction in their characters' worlds.

Whilst Smilla is inherently characterised by the qualities of snow, her memories also connect her mother with the snow and ice of their surroundings, conversely her father has a driving ambition, "the eternal flame of the alchemist" 5, a fiery man determined to overcome nature (he is a doctor) rather than coexist with it. The characters evoked in Smilla's flashbacks are briefly and blandly pictured, strongly contrasting with the minutely detailed settings and emotions. Rarely does Hoeg use emotive language in his descriptions, the language lacks exaggeration or colour, it is clinical.

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Ishmael's flashbacks are strikingly different; they are fuelled by the warmth of human emotion and connection. The majority of flashbacks in the film explore Hatsue's and Ishmael's past relationship. Hicks uses close-ups of smiling faces and a fuzzy filter as well as sound-bites carrying over from one scene to another, to give the memories a warmth and a connection to the present. Fire is a repeated image during the war scenes and is used by Hicks to convey an important aspect of the story: Ishmael's personal struggle.

Flashes of fire, bubbling water, noise and flickering light are used to depict war, it is not excessive war machinery or blood, but images of Ishmael that we see. This reinforces the idea of Ishmael's personal struggle rather than an archetypal war-scene. Ishmael and Smilla are similar in that they both are isolated within their societies and also from their audiences. Hoeg filters information in terms of snow and rational science, the references that Smilla uses to classify all occurrences in her world.

Whereas Hicks creates the viewers' empathy for Ishmael by using the warmth of his memories to explain Ishmael's actions. Smilla is also isolated within her society but she possesses an inner-peace that Ishmael lacks. Smilla cannot connect with the world around her because she is too busy moving, whilst Ishmael cannot connect because he remains trapped in the circumstances of his past. The key to both stories is the notion of truth. At one level it is the answer to the murder-mystery at the core of each plot but both Ishmael and Smilla strive for a more spiritual truth.

Hoeg displays the truth of others, of religion and science to begin Smilla's journey. Throughout, Smilla attempts to use science and maths to describe

the inexplicable complexities of the snowflake. These attempts fail but the reader is given a clue to the puzzle. Smilla wittily replies in an argument over religion that snow is “ a symbol of the light of truth. As in Revelations. ‘ His raiment was white as snow’ “ 6. This motif of the light of truth is also used by Hicks, first in the lighthouse scene; the light pierces the darkness and brings a literal truth to Ishmael.

Consistent in the courthouse scenes, which suffer flickering lights, representing the precarious position of “ truth”, within this hostile environment, the cuts from the courthouse to snow-covered cedars reinforces the fragility of human institutions. The lights fail but are eventually restored, and justice is returned to the community. Like Smilla, Ishmael clings to the factual truth as much as he can. This is apparent in his confrontation with his mother early in the film; she scolds him for believing that the facts point toward Kazuku being guilty: ““ Besides you can’t depend on facts, not by themselves.

‘ What else is there? Emotions? Facts you can cling to, emotions just float away. ’” 7 This conversation reiterates the importance of emotional truth in Hicks’s story, even if Ishmael denies it. Later in the film Hatsue rebuts an attack from the prosecutor Hooks, saying that: “ Trials aren’t always about truth, Mr. Hooks. Even if they should be. “ 7 Hoeg and Hicks use deeply embedded motifs to develop the exploration of truth which is vital to both stories. The layered and increasing importance of these motifs as the stories progress, sustains the characters’ reality.

The delayed impact of these motifs, due to their intrinsic connection with the narrative, furthers the author's and director's formation of theme and its relevance to the reader or viewer. Connecting the imagery directly with the plot, Hoeg and Hicks implicitly shape their readers'/viewers' understanding of their natural yet human worlds. Ishmael's world ends covered in the truth as white as the snow in Smilla's biblical allusion, whilst Smilla ends alone in the pure white, fresh snow. She faces a new beginning and with it the knowledge that there is no single truth and therefore no certainty in beginning or conclusion.