

Calgary Society of Independent Filmmakers Co-operative presents

Screening from the CSIF collection: Tuesday August 11, 2009 curated by Gerald Saul

Finding the Cannibal Within: a headhunter's guide to modern times

Borneo: The Land of the Head Hunters directed by Carl Lumholtz 1915 and The Land of Mystery and Charm directed by Francis Hotham 1937 (?), compiled 1980 (77 minutes)

Cannibal Tours directed by Dennis O'Rourke 1987 (25 minutes)

The films I selected for this program were grabbed initially off of the archive shelf for their lurid titles. I have watched a number of similar "exotic" documentaries in the past and have always found them to be painfully amusing in their outdated representations of non-European peoples living in less-technologically developed environments. I have found there to be a prevalence of white superiority throughout this documentary genre, both through the actions of the people on screen as well as the scientific or adventure narrative added on top of the images. However, this was not what I discovered with these films. To my delight, even though the films are each highly constructed and hide multiple meanings behind a veil of lies, they do break that mould.

The earlier film is actually a composite of two films, tied together with segues of an on-screen narrator. Borneo: The Land of the Head Hunters by Carl Lumholtz is originally a 1915 silent film and features what they claim are the first motion picture images ever taken in Borneo. The tone of the voice-over included with this film suggests that it part of the original project but due to the dates of creation, the narrative is obviously added decades later. The original narration, in the form of title cards, has been left in place giving the viewer two simultaneous viewpoints. This film, while picturesque, is edited in a primitive style, even for its day. Single static shots are intercut with titles with no attempt at constructing a visual narrative or a continuity of action. The voice-over is only added over the images and not over the existing titles to relieve the audience and to minimize our awareness of the subtle contradictions between the two. With most images shot from a wide point of view, we are reliant on these narrative layers to aid us in interpreting the film. The relative level of truth of the narratives seems high; no extreme stories are told. We are told that this is a scientific exploration and that the head hunters pictured are putting on a performance in honour of the visitors. The scientists seem to be more guests and tourists than real anthropologists as we are reassured of the safety of the film crew and, above all, of the safety of the world. With all of its dangerous past, Borneo seems now to be as safe as any tourist destination.

The second half of this film is originally from around 1937 and is a travelogue of China by "filmmaker and traveller" Francis Hotham entitled The Land of Mystery and Charm. Again, this film is not highly politically incorrect but rather is the creation of a well meaning talented outsider. Stylistically, the film is quite nicely made with well composed cinematography and carefully paced editing. When she sticks to it being a visual study, the film is strong and enjoyable. The voice-over that Hotham presents is didactic, telling us what we are looking at in much the same way as the previous film. The music she selected to correspond to the images is entirely western (classical and jazz), giving the western viewer a level of comfort while facing the unfamiliar. Hotham rarely express opinions and is (thankfully) relatively non-judgemental. Her tourist standpoint is honest but certainly superficial. I was interested in her description of the use of time by the Chinese

people. She once states that "time is of no consequence, but money is". These sorts of observations illustrate the limitations of creating documentaries from the tourist perspective.

The 1980 narrator who ties these two old films together only problematizes the project further. Sitting on a throne, he is the personification of white European arrogance. While the films contained white people voicing opinions in the background, he reinforces the certainty that this is a film by and for white people.

The other film I am presenting is the 1987 Cannibal Tours by Australian director Dennis O'Rourke. This film avoids the mistakes of his predecessors who had attempted to make the exotic places and people their subject matter. Instead, he wisely turned the camera around and made a film about what he knew, his own culture. Cannibal Tours is less about cannibals than it is about tours. In a way that is usually reserved for satirists, O'Rourke turns the tables on situation and has us gawking and shaking our heads in disbelief at the swarms of presumptuous camera obsessed Westerners and their ridiculous ideas. Ironically, it is the "primitive" New Guinea aboriginals who are conscious of the image they present to the camera and it is the civilized westerners who seem apt to display their foolish sides. Similar to the older films, the tourists continue to be well meaning and open minded, within their own limits. This time though, it is no longer their point of view that is being expressed. O'Rourke takes the cameras to the subjects of the tourism, the so-called cannibals, and interviews them in their own language about their history, their current conditions, and their opinions of the tourists. They are either perplexed, angry, or ashamed at the state of things. In one poignant moment, a young, handsome, shirtless aboriginal man poses for photographs and is handed a coin by a delighted white woman. The interviewer asks if it is difficult to earn a dollar. With downcast eyes, this viral young man who may have been a leader or warrior in another time, simply murmurs "yes". With no non-diegetic voice-over, this film essay is a powerful critique of previous films of this genre as well as of the whole history of colonialism, capitalism, and tourism. Profound, absurd, and melancholy, Cannibal Tours redefines the travelogue.

Gerald Saul is a professor of film and video production at the University of Regina Department of Media Production and Studies. He is also a prolific experimental filmmaker and a long time member of the Saskatchewan Filmpool Co-operative.