

Defining Defying Extinction

"Defying Extinction": 16mm, 52 minutes, colour and black&white, positive and negative

Directed by Rania Al Harthi, An An, Dianne Ouellette, Gerald Saul and Ken Wilson

At the University of Regina, Department of Film. Featuring Caleb Andrews and William Bessai-Saul

Preview screening, Friday June 19, 2015, YAAG Outdoor Annex, 2261 Argyle St., Regina, Canada.

"...if the Dinosaur did not exist, we would have invented him. In fact, we have invented him as the most spectacular animal image of the modern era. When Foucault wondered what would take the place of the Age of Man, he probably didn't suspect that it would be the Age of the Dinosaur."

- W.J.T. Mitchell The Last Dinosaur Book

Rania Al Harthi

Long live film...long live dinosaurs..

Going back in time is a characteristic of Analog film processing. As a filmmaker, you deliberately cease from using digital solutions and immerse yourself in the magical possibilities of chemicals, light, shutter speed, and accidental solarization. Every time we have entered the darkroom we were saying *NO* to the death of film. Every roll of film that we have processed contained a message against extinction. Film is alive and so are dinosaurs.

An An

Perform as a dinosaur.

How can we perform as dinosaurs? In the very beginning, we should figure out what kinds of dinosaurs we want to be? Some of us may want to act as dinosaurs in the Jurassic Park. Some of us want to become dinosaurs from documentaries on Discovery Channel or museums. No matter where those dinosaurs come from, they all come from our memories when we start our performance. According to Brain Smith, the past is a concept originating from our memory-experiences, not vice versa. In fact, dinosaurs had been extinct 66 million years ago. Further, the modern human appeared around 200 thousands years ago. In other words, nobody has experienced periods of dinosaurs. So, in our life, there must be a moment that we were told those enormous creatures in Jurassic Park or TV shows are dinosaurs, then we believed and remembered. However, even pictures and images of dinosaurs we see in science museums are scientists' imaginations that based on skeletons of dinosaurs. Nobody knows what kind of skins or eyeballs dinosaurs should have. So, we do not perform as a real dinosaur, but a creature that we believe is a dinosaur. When we attempt to perform as dinosaurs, the performance includes our own emotions or experiences. Thus, in films, we are not performing as dinosaurs. We are just wearing a strange mask and showing the other aspect of ourselves.

Dianne Ouellette

As the dinosaurs once roamed the earth millions of years ago they slowly became one with the earth as they became extinct. Presently, as archaeologists uncover dinosaur bones, they are pieced together. Scientists reconstruct the bones of the long gone creatures. Filmmakers take these reconstructed dinosaur skeletons and create life---like dinosaurs in movies for the world to see. Hence, dinosaurs have defied extinction through the eyes and hearts of filmmakers. Analog filmmaking is slowly being phased out in the world today. There are many filmmakers who are holding onto analog filmmaking and continue to work in this process, but in time it may become extinct. Analog filmmaking, like the dinosaurs, can defy extinction because some filmmakers will pass on their knowledge and continue to keep it alive. Although, if someday analog filmmaking does fade away to extinction then someone, somewhere in the future will dig up a can of film and figure out how to bring it back to life and maybe, just maybe, the roll of film will have a dinosaur mowing the grass on it. Dinosaurs, like analog filmmaking will forever defy extinction for as long as they both live in the hearts of people.

Ken Wilson

People have a hard time believing that I'm taking a course in which we shoot film and process the results in a darkroom. "Oh, it's all digital now, isn't it?" they ask. It's a reasonable question. Chemical photography has almost entirely been supplanted by digital imaging. Just last week, the camera sales and film processing chain Black's announced it was closing. Old-fashioned film cameras (and the stores that sell them and process the prints) just can't compete with cameras in smart phones and other devices. If that's true of still photography, it's even more true about moving images. Why would anyone want to wind a Bolex when they could play with a GoPro? Why bother with the expense of film when video is cheaper and more immediate? Is film inevitably going to become extinct, like the dinosaurs? Sure, you can still buy the cameras, but the other gear we've been using is as old as I am, and the whole enterprise seems to depend on the willingness of a handful of companies (primarily Kodak) to continue manufacturing film stock and chemistry.

Yet there's something about film as a medium that digital imaging doesn't have: it's tangible. You can touch it. You can process it yourself and experience the strange randomness of chemistry and light working together (or, sometimes, at cross-purposes). There is room for happy accidents (or unfortunate disasters). The lack of immediacy, the fact that you can't see what you've shot until after it's been processed, adds to the magic of film. You have to hope you got the exposure right, that you chose the right lens and filmed your subject from the best angle. The anxiety is part of the process. It's tricky and scary and complicated and wonderful. Let's hope this dinosaur medium has many years left.

Gerald Saul

Sixty million years ago, when an asteroid smashed into our planet, it created unprecedented turmoil and led to the death of the dinosaur species. It was not progress, it was not evolution, and it was not inevitable. It was a random event. The asteroid had no intent; it was just doing what asteroids do. So too has digital technology devastated the two centuries of emulsion based media. As Ken Wilson points out, digital media is so predominant that it has quickly become the default tool for every communication situation. But unlike the dinosaurs, old media was not immediately overcome. It clings to its uniqueness with champions around the globe. No longer supported by big industry, film artists conceive of a myriad of ways to continue their filmmaking practices. As we see in almost every Hollywood movie, filmmakers are obsessed with positioning the underdog as the inevitable winner. In only a few short years, analog film has switched places from being Goliath to being the sling swinging Davey. We look to rewrite history and make analog film the misunderstood future king of the media, rather than the doomed dinosaur. As An An suggests, we are willing to alter our memories of extinction to the point of identifying with the dinosaur, walking in its shoes. We want to be the dinosaur because it can never die. As Rania Al Harthi observes, filmmakers are inclined to believe in magic and the emulsion of the film is the fairy dust of this illusion. Dianne Ouellette outlines the role that filmmakers have had in presenting the dinosaur, making them more the child of entertainment than of science. If life were a Hollywood movie, analog film would be resurrected from the ashes (or from a piece of amber) and would once again dominate the world. But dinosaurs are not coming back, nor is analog film. It is quickly and silently slipping from our grasp and we must appreciate it while we still can, to remember it and to remember why it was important to us. We make films to remember and to be remembered. I take WJT Mitchell's claim to heart, that we would likely create dinosaurs even if they didn't exist. They are as true to us as mermaids and unicorns and dragons. They are the stuff legends are made of and as filmmakers, we need to tell legends and place ourselves in the middle of our own stories.