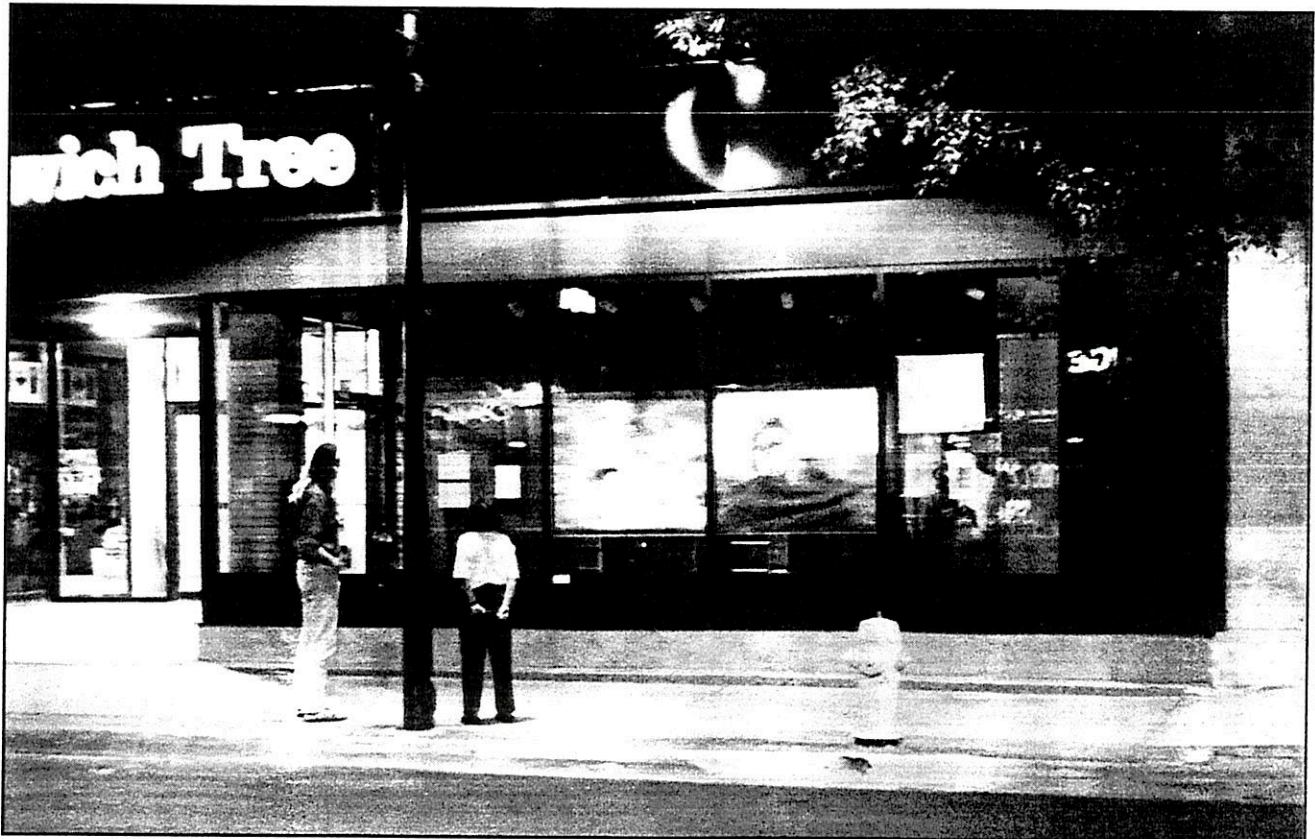


Projected Value

by Philippe Mather

It is a commonplace to state that one function of the avant-garde is to reflect on the nature of the expressive medium, to refer to its own material basis as a means of transcending the illusionism of the dominant narrative forms. Avant-garde or experimental cinema thus

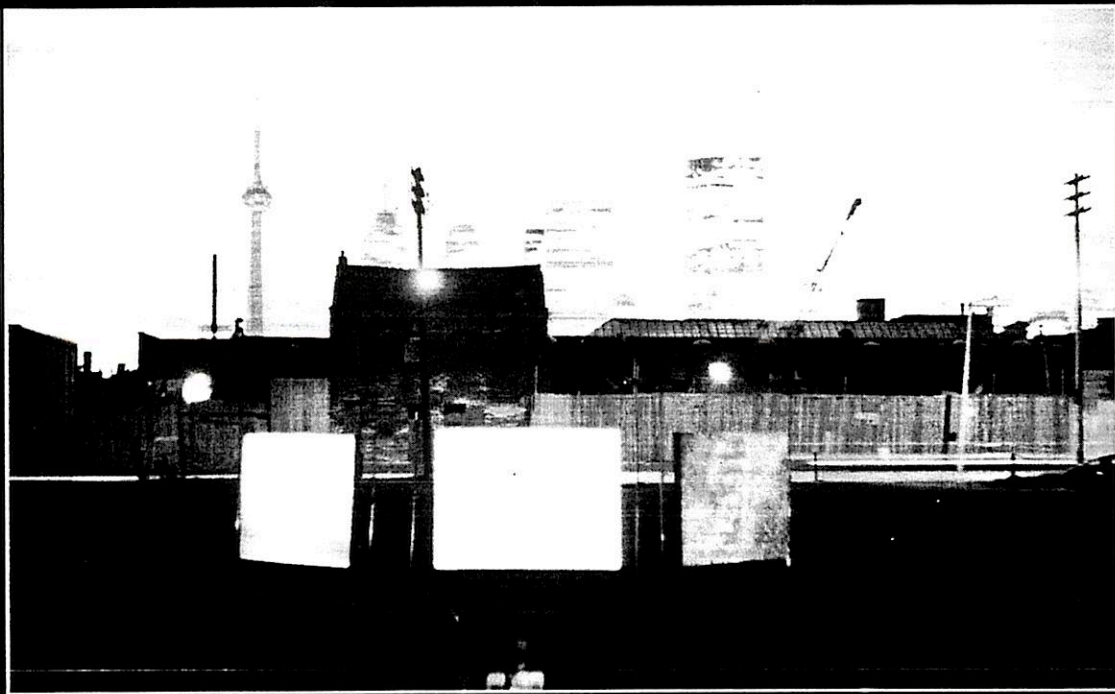


Gerald Saul's "Persistent Visions". Photo by Charlie Fox

adopts an oppositional stance which is meant to question what the limits of film are, in terms of form, content and reception. But this ontological reflexivity has an intellectual dimension which tends to isolate the avant-garde from the general public. As a result, the screening of experimental films is often limited to universities and museums, conservative institutions that ultimately serve to contain the aesthetically radical aspects of the avant-garde.

Conscious of this paradox, Saskatchewan filmmaker Brett Bell organized a special exhibition of experimental films this past July for the artist-run gallery Neutral Ground. Entitled "Projected Value: a satellite space experimental film project", this film installation series featured the work of Regina's Gerald Saul and Toronto-based filmmaker Mark Wihak. Both installations used film loops, as well as "satellite spaces" (i.e. alternative or non-conventional locations for the screenings) but each installation offered a different reflection on viewing contexts and habits.

Mark Wihak's "The Interstitial Zone" consisted of three loops projected on translucent screens, a triptych with the two end screens set at an angle so that the spectator's field of vision would be completely filled. Each loop contained an original image, and shared a common one with the two other loops. The original images were extreme close-ups of water, clouds and



"The Interstitial Zone" in one of its seven outdoor Toronto venues, following its appearance in Regina Photo by Mark Wihak

leaves, and as the loops varied in length from 35 to 60 seconds, the common image would periodically end up "in sync" on the three screens. This installation was set up inside the old Mappin's Jewellers on Hamilton Street. The imagery of Saskatchewan's natural environment contrasted with its setting, the abandoned store as a symbol of urban decay which was being "recycled" or taken over by art and nature. The salvaging or transformation of the store into a film viewing area offered an unusual, non-institutional context in which passers-by could spend a few minutes contemplating the cyclical imagery, which in some respects recalled the turn-of-the-century nickelodeon storefronts with their film loop kinetoscopes.

Gerald Saul's "Persistent Visions" ran from dusk until midnight, consisting of two film loops projected from inside the old Sutherland Books onto the abandoned store's front

window, so that passers-by might look at experimental art from the sidewalk. Not having to enter an enclosed space further removed this installation from the more conventional museum setting. An additional non-conformist element was the ephemeral nature of Saul's film loops. One of them was made up of three 10 to 30 second images selected from the filmmaker's collection of found or original footage, and the other loop was an equally short hand-drawn film. These loops ran continuously for three hours, with the result that the film was completely worn out by the end of the evening. Each time the cycle was repeated, the film was slightly different, a bit more more scratched and damaged than the previous time. In that sense, "Persistent Visions" was an ironic (and thus reflexive) title for an installation which was a one-



Frame enlargement from "Persistent Visions"

time only performance by the film projector, given that different loops were shown each evening due to the wearing-out process.

Avant-garde films tend to be radical only from a formal or textual point of view, with images that call attention to their status as images rather than being conveyors of a fictional narrative. But they are often not as radical from a contextual perspective, as the avant-garde institution provides a ready-made environment for viewing and interpreting these supposedly alternative works. Also, the artwork remains a circumscribed, finite object which can be viewed repeatedly, just like any "highbrow" or "lowbrow" cultural artifact.

As two distinct film installations, "Projected Value" served to highlight the

possibility of "democratizing" the reception of avant-garde film by taking it into the streets, so to speak, by breaking or at least changing the institutional context in which these artworks are read. It also made for a more casual, less text-bound viewing experience as the films had a short life-span, from a material perspective. The importance of documenting these events, however, both in written and visual forms — as Gerald Saul pointed out in his article for the Filmpool's 20th Anniversary edition of *Splice* — becomes all the more essential. 5