

Art and Outrage: the films of Ian Toews

Over the past decade, Ian Toews has created an impressive body of work which explores landscape, art, and American politics, using a sophisticated set of experimental film approaches. In viewing Toews's films, a spectator is continuously aware of the act of watching and of the constructed nature of these films. Toews resists all urges to lull his audience into the artifice of a cinematic world. There is no entryway through which one might immerse themselves into the world presented. Instead, contrasting audio and visual elements and the distancing effect of his graphic studies of architecture, roads, monuments, and nature, keep the temptation for lazy viewing at bay. His films are further unified by powerful photographic/cinematic/graphic vision, by graceful pacing, and by passionate stands on US politics and policies. The value of Art and Art making, (with a capital "A") underlies all of his films; initially as subtext but more recently as the text itself.

In his earliest film in the program, *Window*, Toews silently traces architecture and moments in the American Midwest. As each sketch is completed, movement begins, demonstrating that the past cannot be frozen or preserved and attempts to do so only result in rough shadows. Progress is relentless. A car which seems to surpass the camera, suggests that technology moves beyond our ability to anticipate its progress.

Four Corners (a student film created under the tutorage of Gordon Pepper), seems initially to be a study of landscape, barren and dry but beautiful. We look at the compositional style, the rhythm of the editing, and the flashes of rapid Brakhage-influenced shots which quickly return to the controlled examination of the desert region. However, this interpretation of *Four Corners* as a landscape film falls into question as the soundtrack, consisting of intermittent popping noises, escalates until we realize that it is the sound of a Geiger counter. A final title card confirms this reading and in fact makes us re-interpret the entire film as a critique of American internal politics.

This pattern of presenting visions of peace and order to an audience then surprising them with an eye/ ear/mind opening counterpoint through text and/or soundtrack elements continues with the exploration of the collision in Toews's next film, *Drive: automatic/standard*. Lines are blurred between obsessive monster truck owners and the swarms of faceless drivers which fill the hive-like metropolitan motorways. The contrast between the reversal of soundtracks, the monster trucks with normal traffic and the normal traffic with monster trucks, is ironic but perhaps doesn't pack as strong a punch as was intended. Toews's travels to Japan and Europe beginning in 2001 resulted in a renewed bravery. His eye on architecture became even further sharpened and his films became bolder and less didactic. *Japan Kesei Line Single Take* is a relentless but beautiful image which subtly speaks volumes about culture

shock. The subsequent *Empire Studies* series (from which only one is presented tonight) feature strong collisions between image and sound, between the promise and potential of a great America (utopic architectural projects) and simultaneously the grim and unconscionable truth of its arrogant and egotistical nature (voices on the radio smothering the nation). Toews's film *Opening of Japan* also begins with the threat of American imperialistic bullying, but morphs into a mesmerizing study of Japanese landscape, architecture, art, and people. We are left to make up our own minds about the fate of this unique nation which simultaneously resists and embraces American influence. Of these political works of Toews, only this last one offers a potentially optimistic outcome.

Toews new work consists primarily of a series of television programs unlike any I've encountered before. Using a mixture of super-8 film, 16mm film, and video, Toews creates portraits of artists working within remote landscapes. While certain conventions need to be adhered to, Toews appears to have found a niche where he can maintain a strong creative voice with a commercial milieu. The program demands true interactive collaboration with each artist, for Toews to expand his horizons almost continuously to find the right artists and the optimal situation to place each of them within. Politics are put aside, art and nature are the sole concern. Nature is never untouched, it remains as with all of his previously films, inseparable from the human contact and alterations. Beauty is not in the landscape, be it a mountain, a tree, or a skyscraper, but rather within the way we look at it and interact with it.

"Through watching and observation comes consciousness. Through consciousness comes enlightenment and peace." – Peter Von Tiesenhausen

In looking at these films, we are forced to remain active viewers, re-evaluating our perceptions of our presence in our environment and the world. Toews demands that we face the hope inherent in art and the despair inherent in politics. Passion and outrage bleed from the sprocket holes.

- Gerald Saul, April, 2008.

Window (co-directed with Robert Pytlyk)

1997-8 , 3 minutes, 16mm, B&W, silent

A silent black and white study of the landscape of the American midwest

Four Corners

1998-9, 6 minutes, 16mm colour.

"Without using words or sensational imagery, this film makes a powerful statement in communicating the horror of environmental pollution."

- Jury, 30th Tampere International Short Film Festival

Drive: automatic / standard (collaboration with Andrea Spakowski)

2000, 10:30, 16mm colour.

A film about cars, monster trucks, and the North American driving landscape.

Japan: Kesei Line Single Take

2001, 5 minutes, DV Video

This film is part of an ongoing series simply called Japan. Kesei Line Single Take is a visual poem; its imagery, of passing Japanese landscape, is at times like that of Abstract Expressionist painting. This entire film is comprised of one take – there are no cuts, no camera moves, and no exposure, focus, or shutter adjustments.

"...a spectacular display of a "living" abstract canvas." -- Stephen Lan, Take One Magazine

Empire Studies in Contrast. #2: Boulder

2004, 3 minutes, super 8/16mm colour.

Empire is an ongoing series of films studying the paradoxes in American culture. These films were shot in the US during the early stages of the latest US war on Iraq.

Opening of Japan

2006, 18 minutes, 16mm colour

This image driven film examines the history of Japan since American trade contact began in 1843.

THE FOREST with PETER VON TIESENHAUSEN (from Landscape As Muse, season 2), 2006, 24 minutes, D-Beta

Amid Alberta's vast oil and gas fields and insatiable logging industry, Peter von Tiesenhausen's isolated farm remains relatively untouched – except by his own hand. Using materials that the land provides – trees, wood, pulp, rock, fire, ash – von Tiesenhausen, his home, and his art demonstrate an inextricable link to nature:

I use the landscape and nature because its right here. I understand it better than I understand anything else. It becomes my philosophy. It becomes my artwork. It is co-creating with me.

ATACAMA DESERT (CHILE) with EDWARD BURTYNSKY (from Landscape As Muse, season 3), 2007, 24 minutes, D-Beta

There are few photographers today whose images summarize the most imperative issues of our time while leaving gallery audiences aghast. In every image that Edward Burtynsky photographs there is something that speaks to what we are all thinking but are powerless to voice. His photographs of Sudbury's nickel mines, Bangladesh's shipbreaking yards, and China's Three Gorges Dam are fast becoming icons that testify to the scale and scope of our legacy on this planet.

In this episode, Edward Burtynsky travels to South America and Chile's Atacama Desert — one of the driest places on earth. Here he photographs mine sites: both derelict and active. The Chuquibambilla copper mine in the heart of the Atacama is the largest open-pit mine on the planet. At over 800 meters deep, the overwhelming scale of this place is the focus of Burtynsky's lens: