

The Long and the Tall of It: A Look at Two Recent Films by Berny Hi

By Gerald Saul



George Bassler's Perpetual Motion Machine (Digital, 2012).

I love the 19th century, when science was replacing magic, but, for a time, the two became tangled into one. The lens of a magic lantern didn't just bend light, it twisted reality and showed worlds beyond our own. Cameras were widely believed to be able to see ghosts and the myth of alchemy was superseded by the new mythology of the engineer whose supremacy of the machine would cure all ills,

reveal all truths, and harness the infinite. When cinema arrived at the end of the century it was already riding the coattails of the charlatans and geniuses with their myriad of spinning and shining devices, lulling their audiences with shadow-play, puppetry, and diaptic science. Berny Hi would be right at home; a tinkerer, a trickster, and showman.



Scene from Kitty Dreams of Dying. (Super-8, 2012).

In *Kitty Dreams of Dying*, (super-8, 2012) Hi uses simultaneous duel projectors and additional lenses and glass to create a living image. Ghostly reflections allow fluid interchange between the two frames as images pass effortlessly between worlds of dream/wake and ultimately life/death. As the recording of Hi's voice tells us of his cat's ongoing successful fight against an incurable ailment, he manipulates the projection of the images making each screening unique and beautiful.

Kitty Dreams of Dying is cast upon the screen like a magic spell. Digital reproductions cannot carry the emotional weight that the performance does; only by Hi's own hand can this film come to light. The darkened room, the purring cat, and the hallucinatory streaks of light create a séance-inspired environment. Like an incantation, this performance helps ensure Kitty's well-being. As we see

through his alternative cinematic techniques, we can recognise that Hi is emotionally grounded in the cinematic apparatus. It is the place of comfort where he seeks solace.

In *George Bassler's Perpetual Motion Machine* (digital, 2012) Hi presents a story with rich potential about two tragic men, the 18th century European Johann Bessler (occupational name for a tinkerer) who investigated the construction of a perpetual motion machine but died fixing a clock tower, and the Saskatchewanian Johaan Bassler (a nickname for a scatterbrained person) who died under the uncontrolled spinning blades of what was purportedly a successful perpetual motion machine of his own. Again, Hi uses his own soft-spoken voice in monologue to tell these tales. The recording of his voice seems to be done in two (or more) recording sessions, sometimes cut together in mid-sentence. The script often reveals its own rewrites through Hi's correcting of himself. This demonstrates both an immediacy, as if spoken live along with the film, as well as a considered process, recorded at different times and edited together. This dichotomy creates an ambiguous sensation for the viewer as we cannot discern if the project is painstakingly constructed or assembled casually. Visually, Berny Hi's use of puppets—a drinking/dippy bird, clocks, a camera, and a music box—to represent this mythological machine is intriguing. However, while the spectre of creation

is enticing, it fails to be as satisfying as the theme of "mortality" which hung over *Kitty's Dream of Dying*. Hi's inventory of the subjects' personal details (the various deaths of Bessler's family for example) may be better suited within a chronicle of local history than the confines of a short film. While these factual events could certainly be transformed into a macabre tale of murder or mysticism suitable to Poe or Lovecraft, the causal relationships suggested by them in this film is insubstantial. George Bassler's *Perpetual Motion Machine* hints at crime and injustice and passion and creation and madness but only delivers a portion of this potential. It is as if Hi needs a broader canvas onto which to weave together his tangle of threads in all their complexities. Simply put, I wanted more.

These two recent films by Hi remind us of more difficult times when machines required more than a tap of a thumb to operate. Invention, including the art of film trickery, did not begin with a keyboard command but were devised by individuals willing to craft tools and manipulate devices. Hi reminds us of the value of embracing the glass and the steel, how the tangibility of our tools brings our bodies and our craft closer together and perhaps, in some way, allows us to cope with the rest of the physical realm, of change and pain and mortality.

Expanded Cinema: The Great Saskatchewan Timelapse

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Expanded Cinema is a creative adventure in cinematic language created and facilitated by Berny Hi, a Regina-based filmmaker, and current artist-in-residence at the Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative. Over 30 independent artists are coming together to explore vertical cinema as a community collaborative film project, *The Great Saskatchewan Timelapse*, consisting of a number of 1-2 minute short films, animations, and puppet films created in workshops across Saskatchewan that will be edited together for site-specific presentation on a monumental, free-standing rectangular screen mirroring the shape of the province. The project will playfully trace the memory of place, from Saskatchewan's earliest defined geological past, through the rise and fall of the dinosaurs, the crashing of meteors, the ebb and flow of the glaciers, the arrival of mammals and the migration of the first humans, and subsequent cultural events, leading to the present day. The projects take place at Hi's Regina-based studio, *The Vault*, and in various locales across Saskatchewan.

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The
Great Saskatchewan
Timelapse
with Artist-in-Residence
Bery Hi