

Spring 2004 Filmpool Premiere Screening

Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative
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by Ken Wilson

I have a confession to make: I don't get to as many Filmpool screenings as I'd like. Or even as I should. But after seeing the Spring 2004 Filmpool Premiere Screening, I'm going to make more of an effort from now on. Because I learned something that everyone else in the room (and the room was pretty full) already knew: a premiere screening is an opportunity to see some challenging, thought-provoking, and beautiful films.

The evening began with Troy Rhoades's *Lachine*. This is a short, silent, black-and-white study of the Lachine Rapids in Montreal that juxtaposes the horizontal movement of the moving rapids to vertical waves of moving light on both sides of the film frame. I'm not sure how Troy got this effect. Perhaps it was the result of a deliberate (or accidental?) light leak during filming or processing? However the effect was created, *Lachine* is a strangely hypnotic formal, abstract study of vertical and horizontal movement.

Next came *Arc Light*, the first of three films by Jason Britski about landscapes, travel, and tourism. *Arc Light* examines the relationship between tourists and two important tourism sites (and sights): Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon. It opens with footage of the Horseshoe Falls (the Canadian side of Niagara Falls)—the "arc" of the film's title. The film attempts to capture the magnificence of the Falls on 16mm film and audio tape—a very difficult and ambitious proposition. However, Britski's camera isn't the only one pointed at the Falls; all of the tourists are looking at the landscape through their own cameras. About half way through the film, the landscape suddenly shifts to the Grand Canyon. The roar of water is replaced by wind, the moving water becomes dry desert, but the onlookers continue to peer through their cameras at the sight.

Arc Light posits an interesting relationship between the filmmaker and the tourists. Both are looking at famous tourist destinations. Both are situated on clearly marked observation points or lookouts, behind railings that are intended to keep clumsy sightseers from tumbling over the edge into the abyss. Both are looking at the sights through cameras. Is the film suggesting a resemblance between filmmaker and tourist, or is there a difference between the goals (real and aesthetic) of the two

groups? At one point you hear Britski replying to someone's question about the purpose of the microphone; he says he's trying to get "the general sound of the place." Is the film suggesting his ambitions are different from the other onlookers, or the same?

One difference between tourists and filmmaker lies in the different technology the two groups use to capture the sights before them. The filmmaker uses a film camera; the tourists use digital video. If these films are portraits of both landscape and onlookers, perhaps it's not surprising that the second of Britski's films, *Tortured By Sidewalks*, consists of what appears to be video footage of fissures in the rocks and candles of light reflected off the ocean at Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia. Peggy's Cove, of course, is another famous tourist destination; the tiny fishing village's famous lighthouse is one of the most photographed places in Canada. The use of video creates lots of interference with the image, making it difficult at first to recognize what's on the screen, but at the same time it makes the image quite beautiful. As with *Arc Light*, the sound quality is excellent; I was at Peggy's Cove last summer, and Britski really has captured "the general sound of the place."

My favourite of Britski's three films was *Shoulders On A Map*. It begins with shots of an ocean and what appears to be the wake of a ferry, followed by footage of mountain scenery filmed from a car driving down the highway. Once again the subjects of the film are sublime landscapes (the ocean, the mountains). This time, however, instead of standing still and looking at these landscapes (or looking at others looking), we are moving through them, headed towards some destination. The sense of movement is reinforced by the use of swish pans and overlapping multiple images (sometimes with contrasting patterns of movement) on the screen. I thought *Shoulders On A Map* was quite stunning.

I really liked Gerald Saul's *The Thin Letter (Toxic 3)*, too, although it couldn't be more different from *Shoulders On A Map*. In the film, Gerald tells a story about his recent cancer scare—he compares the doctor's telephone call to receiving a "thin letter" after applying for a grant—and the starkness of the mise-en-scene (he

stands before an unfinished building, a stark wire fence and stacks of girders) was particularly well-chosen. The film is anecdotal and personal, reminiscent of Mike Hoolboom's work. However, what makes *The Thin Letter* really unusual is the fact that although the film was shot in colour, it is also hand-processed, something I've never seen before. Gerald used 20-year-old colour print chemistry to process the film. It was an experiment, but one that really worked. I'm not sure if this was the last film in the *Toxic* series, but it would be interesting to see them screened in sequence some time.

The first half of the program concluded with Shane Eason's . . . *And In The End Only One Will Remain*. The film is a reflection on masculinity. It begins with a famous quotation about winning and losing from an equally famous football coach, Vince Lombardi, and goes on to test his claim that winning is "an all the time thing," using found footage (tinted a strangely murky orange-brown colour) of men and boys, together and alone. The footage has been step-printed using an optical printer—clearly one of the most important tools available to experimental filmmakers. The film is divided into seven chapters, each introduced by a title card that indicates it's the story of someone named "Little John." Despite these gestures towards narrative, however, the film is really tied together by its theme and its use of icons of masculinity (or of masculine performance): a boy wearing a cowboy hat; a boy losing a game of tug-of-war; a group of boys running and playing with toy guns; a boy playing with fire; one boy hitting another while playing soccer; teenaged boys playing basketball; and, finally, a young man grinning and grimacing while performing body-building poses and doing calisthenics. The step-printing breaks these simple actions down, creating a sense of ominous dread, which is reinforced by the soundtrack, which consists of muffled rumbles and booms that sound like distant thunder or an earthquake. Like many experimental films, you probably have to see . . . *And In The End Only One Will Remain* more than once; the first time through, I thought it was too long, but during my second viewing I was riveted.

The second half of the program began with two films from Ian Toews's *Empire: Studies in Contrast* series. According to the program notes, these two films are part of "an ongoing series of films studying American culture." Both were shot while traveling in the U.S. during the early stages of the recent invasion of Iraq. The two films are short, time-lapse studies of two examples of modernist architecture: I.M. Pei's National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado; and the J. Russell and Bonnie Nelson Fine Arts Center by Antoine Predock in Tempe, Arizona. (Both films identify the buildings' architects and locations at the end, suggesting their importance). These images of cultural (and perhaps also scientific) achievement are juxtaposed against the worst of American popular (and political) culture on the films' soundtracks: radio commercials; tabloid journalism; and, most of all, the ugly racism of American talk radio. In fact, one of the really interesting aspects of these two films is the way that their soundtracks overpower the lovely, meditative quality of the visual images. Maybe that's the point—that the worst of American culture is capable of obliterating its greatest achievements.

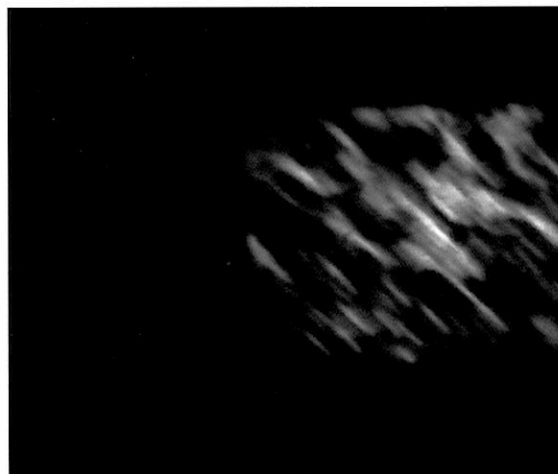
Dianne Ouellette's *Dizzy Lizzy* was the only narrative film on the bill. It tells the story of Elizabeth, a little girl who, like her Auntie Ann, can see fairies. Led by the



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local bully, a boy named Albert, the neighbourhood kids tease her, chanting “Dizzy Lizzy” whenever she’s around. Elizabeth captures fairies to prove to the other kids that she’s not lying, but they keep dying on her. The film’s twist ending explains why.

For me, the real strength of this film was its little aesthetic touches: the kids playing “Ring Around the Rosie”; the use of slow-motion photography; the shots of the grass and bushes where the fairies live; the Hallowe’en makeup on the kids; and the red cloak that Elizabeth wears—it really leaps off the screen. The cinematography (by Darryl Kessler) was excellent, as was the editing (by Jason Britski and Ouellette). And Dianne got some great performances out of the kids in her cast, particularly Matthew Ferstl as Albert. I liked *Dizzy Lizzy*, although I have to admit that I like Ouellette’s earlier, more experimental work more. It speaks to me in a way that this film doesn’t. Then again, I don’t have kids, so perhaps I’m not part of the film’s target audience?

Mike Rollo’s *still / move* was next. It’s a kind of experimental documentary about a family’s past. While on the soundtrack we hear steam trains rattling past, we see old home movies and a hand holding family photographs in front of the locations where they were taken, in or near the town of Sprague, Manitoba. It’s a nice concept—a great way to use old stills. There’s a real sense of loneliness and abandonment, particularly in the shots of Sprague, another dying prairie town, and some really nice compositions—telegraph lines reflected in a puddle, for example—evoke rural economic decline. Of course, the atmosphere created suggests there was something wrong in the family’s past. (In fact, the program notes identify the problem as alcoholism.) As the film’s title suggests, *still / move* is organized around juxtapositions of movement and stillness. The repeated images of trains suggest movement, and while we hear trains moving on the soundtrack, pretty well all of the trains we actually see are not moving; like the rest of the town, they seem to be abandoned. The use of still photographs also suggests stillness, but at one point, the camera pans across a row of photographs, suggesting movement. However, the word “still” also suggests something persisting over time, the way that memories, photographs and stories about Rollo’s family continue to have powerful effects on him. (Note: please see the essay on *still / move* in this issue of *Splice* for a more detailed discussion of Rollo’s film.)

The last work on the program was another short by Troy Rhoades: *Sounds In The Grass*. This silent film consists of close-ups of blades of grass. There are fast pans and cuts, suggesting that the plants are moving. The program notes quote Jackson Pollock saying “You can hear the life in grass, hear it growing,” and the camera movement and editing in *Sounds In The Grass* clearly attempt to communicate the sound of growth in visual terms. The film’s rhythms reminded me of Arthur Lipsett’s film, *Free Fall*—perhaps it’s Rhoades’s homage to the great Montreal experimental filmmaker?

Together, the films screened at the Spring 2004 Premiere Screening were an impressive and varied collection of work, and I’m glad I got a chance to see them. I’m going to make sure I make it to the next Filmpool premiere screening.

Thanks to Adam Budd and Simon Nakonechny for their assistance with this review.



The cast and crew of Dianne Ouellette’s *Dizzy Lizzy*.
photograph by Mark Bradley



Auntie Ann (Leslea Mair) and Elizabeth (Maya Hoenes) in Dianne Ouellette’s *Dizzy Lizzy*.
photograph by Mark Bradley



Maya Hoenes (Elizabeth) in Dianne Ouellette’s *Dizzy Lizzy*.
photograph by Carina Gartner