

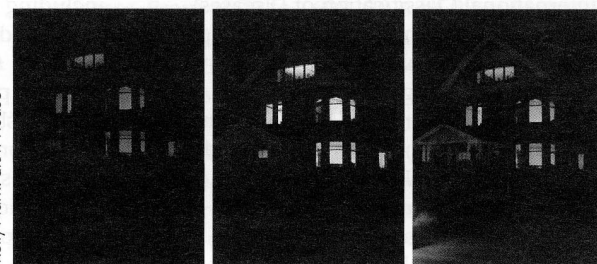
Modernism, Images, Documentation and Television



Chain



God Plays Sax, the Devil Violin



Kelly Mark: Glow House

Remains: A Preliminary Investigation



By Andrew James Paterson

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The 18th annual Images Festival boasted a fresh artistic programmer—Jeremy Rigsby, courtesy of Windsor's renowned Media City—and a stronger emphasis on internationalism. Along with that commitment to international content, this year's festival showcased an exhaustive potpourri of documentary strategies and impulses, although not that many formally-straightforward documentaries. The emphasis on documenting and its problematics was a motif of the international shorts programmes, the opening night gala feature, and many of the Images Off-Screen installations visible in downtown Toronto art galleries.

A series of panels titled the Visible City Symposium was also presented in tandem with the 2005 Images Festival, and visible cities (also, of course, neighbourhoods, sub-cities, and suburbs) were another festival trope. The opening night gala, Jem Cohen's *Chain*, set a tone. The ninety-minute feature placed two parallel characters, who never meet, within a chain of motels, shopping malls, billboards, cell-phones and found camcorders. One player is a Japanese businesswoman at the relative bottom of the corporate food-chain, and her counterpart is a professional mall habitue from Maryland. This girl is a world-traveler but one

wouldn't know it by looking at her destinations. *Chain* may well be too long by half but that is a moot point, as varieties of sameness is its raison d'être.

Images 2005's Canadian Spotlight featured Toronto-based video artist Robert Lee in a programme consisting of radical revisions of six of his back-titles which he had pulled from distribution years ago, having cited the works as being incomplete. All the tapes originally in colour are now in high-contrast black and white, with found footage stocks blending seamlessly with both original and new material. Lee presented these shorts as a loosely-unified feature or extended mix, linked by images that are now in a different spot than they were the first, second or even sixth time around. The artist's voice-over remembers that he has amnesia.

A daylight and deadpan-flat mirror image of Robert Lee's bewildered urbanity became apparent in *A Certain Kind Of Death*, co-directed by Grover Babcock and Blue Hadaegh. This LA documentary laid bare the required details of burying those who die without known next of kin—and often without addresses, bank accounts, living wills, and burial instructions. People go west to LA to become somebody; *A Certain Kind of Death* itemizes those who die as nobodies. Laura Daroca's *Remains: A Preliminary Investigation* echoes *A Certain Kind of Death*, as the artist finds documents of a woman's past lying in a trash bin, 40 years after her death. This corpse's life, revealed through photographs, was rather typical of her lifetime. Somehow her



A Certain Kind of Death

possessions managed to become “public property,” long after her innocuous burial. This film concluded the aptly titled programme *Things Gone and Things Still Here*.

Disputed borders recurred throughout this year's festival. Laura Whittington's *Border* (Border Patrol) poses questions involving the artist's position, intent, and relation to subject. Her camera is one of surveillance, but the artist arguably subverts her controlling position by deploying a constant strobe effect that complements the clandestine movements of Afghani refugees to flee their camp in Northern France and cross the Channel into England. She also uses an effectively suspenseful soundtrack and her own voice-over, prevalent enough to beg questions concerning the artist's personal location. *Diary*, by Lithuanian filmmaker Oksana Buraja, observes a poor woman dealing with an abusive marriage, and the literal dismantling of her working-class Vilnius neighbourhood, by retreating into fantasies of her dead grandmother. This film is remarkable for its depiction of the space between husband and wife, that is frequently buffered by her cats. The filmmaker's position is ambiguous, to say the least, with regards to what is verité and what is in fact staged. Images' Artistic Director Riggsby states, in an e-mail, that “suspension of this question is what I find enjoyable about the work. If that provokes an ETHICAL ambiguity, so much the better.”

God Plays Sax, the Devil Violin by Alexandra Gulea (in the programme Letters from Germany: The Best of the Kasseler Dokumentarfilm und Videofest) documents the everyday activities of the habits of a Romanian psychiatric institution. Although shot with a 16mm camera, the filmmaker's range is much closer to her subjects than, say, Frederick Wiseman's is in his seminal *Titticut Follies*. It's not that *God Plays Sax, the Devil Violin* lacks analytical or structural perspective of the institution, but Gulea does at least flirt with aestheticization of the heavily-medicated inmates, who often prefer to express themselves by singing rather than talking.

The selection of *Chain* as an opening night gala was perhaps indicative of Images' wary perspective on spectacle, as well as an acknowledgment that the festival is by now nearly as much about off-screen film, video, and new-media installations as it is about cinematic screenings. For the past few years, Images off-screen coordinator Scott Berry has worked in tandem with artist-run, public, and even commercial galleries to present installations. Two multi-channel installations well worth the investment are *Thirty-One*, by Lorna Simpson (Prefix Gallery) and *The Hidden Location* (Hassan Khan, A Space Gallery). Both present the everyday as being performative.

Thirty-One uses 31 DVDs and monitors to present parallel days of the month for an individual New York woman and *The*

Hidden Location is a four-monitor symphonic composition skillfully deploying parallel conversations, parallel movements, and a simultaneous suspicion of and desire for documentation.

Images prefers to maintain a critical perspective on “popular culture” even while acknowledging it. Pop culture here frequently refers to that ghost of the video medium and nemesis of canonical art-film—television. Renzo Martens' *Episode 1* (V/Tape Salon—April 9 – May 28) plays on mass-media viewers' need for constant information on “foreign” wars and catastrophes. Martens inhabits the position of the professional war-correspondent whose omnipresent reports are at least as much about themselves as they are about genuine information. *Episode 1* is, of course, a pilot for an ongoing soap-opera. This artist, literally a romantic leading man, also raises speculation concerning the “authenticity” of his own and his compatriots dispatches. In *November*, by Hito Steyerl (Things Gone and Things Still Here) the narrator wakes up to news that her best friend has become a Kurdish guerrilla and consequently been killed, and then observes a posthumous mystification of her deceased friend as a Mata Hari icon.

Television has been a ghost medium for video art and a frequent rival to intellectual film making. Television is a conduit as much as an instigator, and its barrage of infotainment has been mirrored by other monitor-based networks such as the Internet and various attractive and repellent



A Perfect Fake



Ravel's Brain

websites. In *Home is Where You're Happy* (Fancy, Furry, and Sticky), Jeremy Drummond mixes Britney Spears, online pornographic options, and fundamentalist fanatics into a delirious stew and literally draws blood. Fittingly, Drummond's title comes courtesy of proto-celebrity serial-killer Charles Manson. Since television and popular culture can eat themselves, it is appropriate that one of Images' most effective off-site installations involved television as a light source rather than a purveyor of content. Kelly Mark's *Glow House* is situated in a house characterized by light emanating from television-sets in every room. All sets are hosting the same programme—television here is a comfort and a sedative. Many working people and their families tune in at the end of their days: the box soothes the nerves and indicates time. Mark's installation recalls early video art practices, with an acknowledgment of a working monitor's ability to literally provide a light for homebodies and pedestrians alike.

A further instance of creative satellite programming was the presentation of three Super-8 programmes in licensed informal venues. The first two were international curated programmes, held at the Cameron Public House, and the third was an open screening hosted by CineCycle. Images' recognition of Super-8

as a vital medium has been long overdue. The choice to present Super-8 programmes with pay-as-you-can admission recognizes the accessibility of the format, despite a serious threat to the gauge's very existence. Here, Images is recognizing that high art needn't be oppositional to both low budget production and looser presentations. Super-8 has, of course, always blurred boundaries between documentary, home-movies, and performance on location.

Zoe Beloff's wonderfully ambitious installation *The Ideoplastic Materializations of Eva C.* (Gallery TPW—April 6 – 30) offered viewers the opportunity to wear 3-D glasses and participate in past, present, and future-tense cinemas. Early-twentieth century melodrama, stereoscopic projection, and contemporary DVD-technologies combine in an environmental tour-de-force that celebrates the medium via a medium—or clairvoyant—who reaches inside to extract a potpourri of ghosts. Beloff draws attention to tensions between what she calls "cinemas as a window on the world and...as moving images or apparitions within our own space." (Beloff quoted in exhibition essay by Karen Beckman—Ectoplasmic Cinema). After all, the progenitors of cinema were magicians as much as they were scientists or even photographers.

Death in the Garden of Paradise



Grizzly Man



Documentation and therefore documentaries would thus appear to be essential instances of cinema as a window on the world. However, windows don't exist just to look out; they also reflect and refract. They are close cousins of mirrors and cameras. Several of the documentaries presented in this year's 12th Hot Docs festival acknowledge this reflexivity.

Renzo Martens' maxim that reporters eventually wind up reporting about themselves is not entirely untrue with regards to documentarians when they explore something or somebody mysterious. The esoteric becomes familiar through perseverance and introspection. Eylem Kaftan's *Vendetta Song* (in Canadian Spectrum) involves both a search for another and self-discovery. The Montreal-based filmmaker had learned in Istanbul at age seventeen that her aunt had been murdered in an honour killing. Kaftan's search for the location and executor of her aunt's murder essays customs of male-



WebCam Girls

privileging polygamy, arranged marriage, and brides for sale, but it also leads back to herself as an individual who needed a mirror to recognize herself. *Stroke*, by German experimental filmmaker Katarina Peters, is also personally essayistic. The filmmaker is married to a gifted cellist who suddenly suffers a debilitating stroke; in response, she begins an imagistic diary, encompassing her own dream sequences, her Super-8 inserts, and approximations of her husband's blurry double vision. This documentary definitely becomes as much about its maker as its subject, and it's difficult to ascertain what is verité and what is reenactment.

It is apt that the docs I saw that exhibited experimental tendencies were concerned with either modernist musical-composition or visual art. *Ravel's Brain*, by Larry Weinstein, focused on the French composer's aphasia, which plagued him for the final five years of his life. Possibly due to Ravel being a primarily instrumental composer, this film feels free to mix abstract and even more experimental strategies alongside its talking heads. *Ravel's Brain* does not depend on an omnipresent unifying voice-over, although the operatic doctor did remind me of *The Singing Detective*.

The ALMA Drawings, by Jeremy Munce, presents a woman who lived a virtually anonymous life in Huntsville, Ontario, but who experienced a serious epiphany and then, without prior art education, began making elaborately religious drawings. Or rather, she drew by divine automation, paralleling the Surrealists' belief in the power of the unconscious. The filmmaker's camera literally explores the artist's canvases, in a marked departure from the slide-show manner that television programmes routinely deploy with visual art.

Death in the Garden of Paradise, by Nurjahan Ahkmaq (Canadian Spectrum) also moves away from straightforward

documentary toward the personal essay and meditative impressionism. The filmmaker's father and sister were murdered in Lahore by an unknown intruder and Ahkmaq wants to understand why. The artist deploys extended tracking shots in a manner more reminiscent of thrillers or mysteries than formulaic documentaries. Voice-over is minimal, and blue-tinting is highly prevalent.

There was a link in this year's Hot Docs consisting of films about people who prefer to maintain distances from others. Some of the distances travelled are quite extreme, such as those taken by Timothy Treadwell, in Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (International Showcase). Upon hearing of this man and his girlfriend who were fatally mauled and eaten by grizzlies in Alaska, Herzog recognized a great subject. He was able to access Treadwell's own footage of not only grizzlies in the wild but also the subject himself as a radical environmentalist who prefers "nature" to people. Treadwell is, in fact, revealed as being a failed actor, and his direct-to-camera soap-box oratories imply at least some intended audience, contradicting his stated preference for animals over humans. *Grizzly Man* counterpoints *Lifelike* (Canadian Spectrum), which focuses on taxidermy, the acquisition of the necessary (often wild) animals, and the freeze-drying of a beloved Jack Russell terrier. The guys are definitely macho competitors, and the woman with the dog seems pathetic and beyond lonely.

Seventies gay-porn star Peter Berlin also generally prefers solitude. In *That Man: Peter Berlin* (Jim Tushinski, Show Me Yours; Sex and Documentary programme), the elusive Mr. Berlin is portrayed as a parallel exhibitionist and loner. Nobody but nobody walks the streets with vintage Levis and accentuated crotch like Peter did but, in addition to his legendary porn-career, Berlin also became renowned for

his double-exposure photos of his favourite subject—himself. Like Garbo, the icon wants to be alone, but he doesn't mind being filmed.

Conflation of public and private realms, or intellectual property debates, were also a recurring theme throughout this year's festival. *WebCam Girls*, by Aerlyn Weissman (Canadian Spectrum) presents four female cyber-girls or "micro-celebrities" who articulately redefine concepts of availability and privacy. All four subjects flaunt their performative exhibitionist tendencies while confident of their distance from their johns and site-hits. The web-cam girls contrast with the dolls fetishized by the eroto-phobic gentlemen in Marc de Guerre's *A Perfect Fake* also in Canadian Spectrum. These virtual-porn enthusiasts inhabit a simultaneously technophilic and technophobic universe, unlike the practically survivalist webcam girls, who are savvy yet casual concerning intellectual-property concerns.

Gilbert Duclos' *Off Limits* advocates a strong artists' and documentarians' rights position regarding issues of image-ownership in public space. The distinguished tradition of documentary photography, of capturing an image at the precise revelatory moment (which would be artistically compromised by procedures of permission and negotiation) are being threatened by the insistence of many subjects on their legal rights to their own selves. The pioneering photography of artists like Henri Cartier-Bresson, William Klein, and scores of others would be impossible within today's climate. Yet *Off Limits* only briefly refers to contemporary digital technologies, which, if anything, even further complicate issues concerning spontaneity and consent.

It is particularly appropriate that Hot Docs would include films concerned with issues of private and public space, and of intellectual property and creative right. The act of documenting is key to all filming, whether the intention may be to provide a window to the world or to represent apparitions within an interior personal space. No matter what technologies may be involved, the recognition of a great shot is *a priori*. Debates concerning image copyright, artistic freedom and privilege, and definitions of private and public spaces are ongoing and they are, as always, crucial. **POV**