

INTRODUCTION

The streets are full of admirable craftsmen, but so few practical dreamers. – Man Ray

I live in a world of pictures. Once, perhaps not so long ago, the bed I sleep in, the desk I am scribbling at now, the glass in my windows – all these were pictures. They didn't come up out of the ground, these windows weren't plucked from the trees – someone thought about them once, and it's hard not to feel that the form of this thinking was in pictures. My ability to imagine this window, to create pictures, provides the frame for me to see the world. Through this frame I learn about things like: What is beautiful? Or how to behave when a car swerves into my path. Or why eating chocolate cake is better than most conversations.

Earlier this morning I was trying to understand how Thomas Jefferson could write in the American Constitution that 'all men are created equal,' even though he was a slave owner and had a long romance with one of 'his' slaves who became pregnant and had a child. To be able to refuse the evidence of your own eyes, to ignore the stirrings of your own body, and to mark a separation between a white visitor who is 'equal' and a black woman you love for years as a 'slave'; this is how pictures too often work. They are created by the powerful and beamed down (or projected, or broadcast, or printed in newspapers and billboards) to those with less power or, at least, those who lack the means of creating pictures of their own. This desk I am writing at now, the four walls of this apartment, the shape of the skyline – all these are someone else's pictures.

What would it be like if we saw movies made by individuals instead of corporations? What if there were movies made the same way as suits, custom-fitted, slimmed down for one person? Not broadcast, but narrowcast; not theatres around the world showing the same movie (the globalization of pictures) but instead a local circumstance, a movie so particular, so peculiar, it could cure night blindness or vertigo.

Welcome to the world of fringe movies, where artists from the other side of the media plantation have been busy putting queer shoulders to the wheels, or bending light to talk about First Nations rights (and making it funny at the same time), or demonstrating how a personality can be taken apart and put together again, all in the course of a ten-minute movie that might take years to make.

In this sequel to *Inside the Pleasure Dome: Fringe Film in Canada* (which sold out its first two editions), 27 Canadian artists dish about how they get it done and why it matters. The conversations are personal, up close and jargon-free, smart without smarting. The stellar cast includes Middle East maestro Jayce Salloum; queer Asian avatars Richard Fung, Midi Onodera, Ho

Tam and Wayne Yung; footage recyclers Aleesa Cohene and Jubal Brown; overhead-projector king Daniel Barrow, visionary Peter Mettler; First Nations vets Kent Monkman and Shelley Niro; international art presence Paulette Phillips; and underbelly documentarian Donigan Cumming.

In the world of fringe media, the big light is lived every day by someone who looks very much like your neighbour, the person stirring up your latte, the co-worker who doesn't talk unless she's asked and asked again. It is not business or religion or hobby; there are no dreams of clutching trophies or spending vast amounts of other people's money. There are no tops and no bottoms here, no dreams of waving gold statuettes and shouting, 'I'm the king of the world,' no waiting for the applause to start, hardly a career or reputation. For the most part, these movies are a bit like reading a book with a roomful of others – everyone sees their own movie, their own way.

How much better I understood it all when I visited the old new town of Vila do Conde in Portugal, where old men are scattered across its small picturesque bridges, quietly waiting with homemade rods and buckets of lures and bait. They are fishing, and whenever I'm around, which isn't so often, everything happens very slowly – the long walk up hills disguised as streets, the perfect homemade dinner, the way fish bite on the line. The men get up early in the morning, before daybreak, and they stand there all day, sometimes only a few feet from one another, and hardly say a word. And do I even need to add that every fish they catch is hauled in and examined and then thrown back? They are unwavering in their posts, resolute in their dedication to this purposeless activity. Did I say purposeless? They have discovered, somehow, a luxury of time; they act as if they have all the time in the world, while all around them their offspring are busy getting wired and jumping into their computer time bombs, which have been created not to save time but to absorb it – like a neutron bomb of time, the computer destroys all the time that is around it, and leaves everything else intact.

The shaping of time is something fringe makers do every day. Sometimes they create movies whose only purpose is to allow their viewers to experience, for just a moment, the feeling of time that these Portuguese fishermen feel. At other times they create delirious montages where pictures rush past; the point is no longer an individual picture, there is no single picture, not anymore, only a tap opening and a great rushing forward.

Mike Hoolboom

DANIEL COCKBURN
SMARTBOMB



He tells me his dreams sometimes when I run into him, which is more often than not these days. It seems we are intersecting, ready or not, but I can no more remember his dreams than my own. They are so fine I wonder why they aren't busy gracing screens across the city, though that might ruin them. The act of turning them into movies would only make them less, and so they must remain between us as a promise – a promise I can't help forgetting.

In the pages of *NOW* magazine, Cameron Bailey picked Daniel Cockburn as Toronto's best new video artist, and I can only agree. He has a rare literary talent that he serves up with visual élan, smart design sense and a playful philosophical project whose deeply lived roots are leavened throughout with humour. In fact, he's most serious when he's having fun. And even though his works appear as audio-visual feuillets (essayistic briefs, missives from the margins), they possess an uncanny narrative order (though it is a narrativity steeped in the 20th century, not the 19th).

Here in Toronto, we are living in an age of commissions. Not Zanuck and Meyer, but Charles Street Video and Vtape. Can you imagine making art on demand? Daniel can. And when these commissioned movies arrive at last, fresh from the hard drive, there is a palpable buzz in the often home-brewed evenings, balanced by an exactly proportional degree of disappointment in the afterglow. Oh, it's only ... Except for Daniel. I don't know what it is. Perhaps the same thrill speckled rabbits get from choosing a moment to cross the road that most nearly coincides with oncoming traffic. Is it the sense that others are watching, or the more covert run of blood against blood? Whose is bigger? Faster, stronger, made to last? Not that the Canadian art scene is built on winners and losers – *au contraire*, the reigning philosophy insists that a democracy of attention be granted to anyone who asks. Is it any wonder the work often appears small and grey? But not Daniel. Not with all those borrowed movie stars swimming from the mix. And he hasn't left his Wittgenstein behind either.

The more often I see his videos, the more urgent becomes my necessity for them. Addictions are born in these oases of image. And I am not alone here. It's us now. We need these pictures, these thoughts on pictures, these new frames from which to glimpse the impossible.

Mike Hoolboom: You told me a dream once – in fact, you have narrated several, all of which I have forgotten. Am hoping you might recount again, so I can begin the task of remembering my forgetting.

Daniel Cockburn: I'm not sure if this is the dream you're thinking of, but it's the one I'm thinking of. It took the familiar shape of a horror-movie narrative; there was something terribly wrong with the world and I was the only one who knew about it. I found a Minidv videotape in an alley and, as I picked it up, the reels

started to revolve, like in *Starman* (the tv show; I never saw the movie). Jeff Bridges could hold an audiocassette to his ear, telekinetically cause the reels to turn, and hear the contents of the tape. Now the reels were turning of their own volition, and I could not see or hear what was on the tape ... but as I held it between my thumb and forefinger, watching the reels turn, I saw that the tape was slowly peeling a strip of skin off my fingers and winding it around the reels. I tried to drop the tape, but I couldn't, because my skin was inside it. I worried this process would continue until I gradually lost all of my skin to the inside of this Minidv tape ... but some more tugging managed to snap the skin and I dropped the tape to the ground.

Later, I was with a group of people (we may have been at a restaurant, though I think that first I was in a hospital emergency room inside a mall), seated near a woman about my age whom I had never met before ... but, in familiar horror-movie-narrative fashion, I Knew That She Knew. So I leaned over to her and said, 'I think there are some terrible things happening, and that you and I are the only people who can see them.'

She responded, wide-eyed, 'Yes! Exactly! For instance ...' and here she opened her mouth and pointed at a dark gap where two front teeth should have been. 'Look, I accidentally knocked two teeth out with my toothbrush while I was brushing my teeth this morning.'

This troubled me greatly; I knew that if teeth were so easily falling out of heads, something was amiss. She continued, 'But that's not the horrible thing. The horrible thing is that ...' (now she points at two white teeth farther back in her mouth) '... these are the teeth I knocked out.' Pointing back at the dark toothless gap: 'These teeth are still here. It's just Not Showing Up Correctly.' This, to me, was perhaps the most upsetting thing yet.

I can't remember where the dream went from there. But here's another one I had a while ago: I dreamed the existence of a 1970s tv cop show. It was about an undercover policewoman. The whole series took place with her on an ongoing undercover assignment at a summer camp for incontinent elderly people. The heroine's name was Slapper Coleco.

My dream was only about four seconds long. It was a still image, a promotional image for the tv show. The image looked like this: a woman standing in a sunlit forest, holding a gun. Beside her, text: SLAPPER COLECO, UNDERCOVER SUMMER RUBBER PANTS CAMP DETECTIVE.

MH: Do your dreams come with laugh tracks and audience applause? Mine often have closing credits (which threaten, at least occasionally, never to end – some repression of pictures seems at work, entire dreams consisting of nothing but words that appear as images of language). I am sorely tempted to offer a backseat analysis of your dreams, as they seem ripe with pictures of a threatened body in the shadow of videotape, specifically digital video. Video and the body have been a duet since the beginning, when black-and-white portapacks were too heavy to carry around easily, and artists' studio practice refocused art

matters onto the body, the videotaped body. You often appear in your own work, a fact I thought initially unlikely, perhaps because you appear to lack some necessary fundament of narcissism, but of course I don't know you so well. As your work slowly gains a public life, how have you begun to reimagine your body, which has been pried loose from its physical moorings and now exists (in always younger, presumably 'better' versions) independently of you, as an image?

DC: I can't think of any dream I had that included laugh tracks or audience applause, or any indication of a studio audience. That's so tv; my dreams are cinema!

To your question of body: I have a group of media-making friends who meet irregularly, and we sometimes set each other challenges ('obstructions' in the Jorgen Leth/Lars von Trier model). A few years ago, we were speculating as to how each of us would deal with the parameters of a certain project, and one of the group said to me, 'Well, we know your movie won't have anything to do with sex!' This sentiment was laughingly echoed by everybody, including me.

That is to say, I have made it a habit of ignoring the body's presence in my life and in my motion pictures. To my mind, my body has been a mere conveyance for the life of my mind. You may disagree, since as a viewer you see only the result, not the intent, but my position as maker means I can see only the intent, never the result. (Once enough time has passed since the making of a video, the trueness of that statement fades to grey; I can look at *Rocket Man* and at the very least think it interesting that I am/was that fellow with blond tips and a beard.)

You mention that 'Video and the body have been a duet since the beginning,' but I wasn't around in any meaningful consumptive/productive sense for that beginning. I've come to video (via Super 8, 16mm and linear video editing) more or less as a 'user' in the Microsoft™ sense. The tools I know are the ones software companies deem worthy to provide, based on some sort of überdemographic knowledge they have of me whether or not I've ever filled out any survey (for the record, I'm pretty sure I haven't).

Digital video scares the crap out of me, moreso than film by a long shot. *The Other Shoe* was a not-very-veiled plea for the virtues of film over those of digitalia; *Metronome* alludes to the physical experience of life in a digital age; the/my body is presented as a thing stuck living out the mental loops of its controlling brain. Governor Schwarzenegger is condemned to the seven circles of digital hell in *WEAKEND*, and I think *Continuity* is the most explicit statement of digiphobia I've yet made. Tasman Richardson asked me after its first screening whether the scene in which I burned my hand with a cigarette was real; in



Rocket Man

answer, I showed him the scar, reaping and revelling in the perceived benefits of full macho I-sacrifice-myself-for-my-art-dom. He was glad it was so, and made the pertinent point that up until that moment there had been ambiguity about whether I was 'merely' portraying a character or existing as myself in the time of the video. But at that self-immolative moment, the two merged into one; scripted or not, That Guy Onscreen was really burning himself, the pain was real and fiction blew out the window.

Four Addenda:

1. But I feel sorry for that guy who was me, though any apology is futile since it was my fault that I made him do that.
2. Since Tasman had to ask whether the burning was real, the moment must not have been fully realized.
3. Jubal Brown fully believed that I had burned myself but asked whether the preceding nerve-steeling swig of gin was actually water; in fact, it was straight gin, but I suppressed my wincing reaction so I wouldn't seem like a wimp. The effect of my steely self-control apparently made me seem like a wimp for drinking 'fake' liquor.
4. A few days after shooting that scene, I realized how stupid it had been, since the mark on my hand was just getting worse and worse, and maybe I'd actually have a scar ... which would make me more like the scripted character than I would care to be.

Similarly (so similar, in fact, that it's probably redundant): in (repeatedly) shooting the final shot of *Stupid Coalescing Becomers.*, in which I unfall upward out of frame, I hurt my knees and they ached for days afterward. I never remember this fact when I watch or think about this video now. That guy onscreen has a lot to do with me, but he doesn't have much to do with right-now me at all.



Continuity

Certainly I harbour a fear of film, insofar as I harbour a fear of anything that purports to represent the real but whose representation is not 100 percent infallible/unquestionable (i.e., everything). But digital video seems to offer the most seemingly perfect representation while also translating it through the longest and most cryptic series of incomprehensible procedures. I remember reading a *Film Comment* article about the impending release of *Fight Club* that said, in effect, ‘with the arrival of this movie, film is no longer an index of physical reality.’ An exciting turning point, to be sure, and also one I keep wanting to persuade myself we haven’t passed. Whatever you say about it, a film frame is an object that bears the physical imprint of reality. A videotape is an object that bears an analogically encoded imprint of reality. This is still somehow acceptable to me – but once you get into digital video, and the tape object is merely a carrier for various file formats, for language that humans will never be able to comprehend (though they may have invented it), it seems somehow heretical that we should think the image and sound that spew out the other end of this tape/computer actually embody a connection to reality. Bearing a resemblance and embodying a connection are two different things.

I make things that, without the benefit of decoding devices I can never hope to comprehend, would be unintelligible to anyone, including myself – things that, without the benefit of said devices, would cease to exist, even though their rectangular plastic-and-code containers might live for ages.

Writing all this, I am extremely dissatisfied with my expression of it; my thoughts have been translated from various states and media into this final digital output via text via fingers. And, of course, to say it is untruthful because the number of links in this chain surpasses some reverse quota would be silly. Nevertheless, I am frustrated at the chain of translations that makes the seeming truth seem to recede.

So here’s something else. You asked earlier, ‘How have you begun to reimagine your body, which has been pried loose from its physical moorings and now exists (in always younger, presumably better versions) independently of you, as an image?’ I recently visited the dentist and was told one of my wisdom teeth is rotated 90 degrees sideways, assuming it’s ‘showing up correctly.’ It should be taken out but it’s sitting right on top of a nerve, so the operation could possibly result in losing some sensation in my lower mouth. And I wondered what it would be like if I were to have my mouth go slack/disfigured, denormalizing my face and voice. Would I still continue to use my face and voice in my videos?

I realized it would feel difficult to do so without some acknowledgement of that face’s/voice’s abnormality. And this made me realize that I therefore must currently be using my

physical audiovisual persona as some ‘normal’ or ‘normative’ manifestation – a body and voice via which I can express all of my concerns that don’t really have specifically to do with body and voice. Were my actual body to undergo some change, I would feel uncomfortable about using it as an idealized vehicle – which is ridiculous, since it implies that I consider my current (youthful white guy) body-state not only normative but idealized. I don’t think I have reimagined my body at all, in an actual sense, but my encounter with my inability to reimagine it has at least exposed some of my own hypocrisy to itself.

MH: Your attentions lie with models of subjectivity and cognition, using yourself as model. What stops this from being only narcissism? There are terrifying cruelties enacted around us daily, the AIDS pandemic continues to ravage large parts of the world, genocide continues in Indonesia – what does it mean to make video art in the midst of these punishing realities? Is it only a more rarefied form of escapism?

DC: I don’t think art has to change the world, only the people in it. And escape can be a form of change, provided the escapees return to the world after their stint abroad or inside, and provided said stint is a fruitful one. I think video art that speaks not one explicit word to the problems of the world is as defensible as an equally ‘escapist’ conversation. Political discourse is necessary, but if every verbal exchange were graded against a quota of explicitly political content, there would be a sore limitation on the number of possible dreams – to say nothing of the number of implicitly political dreams.

How it’s positioned is the greater difficulty/problem. My videos certainly have a narcissistic core – and, worse!, it’s the narcissism of a well-off, white North American male – but your phrase ‘using [my]self as model’ is key. If I examine myself

closely and rigorously and honestly enough, it will be useful not only to me for my own reasons but to others for their own reasons. I'll be satisfied if people glean from my videos not 'This is what Daniel Cockburn is like' but 'This is what a particular well-off white North American male in the early 21st century is (or was) like.' I don't mean that I am submitting myself as a representative sample, a normative or ideal or 'model' citizen for time-capsule posterity (though this is a problematic subconscious tendency of my work I mentioned earlier); I mean that I am offering myself in my work as a self-expressing locus of various external tendencies at this point in time and space. My environment in large part has made me what I am, and from my work the audience may extrapolate various thoughts about that environment.

All of this, however, assumes people actually see the work. Current presentation modes ensure that my videos are seen only by a very specific slice of the population. Work away at work that will be seen by precious few? I can do nothing else, and few is infinitely better than none. To somehow preach the gospel of alternative dream-styles to the uninitiated and uninterested majority would, perhaps, if I really believe in all of the above, be less of a sellout. And anyway, I have not yet given up the ghost of narrative feature filmmaking.

MH: Doesn't your work rely on an audience already hip to art recordings, savvy in the ways of stolen pictures, drunk and drunk again on deconstructive cocktails? Isn't this insular insider art, and isn't this the forever instance of Canadian art scenes? Hosting government-appointed screenings for the faithful, an audience of like-minded makers, where consensus is everywhere and who can even remember what you saw in the blizzard of the too many shows on offer? Politically, at least, this seems (the situation, I mean, not your work in particular) to be a large step backwards.

DC: I would like to think my work doesn't require that the audience be hip, savvy and/or drunk on art and deconstruction. Or, to put it another way, I think anyone even slightly schooled in our current mass media should already be sufficiently hip, savvy and drunk. Personal video diaries, amateur (read: non-Hollywood) narrative filmmaking, rejigging of iconic images and sounds – anybody with internet access should be familiar with these and other previously non-mainstream modes of making and receiving. And even if you don't have a broadband connection, as long as you've been watching some movies or television in the last decade, you're fully attuned to postmodern intertextuality (the contemporary version of which is certainly toothless, far from the critical weapon it was originally meant to be, but nevertheless it's a popularized form). The consuming majority accepts intertextuality in Michael Bay's *The Island*, video diaries on *Jack-ass* and cultural appropriation on *fenslerfilm.com*, so there's no reason they shouldn't accept like-minded fringe media.

Yet we know they don't. Audiences for fringe work are composed almost exclusively of fringe makers and people otherwise

closely affiliated with the arts sector – and the latter set, I suspect, rarely exceeds the bounds of the former. This is at first encouraging (you get more applause from friends than you do from strangers), but eventually demoralizing. Where are the people who don't give a rat's ass about 'art,' who just want to see something good? They don't come and, frankly, I don't expect them to.

At this point, a greater obstacle than form or content might be modes of presentation. People will accept most anything if it's in a music video or on some crazy website; when they pay money to sit down and look at a screen, they expect to see movies. The parameters of what constitutes a 'movie' are broadening, but they're not yet wide open. So artists are left showing videos to each other in rec rooms that we rent with arts-council money.

This problem could be eliminated by revoking the funding, in the same way that a lot of bad art could be eliminated by dispensing with production grants. But both those tactics solve only the superficial problems. Ceasing production grants won't cause more good art (though it might up the good:bad ratio). Nor will ceasing exhibition funding cause the general public to seek out fringe work. We're in a holding pattern right now; nothing wrong with that, but the fuel doesn't last forever. What at first seems encouragement becomes lack of criticality; the community is so small and interconnected that I think people are terrified to express honest opinions of bad work – how, then, are artists supposed to get better?

Is the solution for video art and fringe film to enter the market – not the art or educational market, but the popular market? Sure, the popular market will not necessarily support the most worthy work; even in our current system, artists struggle to achieve a standardized level of compensation for their work. Every impulse I have with regards to this situation feels more capitalist than I thought I was. I'm not convinced that that is always awful. I'm not convinced, you may say, of much.

In summary (working backwards): my art is made for and shown in an insular insider art scene, but it is not insular insider art.

MH: Why can't artists produce work that conforms to more generally accepted media portals: the feature film or 50-minute television documentary? Why all this work on the signifier, on skewing the form, changing the way we show pictures or listen to sounds? Does it really make new experiences possible? I used to think so, but that would mean that fringe devotees would be exemplars of virtue, their happiness organs bigged up on all those hours of difficult light. But fringe media is hardly a guarantor of a better life, so why bother?

DC: Refusing to make your work accessible is not a sin, though doing so for no reason other than elitism or spite is plain silly, and I think that refusing in your creative process to acknowledge and incorporate the existence of your audience is at least a mortal error. Certain types of experience cannot be transmitted in the feature-film or 50-minute-tv-doc format, just as certain types of

experiences that those formats transmit so well are anathema to short-film or non-narrative work. Not all art has to be free, unfettered newness, but the spectrum of available art absolutely has to be an arena of possibility, otherwise what's the point? Form can be founded on a moral foundation, but that doesn't mean form will necessarily generate morality in the receiver. This is how communication works, and we have to take what we can get (and give what we hope can be gotten).

My experiences of fringe transcendence are pleasures like no other I know. Why shouldn't new pleasure be a worthwhile offering? Our happiness organs do get bigged up on light-bending – it's just on a very narrow spectrum of happiness. This is a problem if you mistake light-happiness for world-happiness, which is certainly the case for some of us who get a

certain horizon-broadening from fringe work and then seek out a repeat of that same, lovely, immensifying feeling at screening after screening, rather than going out looking for it in a world whose horizons have supposedly just been broadened. Every pleasure carries within it the seeds of addiction.

However deluded or realistic our motives, we who are familiar with experimental form and work are prepared to wade through the shit for the good stuff. The general public isn't, nor should they be. If a chef friend took me to a tapas restaurant that she highly recommended, and we ordered 20 dishes, two of which were mind-blowingly succulent, 14 of which were passable and four of which were repugnant, would I not be justified in refusing to return (especially if I knew the menu was entirely changed twice daily)? The festival-programming or curated-screening format works for those of us who are already in the thick of things, but hoping that people open up to new ideas on the basis of an assorted appetizer platter is at best naive – and thinking that the appetizer platter is the only kind of meal there is is dangerous self-limitation at the individual and the community level.

A previously typed aside that no longer feels integrated but that I cannot quite bring myself to delete: the MuchMusic Video Awards just named 50 Cent 'the year's best video artist.' Video art obviously has a very different meaning for most people than it does for us. Not to say we're right and they're wrong, but the phrase's current majority definition obscures the existence of the type of work we're talking about. The only other 'video art' reference in the public canon I can think of is David Thewlis's portrayal of 'Knox Herrington, the video artist' in the Coen Brothers' *The Big Lebowski* – itself only half-public, but an underground cult thing of the above-mentioned order that I would love to see some experimental work attain (and anyway, you haven't seen that movie, or at least you hadn't when Mike Bullard asked you about it, so maybe you're the problem here) – which more or



Subterranea Gargantua (Prelude)

less reaffirms the general cliché stereotype of video art=high pretension.

I feel my answers are growing increasingly committed to absolute diplomacy; my eyes are sliding farther apart from one another and soon I'll have one over each ear, resolutely seeing both sides of everything. Which will be great, except that I won't be able to see where I came from or where I'm heading.

MH: What kinds of experiences can't be relayed through mainstream portals? And what is it in your biography (real or simulated), or your work, that can't be dished up in familiar audiovisual formatings?

DC: The image-propagation world is growing; it's increasingly the world in which we communicate with one another and experience imagination. The more often pictures replace the world we live in, the more we accept dominant forms as a fundamental syntax. As advertising, feature films, TV, news, video games and the worldwide web converge, we need to remember that, for example, while moving images may not be the ideal way to convey foreign policy news, moving images that borrow specifically from advertising or video game forms can only limit such conveyance even further.

We can use images to explore alternate ways of transmitting and receiving – oh, but what ways are they? That was your question, wasn't it? I'll answer by first seemingly avoiding it for a little while longer.

Images are becoming less and less precious, and their connection to our world increasingly superficial and misleading (and this goes back to my greater fear of DV than of film). I think this leads us to regard our own lives as less precious.

Tarkovsky said, 'I think that what a person normally goes to the cinema for is time,' and he wasn't just talking about art-house audiences. All films offer an experience of time segments that

have been elongated or compressed into a singular experience (otherwise why not just have a relationship with time on the street outside the ticket booth?). The current trend is one of speed and diversion; these have their uses, but at this point the fringe is where I have to go to find the alternative.

There is one place you can find plenty of static shots, and that is TV advertising. We have learned that slowness can be appreciated, but only briefly; slownesses thus follow one another with great rapidity, as refreshing as ice cubes shooting out of a volcano.

Gus van Sant's recent work (and he, I suppose, is on the fringe of the mainstream) is exemplary of current success in this regard; watching *Gerry* or *Elephant*, one becomes reacquainted with the pleasures of long-form attentiveness summoned forth by a slow-moving object, and I'd like to think I carry the taste for this pleasure outside with me afterwards. I'm convinced we'd be better off were the world at large (me included) more attuned to such things; longer attention span means greater capability of complex thought, means greater empowerment (and awareness on which to found your choice as to what to do with your power). I've made stabs at this kind of pleasure with *The Other Shoe* and *The Impostor (hello goodbye)*, placing single takes in a multiframe context, which I hope will point out their purity while distracting from and, sadly, destroying it. Not that I am fixated on slowness and the long-take aesthetic, or that I think we need to become a society of humanoid glaciers; *Metronome* and *Stupid Coalescing Becomers*. both seek to foreground time awareness via other means (rhythm and reversal).

You also mention my 'work on the signifier, on skewing the form, changing the way we show pictures or listen to sound.' I hope that in my appropriation I manage to express my relation to the current way in which I receive pictures and sounds, thus providing a model for my own thought, which can form a model for the viewer's. I can't imagine this would have as much chance of success on, for example, television, where in the first place image appropriation is illegal and, secondly, it would be subsumed into the background noise, becoming indistinguishable from its original sources. My appropriation videos are preplanned and highly controlled channel-surfing, as indeed is any montage; in this sense their pleasure is the same as the pleasure of narrative film. The other pleasure, though, is that of being taken on a guided surf through the media we've already consumed; this will hopefully spread the desire to reorder the contents of one's own brain to arrive at one's own conclusions.

If I still haven't answered some of your questions, prod further, professor.

MH: I've always wanted to make a movie in paralyzing slow motion so that afterwards, after watching someone get off a chair for half an hour, or drink a glass of milk for ten minutes, one could leave the theatre and everything would appear strangely sped up. But of course these effects don't last; these perceptual oases are temporary effects, the crack cocaine of the picture world, soon requiring another hit to keep the senses from

reorienting. How to deal with our present deluge of too many pictures? Why bother producing when there's already too much, knowing that whatever you do will so very quickly become subsumed in the evening news, the morning headline, the restless chatter of celebrity?

DC: If by 'these effects don't last,' you mean they don't last forever, then I agree. But I also agree that they're temporary, and anything that's temporary does last, just not infinitely. And just because something isn't infinite doesn't mean it's not worthwhile – the pyramids have lasted quite a while, and they're likely to last a long while longer, but they are definitely not going to last.

I was about 13 when I saw *Midnight Cowboy*, and today, the one thing that stands out for me is not any of its famous lines or images, but a small speck of time in which Jon Voight defends his cowboy attire to Dustin Hoffman. 'Why do you have to make fun of my clothes?' he says. 'I like these clothes and I like the way I look in them. I feel good about myself when I wear them.' I was a teenager with an intellectual-superiority complex living in a small town, and this moment forced me ever so subtly, but consciously, to reconsider my sense of being better than a lot of people around me on the sole basis of personal taste. And that moment of consciousness is one I have returned to (or have had returned to me) over the years, up to and including even now, whenever associations conspire to re-uncover it.

Things get subsumed, but, as I mentioned, they leave residue, and that layer of intra-cranial grime can certainly last, and even occasionally contain seeds.

MH: Daniel, as usual, you put it so well. Grime that contains seeds, or as Jonas Mekas once asked, 'Where are we, the underground?' It's too much for anyone to bear, to carry the burden of representation for all pictures, all the time. Pictures, we imagine them (don't we?) as something evanescent, made of light, as light as air, and yet sometimes they're heavier than lead. And just as opaque.

I would like to shift focus and speak about a couple of your movies. Can you talk about *Stupid Coalescing Becomers*. (2:31 min, 2004)? It is a backwards time fantasy, a home movie redressed as science fiction. Would you briefly describe the movie and tell me how it came about?

DC: *Stupid Coalescing Becomers*. is a three-minute video with continuous voice-over. The images are fairly standard backwards footage: a cigarette burns from ash to fullness, a hammer-wielding hand smashes glass shards into light bulbs, etc. The voice-over is a moral diatribe against the 'stupid coalescing becomers' who think they can avoid acknowledging the cause-and-effect workings of the world by temporarily (but ultimately futilely, in the narrator's opinion) reversing time for themselves. The narrator's identity is ambiguous; even at the end, when a human body falls reversedly up and out of the frame, it's uncertain (unless you know me) as to whether this body is the



WEAKEND

narrator's or whether it belongs to one of the Becomers.

A few years ago, I met up with Jeremy Rigsby (artistic director of the Media City Festival in Windsor, Ontario) at the opening night of Toronto's Images Festival. I asked him at one point whether he had seen a Super 8 film called *Smartbomb* (the filmmaker's name did and does escape me, though it might have been Marnie Parrell), and he said there were too many experimental films called *Smartbomb*, and someone should make a film called the opposite of *Smartbomb*. 'Stupid ... Flowers?' was the tentative first title suggestion, but we gradually came to the conclusion that the opposite of an exploder would be a coalescing becomer. We both agreed that someone should make a film or video called *Stupid Coalescing Becomers.*, and I thought it would be lovely and hilarious if I could present him with a VHS tape containing said movie before he went home at festival's end. So I made the movie that weekend (adding the period to the end of the title for greater assertive effect, the three-word phrase having taken on a definite insulting third-person tendency) and gave him the VHS tape on closing night when I said goodbye. He got a good laugh out of it (my handing him the tape, that is), which was the sum of my original intent, to please someone and myself not with the movie itself, but simply with the fact of its existence.

Then, of course, I hemmed and hawed about it for a year and a half, vaguely thinking about re-editing, re-recording some voice-over ... I can't remember if I made any cosmetic changes before mastering it and taking it off my hard drive, but I probably didn't.

The backwardness seemed a natural concept with that title as the starting point; I think I was leery of the fact that I'd already seen several experimental videos that year alone that took backwards footage as their main selling point: Saki Satomi's *M. Station Backward*; Eno-Liis Semper's *FF/REV*. I hadn't (and haven't) seen Jeroen Offerman's *Stairway at St. Paul's*, but I'd

heard plenty about it, where he learned 'Stairway to Heaven' backwards and sang it while people strolled past. Most of the ones I'd seen were good, but taken together it seemed like artists were in need of a new hook, and here I was making another backwards movie. So I think the voice-over grew out of a tendency to chastise them and myself for using a device that, let's face it, has been around long before that guy backwards-sang 'What a Wonderful World' on *America's Funniest People* back in the '80s. And, it occurs to me, my above description of the Becomers as beings who 'think they can avoid acknowledging the cause-and-effect workings of the world by temporarily (but ultimately futilely, in the narrator's opinion) reversing time for themselves' fits with your previous and implied definition of video artists/audiences as wilful self-oblivionizers.

MH: In the future, not only an iPod, but iDrives in iCars. iMovies already exist (you claim you make them yourself), and iJournalism we already see too much of. Now, let's see. Your *WEAKEND* (7:15 min, 2003) project turned Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger into a reflexive digital philosopher. Can you write about how this project began, how restrictions (prohibitions, taboos) can provide freedom, and why the governor is a particular apt figure (or is he?) for the new role into which you've cast him.

DC: How it began is the easiest question. Media-art collective famefame curated a program called *Attack of the Clones* for the Tranz Tech Media Art Biennial 2003 in Toronto. The call for submissions requested videos whose sole audio/video source was *The 6th Day*, a Roger Spottiswoode-directed Hollywood sci-fi film whose star is Arnold Schwarzenegger and whose subject is cloning. The idea was, of course, that all videos in the program would have the same DNA, so to speak – all clones of the original 35mm opus.

I want to answer the question of how restrictions (or, rather, let's call them parameters) can provide freedom. It makes me think of the Lars von Trier/Jorgen Leth film *The Five Obstructions*, in which von Trier gives Leth a series of assignments consisting of parameters to which Leth must adhere in remaking his own short film *The Perfect Human*. Leth breaks the rules in the second assignment and von Trier punishes him by making the next assignment devoid of parameters: absolute freedom. Leth retreats to his hotel room, where he laments, 'This is the worst one yet.'

We always have restrictions, more and less visible, when we make anything. You can't make a video that lasts longer than the life of the universe; you can't have a projection screen bigger than Ontario; you can't render explicit something you're too frightened to admit. It's simply a useful exercise to start out with a more-defined-than-usual parameter set. In the case of *WEAKEND*,

my remix of *The 6th Day*, I was very excited about the project – until I finally watched the film and was so underwhelmed by its content and images that I felt sullenly noncommittal. The best I could come up with was a series of digital gimmicks to perpetrate upon Arnold, which would be fun but hardly seemed enough to hang a video on. So I felt I needed to give them some context and use (and also expiate my moral twinges at playing with Arnold so cruelly, doing to Arnold what I usually do to myself) by giving Arnold the epilogue in which he criticizes the proceedings.

By splicing together words, or parts of words, I have him speak a new text: ‘You think you are a media artist because you control me with a piece of software? This is terrible. This is not natural,’ and so on.

You know, I saw footage of Ronald Reagan’s funeral, or at least memorial service, and Schwarzenegger was there, and he made the sign of the cross, but I could swear he made it backwards: up-down-right-left instead of up-down-left-right. Mirror images of religious iconography do not often portend well, at least in my experience (of watching horror movies and other less interesting movies in which characters played by people like Arnold Schwarzenegger fight demons). It also occurs to me that perhaps the explanation is simple: the image itself was flipped mirrorwise for some purely pragmatic reason known only to the networks. Which itself is cause for alarm in ways I hope I’ve already expressed at length in this interview.

MH: We were both invited a couple of years ago to produce a short video as a reaction to the life and work of the late Canadian video artist Colin Campbell. One of the curiosities of this commission was that Colin had long been surrounded by über talents from the art world, but Lisa Steele, the woman who commissioned the project through Vtape, a distribution organization co-founded by Colin and Lisa, amongst others, approached only artists who didn’t know Colin well. She always has an eye for outreach, and it was from this missionary position that the work advanced. I felt ambivalent about the results, particularly because Colin was dead, so there was no way he could defend or represent himself (why do I imagine defence and representation are the same?). To add this insult to his untimely death: a badly made piece of video art struck in his name. I was confused by your movie, *The Impostor (hello goodbye)* (8:48 min, 2003), when I first saw it: it was so archly ironic and spoke incessantly about death, but in an almost cartoon fashion, without any feeling at all, though there is much mention of tears. When I saw it I thought it was an image of an image of grieving. But now that I’ve soaked in it awhile and screened it more often, it’s becoming clearer. I’ve crossed some threshold of your intention and am happier for it. I’m wondering if you can talk about its making and your thoughts about Colin.

DC: I hadn’t realized that *The Colin Campbell Sessions* were such an outreach project. (Nor am I sure which video you’re referring to as ‘a bad piece of video art struck in his name’ – all of them,

perhaps? Including your own?) Are you sure none of the artists involved knew Colin? I was under the impression that at least you had known him; you’ve certainly done well to foster this impression in eyes mine and public with your own Colin video and with much allusive talk and activity since. But maybe you aren’t counting yourself.

Anyhow, it’s funny if you are right about that, because my entire video is a response to my (mis?)-apprehension that everyone else in the program had been intimately familiar with and influenced by the man and his work, whereas I had virtually no knowledge of either. I thought it had been assumed that I, like everyone else, was a Colin-friend and Colin-ophile, and I felt I’d be a fraud if I accepted and took the money and got the glory – but then I figured that to come clean about this in the video would be even braver than declining the invitation altogether.

So, of course, my ‘coming clean’ is a little cryptic, and I’ve substituted a fictional dream about my fictionally dead father for my real misgivings about Colin. This is partly because saying exactly and artlessly what you mean is generally, well, artless, and partly because (I must come clean here!) I was afraid of saying what I meant.

Even as artifice-woven as it is, at its premiere I was very afraid that in so exposing my own ignorance and fraudulence amidst an audience of Colin’s friends, advocates and aficionados, I was about to pour salt in their wounds and incur their wrath (‘Who is this nobody who made us think he was somebody and then rubbed it in our faces after we’d already given him recognition?’).

But the reception was warm, so either they didn’t get it – which would likely be a combination of their inattentiveness and my intent-obscuring crypticism – or I had managed to extrapolate from my feelings about my non-feelings about Colin a less specific and more resonant experience. I don’t know how much I can agree with you that it’s unemotional. Certainly it’s inexpressive facially and vocally, as I usually am in my videos (I try to know my limitations), and you also call it ‘cartoonish,’ which reminds me that most of my videos (including this one) evoke audience laughter, which I get such a quick taste for that I forget the surprise and conflict I felt on first hearing it.

Alex Glenfield’s music is the emotional anchor of the movie (Tarkovsky said that electronic music at its ideal could ‘be like someone breathing’). I think anybody who finds *The Impostor* entirely arch or comical is focusing so much on the text that the music is not allowed to get under the skin. Alex composed and recorded it a couple of years before I was invited to make the video, and he first played me the CD while I was formulating the concept. I thought it would be appropriate for *The Impostor*, with its waxing/waning, loop-like structure, and when he told me the title and the sonic ingredients, I knew it was doubly perfect. He’d been thinking, he told me, about Morse code and its use as a means for soldiers to send messages to their allies during wartime. Would anyone ever have formulated a message for his enemy?, he wondered, a proposal that sounds melancholy and humane to my ears, and so he made this piece of music that is

the phrase *For my enemy* in Morse code, repeated and superposed at various pitches. (There is also, he later told me, a second Morse code phrase in the piece, but no one has yet been able to decipher it, and he refuses to tell.)

It seemed fitting, since the character in the video has an adverse relationship to his late father (who is also himself) – an antagonism born of disassociation, of one party's ignorance and the other's absence. If the video is resonant, it's because of his attempt to throw a connective rope over this chasm, even as a third aspect of himself scissors the rope into little bits. And this is a pretty good expression of the way I feel, or don't, about Colin.

By this I mean Colin is an influence at second remove; I understand his work by having heard people talk about it, by having seen work made in its shadow. So my work is the shadow of a shadow, a second-generation copy at best. For me, in the context of video art, Colin is like, for instance, Orson Welles (and I mean the Welles of *Chimes at Midnight* and *It's All True!*, not the Welles who made *Citizen Kane* and *Touch of Evil* and the other few that I actually have seen), or like all the Godard or Snow that I know enough about to pretend I've seen if the conversation doesn't get too specific.

And if we stand on the shoulders of those who come before us, then I'm standing on someone who's standing on Colin's shoulders, and I've gotten to this height to no credit of my own (no self-aggrandizing, this – by 'height' I only mean the point at which everybody now is at, as a result of everything made up until now).

And I want to build on what I'm standing on, not just fritter away my vantage point from atop the dead, yet it feels that to do so I have to wrest attention away from them, toward myself (because attention is a finite resource). I don't know if they are my enemy – I doubt it, in fact, for they have given me so much – but quite often I feel I am theirs (or maybe *rival* is a more accurate, less stinging though also less evocative term than *enemy*).

At any rate, I feel a need to justify or defend myself – even if only to myself, to make me happy. And as you imply, defence equals representation, so I can at least represent myself. That's *The Impostor*, and Colin, and me.

I am, of course, wondering what was the threshold of my intention that you crossed, and where you found yourself.

MH: I met Colin only twice, and he lit me up like a fuse before disappearing again into that swarm of adoring and remarkable friends that I am slowly getting to know as I continue this project of portraiture, chasing his echoes. When we glanced off one another, he seemed a formidable figure from the past of a medium I had embraced only recently. He was able to make magic when video meant black and white and bad sound and no editing, so his practice provides, just as you suggest, the necessary sediment, the firmament, on which we are having this discussion.

You make a gesture toward this ur-time with your tape, which is made in a single shot (no edits), as a performance for camera, a first-person funeral oration for your dead father. You deliver this

monologue in a manner Colin would have relished, brimful with irony. But irony is very low on my pleasure register; the joys of camp and kitsch have proven elusive – I am either not large or not small enough to appreciate them. The music you mention, I must confess, has breezed past four or five times now with hardly a notice, not that music requires notice to be effective, but I am fixated, as usual, on your performing presence. In this movie you play a self-conscious fairy-taler who narrates a dreamed deathbed visitation with dear old Dad and then hyperbolizes a moment of response at the funeral. Your inheritance, you insist, relies on the volume of tears you can wring from your audience. This is all recounted in such a studied fashion that the first few times I watched I felt nothing but far away. Is this the theatre that old Brecht had in mind? The alienation effect, the ability to study the scene in front of you without the mess of identification. The truth is, I still don't find it moving, but as George Lucas once said, hitting a cat on the head with a hammer is emotionally stirring for audiences, and anyone can do that. I once felt Colin's passing deserved more, but no longer. I don't believe your movie needs to reach past itself to provide emotional transport for strangers. Nor to provide a stage for our emotions, or to demonstrate how emotions are made (oh look, they're crying, no wonder I feel sad). Instead, your movie offers the more vicarious pleasures of the meta-verse: not emotions, but emotions that are about emotions. And this is familiar ground to me. All of my dreams take place in bookshops and cinemas. I know it must have been different for previous generations, perhaps for someone like Colin, who could dream of something like primary experiences, actual encounters, instead of reading about them in a book inside a dream. And then, of course, there are the generations who came before Colin, some born before the unconscious was invented. What hope for these brave men and women who were left no apparatus to dream with?

DC: I'll begin with a technicality: it is true that *The Impostor* is made in a single shot, but it's not entirely true that it is without edits. There is one not-quite-hidden but not-usually-noticed dissolve that enables me to present an 18-minute take as a nine-minute (hopefully invisible) split-screen. (I feel uncomfortable saying this, as if I were Hitchcock letting the dead mother out of the bag just because it seemed a fitting thing to do in the middle of a chat with some decent fellow down at the press club.)

I always run into this problem of doing things I know are alienating not because of any really marvellous reasons that Brecht might have had, but because that's the approach I identify with. The alienating tactic isn't alienating to me, not at all; it's the expression of how I feel about the material.

Hal Hartley described himself as a scientist carrying out an experiment, telling the audience what's going to happen before it happens, making them recognize that the movie they're watching is just a shred of film passing past a light bulb. His aim is not to destroy their emotional experience – quite the opposite. When this experiment succeeds, it creates a kind of magic – not only are we

involved and invested, in spite of ourselves, in things we know to be untrue, but we are aware that this is the case, that we have this desire. In his view, this bald-faced suspension of disbelief is a fuller goal than the conventional one of total immersion, which he calls 'emotional effect as opposed to emotional involvement.'

I read this in an interview years ago; looking at it again now, it seems I internalized it enough that I applied its method to an artifact composed of its own method's metaphorical ingredients: *The Impostor's* introductory remarks give away the ending, the lab scientist foregrounds the film strip's passing and both onscreen figures reveal their identities' shared artifice.

MH: What a terrific answer – even your sidesteppings are terrific. I hope you are not feeling that my intention is to keep you spinning round the centrifuge until all your features flatten into some grotesque, uniform, two-dimensional space. The grotesque is best appreciated in three dimensions, don't you think?

DC: In Borges' 'Funes the Memorious,' the narrator has a conversation with a man incapable of forgetting anything, and expresses his anxiety thus: 'I thought that each of my words (that each of my movements) would persist in his implacable memory; I was benumbed by the fear of multiplying useless gestures.' I know this interview is creeping along, and it's because of the anxiety I feel in committing words to a likely life beyond my control. This anxiety manifests as half-compulsion to make the words right, half-reticence to make them at all.

So for now I'll keep putting it off by resurrecting the words of others, throwing zombie texts up in front of myself as a front line of defence. Atom Egoyan wrote, in the foreword to your *Fringe Film in Canada* book: '[I]s the traditional grammar of cinema a direct expression of how we dream? Do we dream in multi-angle coverage, with static masters, close-ups, tracking shots, and pans? Do we never cross the magical axis, except when we wake out of our sleep in terror? Is this why the language of early cinema came so quickly – because we've been playing it inside our heads forever?'

I heard him espousing this theory in a radio interview a few years before I read it (and, I imagine, before he wrote it), and when

I first heard him (paraphrasing himself before his time?), I thought, 'How wonderful, how true.' But now I'm more inclined to think it's something a film director would say and a film student would believe. It certainly has the ring of aphoristic truth to it, and it still pleases me, but I'm more compelled to believe that Egoyan's connection is backwards. The contemporary language of dreams is indeed the language of cinema, not the other way around; the language inside our heads has come to us because we've been playing it to ourselves incessantly for the last hundred years.

We dream about our apparatus, or at least in its language. Maybe the pre-cinema people were tied to other machines and languages, maybe they dreamed more words than we do. The dreams of the even older past are still around, but I don't think they're compatible with our dreams. Our dreams are noisy and addictive, and I think they drown out the old ones.

My friend had a dream once in which he opened a book, read it in its entirety, closed it and awoke. Now, that's what I call a dream! But of course it's still using the language of an apparatus, just an older one. I wish I dreamed more about bookstores. Borges dreamed about texts (and about dreams, ad infinitum), and he put the 'words' outside the parentheses, the 'movements' inside. His words were the primary experience, his body the secondary, but what else could be expected of a dreamer whose apparatus was the library?

The hope for those brave gone people, as you mentioned earlier, might be that they need not fear the multiplication of their gestures, useless or otherwise. (They may well have not even understood this fear, except dimly, abstractly, as a literary or pre-literary fantasy.) They can rest in peace – if silence, invisibility and stillness amount to peace. Though if they do, then I wonder what hope for us.

MH: Are stories a way to 'kill' time, a way to foreshorten the drift I feel settling in as each day trips past, heedless, joining all the other small habits of all the other small days in that pool of forgetting I insist on calling myself?

DC: Stories are a way to reacquaint ourselves with time, which can also mean reacquainting ourselves with mortality. I saw *Broken Flowers* a few weeks ago, and I can't say I thought it was thor-

oughly great, but there were a couple of minutes during which I knew I was going to die. I write it now and it just feels like words, almost like a lie, but for that brief time it was a new understanding, intense and acceptable. I knew it was new, and I also knew it would probably leave me soon, and it did.



The Impostor (hello goodbye)

The fact that I have absolutely no recollection which part of the movie's 'story' (in the sense of 'plot') brought this on shows, I think, that it was not a purely plot-based epiphany, but rather one enabled by some temporal experience.

MH: Take heart, we are nearing the end. But not before you scribble a few words about *Metronome* (10:40 min, 2002), your breakout hit. I remember when James Benning released *American Dreams*, the Hoberman review in the *Village Voice* asked: *avant-garde MVP?* And something of that shadow hung over *Metronome*; it was just so smart and hurting and funny. If I'm remembering correctly, it was yet another commission, and features yourself, of course, the last beating heart of the video fringe. Or the first one. What might be curious, for the singularity trackers, those in search of an artist's interiority, is that this movie, which so flamboyantly and elegantly demonstrated your own, is largely made up of other people's pictures. Do you see what I see?

DC: Yes, I suppose I do.

But to agree feels a little too close to an admission of defeat, or at least defeatism, taking the stance that all worthwhile images have already been made, so there's nothing left to do but shift them around like puzzle pieces. The fame-fame group seem to occupy this position (or, at least, they seem to profess to occupy it). The extreme aggression of their reorganization is an attempt to annihilate received pictures and, hopefully, reveal something behind. I think the project is a good one, but I can't agree with its despairing impulse. If I thought there were no more new images left to be made and/or found, I doubt I would be very interested in looking at them or working with them – or, at least, I would no longer be able to convince myself that doing so had more to do with joy than addiction.

It is very true, though, that the invention of imagery is not my strong suit. The images I shoot myself (or get friends to shoot for me) are usually illustrative of ideas but not seductive in their own right (this is a discredit not to my friends' shooting skills, but rather to my imagistic imagination). The pictures are there to support the narrative throughline, and I'm capable of making them do that undistractingly, while also ensuring that they don't look crappy, but I have made relatively few shots I find really aesthetically pleasing. The single widescreen shot of *The Impositor*; portions of *The Other Shoe*'s black-and-white 16mm slowfall; certain compositions in *Doctor Virtuous*, *You Are In A Maze* and *Stupid Coalescing Becomers*. – not much else really springs to mind.

Metronome is all about a mind formed by the images of others, so it's only fitting that it be comprised in large part of pictures from outside. But I'm less interested in that nowadays, maybe

every night,
the man heard
his upstairs neighbour

hit the floor.

The Other Shoe

because I've done a couple of post-production-heavy remix projects and I feel like I want to get my hands on the world again. Maybe because I've seen so much remixing and puzzle-piecing even in the three years since I made *Metronome* that I feel that confining ourselves to existing images is a dead end than trying to make new ones. And maybe because I know this is something I need to practice, to get better at, because I've always known that thinking in pictures can go farther when it's combined with invention, aesthetic and otherwise.

I'm a singularity tracker too. I understand they used to be called auteurs.

Metronome's conceptual starting point is my attempt to keep a steady beat for an extended period of time. It's a 'day in the life' movie, from breakfast to bedtime, with me pounding my own chest at 144 beats per minute in sync with a constant table-drumming on the soundtrack. A just-as-insistent voice-over makes a fairly deterministic and despairing relation between meter/order/loops and the experience of repetitive thought patterns.

The monologue acknowledges its debt to other monologue-based movies I've seen (repeatedly, in many cases), and goes on from there to speculate on how two decades of moviegoing has insinuated certain aesthetic and ideological beats into the polyrhythm that is my psyche. Footage from narrative feature films (primarily Hollywood, with a focus on science fiction and its love-hate relationship with order) is intercut with the me-footage; both sets of images are for the most part illustrations of the internal monologue. I could also say it begins with a Wittgenstein aphorism via Steve Reich: 'How small a thought it takes to fill a whole life!' – in a way, that says it all (how could it not?).

MH: My previous question still waits answering: how is it possible to arrive at something like auteur moments via quotation? How do you manage to express your subjectivity through others' pictures?



The Other Shoe

there are plenty of such image-makers, neither I nor anybody else knows about them. I don't see how it would be possible to learn from such an example; if the task is to be invisible, where do you find pictures of your role models?

I understand 'subjectivity' to mean a singularity through which the world is passing in a particular way, in a particular order, 'a piece of the world through which the world looks at itself,' as Italo Calvino described his Mr. Palomar describing himself. And since a subjectivity can't take a picture of itself, it can only take a picture of the world. I suppose the goal in self-expression is to take enough pictures of the world that the viewer undergoes an analogue of the self's experience. And if that world the self is taking pictures of is already full of other people's pictures, then so be it.

DC: I hadn't realized you asked that. If I were limited further – e.g., if I were unable to write and perform voice-over – then personal expression would be harder for me to achieve – though didn't I say in talking about one of my remix movies that I liked restrictions, parameters, limitations? So strange that this conversation, which has taken months, is going to be compiled into a single something that will take minutes to read. Contradictions and redundancies I would have never noticed, separated by weeks, will arrive on top of one another.

At any rate, I do have all these other tools at my disposal, to say nothing of montage. In *Metronome*, you could say that the appropriated footage is like a pov shot, and the footage of me is a reaction shot. My voice-over, in connecting the two, fulfills the function that would in classical cinema be fulfilled by my eyeline. This might in fact be more subjective, since it's a shot-reverse-shot alternation motivated by the mind's eye rather than the retina's (of course, saying this assumes some primal connection between language and subjectivity).

Your question implies an equation of picture ownership with subjectivity ownership. I want to agree with that equation, but I'm not sure it holds water. Pictures are part of the world now. It's ridiculous to lay claim to them, and it's ridiculous to say others have already legitimately done so. Yet we do every day. Our careers as filmmakers or video artists depend on our ability to put our names on packages of pictures. You or I or anyone might espouse the belief in an open-source model of image accessibility (though, for the record, I currently don't), but that speaks only to the control-related aspect of ownership. Unless you cease associating your name with the works you make, cease reaping the benefits of the attention those works garner and allow yourself to recede into anonymity and obscurity, you're claiming some ownership of images. Ego is another aspect of ownership, and I think very few image-makers are willing to forfeit the opportunity to propagate their ego across space and time. If

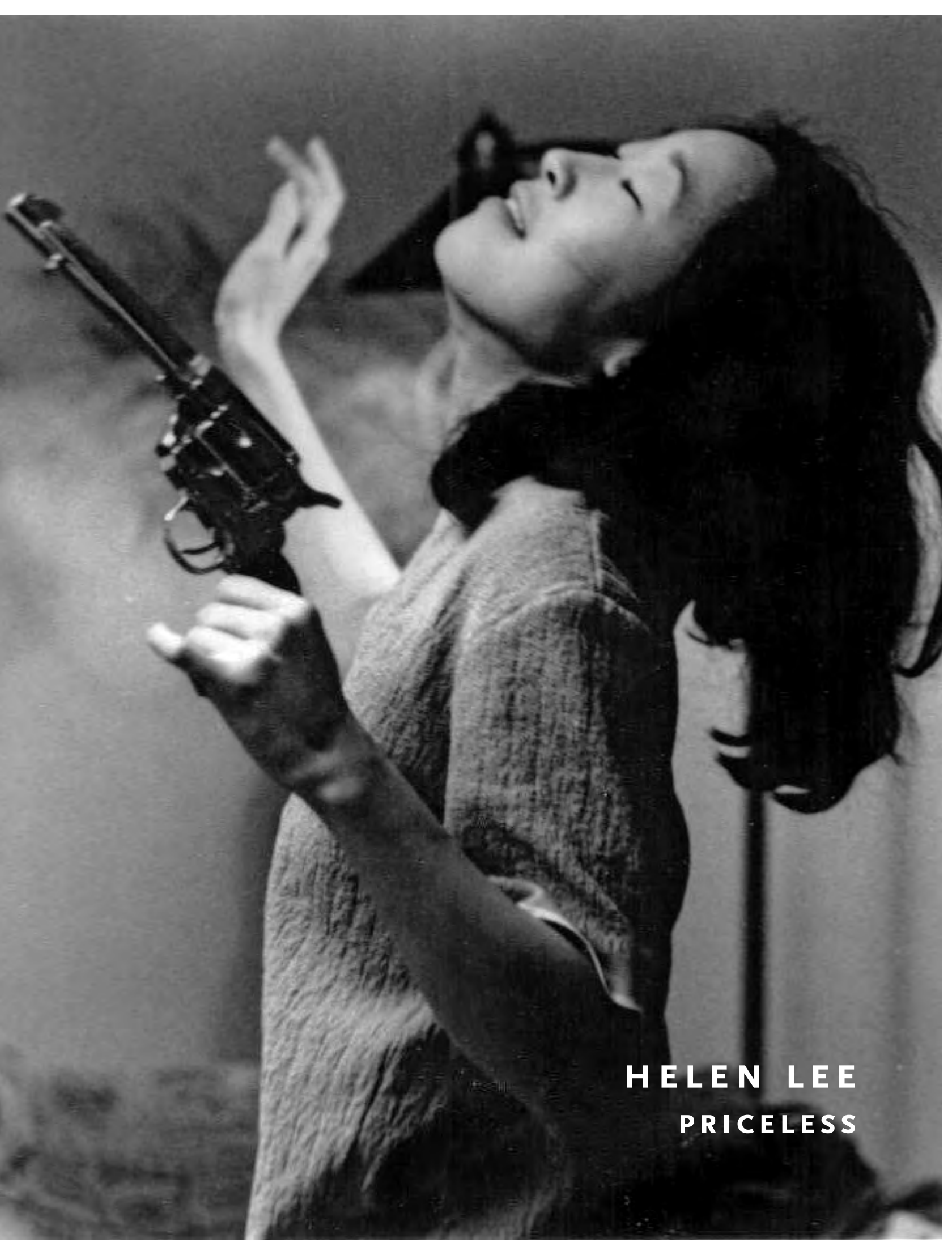
Daniel Cockburn's Videos and Films

Doctor Virtuous 5:30 min 1999
Rocket Man 5 min 2000
monopedal Joy 1:20 min, 2001
The Other Shoe 5:10 min 2001
IdeaL 2:18 min 2002
You Are In A Maze Of Twisty Little
Passages, All Different 9:11 min 2002
Metronome 10:40 min 2002
i hate video 8 min 2002
PSYCHO / 28 x 2 3 min 2002
Subterranea Gargantua (prelude) 3 min 2002
WEAKEND 7:15 min 2003
The Impostor (hello goodbye) 8:48 min 2003
Denominations 1 min 2003
Audit 3 min 2003
Figure vs. Ground 7 min 2004 (with Emily Vey Duke)
Nocturnal Doubling 4:07 min 2004
Chicken/Egg: The Williams Equation 1 min 2004
Continuity 21:58 min 2004
Stupid Coalescing Becomers. 2:31 min 2004
Brother Tongue/Langue Fraternelle 15:43 min 2006

Single-channel works distributed by Vtape.

Daniel Cockburn lives in Toronto. He is currently at work on a feature-length video (working title *You Are Here*). In 2009 he will be a filmmaker-in-residence at the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program. For information on his videos, films and writing, visit www.zeroFunction.com.





HELEN LEE
PRICELESS

She was supposed to be far too famous to be in a book like this. *Helen Lee!* She should have eaten up the director's fortnight at Cannes, then produced her crossover hit, before retreating back into a first-person cinema that hurts to look at, the way you turn your eyes from certain kinds of beauty. But there are some dreams that only someone else's money can buy.

Like Jeff Erbach, who appears elsewhere in this volume, Helen can't just pick up a camera and go wandering out into the streets in search of the good light and a face that looks back. Instead, she needs a script and a director of photography and a crew to realize the pictures that are lying inside her. These capital-intensive efforts mean that picture-making is a slow and sometimes cumbersome affair, and one that involves waiting and organizing and turning yourself into a personal bureaucrat. She has handled all that on a small scale in her work to date and produced a suite of glowing promissory notes that elegantly lend stories to a post-colonial condition. She is one of the smartest filmmakers I've ever met, rousing herself out of a temporary haze of shoe stores and insider food jokes to lay down incisive and unsettling critiques. The pictures that have already arrived and the pictures that are in the midst of being born, they cut to the quick. They are somehow always unexpected, as if one were ambushed by a cool beauty, the steady throb of minor-key glamour, the raw intelligence that bursts out of the background details.

MH: Helen, I am just back in Toronto from Windsor's Media City Festival, a gathering of fringe moviemakers bent under a rigorous light. Landscapes rules, okay? Silent movies are better than sound. It was a stern demonstration of a cinema that remains abstract, first-person, sometimes lyric, reflexive to a fault, an examination of the apparatus and of the act of the seeing itself. And, of course, it was helmed by white males. Everywhere I looked there were more white males, like me. And I found this distressing, that this 'genre' had been commandeered, once again, without anyone saying a word, by more white males. As if dominance in the dominant genres weren't enough. Of course, we were all crouched behind our marginal attitudes, our First World poverties, and whenever I brought up the fact that this festival was dedicated to staging a white aesthetic, people looked at me as if I'd swallowed all the blue pills and not the red ones like I was supposed to. Have racial politics taken a giant step backwards over the past decade? Has the constant bludgeoning of the neo-con right won out, after all, and allowed, even in the grottos of the fringe, a white male supremacy to rule again?

HL: To announce that cinema itself, at root and centre, is a white male enclave seems to be stating the obvious – and people don't like to hear it, not then and not now: *how boring, oh do we have to bring that up again, get over it already.* To have the same sentiments reinscribed in what's assumed to be a more progressive, now-rehabilitated environment of indie experimental makers, well, it's a bit galling, isn't it (as if we expected better

from our peers than the more commercial arena of feature films)? What being male and white (gay or straight) endows is, of course, not a natural aptitude or in-born talent for cinema, but rather a feeling of enfranchisement, that yes, I'm able to go out and make movies as if it's my right. Thank god there are some women, and increasingly more and more, who believe they are equally entitled. I don't think anyone was ever happy with the term *people of colour*, but we created that space for ourselves, pried it open, carved it out, squatted it and made our own uses of it. So, Mike, now you're back in Windsor and it's feeling so old-school again; that's a bit demoralizing. I did love that scrutiny, the precise and passionate attention to cinema itself. The revitalizing gestures of reflexivity were part of a time when I discovered cinema in the mid-'80s, and were part of the sea change that occurred a few years later, where social and political matters went hand in hand with aesthetic considerations, making the work all the more strong, pressing and provocative. I'd hate to think of a backwards movement, or even a lateral one – more of a coexistence, perhaps, whether one likes to acknowledge others or not.

MH: Could you speak about your relation to the avant-garde? Do you believe this is a historical consideration, something that used to exist, for instance, in Russia during the 1920s, but not any longer? When *Sally's Beauty Spot* came out, it really lit up imaginations around the globe, in its own small, avant way, of course. It seemed part of a generational agon around issues of racial representation that remains ongoing. But your work represented part of a new frontier of visibility and intelligence, a new way to address racial politics, perhaps, a new kind of aspiration and a new sort of pleasure. I don't need you to mull over whether you were more avant than the next liberation theorist, but I'm hoping you can describe something of this heady time.

HL: There is certainly that avant-garde you speak of, which includes *Battleship Potemkin*, Dziga Vertov, Kuleshov, et al., that we learned about in our cinema studies classes. Of course it's inspirational but historically circumscribed and reified – possibly exactly what the avant-garde is exactly not about. It's become a genre in itself. It has an 'experimental look,' a 'music-video feel' – you know what I'm talking about. I was exposed to art and artmaking early (my parents, particularly my mother, believed in art) and started to view the world aesthetically, at the same time as sensing my own foreignness in early '70s immigrant Canadian culture. My grade school coincided with the era of Trudeau's multiculturalism as official government policy colliding with the changeover to the metric system and visits to Ontario Place ... It all seemed extremely modern and shiny! Finding words for a racialized identity, and then moving toward cinematic expression, was altogether organic with the artistic and intellectual goals of my education, which culminated then. I was in New York in 1989 at an astonishingly vibrant time for critical and cultural studies, learning from groundbreaking figures like Homi

Bhabha, Mick Taussig and Faye Ginsburg. My illustrious teachers at NYU and the Whitney were wondrous, and we students were tadpoles in a very deep pond. At the same time, nobody was saying anything exactly about my experience in the Asian American world, the way I'd like to see it – which is more sideways and askance – in the critically challenging way that was exciting me at the time. In that sense, criticism and theory (Stuart Hall, ideas of Third Cinema) came slightly before the watershed moments and prepared the way. But very quickly, they arrived hand in hand (Trinh T. Minh-ha, Sankofa and Black Audio Film Collective), inseparable and stronger for it. The most compelling artwork, for me, is almost always socially engaged.

MH: In his seminal 1991 essay 'Yellow Peril: Reconsidered,' Paul Wong writes, 'In general, few Asians venture into the field of contemporary art practice. Those who do, make fully assimilated Eurocentric work or choose to work in traditional forms or commercial art areas.' How did you get hooked on movies, and how did you avoid (or did you?) the Eurocentric banalities Wong warns against?

HL: Doesn't everybody love movies? I had a steady diet of '70s kids' tv shows and California sitcoms, graduated to watching black-and-white oldies and Duran Duran music videos, before becoming thoroughly semiotized through years of film theory. Seriously, that's the narrative. And ringing through my head was hearing about Kathryn Bigelow and how she had to 'unlearn' everything she was taught in the Whitney program in order to make her Hollywood films. That said, I've hardly watched any television over the past 20 years, and narrative filmmaking is still an unending puzzle for me. Writing a script is such a mind-crunch, especially when you want to engage in genre but not be entirely subsumed by it (those reflexive experiments hardly ever really work, do they?). I had an early interest in meta-narratives, especially those with a feminist perspective (Chantal Akerman), even when these perspectives are not obvious (like in the fearless films of Claire Denis). In the 15 years since Paul's essay, the ground has definitely shifted and there are certainly more Asian artists in the sphere. To lapse into arguments of Eurocentricism even seems quaintly outdated, glad to say – everything's become so much more decentralized, and it's widely acknowledged that some of the best cinema comes from other parts of the world. Korea has also been 'discovered' for cineastes and lionized at international festivals and popular in art-house circuits. But there is always Hollywood as some kind of global standard, and the obsession of box-office statistics as daily news. The making of feature films, especially in English, will always be circumscribed by this context, between the American behemoth and European felines. Which is why Canadian cinema fares so poorly on the screens, even (or, should I say, especially) on our own.

MH: There is an abiding stress placed on women around the question of balancing a 'work/artist's' life with duties of family and



Sally's Beauty Spot

home. A friend of mine complained that since she had a child she was no longer taken seriously as an artist, at least not in Toronto. As someone recently hitched, with two kids as part of the deal, could you comment on the continuing joys and pleasures of balancing a world of self-made pictures with everyday demands of those near and dear?

HL: Haven't been able to learn that trick yet, Mike. That uneasy, if not downright ill-fitting, match of artistic aspiration with motherhood. Perhaps they are equally vital creative endeavours? We all know about Jane Campion's work after becoming a mother – whatever happened to that edge and visual incisiveness, her adroit direction – and I say this as someone who was her biggest fan. Something about focus, I imagine (no pun intended), and the intense burning passion and extremely hard work that attends both filmmaking and raising children. I know that to pursue film properly, everything (and I mean everything) has to go by the wayside, including personal relationships. Men can put family on the backburner as they go into production, but it's harder for women, who usually carry the domestic burden on their shoulders, to ignore the laundry, kitchen mess and hungry children. Some of the most successful filmmakers have extremely supportive spouses (i.e., wives), though I don't know many women directors with kids who have been able to muster the same support.

Even the dance of development, when financing is in limbo and endless meetings with various people you want on board your as-yet-unrealized project, combined with creative uncertainty and constant script changes, can be overcome only by 110 percent energy plus luck, and that can be a bit difficult when you have to be home by five for the kids. The domestic juggle alone is exhausting, never mind adding the more-than-full-time occupation of being a filmmaker. Right now I don't feel like a filmmaker anymore. Though, believe me, I am craving to make those cuts, add the sound, recut to make it work, rescreen, cut again – that completely obsessive activity so ingrained it feels like part of the DNA. Maybe when the children get older it will be easier, more in the realm of possibility. Or, in the interim, scale down the projects into mini-movies, little video projects. Somehow I'll try. But right now I have to go and make dinner.

MH: What a thrill it was for me to watch *Sally's Beauty Spot* (12 min, 1990) again, though I'm guessing if you made it today it would be quicker, slicker, its surface a smooth sheen. Which makes me wonder: is there a pitch and speed that 'belongs' to each time of making, and do movies both express and reflect that attention? Does the flow of pictured events, even in narratives, provide models of time that we watch so they can inhabit us, so we can inhabit them?

HL: That's so funny. When I see *SBS*, all I see is how rough, even primitive, it is. It was shot on a hand-cranked, non-reflex Bolex camera I bought at a country auction, with those 100-foot 16mm rolls, no sound, and we had practically nothing in the way of lights. I think we shot the whole thing in our pyjamas. We'd all roll out of bed and I'd wake up Sally: 'C'mon, we gotta go shoot now.' One thing I was preoccupied with, besides the ideas of the film, was the rhythm and pacing, because it was originally done for an undergrad editing class when I was enrolled at New York University's graduate cinema studies program. I took it as an extra course because I wanted to learn some filmmaking while studying theory; everyone in the class had to edit something, anything, like found footage, but I thought I'd just shoot some of my own footage to cut together for the exercise. I cut the work print on a Steenbeck, with magnetic sound. I think there's a fundamental difference of time and duration between film and video. It's a much faster and more expedient process cutting in video, of course – cleaner, even sterile. Pushing buttons allows you to cut more impulsively, try dozens of variations, and in the process become confused with all the minuscule variations. With film – and stop me if I sound nostalgic – you are forced to think things through more, to respond more to a physiological impulse, because the cut is physical. The feeling of ribbons of celluloid running through your fingers, or threading through the machine, creates a different sense of time and timing. When you're fine-cutting, you can tweak it to the frame, see those individual frames literally pass before your eyes. It's a feeling like being inside the text, and being part of its texture – you don't get that same feeling

with video, which offers a feeling of gliding mastery, manipulation and digital dexterity. Despite its anachronistic status, in some ways I think film-cutting is a more conceptually sound process; the construction of the film can be more holistically achieved. You can have all these trims of different shots and selects sitting in your bin and then an idea strikes. Some happy little accidents can happen while editing, as you're putting one shot next to another. The physical proximity and handling of the footage is what we miss when working in video.

MH: Your movie is, among other things, a very intimate exploration of your sister's body. The beauty spot of the title is a mole just above her breast, which she is constantly scrubbing and picking at; we watch her putting her shirt on over and over again, rouging her lips, kissing a couple of handsones. Why did you cast your sister for this role? Was the 'issue' of her beauty spot already a point of discussion between the two of you? Did you ever ask her to do anything she refused? *Sally's Beauty Spot* is redolent with pictures of Asian skin: the disrobing of Suzie Wong ('Take that dress off!'), for instance. There is a delight in looking expressed throughout the movie, accompanied, of course, by theoretical hat pins, an erotics of attention that lingers despite the quick-witted montage. Can you comment?

HL: My sister Sally is now seven months pregnant and I feel her pregnancy in a wholly different way than from when, say, other relatives or friends were pregnant. Obviously it's because of the relationship I have with her body, our bodies, over time, as sisters close in age (she's two years younger) growing up. Koreans have a term called *skinship*, which means the feelings of closeness and tenderness engendered from literally touching the skin, or say a couple on their first date and one of them accidentally brushes by the other's arm or something. It's not so much sexual as it is sensuous. I think feelings of absorption, feeling subsumed, and otherwise giving yourself over to the other, is part of it. My sister and I are unusually close. When boyfriends weren't around (and sometimes when they were), we were still each other's significant other. (I guess that's all changed now since we both got married this year.) Just after completing the film, I showed it to a fellow Canadian studying in New York, David Weaver (who was at Columbia and also became a filmmaker), and he mentioned pretty much the same thing, the 'erotics of attention' you speak of. And for the first time it struck me how sexualized my sister's body was in the film! I was so preoccupied with the concepts of the film that the idea never even occurred to me. Although it is a sexualization that comes from a self-possessed self-actualization rather than objectification, I'd argue. Biographically speaking, I don't think Sally had any complex whatsoever about the mole on her breast, and I had only a vague awareness of its existence even – it was just a rather convenient cathexis. One of my academic highlights was being able to do an independent study with Homi Bhabha through the Whitney Program, a kind of one-on-one seminar with him when he was a guest professor at

Princeton in 1992. Since he was one of the inspirations of the film, I showed it to him. He commented on the mole on her breast as a kind of Barthesian punctum, the peripheral detail that is so telling. My sister, no slouch in theory herself, immediately ripostes, 'Hey, no way, the punctum is the stretch marks.'

MH: You make ample use of clips from *The World of Suzie Wong* by Richard Quine (starring Nancy Kwan and William Holden). We see Sally watching this movie; as she takes cues for her own life, she offers us a model of picture reception. She is the first audience, and we watch the movie over her shoulder. Or at least part of it. Why was it important to insert the viewer into the frame? How did you come to choose this movie, and how does it function within your film? And how does the complicated exchange of looks 'work' in your movie?

HL: It was important to assert Sally as an active and interested viewer who took pleasure in the images of Suzie, a stereotypical 'dragon lady' and 'hooker with a heart of gold.' Although *The World of Suzie Wong* is added with clichés, it was one of the few attractive mass-media images – one of the few images whatsoever – for young girls like us growing up in North American suburbs in the '70s, and this old 1960 film seemed to be on tv all the time. She looks smashing in a cheongsam; her sassy attitude and flagrant sexuality was part of the hook (and even more so if she had actually spoken with the British accent Nancy Kwan must have had, since she was raised in England – how interesting would that have been). So Sally's viewing provokes a discussion about how we find pleasure in things that are supposedly 'bad' for us, in reputedly racist images such as Suzie Wong. It upends the rather simplistic argument that only 'positive' images are good for us, for the so-called model minority citizens that Asian Americans are purported to be. But then I wondered: isn't it just another kind of simplistic reflex to position Sally as a viewer in front of the film? And then I realized that film is fundamentally full of simple gestures, basic human responses and behaviours. Sally is no longer ignored or invisible but, rather, becomes a 'reading against the grain' kind of viewer. Because that's the only way to look at old films or old pop songs – otherwise we revert to nostalgia and sentiment. We have to invent a new historicity to make it relevant to us, how we live now.

MH: One of the voices in the soundtrack says, 'Skin as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype is the most visible of fetishes, recognized as common knowledge in a range of cultural, political, historical discourses, and it plays a part in the racial drama that is enacted every day in colonial societies.' Do you still believe this to be true? It is rare to hear statements like this made in movies made today. Why do you imagine that is?

HL: Yes, it does sound rather totalizing, doesn't it? Especially for most of us who don't see the world in that way, despite the

dialects of north/south, white/black (or brown or yellow), master/slave – because history can't be ignored. But probably class and economics penetrates all this. I mean, practically anyone will work with anyone and put prejudices aside if the money is right. That's probably too crude or jaded. I think in cities like Toronto or New York you'll find both race-identified clusters and also a cosmopolitanism that tends to elide or mask the conflicts – but they're there, especially in terms of class (as other places such as Los Angeles and the Paris suburbs have found), or obviously in terms of religion (London, the Middle East), and the perceived threat of difference. Everyone likes to believe there's progress and tolerance, and that education and assimilation are working. But the issue of race remains. It may be parodied in Hollywood, or commodified and niche-marketed, but it's still an 'issue.' It's not often talked about as 'skin' per se, because that would be so wrong and retrograde, wouldn't it? French films that take up race with a heavy skin factor at play, like *La Haine* and some of the earlier films by Claire Denis (who I immensely admire), seem to be made under the ghost of Frantz Fanon and the spectre of Otherness, like it's an inescapable legacy. No matter how far away from a post-colonial environment we think we may be, we're always confronting the Other and, in turn, ourselves.

MH: *My Niagara* (40 min, 1992) opens with home movies taken in Japan. Where are these from? How do they escape the aura of cliché and redundancy that clings to all home movies (which all seem to be made by the same cameraperson, showing the same family, doing the same things)?

HL: We shot those 'home movies' on Super 8 Kodachrome, then transferred to 16mm, a beautiful process that renders supersaturated colour and grain you can almost touch. It exemplifies the difference between digital and analog, with all of its scratches and hiccups – a much more 'human' look. In a sense we wanted to remake that cliché. I saw the opening sequence as a fantasy, a childhood nostalgia for the main character, Julie Kumagai, whose mother is an idealized, untouchable figure, long-dead. I don't know all that many Asians, especially Asians like me who immigrated to Canada in the late '60s or '70s, who took those kinds of pictures – we were caught in snap cameras or Polaroids. But it was different for Japanese-Canadian/American communities who had been here one or two generations – some of them made those beguiling pictures. I couldn't resist, at the end of the home-movie footage, to steal some thriller genre music (from a 1948 Nicholas Ray film called *They Live by Night*) to undercut its sweet nostalgia, a foreshadowing of Julie's sullen, introspective character.

MH: The clothesline at night with its ghost-like sheets, the snake-like green hose glimpsed in moonlight – you've rendered suburbia as a mythical place of beauty and terror. You grew up there, didn't you?



My Niagara

HL: And I have tremendous nostalgia for it, despite having desperately wanted to escape it, especially at the time of *My Niagara*, because I was living in Toronto without my family. My parents and siblings had moved to California and then Vancouver (though my sister subsequently moved back), leaving me immediate-family-less in my hometown. The situation gave me time to mull over my childhood and upbringing. We shot the film in Etobicoke, in the house that Kerri Sakamoto (the co-writer) grew up in. It was different than Scarborough, where I was raised – a little denser, not as spaced out – but also the same. The safety, the ennui and also the repressions lie beneath a pretty and peaceful exterior. The cinematographer, Ali Kazimi, had an idea to shoot these day-for-night shots that would bring a spark to the silhouettes and evoke loneliness. Now that my existence has been completely urban and downtown the past 20 years, I think I look back too fondly on it, even now with all the big-box retailers. Of course, I could never live there again.

MH: Throughout *My Niagara* there is an eye for lingering details. The impulse to stop and admire the shape of a plant takes one outside narrative requirements that are fundamentally paranoid – in this sense, that every gesture, no matter how small, has significance, and that these significances ‘add up’ to a closing denouement, the *aha!* moment. Your movie presents these nomadic attentions as asides, and these two movements of the film seem in opposition. Can you comment?

HL: That’s so astutely observed, Mike. Because again it was an unconscious process at the time. All I know was I was extremely concerned about these little details, and when we were shooting, the crew members (who were much more experienced than me) referred to these shots as ‘cutaways’ and seemed to relax and not care so much about these short set-ups without actors. But to me they were just as important as the dramatic sequences! In fact,

there were more of these asides than what ended up in the film, because, exactly as you say, they were hard to reconcile with the story and tended to hold up the film’s narrative momentum. In that way I felt the narrative had won out over the anti-narrative impulse I was exploring at that time. Those experiments fascinated me, those films by Sally Potter, Patricia Gruben and Chantal Akerman. I thought the film was a ‘failure’ not to fulfill these puncturing effects, these quiet moments outside the story proper that still had something to say. There were similar sound cues in the film: sounds of water dripping, sprinklers, that kind of thing. I think that’s what gives the film its enigmatic character, this sense of estrangement from a typical narrative film, because there’s something else at work. The film ends with Julie serving two bowls of rice for herself and

her father, and it’s shot at waist level. There was never a full shot that included her head, or a close-up of her face that would ‘tell us what she’s thinking.’ It was exactly her gesture that was important, the same daily, never-changing, never-questioning gesture of duty and obeisance that ruled her life.

MH: *My Niagara* is set at the waterworks, part of Toronto’s small cache of mythic architecture. It is the setting for the climax of Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* and the subject of Rick Hancox’s *Waterworx (A Clear Day and No Memories)*, among other cultural stargazings. What is your fascination with this place?

HL: I originally attended a site-specific show of installation artworks at the Harris Filtration Plant, not knowing its place in the lore of Toronto cultural geography. It was revelatory because the Beaches was an entirely new neighbourhood for me, and felt both part of contemporary Toronto but also outside of it. The place has mythic dimensions and a certain haunting quality. Before the filtration plant was built, the grounds served as a sanatorium for lepers and tuberculosis patients at the turn of the century. This bucolic and barren environment with its functional industrial complex filtering drinking water from the adjacent lake was very inspiring. Since water was always the metaphor at work as this piece slowly seeped from our brains (mine and Kerri’s), it made perfect sense for Julie to work at this water filtration plant. It all seemed possible, though it was a big scale-up from *Beauty Spot*’s shooting-in-our-loft-one-weekend, that’s for sure. It’s become a really popular location and all sorts of commercials and music videos shoot there now.

MH: Each of the characters lives a double life because of their ethnicity. He’s Korean trying to escape the Japan he grew up in, while she longs for the Japan she’s never seen (and hopes to find in him). This double vision that troubles the transparency of

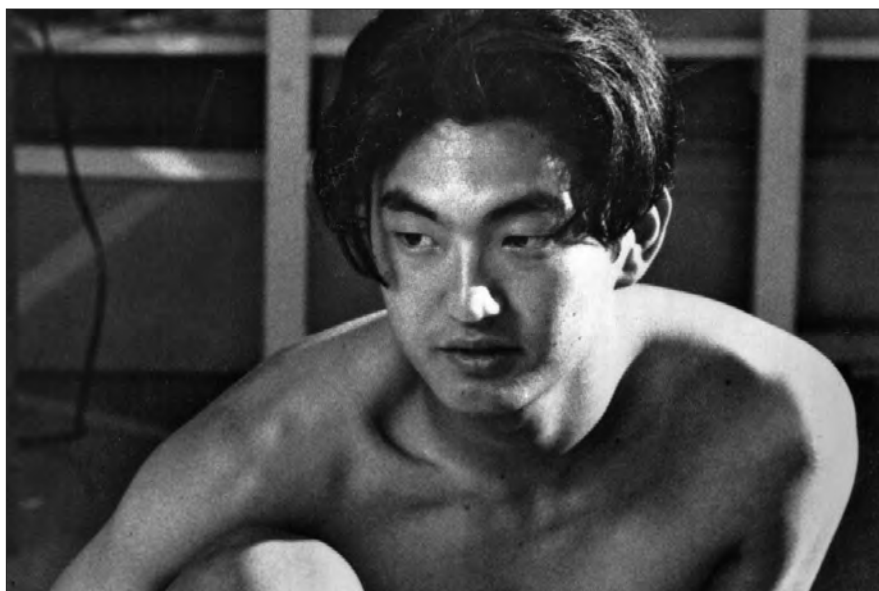
representation is typical for makers of fringe movies, which feature a disproportionate number of first-generation transplants. Their (our) parents grant us an irresistible sense of another world, even as we are busy growing up in this one. Your movie articulates this double vision, both content-wise and in its stylings and vagrant attentions. Can you elaborate on this theme and why it is important for you?

HL: At that time, in the late '80s and early '90s, there was so much critical theorization around otherness and alterity, post-colonialism, Third cinema, oppositionality, marginality, fringe films ... it nearly busted my brain! Here I was in cinema classes studying Wittgenstein and the Frankfurt School and continental philosophy – and I thought I was supposed to be studying film! (At the time, cinema studies was concerned about its position in the humanities and institutionalizing itself in the academy.) It was so much more pleasurable and productive, I thought, to try to apply these interesting ideas to making films. So I was extraordinarily preoccupied by these themes; they were there first for me, preceding the filmmaking apparatus and production skills I learned in conjunction with the making of these films. These projects were, at first, a critical enquiry or investigation, and then a film proper – as if I were making films instead of writing essays. Making *My Niagara* was so much about the way its characters were seared by marginality, but we didn't want to portray only that. Their ethnicity and backgrounds were a given (race wasn't 'the story,' so to speak), so that we could contemplate something else about them, their particular foibles and self-projections. I was also obsessed with tracing a kind of subjective cinema, and how to shoot a film that let subjects speak from a naturally empowered position, not as objects of sociological or anthropological interest. Which is still why I am asked, when someone finds out that I'm a filmmaker, 'What kind of films do you make – documentaries?' Because if I'm an Asian woman, then it's about sociology first and films second. The challenge is trying to bring a cinematic structure to this 'double vision,' as it's so aptly called, wherever that doubling or tripling may take place – on the level of aesthetics (experimental films), gender (feminist films) or race and ethnicity (films by 'people of colour'). Don't you love that line in Miranda July's film where Tracy Wright's curator asks about an artist, 'Is she ... of colour?' It's such a knowing comment about the contemporary artistic cultural environment, isn't it, along with its jaded, aren't-we-all-past-that posture. Well no, we aren't.

MH: Can you comment on the figure of the father? He is a box maker, able to make containers (which are empty – it's as if only those at home here in the new world can fill the containers, while he is able to provide the frame, the

shape of experience). When his daughter Julie expresses her admiration and accepts one of his handmades as a gift, she provides a bridge between old and new worlds.

HL: It is that little gesture of offering and acceptance that provides the tiniest suggestion of where Julie's gone as a character. Otherwise, she's someone who's changed very little throughout the course of the film, as tied up as she is in the trauma of her mother's disappearance in her childhood. That may have been a problem for some audiences, that she didn't change or transform, as is ordinarily expected. We want our main characters to advance themselves, to learn something, etc. Her mother's spirit still haunts and disables her. Her relationship with her father is a kind of inverse – it's so everyday, but their exchanges are stilted. The father is the classic Nisei (second-generation) character, which is to say, though he was born in Canada, speaks only English and likely spent some of his childhood in the internment camps during World War II, he is still identified by mainstream Canada as a Japanese man. But again, that wasn't 'the story.' That's how Kerri and I approached the script – we weren't stuck with announcing the character's ethnicity or racial background all the time. We wanted those histories to be already absorbed by the characters; it's a part of who they were, and it wasn't our job or theirs to explain it all the time. In some ways the father is a vacant figure, or rather evacuated from Julie's life (which is fairly solitary anyway), so they are in that sense two solitudes living in one household. He can express so little, except by giving his daughter one of his empty boxes. The running theme through most of my films is, ironically, the absent mother. It started with *My Niagara* and then continues through the other shorts and even my feature film. I can't really account for this repeated pattern of maternal loss, except to say the figure of the mother is also a symbol of the motherland, the repository for all the cultural longings, memories and projections that remain unfulfilled.



My Niagara

MH: *Prey* (26 min, 1995) is a self-assured drama about Il Bae (or Eileen), who works in the family's convenience store and falls in with a young drifter. The movie revels in the beauty of its stars, the hunky Adam Beach and beauty queen Sandra Oh. While their onscreen chemistry and acting chops raise them well above the level of eye candy, do you worry that their fine looks present an ideal the rest of us will never manage, and that this frustration will further the cycle of beauty debt and pharmaceutical potions that has extended the reach of capital into every moment of the consuming body?

HL: Sandra and Adam are hardly beauties of the typical sort, but they inherently have stories to tell, a lived-in experience that makes us want to know them. I'd be dishonest if I said they weren't cast for cheekbones, but more than the physiognomy, there's a steady gaze that holds your eyes. And most of all, the two had a chemistry that busted archetypes and memories of staid, objectified characterizations. So I don't think the film presents them as idealized figures in any way. (In fact, Sandra wondered why she had to look so grungy, but it was all in character to say that Il Bae got woken up in the morning with an emergency and stayed that way all day.)

MH: Could you elaborate on the title, *Prey*? This is a movie where every character seems both predator and prey.

HL: When we were in production we had another working title, *Automatic*, but that seemed didactic and cold, while *Prey* already sets up a kind of narrative in the title and has a metaphoric dimension. I don't remember exactly where the title came from – probably from Cameron (Bailey, my partner at the time), he's really good with titles. In any case, it's not meant to be literally interpreted. Although there is that section in the film where Il Bae sits down with her grandmother, Halmoni, to watch a

nature documentary on tv. This is shortly after the surprise encounter with her semi-naked, now banished Native lover in the same room. Avoiding the obvious, Halmoni remarks on a lion devouring its prey, correlating it with Korean survival, not without nationalistic pride. But then she's completely oblivious to calling this Native stranger a 'foreigner.' Who is foreign, native or other here? The immigrant still trumps the Native on Canadian soil, both economically and socially. In terms of enfranchisement, visibility and power, it is still, ironically, immigrant lives that have advantages over Aboriginal people. And it's a sorry state, isn't it, to be comparing and contrasting oppressions, but these differentials in history, and educational and social opportunities, must be taken into account. Factor in the privileges of whiteness and class, and there's a minefield of difference at play. There are no 'white people' in *Prey* (save the pawnshop owner) who act as a 'base' from which people of colour are positioned as being different. And that's the one thing that's common in all of my films: we are the 'base.'

MH: Among other matters, *Prey* relates a story of young love (whose desire makes prey of each other). Does love occur only where there is something missing – a deficiency that needs to be smoothed through touch and language? Despite their wounds, both Il Bae and Noel appear to be trying on roles, posing with guns and lovers, sometimes shopkeeper or juvenile delinquent or dutiful family member. How do the pictures that surround them, that they are busy occupying, help or hurt them in coming together? Please forgive this dangerously naive question, but might your movie also suggest that ethnicity itself can be a pose or position?

HL: There is a certain amount of positioning that occurs as soon as you place a non-white character onscreen. You automatically do the mental calculus from your position as a viewer – it depends where you're placed or how you place yourself as a spectator, how you can thus read the character. An insider can have 'special knowledge' or assumptions about the character, which means less explaining is needed, or a different approach. We already know that backstory. Can the same be said of, say, gay characters in a movie? You can go only so far with that logic. Because then we're relying on generic stereotypes, even as we play with and manipulate them. Il Bae and Noel were entirely independent creations, but they are constantly flirting with each other on that edge of race, ethnicity and gendered expectations around desire. The challenge was to frame it in a dramatic story that seduced you and shook up your expectations.

MH: Il Bae has lost her mother, Noel his sister, and Il Bae's father has lost both his wife and homeland. Is the displaced place of the



Prey



Prey

immigrant always one of loss? Is every gain measured by what must be left behind? Is that why you conjure this geometry of loss?

HL: I do think the immigration story is suffused by loss, and not only the gain of a new life in a new country. Somehow there's a conflation of mother and culture in my films; this yearning for cultural connection is symbolized by the lost mother. The relationship between Noel's loss of his sister and Il Bae's loss of her mother, tenuously linked in the story, is also a linchpin for their connection – not that they should be defined by negatives, however. They've both known sadness in their lives, that much is shared. And how does one calculate loss, particularly a concrete one such as a family member? I can imagine that one feels that loss in the body, like the perpetual pain of a phantom limb. If you leave your homeland, the loss can be as profound as the gain. I think of my aunt, who my father sponsored to Canada in the early '80s. I don't think she stayed six months, not even two changes of season (maybe it was winter; that would drive anybody away), before returning to Korea. Of course, it was because she was in love with a man from her hometown, who she eventually married. But the connection to the homeland can remain forever compelling. Look at all of Canada's immigrants who return 'home' on a regular basis, to the point of buying land with the expectation of retiring there. So where is home, really? In the most positive light, it's like having two homes, which isn't a bad deal at all. But you need economic flexibility for this. Or, conversely, economic burden – for all the people who make monthly remittances to their parents or relatives – another familiar immigrant duty.

MH: If shorts mattered in this country (or any other country, for that matter), *Prey* might have become Canada's *Do the Right Thing*. Does the marginal status of shorts trouble you, or does it

provide more freedom (no one is looking, so you can do what you want)?

HL: *Do the Right Thing* was a watershed film for its time, a no-holds-barred provocation on cultural politics that seemed to define that era. It was extremely influential for a whole generation of indie filmmakers, of colour and not, who felt like they needed to address these issues, if not as head-on as Spike Lee did, at least in a way that was culturally responsible and, moreover, culturally relevant. It was very 'new' for its time, very exciting. As for the short-film format, I remember attending the Clermont Ferrand Short Film Festival in France with *Prey* and realizing, hey, shorts are not marginal here in Europe at all; they make them in 35mm and they're shown before features in theatres and bought for television. Canada and the U.S. have caught up somewhat, but the

status of the short filmmaker is still zip. In Europe, you can be a short filmmaker forever, and not necessarily have to 'graduate' to making feature films – it's a viable format. But I didn't start off making films with the ambition of making features. Shorts were very much my world, having worked at DEC Films in Toronto and Women Make Movies in New York; the arena of non-theatrical film and video for the educational market was/is mainly short films. To me, they weren't marginal at all, and I made short films with that attitude. Every frame, every scene and every minute had importance. The fact that it was under 45 minutes and would never show in a film theatre or be known to general audiences, that had no bearing. And then my purview widened some more, as I went beyond my own intellectual and aesthetic pursuits to realize there's a whole world out there who didn't even know what a short film is. I was, maybe, wilfully naive about it.

MH: Do you feel responsible to your 'community' to represent their loves and lives? Is there a notable gap that your movies embrace and do these omissions (the movies that haven't been made yet) create pressures to make accessible, positive pictures?

HL: I definitely felt/feel like part of a community, albeit one that has shifted and splintered over the years. I'm acutely aware of my filmmaking peers who are women, who after some promising short films had children or got married or moved on to other work. It's the men who remain, actually. Most, if not all, of my filmmaking colleagues now are men. But the pressure is all mine, the pressure to produce, to make films that are good and that matter. I think if one were pressured to make accessible, positive pictures, that'd be like some kind of Disney film or after-school special. Given that I was raised on that kind of suburban-fed media fare, it wouldn't be too far off for me to make that kind of work. But if you mean community-minded films or



Prey

videos, well, social responsibility can only go so far. So many other things (European art cinema, experimental film, semiotics, etc.) have demented my brain. The desire to reach many people, though, without compromising too much the kind of work you want to bring out there, that's another trick. And film distribution – well, that's another game altogether.

MH: *Subrosa* (22 min, 2000) is a pop-coloured monodrama about a 20-something orphan, newly landed in Seoul to look for her mother. This quest narrative ends with little resolution: the city turns into an increasingly blurred and abstract backdrop as she uncovers few clues. Why this story that refuses storytelling, these arrested moments shirking any sense of closure?

HL: I never feel like my films are at all autobiographical, but the desperation and futility of the protagonist was something I felt while making *Subrosa*. The film originated as a kind of prequel for the feature film I was developing at the time, called *Priceless* (which was never made), which dealt with the same character five years on, still living in Seoul, still engaged in a fruitless search for her mother, among other trials. I'd been enamoured with Korea for a number of years. It's the place of my birth and, at the time, a country I knew very little about. So of course it had a huge place in my imagination. For immigrants, there are two contradictory impulses about your home country: one is to negate or ignore it, and the other is to romanticize it and puff it up. I did the latter. I had wanted to make a film in Korea for a number of years, but had a hard time finding the right shape for it – it is indeed a kind of inchoate, all-consuming feeling you're trying to hammer out into script form, which was a difficult task for me. But, oddly, the script for *Subrosa* came out in a couple of days. I was in the throes of a personal crisis, a breakup that I was taking very badly, and the film came out of my wallowing. It was shot

in a number of video formats (1-chip and 3-chip Minidv, Beta sp), then transferred to 35mm film. We shot it over an eight-day period and somehow the small five-person crew I originally planned ballooned to 15 – although we were still quick and mobile enough to grab shots in markets, on the streets, by the Han River (there are no filming permits to speak of in Korea). There was enough of a narrative impulse, enough of a kind of story musculature, to permit these 'abstractions,' as you say. I was aware that the fish-out-of-water and search-for-roots story was familiar enough to take other liberties, and I let these scenes slacken into something else. Yes, there was definitely a sense of the closer she got, the further she was, and that her search was less about finding her mother than about losing herself. I think it's a self-obliteration story.

MH: The lead is often lensed in extreme close-up, whether taking in her first impressions of the city, talking on the phone or checking out floral arrangements. The camera proximity centres the action and grants the viewer an anchor. We are always seeing with her, alongside her. But is the closeness also a kind of deception, because we don't find out so much about her? Like her lost mother, she is close and far at the same time. We discover little about her in a strict biographical factoid manner – perhaps there is another level of knowing that arrives before that, and that is finally more powerful and more cinematic?

HL: Again, I wanted our knowledge of this character to be organic and not psychological. You may be detecting a kind of anti-psychological refusal of character, at least in the Western sense, where we enunciate all the time who we are, our tastes, our status, our opinions, our sense of ourselves in every way: what we like to eat, where we went to school, our favourite authors. This is a conception of individualism that is wholly Western. We know very little about this *Subrosa* character. She wears a red coat. She speaks English in an off-accent – although, in fact, she speaks very little. There's a diaristic feeling to the film. The close-ups you mention are part of an exploration of subjectivity that had been obsessing me for some time. But those decisions also came along with tiny, hand-held cameras that allowed us to fit into tight spaces and produce tight frames. There's something about seeing someone so large onscreen, getting to know an eyelash or a mole; sometimes that says enough about the character, because that's all she's willing to tell you. The danger, especially dangerous for Asian characters, is to end up being called 'inscrutable,' because then you're finished. The viewer doesn't have an entry point and it's game over. There's that fine line between enigmatic and unknowable, a line that many art cinemas graze against, that may be compounded by ethnic or cultural differences that further

frustrate or intrigue the viewer, depending on who s/he is. As the main character plunges deeper into an unknown Seoul, she loses herself even more. When she plunges into the river and emerges, she arrives at a zero point. As if she's been born again.

MH: She is the visitor, the seeker, and is corralled into a bar where she has a nearly wordless sex encounter with the handsome barkeep. You deliver this extimacy in a single, red-tinted medium shot, but I'm wondering if you could elaborate on the question of onscreen sex. It so rarely approaches the boredom and disgust, the rawness and emotional accelerations, of 'real' sex – is it possible? Pictures have allowed the surrogate experience (as if we were there ...) of so many things, does sex lie beyond the image's capacity?

HL: She, the main character, is deliberately unnamed. When she asks to see her adoption files, to find out her 'real' name, she is denied access. She goes into this search with nothing but her body and her wits, and a small sense of history. The fact that she unwittingly mimics her mother's past, travelling to the army-base town, visiting the brothel for information, and then has passionless sex with a stranger – well, it's more than ironic. I want to cry for her. The red-tinted shot is alluded to early in the film when she checks into a *yeogwan* (small motel) where she pulls on the overhead light, fluorescent white and then red. All the love motels have it – the red light that's supposed to be sexy or discreet or something. It's pretty lurid, that's for sure. And it's the same red light under which she has sex. It seemed very appropriate. As for capturing 'real sex' on film, I'm not sure what to think of all those 'non-simulated' sex-cinema experiments by Catherine Breillat, Leos Carax and the other French filmmakers, or the American one by John Cameron Mitchell (and future blogspots or reality tv cable shows – just the thought itself ... I'd rather not), except that you invariably feel a bit like a voyeur. But I know in my films the

sex acts are more signifier than signified – it's about much more than the act itself, and I think most filmmakers would tell you that. But sometimes, like for the aforementioned filmmakers, the act itself is what's important. I think cinema acts as a kind of 'condenser' for all sorts of things, including sex. And the fact that the emotional and physical components, inextricably linked in most forms of sex (even when they are 'unemotional' or 'empty' experiences – the lack still means something), exceed the limits of cinema's capture – is that a bad thing? Cinema is many a marvellous thing, and functions from mirror to mimesis to metaphor, but it's not life. Yes, at times cinema can be realer than life itself, but sometimes woefully not.

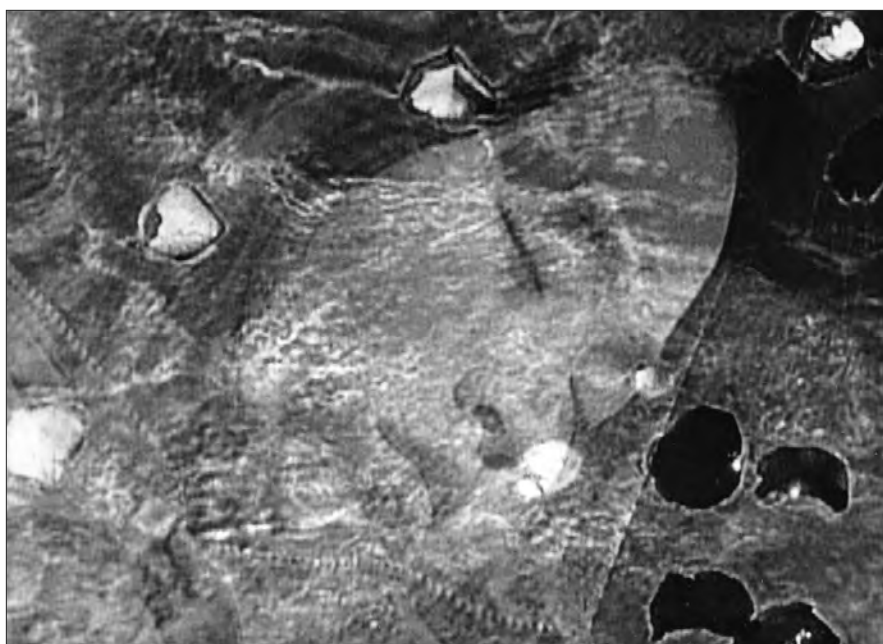
MH: One of my enduring frustrations is the coverage of 'independent' media. Cover after cover, month after month, there are stories that take readers behind the scenes, the making of this month's big flash.

But there is a story much larger than any of this that is seldom told. Many of these folks will never appear in any kind of magazine again, because after their 15 minutes is over, they will hit a wall of impossible funding they won't be able to climb over. I've yet to speak with a feature maker who hasn't been cast into the wilderness, wondering if she would ever make another movie, unable to raise interest or money in her new project(s), no matter how successful or heralded her past efforts. You have gone through this experience in trying to make *Priceless*, and I wonder if you could take me through the frustrating steps that have led to the current impasse. And I can't help but wonder whether questions of ethnicity and gender exacerbate these problems.

HL: As you said, regardless of gender and ethnicity, every filmmaker has had these problems. But perhaps it's best to think about these not as 'problems' per se, but just a natural, inevitable part of the process of filmmaking. And the process can be soul-

destroying. Most of my peers from my 20s have fallen away to other professions outside of film, adjacent to filmmaking (such as teaching) or steady-paying gigs (jobs in tv). The irrefutable, practical aspects of making a living and feeding yourself come to the fore, never mind taking care of a family. It's okay to starve for your art in your youth, but few of us have the means and heart and single-minded devotion that independent cinema demands. At the end of every project, you're left with a blank slate, returned to zero. You might have garnered some good reviews, sure, and attended some festivals, and made the rounds of university classes or had the occasional speaking or guest-teaching gig, but in terms of continued sustenance it's a hard trick, isn't it?

I worked four years on a film that was never made. We garnered continual interest, and



Subrosa

attended every selected market from CineMart in Rotterdam to Independent Feature Film Market in New York to International Film Financing Conference in San Francisco, to Pusan. Is this in any way sane or normal? No, of course not, it's potentially self-destructive to put so much of yourself in a project and have it fail. It's like starting a small business that goes bankrupt before it even opens. And then there's the whole psychic, emotional and intellectual investment that seems all for naught. A colossal waste of time and energy. But then you think, hey, maybe it was good practice to write 30 drafts with four different script editors (because, as Toni Morrison says, there's no such thing as writing, only rewriting) and to continually defend its reshaping, even though it still wasn't good enough in the end. I think there's an alchemical aspect to filmmaking, outside of logic and reason, akin to karma, that works in your favour and tips you toward a green light, or not. Sometimes it's your time and sometimes it's not. Most people can't wait it out.



Subrosa

Priceless was a culmination of all the ideas I had explored in my short films about ethnicity and being an outsider, about cultural displacement and estrangements. But it would be set in a new location for me, Korea, before the plot moves it back to Canada. It was a fish-out-of-water tale, with some thriller/crime elements (starting with an immigration scam that turns into an inadvertent child-kidnapping case), but it was an essentially personal story. It's now five years dead. At the time I thought the funding structure disintegrated and my relationship with producers along with it, but now I realize the opposite is true. Canadian international co-productions with countries other than England or France or Germany (where deals are made in the lingua franca of English) were fairly rare, and the Canadian producers simply felt threatened by the prospect of working hand in hand with a Korean production company who didn't speak their language but would have equal say. This was shortly after the IMF collapse of

the Korean economy in 1997, mind you. The irony is that now, with Korean cinema being so hot, it seems like the time is ripe for this kind of film to happen. But back then it was wild, unexplored territory. And, simply put, Canadian producers are a cautious lot, with a lot of tethers choked to the purse strings. It's the whole oxymoron of the term *independent*, which often means dependency on a lot of things, including funding sources tied to deadlines, policies, quotas, etc. It was altogether a demoralizing professional experience.

When *Priceless* collapsed, co-producer Anita Lee approached me about making *The Art of Woo*. It would be done very quickly, and ultra-low budget.

MH: Could you continue with your story about *The Art of Woo* (90 min, 2004)? The version I (badly) remember is that you had a treasure-island deadline: if you finish a new script in six weeks, we'll get you the money to put it onscreen. Was your turn toward

romantic comedy a move away from the heaviness and difficulties of the *Priceless* years? Could you describe your favourite moment of the shoot?

HL: The fact that it was a romantic comedy was definitely interesting, because it was so different and out of my usual sphere of reference. And yes, the lightness was very appealing. I remember I had to rush out and watch all these classic romantic comedies to study the genre and understand the structure of these stories better, to see how we could add our own twists of gender and ethnicity into the mix. The first draft was written very quickly, in about two weeks. We rushed it off to the Canadian Film Centre's Feature Film Project, to make a deadline. The program offers 100 percent financing for a low-budget film, and

that budget is \$500,000. From the beginning it was an ambitious plan, because the script isn't truly a low-budget kind of movie – tons of locations, characters, lots of art department and costume requirements. We worked with Peter O'Brian, the then-executive producer of the FFP, and he was extremely supportive and found the themes of mistaken identity and masquerade intriguing. We had a scheduling conflict with the intended female lead (Sandra Oh, whose HBO series was unexpectedly renewed for another season), and the production schedule was fixed (FFP had to spend Telefilm money before the next fiscal year), so we undertook a casting call for a new lead. We eventually cast Sook Yin Lee, who took time off from her vj duties at MuchMusic and even did a crash acting course with Jacqueline McClintock in Montreal. It was a harried, intense time. The upshot was that it was less than a year from project conception to premiere at TIFF the following year – pretty remarkable in itself.

I've always loved the soundtrack stage of making a film. One of the highlights was working with Ron Sexsmith (who won a Genie for his original song contribution) and Kurt Swinghammer, who both wrote the film's score. And it was fun to include members of Toronto's artistic community (Michael Snow and Suzy Lake were very gracious in lending their artwork) and incorporate familiar locales (the Power Plant, University of Toronto, Archive Gallery Inc. opened their facilities to us). What was not particularly fun was to be so rushed in the shooting (20 days), with limited resources in time, equipment, manpower, etc. It felt that we shot just barely enough to cover the script, not enough to attain performances and coverage from the angles we really wanted. But then every filmmaker at almost every budget level would tell you that. Filmmaking is an art of compromise.

MH: Alessa Woo is a social climber forced to choose between love and money, represented by two suitors, the playboy *avec* mansion and the Native artist who has just moved in next door. She is also a self-made picture, posing as an Asian heiress and living beyond her means. What was your interest in this picture within a picture, and why this traditional division in matters of love?

HL: Alessa is not exactly a likeable character, is she? We found that question coming up – her glibness, seeming superficiality and mercenary ways – how could the audience ever sympathize with her? For some reason I never cared about it. Or rather, I think we can see through her 'character' – the pose she puts on for people, the airs she takes on. The film was, in some ways, meant to be a confection, a froth to be enjoyed and consumed. I had hoped to insert my usual interests in gender and race along the way – the class distinctions, social anxieties and cultural displacements of her character. We were aware of trying to do a take on classical romantic comedy, albeit with these twists. At first we conceived it as a run-and-gun kind of shoot, given the parameters of time and budget. After meeting with the cinematographer, we thought, why not try to make it more classical? I'm not sure that was a good decision in the end, because we weren't playing with the beautiful sheen and expanse of 35mm, where you can revel visually in the image, but were shooting digital video that was transferred to film. So the film has another kind of look, blown out sometimes, with intense and saturated colour. As for the splits in her personality, the picture within the picture you mention, we were trying to convert a late-'50s/early-'60s bebop Cinderella escapade in the present-day art scene of Toronto. But because the lead was a person of colour, why not give her a happy ending? She (and we) deserve it.

MH: Some notable performers insist they never read reviews, good or bad, because those opinions only get in the way. Writing about movies has become distinctly more shopping-oriented in the past couple of decades; the marketplace is filled with stars and thumbs that say simply: buy this picture. Or don't. Has this dumbing down affected the way movies are made? How did you feel about your *Woo* reviews, or did you read them at all?

HL: I think everyone has expectations around their first feature film, but in my case this was diluted by the fact that *Woo* was made and *Priceless*, that stillborn child of a movie, wasn't. When the film was released domestically, it was slashed by critics, who, while they've never loved Canadian films in general, seemed to take a particular disliking to *Woo*. To be honest, I took a masochistic interest in reading the reviews, quite possibly because I worked as a critic (music writer for *NOW* magazine) before I became a filmmaker, and I can sometimes similarly distance myself from my work. Or possibly because I think you can also learn something from your reviews, that even if you don't care for that critic's taste, it's still part of a public response. It's amazing how things are received and read in ways that you never expected or intended. I tend to wallow anyway, to mull over and conternate to no productive end. It's all part of having an obsessive character, a trait common to all filmmakers, I think, because filmmaking is, if nothing else, a completely obsessive activity. I read movie reviews like everybody else, to find out if a film is good and deserving of my time: do I want to go out (to the theatre, to the video store) and sit down and watch this movie for two hours? Only recently have I turned off films if I don't like them, because like some folks I'm also afflicted with a completion complex and feel I should watch until the end to know whether it really was good or not. But as time creeps on, and minutes become scarcer, I just switch the thing off, and sometimes even walk out of the theatre.

Overall, though, apart from a few exceptional critics (A. O. Scott, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Jim Hoberman), there aren't nearly as many consistently interesting people writing in film as there are in music. While the aesthetic and ideological underpinnings of serious cinema are ripe for intellectual consideration, it is, oddly enough, in music that you can find truly stellar writing about the art form. I think it's partly because writing or criticism is such a projection itself, that what's on the film screen somewhat limits the scope and scheme of the writing about it, whereas music is a complete abstraction that invites the full play of your imaginative powers. Yes, you can seize on the music's genre, history, artist's oeuvre, lyrics and other concrete things, but often that is the least interesting aspect of reading a well-written review. Often the delirious devotion and exuberance of the fan comes through in a review that perfectly encapsulates, in words, what moves you about the music. Film writing is often completely passionless.

MH: Every artist I know makes dazzling things on occasion, and then years might follow that are filled with variations on the same theme, or the minor chords, placeholders, the marked time between new ideas or bold expressions. *The Art of Woo* feels like one of those movies. How strange that it should be your longest work (not to mention that smooth Dolby sound and 35mm image). The smallest has become the largest: does this seem similarly disproportionate to you?

HL: Oh god, I just hope it's not my last. I haven't made a film in such a long time. I've had a burgeoning personal life that I can't complain about (though I do), relocating to a new country, learning another language (my forgotten mother tongue), taking on responsibilities of motherhood. All the emotional investment and time that I put into films is diverted elsewhere. As for the small/large thing, I don't regard *Woo* as either large or small, but one and the same. Because I had that odd view, years ago, that the short film was/is important. It feels so vital at the time, almost like a compulsion, otherwise why would you put up with all the bother and hardship that it takes to cobble together a film? And *Woo*, despite or probably because of its weaknesses, was truly a learning experience. Sometimes, I agree, you need to 'feed' yourself, to simply live life. And then your work takes a different shape, seizes other concerns that reflect this broadening horizon. I can sense this shift happening, because now I live in a context completely foreign to my Canadian upbringing. It's been a huge adjustment; being in Seoul still makes me feel like an outsider, only with different layers of estrangements and feelings of foreignness. As for what will happen to my filmmaking, yes, that would be nice, to think of it as a breather.

Helen Lee was born in Seoul, Korea, and raised in Toronto, Canada. She is a graduate of the University of Toronto, New York University, Whitney Independent Study Program and the Canadian Film Centre. www.helenleefilm.com.

Helen Lee's Films and Videos

Sally's Beauty Spot 12 min 1990
My Niagara 40 min 1992
To Sir with Love 3 min 1992 (with Shu Lea Cheang)
M. Nourbese Philip 3:30 min 1995
Prey 26 min 1995
Subrosa 22 min 2000
Star 3 min 2001
The Art of Woo 95 min 2001
Cleaving 2002 (video installation)
Hers at Last 18 min 2008

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