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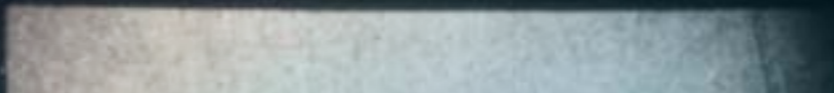
DAVID RIMMER

commentary on the films
1967-2014

edited by
MIKE HOOLBOOM + BRETT KASHMERE











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**DAVID
RIMMER**

commentary on the films
1967-2014

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

by Mike Hoolboom

The first time I hitchhiked west, headed towards a shadowy tree planting hope, I dreamt of pushing as far as the coast and showing up on his doorstep, or if not doorstep then bar stoop, basement projection, perfect window. Perhaps I imagined that it would be enough to sit inside that blue eyed stare for a moment and learn to see the way he did, as if everything ran a beat slower, as if there was time above all to look. To look and to absorb the experience of looking. The short films of David Rimmer have done so much to help my practice of looking, always urging me to take more time. To look more slowly. To look again.

This collection owes everything to the efforts of Sarah Butterfield, who has done more than anyone in recent years to bring David back into the world. This book is only a footnote to her kindness and dedications.

The book gathers voices across six decades of response to David's work, sometimes as personal missive or newspaper brief, sometimes as academic pronouncement or historical visitation. How very

rare it was and for how many years, that anyone would spare a word at all about this arcane moment of the cinematic underground. David was fortunate to receive early welcome mats from writers at the *New York Times* and *Village Voice*, not to mention local lights in Vancouver. The mid-career retrospective in Vancouver brought in a new rush of interest, and with his turn towards film/video hybrids in the 1980s a renewed critical analysis began, along with outraged art critics, foreign retrospective nods, letters of recommendation for Canada's highest honours. The whole shebang closes with a text drawn from a film proposal that may or may not become emulsion, but makes for a fascinating read as an artist looks back on a lifetime's work at the age of eighty.

Strange to think about a book about David though, he was never big on words. Words were part of the cover story that had to be seen through so that he could get down to some more fundamental relation, running it through his large and sensitive fingers. The sentences are gathered here not to take the place of his pictures, but to point the way back towards them. And some offer pleasures, rare and nearly forbidden, all their own. Great thanks to all who offered their permissions, and apologies to those who I didn't get hold of. Please write me and let me know. And enjoy. ■

1 RECOVERING LOST HISTORY

RECOVERING LOST HISTORY: VANCOUVER AVANT-GARDE CINEMA 1960-1969 (EXCERPT)

by Al Razutis

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

Vancouver Art and Artists, 1931-1983,
Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983

"Each generation redefines art — and not in books or essays but through the works of art. Cinema of yesterday was defined by the films of yesterday. Cinema of today is defined by films of today."

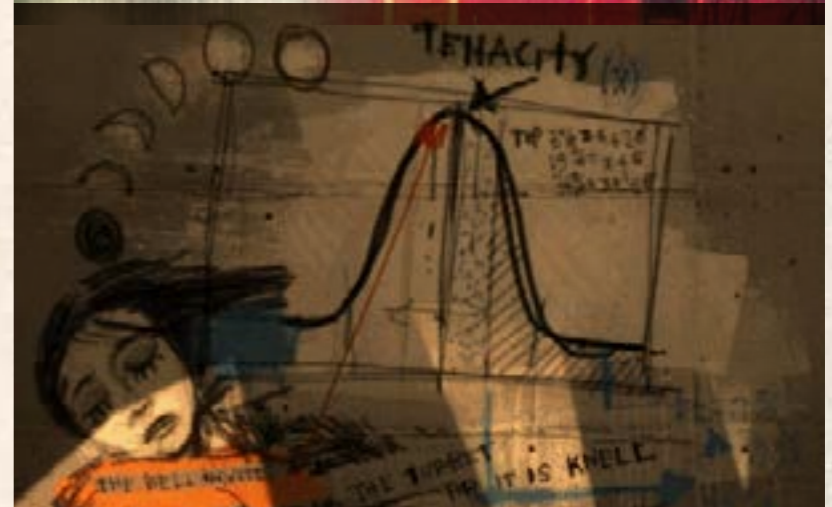
— Jonas Mekas

What Pauline Kael Lost at the Movies (1965)

"It has taken more than seventy years for global man to come to terms with the cinematic medium, to liberate it from theatre and literature. We had to wait until our consciousness caught up with our technology... If we've tolerated a certain absence of discipline, it has been in favor of a freedom through which new language hopefully would be developed. With a fusion of aesthetic sensibilities and technological innovation that language finally has been achieved. The new cinema has emerged as the only aesthetic language to match the environment in which we live."

— Gene Youngblood

Expanded Cinema (1970)



Sharing with Mekas a predisposed hatred for “middle ground” cinema and criticism, and an ongoing interest in aesthetic, theoretical, and technological developments in contemporary cinema, I come to a task that is long overdue: a written document concerning the history and practice of Vancouver’s avant-garde cinema. To treat such a vast subject adequately and within the deadline imposed on me is rather difficult; yet the urgency is also prompted by a personal desire to finally recover a largely unwritten and unacknowledged sense of Vancouver film culture.

If these essays (see also *Critical Perspectives on Vancouver Avant-Garde Cinema 1970–83*) can reveal the history and contexts of a Vancouver-based practice, they will necessarily do so at the expense of a definitive or exhaustive examination. I have imposed several guidelines on the work: first, the focus will reside in contributions to Vancouver’s avant-garde practice that are ostensibly non-commercial — that is, artists working in non-narrative and non-dramatic film forms, and outside the corporate industry base. Second, the filmmakers who are acknowledged are contextualized within major developments that extend beyond a few tentative excursions into “underground” or “experimental” films. The perspective that I am employing draws in historical and background information; it would be difficult to assess work outside its material and social bases of production.

I intend to demonstrate that work conducted in the early and middle sixties found particular correspondence in the attitudes and discoveries conducted in the late sixties, seventies, and eighties. Such correspondences are the result of polymorphic and polysemic attitudes/practices, a multiculturalism that implicates American influence, an ongoing commitment to counter-culture practice and institutions, and an environment that is dominated by media.

THE EARLY SIXTIES: A COMPLEX MOSAIC OF DISCOVERY

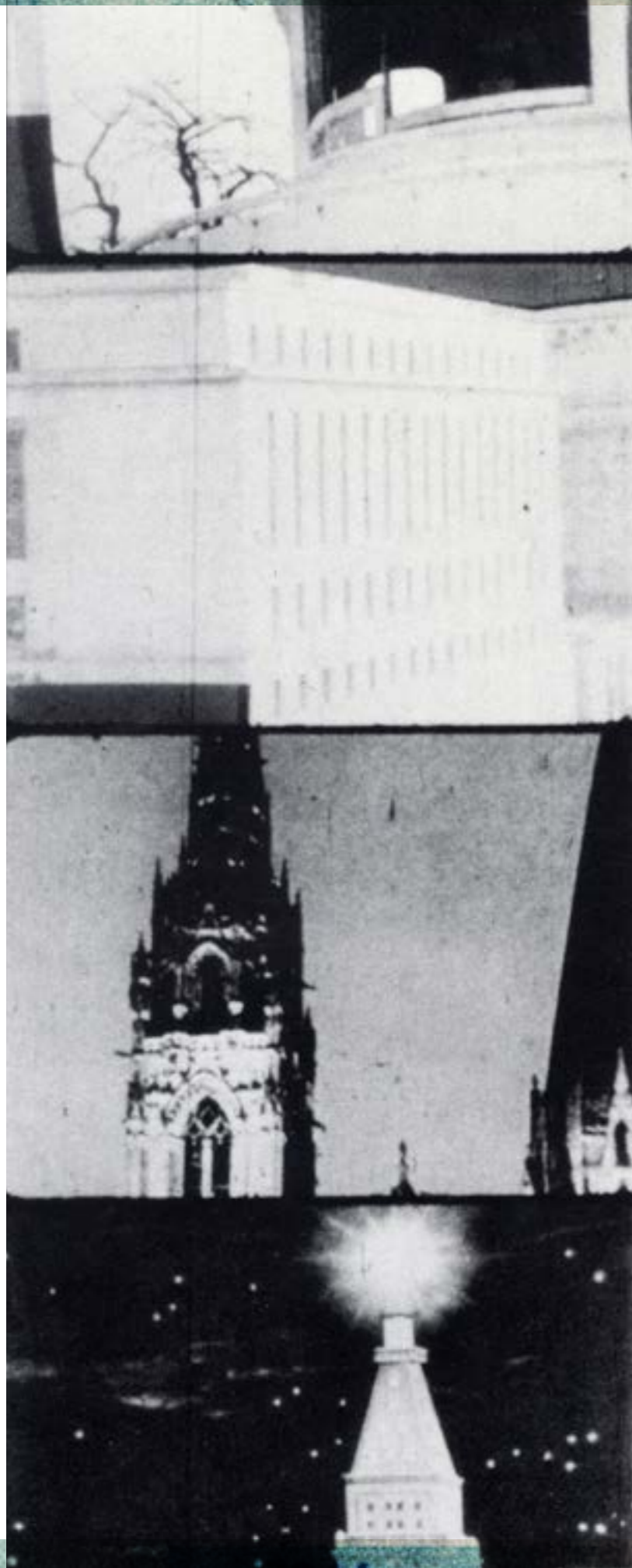
For many contemporary media students, the early sixties represent a time which coincides with their birth, and as such is relegated to pre-memory, rumour, myth, and media accounts of an “accepted history”. Many artists and political activists in this time period did not document their activities, and if they did these documents were relegated to an “underground” cultural status. A few accounts of this counter culture still remain in archival vaults or form part of film co-op collections. As for the “dominant” culture, we can easily recover syndicated versions that chronicle the open revolts against militarism, authority, and the capitalist state; we can also recover stories featuring rejection of middle-class morality, ideology, the concept of family unit, orthodox sexuality, western philosophy and religion. Yet beneath the accepted notions of sixties’ disenfranchisement there existed a substratum, an underground network, of remarkable discovery, inter-cultural exploration and exchange, personal catastrophe, and a more general reaching outwards towards a new and redefined vision of consciousness and world view than has been ordinarily acknowledged. Gene Youngblood, in his important essays on “Synaesthetic Cinema” accounted for emerging practices in the following quote from Herbert Read: “Art never has been an attempt to grasp reality as a whole that is beyond our human capacity; it was never even an attempt to represent the totality of appearances; but rather it has been the piecemeal recognition and patient fixation on what is significant in human experience”.

As Youngblood continued to maintain, what was significant in human experience for contemporary man was “the awareness of consciousness, the recognition of the process of perception...Through synaesthetic

cinema man attempts to express a total phenomenon — his own consciousness.”¹ Youngblood’s conception of “synaesthesia” was predicated on the notions of synthesis (of subjective, objective, and non-objective correlatives) and the “harmony of different and opposing impulses produced by a work of art...the simultaneous perception of harmonic opposites.”² Syncretism and synergy featured prominently in his theory and acted as antidotes to compartmentalized thinking, perception, and specialized knowledge.

Youngblood’s views echoed the thoughts of Buckminster Fuller, John Cage, and others. In general, synaesthetics contextualized art and cinema within a process that engaged chance correspondences, multi-sensory formats, and a simulacrum of expression planes that were not organized by, did not correspond to, the laws of causality. These views also posed a problem for conscious thought, and in particular that faculty which we call reason. Immanuel Kant (in his first *Kritik*) had stated that “the activity of our reason consists largely...in the analysis of ideas which we have with regards to objects.” Analytic judgments would therefore arise from the consideration of a subject as defined by its logical predicates.³ Conversely, and this point is crucial to our understanding of sixties’ avant-garde film, synaesthetic art favored synthetic judgments, in which subject and predication were the result of a synthesis obtained from the data of experience. Synaesthetic procedures implied that a “language of experience” (rather than of objects and rules) existed and could be articulated in expressing consciousness and nature.

Much of international avant-garde cinema in the early sixties was dominated by poetic lyricism and, in particular, the work of Stan Brakhage. Poetic lyricism, as acknowledged by Sitney in *Visionary Film*, was anti-narrative and anti-dramatic.



Sitney summarized the lyrical film as follows: "The lyrical film postulates the filmmaker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film. The images of the film are what he sees, filmed in such a way that we never forget his presence and we know he is reacting to his vision. In the lyrical form there is no longer a hero; instead, the screen is filled with movement, and that movement, both of the camera and the editing, reverberates with the idea of a man looking."

The denial of space (the Renaissance depth and vanishing point) that Sitney attributed to lyrical film could be seen as a formalism directly related to abstract expressionist interests. More importantly, these notions of "flatness", texture, and multiple-image levels, would correspond directly to the inherited values of synaesthetic cinema.

Lyrical film and synaesthetic cinema found its adversary in a sixties' movement labelled (by Sitney) "structuralism." In structuralism, the conceptions of consciousness and author were displaced by the preeminence of form and apparatus. Neither the personal vision, nor the synaesthetic media vision, were important to structuralists. Poesis and syncretism were replaced by conceptual models and cinematic procedures that found in the "machine of cinema" their paradigmatic forms. The machine that dominated structuralist film was either the projector (and intervening printing instruments) or, as in the case of Michael Snow, the camera. The onset of structuralism in the mid-sixties precipitated a return to cinema basics. Filmic expositions on basic camera movements (zoom, track, pan, tilt and roll, etc.) were joined by lengthy written expositions on conceptual modellings, epistemology, and "consciousness".⁴

Much of structuralist cinema functioned as an analog to conceptual formulation and, as such, the work itself was less interesting than the attempts to explain it.

As understatement, Snow's explanations were only exceeded by Warhol's ironic asides. The defenders and apologists tended to take up phenomenological positions (Michelson) and psycho-phenomenological postures (Elder).⁵

Structuralism was attractive both for its particularity (it specified only a few problems) and its modernist impulse. The singular qualities that it portrayed (in terms of an extremely limited range of expression) were antithetical to the plural voices contained in complex polyphonic lyrical work (as in Brakhage); its modernist impulse towards minimalism and the emptying of form could allow for strategies of phenomenological reduction in discourse to take place. It was, in effect, a critic's art, and its conceptions of "consciousness" and "reality" were cultural abstractions that sought analog configurations in art and film-machine.

"...we are not trying to find an equivalent of the written language in the visual language... we are trying to bring the very essence of the language to act intuitively on the brain..."

— Antonin Artaud

METAPHORS FOR LANGUAGE

If "vision" found its metaphor in cinema-art, then "language" also found its metaphor in synaesthetic code-making.⁶ The development of codes was a process that identified "channels" and "constraints" within which signification (that is, meaning) took place. Contrary to the more traditional normative grammatical concerns of written language, synaesthetics favoured investigation of generative codes, procedures, and technology. Synthesis (and generative code-making) involved both human synthesis of image (the Brakhage concept of constant "re-fashioning") and the use of audio, video, and optical (printing) synthesizers.

The “media language” of synaesthetics substituted code for grammar and relied on a commonly-shared semantics base, a “subculture” set of special terminologies, expressions, and media forms. A part of this semantics base was found in the “happenings” and multi-media light shows that relied on ambiguity and chance correspondence to provide “clues” toward meaning. More particularly, language also implied a knowledge of “who is speaking” and “to whom.” While this knowledge is normally based on an understanding of “self” (the speaking subject, the ego) that arises from a concept of difference (between “I” and “other”), the “speaking subjects” in sixties’ synaesthetics were largely articulators of the “media.” We may recall that within the concept of a psychedelic experience there was the prerequisite “ego loss”, a state of “self-less and transcendent” being. Therefore, the speaking subject of synaesthetics shaped experience (for the viewer or listener) in a manner that combined internal and external signification processes. We know from the psychoanalytic studies conducted by Hanna Segal and Melanie Klein (and others) that magical-symbolic language tends to treat object and symbol as one and the same. “It is when psychic reality is experienced and differentiated from external reality, that the symbol is differentiated from the object; it (the symbol) is felt to be created by the self and can be freely used by the self.”⁷

In many instances, synaesthetic practice collapsed symbol and object into one, and in its undifferentiated state treated symbolic language as a direct analog for reality, or reality itself. Synaesthetic preoccupations with mysticism, cosmology, and magic — whether in light-shows or mystical film — targeted an “empathetic response” to take place in the (viewer’s) unconscious. Mystical or cosmological codes would be used as organizing structure for expression; both speaking and listening subjects would be drawn to unconscious language processes, whereby the “reality principle”

was subordinate to eroticism and pleasure principles. Synaesthetic technology, as redefinition of sensory and perceptual experience, mimicked the “free and mobile” characteristics of unconscious process, or dreamwork.

Much of this technology (and the “language” that it employed) would be transitory; many of the institutions would disappear. The explorations of consciousness in the sixties resulted in a great number of overdose psychic collapses, psychotic activity that featured fetishism and misogyny, adherence to authoritarian “cult” leaders, and the development of metaphysical escape routes that led nowhere. This fascination with narcissism and the unconscious resulted in many films that are now forgotten. The work that remained, in its lasting and developing forms, was largely the result of artists working within the synaesthetic culture, but with a perception of reality that existed beyond the personal psyche.

INITIAL TRAJECTORIES: PIONEERING EFFORTS

Film technology in Vancouver in the late fifties/early sixties was largely in the hands of corporate interests (or public institutions like the CBC and NFB), and rarely available to the artists. The first important development in the accessing of 16mm to artists took place in the late fifties when Al Sens established himself as an animator (he was already well-established as a cartoonist for magazines) and constructed his animation stand and attendant technology. Sens proceeded to generate dozens of short animated 16mm films which, as listed in the Intermedia Film Co-op catalogue of 1969, featured a diversity of poetic-allegorical concerns. His animation style always revolved around the personal gesture (drawing and erasing under the camera, doodling, manipulating cut-outs) and an idiosyncratic style of anthropomorphic cartoon charac-

terization which usually featured allegories and moral reflections on man’s condition in an immoral society. He was modest and reclusive, yet his contribution to the formation of independent cinema in Vancouver was based on the capacity to inculcate a sense of technology and authorship in the young media artists who would visit his studio. His formal contributions were largely outside the multi-media and rapidly changing avant-garde.

A major contributor, who was both a contemporary of Sens and one of the founding fathers of multi-media work in Vancouver, was David Orcutt. His initial concerns were also directed at children’s productions (he produced *Shadow Puppet Shows* for CBC), and extended into work developing non-verbal (ideographic, pictographic) sign systems. However, Orcutt was both inventor and multi-media enthusiast.

Orcutt’s work in television (late fifties) began to be displaced by his concern for the development of a “Kinographic language” and “multi-channel environments and communication.” His “projected” lectures, which featured projections of words, statistics, ideograms, and included ideographics (sound/visual images comprised of rudimentary symbols) developed into explorations of environments and multi-sensory information. The Vancouver experiments in multi-media were joined in the late fifties/early sixties by work in the U.S. conducted by Cohen, Stern, and Vanderbeek. However, much of what occurred in Vancouver was created in relative isolation. In March 1961, Orcutt received a grant from UBC to conduct experiments in film and video. These experiments led to the founding of Hut 87 on the UBC campus, an environment that would house an ongoing series of multi-media projection events. Implicit in this work was a conception of cognitive awareness that required a heightened perceptual environment to interconnect the many possible “channels” of information. The

breaking down of distinctions between genres (of art), between performance, theatre, film, lecture, between figurative and non-figurative, knowledge and experience, would generate a sense of meaning and possibilities (of meaning) that directly related to the synaesthetic “language building” process that I have described previously. Hut 87 remained as one of the seminal stages in the development of multi-media interests that would by 1967 reach spectacular proportions at “Labyrinthe” (Expo ‘67) and institutionalized proportions in the creation of Vancouver’s Intermedia. As is often the case, Orcutt’s major contributions have remained backgrounded by better publicized efforts emanating from the NFB or from cultural entrepreneurs.

The influence of technology and media, as origins of Vancouver avant-garde film, was joined by the visionary impulse characterized in the contribution and work of Sam Perry. The “psychedelic tribe” that Peter Synowich described in a particularly sensationalized account of Perry’s life/death⁸ found a paradigmatic expression in the visionary work of Sam Perry. The degree to which dominant culture misunderstood “acid culture” is graphically revealed in the accounts of media reportage. However, Perry’s life was an exceptional moment which contrasted synaesthetic vision with psychic collapse and self destruction, and featured all the gain and loss that characterized the sixties.

Perry’s initial interests in film grew from a fascination with Oriental mysticism and the potential for film to evoke (and even induce) a state of heightened awareness. He dropped out of UBC (English and Physics) in 1962 and, with his wife, travelled to India and Tibet where he shot thousands of feet of rare footage documenting the exodus of Tibetan refugees from Communist repression, religious rituals, and the Lamas of Tibet.

Upon his return to Vancouver, as Gary Lee-Nova recalled, Perry “got serious about animation and ‘visual consciousness’...[the generation of] extraordinary visual experience.” Perry’s preoccupations with Oriental cosmology and Tantric rituals were joined by his interests in the published writings (*Metaphors on Vision*, 1963) of Stan Brakhage.

To realize the technical circumstance of generating the needed visual experience, Perry read books on chemistry and physics, and conducted formative experiments with what he termed the “Dot Plane” the resonant field of perception which can be stimulated by synaesthetic means. To Perry, as to Brakhage, film could provoke a “sensorium” effect in the mind. Brakhage had written in *Metaphors on Vision*: “Suppose the Vision of the saint and the artist to be an increased ability to see — vision. Allow so-called hallucination to enter the realm of perception, allowing that mankind always finds derogatory terminology for that which doesn’t appear to be readily usable, accept dream visions, day-dreams or night-dreams, as you would so-called real scenes, even allowing that the abstractions which move so dynamically when closed eyelids are pressed are actually perceived.”

Perry shared with Brakhage a declared interest in the synthesis of opposing values as realized in Oriental philosophy. But in contrast to Brakhage, Perry’s work featured the direct inclusion of Oriental symbolism and iconography; the metaphors that Brakhage employed in his description of symbology Perry would incorporate directly into film. One can speculate that it was both Perry’s sudden thrust into the crisis of Tibetan Buddhism, the mass exodus he had witnessed and documented in 1962, and the direct interest in utilizing film in generating “cosmic awareness” that directed him away from Brakhage’s use of personal/lyrical mythopoetic structures. Perry’s experiments



with Dot Plane rendition led him to generate film loops and works in progress that were characterized by multiple image overlays, texture, rapid montage cutting within the Oriental notion of “harmony of opposites.” Of the few fragments that I recall seeing, images of flowers (lotus), multi-limbed figures, and “explosions” of grain and texture were contained within his work.

Perry’s earliest experiments with film were conducted in a studio-storefront on 4th Avenue and complemented the musical performances of Al Neil. These “light shows”, as they soon became termed, actually predated their more commercialized counterparts in San Francisco. The consequences of Perry’s discoveries had a direct impact on Intermedia environments and formative avant-garde film practice. His conception of film, as psychic environment that is both expressive and interactive with the viewer’s psyche, was a synaesthetic gesture aimed at transforming “reality.”

Along with many people in the Vancouver cultural community, Perry was extending his experiments into psychotropic drugs (peyote, mescaline, and particularly LSD). The drug-induced state further enhanced visual perception, with the result that works (and stimulus) of greater density, complexity, and detail would become part of his visual “vocabulary.” The use of LSD made conscious the unconscious processing of “dreamworks”,⁹ the “multi-stability” of perception and reality.

The constant use of psychotropics, and in increasing amounts, could produce psychic breakdown, withdrawal, paranoia, and even psychosis. Perry’s excursions into LSD consciousness began to include a “loss of control”: he began to assume that the heightened visual awareness precipitated by LSD was the universal condition towards which we should all aspire.

Perry’s breakdown was foreshadowed by constant use of drugs, police harassment, a rigid macrobiotic diet, and difficulties in dealing with economic responsibilities. The climax came when Perry mounted the Trips Festival, a light-show/dance/multi-media event in July 1966. The Trips Festival featured 52 projectors, 25,000 square feet of screen, and imported rock bands (the Grateful Dead, Quicksilver Messenger Service, and others). Perry, along with Ken Ryan, Al Hewitt, Mike Coutts, Dallas Selman worked to engage this gigantic “apparatus” for a week as an integral part of the music performances. This was in keeping with the romantic Wagnerian conception of theatre: “to turn theatre into a single, gigantic instrument, whose every part would function in concert with the rest to transport an audience from the mundane to the mythical, from the partial to the absolute.”¹⁰ But Wagner’s “unadulterated mythos” complete with its “superheroes”, attempts to complete itself in a kind of “death.” As Wagner wrote in a letter to Liszt: “This is the genuine ardent longing for death, for absolute unconsciousness, total nonexistence.”

The economic failure of the Trips Festival “dreamwork” added stress to Perry’s already fragile psyche. Perry went “berserk,” as Lee-Nova described it, withdrew into paranoia, and was committed to Crease Clinic on Sept. 20, 1966. While at Crease, he tried to commit suicide and was subsequently subjected to three days of shock treatment. Shortly thereafter, while on leave and undergoing “rehabilitation”, he pointed his Browning automatic pistol at his right temple and pulled the trigger, ending his life.

Although four completed films, and numerous works-in-progress, are attributed to Perry, today little can be found of his work. With the death of Sam Perry — and this tragedy was repeated in the sixties under varying circumstances there was, as Lee-Nova characterized it, a “taking notice.”

1967–1970: DISCOVERY, INTERMEDIA, AND CONSOLIDATION

By 1967, the CBC regional office had established a certain amount of programming autonomy; it was because of Stan Fox and Gene Lawrence that this autonomy resulted in support for experimental film. Fox and Lawrence launched *Enterprise*, a television series featuring video and film events produced by local artists. Video-feedback experiments were integrated with commissioned experimental films by Danny Singer, Tom Shandel, Sylvia Spring, Gary Lee-Nova, Dallas Selman, David Rimmer, and others. The influence of Fox on emerging film practice extended far beyond the CBC sphere. He was responsible for initiating film workshops at both UBC and SFU. His vision of accessing broadcast and university facilities to experimental artists resulted in a legacy of several decades of work.

That same year, an even more notable phenomenon occurred. David Orcutt, in meetings with Victor Doray, Joe Kyle, and Jack Shadbolt, proposed the creation of a multi-media workshop facility that would allow artists to engage in work at a variety of levels. The facility would integrate technological art with performance and visual art forms, and would allow the artist to work without individually applying for Canada Council grant funding. As a result of these meetings, a new organization was formed and housed in a four-storey warehouse at 575 Beatty Street: Intermedia. The mandate for this organization included support for film, performance, painting, sculpture, sound, poetry, and media arts. David Orcutt assumed the role of general manager with an open-door policy on unconventional activity and interests.

By 1968, Intermedia housed an increasing number of artists, established and novice. The first floor was dominated by John “Neon” Masciuch’s neon sculptures



and musical staircase, the second floor was an open performance area, the third featured artists' studios, and the fourth was the "experimental" floor that included bizarre video experiments (between channel transmissions) conducted by Ken Ryan. It was also in 1968 that a sudden influx of Americans occurred. This influx included a young California filmmaker named Al Razutis who, upon arriving at Intermedia, immediately established the first ongoing "underground" exhibition program (featuring weekly screenings on the second floor). The underground program ran for nearly a year and offered showings of a wide range of American underground films integrated with showings of work by Vancouver avant-garde filmmakers (Rimmer, Lee-Nova, Shandel, Ruvinsky, and others).

The following year, Razutis, in collaboration with local filmmakers, founded the Intermedia Film Co-op. This co-op was modelled after "underground co-ops" existing in New York and San Francisco and, as such, accepted all films (8mm and 16mm) submitted for distribution. The first Co-op catalogue was a joint publishing effort between Razutis, Gerry Gilbert, and Ed Varney. Intermedia Film Co-op extended an umbrella for avant-garde, animation, dramatic short subject, and student films (from Vancouver School of Art and SFU) and in its inaugural event, the Intermedia Film Marathon — a six-hour showing of films and works-in-progress at the Vancouver Art Gallery — succeeded in raising sufficient funds to maintain itself in operation throughout its early months. In 1968, a newly-appointed director of Intermedia, Werner Aellen (himself a filmmaker), began procedures of consolidating grants for the organization, organizing space, equipment, and staff.

By 1972, after Intermedia had relocated to 4th Avenue and then 1st Avenue, certain ideological splits between more socially-oriented artists and more independent and anarchist artists became severe. Intermedia was disintegrating; in its wake, especially

as funds ran out, the creation of more specialized and special-interest institutions took place. Intermedia Press, Video Inn, the New Era Social Club (formerly Lee-Nova's studio), the Western Front, Metro Media, the Granville Grange, and a collection of disenfranchised artists sprang up. Divisions became evident along the lines of sexual preference, media interests, and ideology. This was, in effect, the death of synaesthetic innovation; the groups that sprang up were there for consolidation.

A SELECTIVE HISTORY AND ANALYSIS OF FILMS 1967-70

The period 1967-70 (and spilling over into the early seventies) was characterized by a plurality of styles, interests, and filmic ideologies impossible to summarize under one definitive heading. What stand out are the lyrical impulse and synaesthetic media vision, delivered to a rapidly developing (and unique) form of structuralism.

POETIC CINEMA

The poet-author, as filmmaker, is most typified by Gerry Gilbert. His uncompromising work is most notable in prose poetry, with its exquisite vision of work, utterance, rhythm, phonetic inflection, and what I would term multistability (and intermedia) of language. In describing his work, one is almost prompted to enter into the "tropic" rainforest within which he dwells. Tropes, metaphors, and a penchant for extreme detail he translates into his filmic accompaniments for readings and performance.

Gilbert works in 8mm film-poems that best illustrate process and artistic method. The camera-eye for him is mobile, free from mechanical encumbrances, a visual and diaristic device that records events as snapshots or portraits of people and events. His work features a combination of "dreamwork" techniques

— a first-person lyricism that is directly related to Brakhage's work — and mythopoetic integrations of the landscape and people of British Columbia (and elsewhere in his travels). Gilbert's procedure is to "break language" in both its aural and visual spheres, and submit the linguistic elements to forms of recombination and synthesis. That which structures and evokes "sight-hearing-word" to him is kinesis, and it is precisely this kinesis and integration which "reflected an era, the era of our perceptions (the 60's)," to cite his words.

Gilbert's conception of the multistability (and free/mobile characteristics) of language resides at the level of deep structure.¹¹ When the deep-structured work is projected in performance or in multimedia screen formats (e.g. dance) a surface structure results which features chance meetings of sound/image, new correspondences, new compositional motifs.

Gilbert began working on a film entitled *Mini-Media* in the mid-sixties. This film included diaristic home-movie footage, documents of cultural events, travels, portraits, and literally everything that he could capture on camera.¹² His view that culture, evolution, and science "work through the individual" as stages of societal development that are not predicated on isolated discovery is directly evoked by "Heads" (the centre-screen section of *Mini-Media*.)

"Heads" presents a rapid-kinetic vision of environs, people, and Indian lore (contained in recurring shots of Indian masks and graphics) which synchronizes all these elements within an artist's vision of *transformation*, rendering myth as living language. Thus, the Indian lore is as much a part of the present as the people and environs. The giving structure to life and culture that characterizes Gilbert's work is achieved with in-camera editing and the joining together of expressive sequences of images and sounds.

Gerry Gilbert/the movie is a video film always in process and in progress. Each screening features yet another version, some footage having been removed, some added, always changing. His film work is relatively unknown because he has steadfastly worked with 8mm (a more inexpensive medium) and outside institutionalized avant-garde norms. His work is a living legacy to Vancouver culture that is invisible yet omnipresent.

Arnold Saba and Gordon Fidler created poetic-narrative genre films in the late sixties featuring a blend of poetry, free-style dramatic interpretation, and a sense of playful insanity that often matched the lifestyles of Vancouver's hippie generation. Three films made in 1969, *The Speck on the Neck of a Goose...*, *Three Poems*, and *Train Ryde* best typified their poetic narratives. *Three Poems* was the most successful, combining poetry by Jim Brown and music by Ross Barrett with an eccentric collection of private and ambiguous domestic details and a looped horse race (wherein the picture finally ejected from the film gate).

A more diluted form of first-person vision existed in the early poetic works of Tom Shandel: *El Diablo* (1967), and *Nitobe* (1967). *El Diablo* was a poetic-documentary look at Retinal Circus light-show/acid rock ambience and featured a highly ritualized fire-eating performance. The title suggested the intended mood: a satanic revelry that arrived at the altar of pagan ritual. *Nitobe* was a naturalist meditation on the Nitobe Memorial Gardens at UBC. The following film, *Superfool* (1968), summarized Shandel's views towards documentary cinema and the inability of cinema to portray "truth." *Superfool* was a "documentary" dialogue with the "town fool" Joachim Fojkis and portrayed the "wisdom" and philosophy of Fojkis in a series of fragmentary narrations acting as exposition and counterpoint to the visuals.

What made the film interesting, and definitive of Tom's early work, was that cinema itself became a part of the "fool's medium." In other words, the "documentary pretensions" were as foolish as the fool's antics. Shandel employed a variety of experimental techniques (solarization, rapid montage, multiple superimpositions) to offer comment on style and "art" and its artificial qualities. He parodied silent film (by undercranking and using familiar music scores); he parodied the director's "objectivity" by featuring ruptures in the narrative and direct encounters between an onscreen director and the town fool, and the fool always had the final say.

Hum Central (1969) represented Shandel's developing interests: the dramatic film, and the leaving behind of experimental formal concerns. The film was constituted around a series of fragmented "scenes", discontinuously arranged, which featured fantasy episodes ("play acting") alongside documentation of characters "as they really are," and constantly interrupting interrogations by the director (Shandel).

As parody of film and performance, and as influenced by Godard's deconstructive cinema, *Hum Central* achieved some of its intended effects. However, the corpus of the film constituted a manipulative kind of cynicism directed equally towards the dominant medium (television) and the counter-culture.

The filmic activities of other people involved with Intermedia were relatively short-lived. Terry Loychuck completed three fragments of works-in-progress entitled *Canned Meat* (an anti-war statement), *Necessary Preparations* (vivisection of locusts as — in his words — "the seven Tantric attacks on Hitler") and *The Process* (a stylized recitation of several stages in alchemical procedures). These films remained unfinished, and he abandoned experimental film in

the early seventies. Gregg Simpson, a painter and musician, completed six 8mm films by 1968. The films were typified by a surrealist/dada preoccupation with spontaneity and ambiguity of ritual and featured tableaux of specific actions re-enacted for the camera with Magritte-like exaggeration and paradox. His humour usually translated into irreverence, as in *Merde in the Cathedral* which featured Satie music and extreme close-ups of rolling balls at "Terminal City Lawn Bowling." Simpson also discontinued film in the seventies.

The four filmmakers whose work most directly contributed to a developing avant-garde practice in the late sixties and early seventies were Gary Lee-Nova, David Rimmer, Keith Rodan, and Al Razutis. Closer reading of their films is warranted to identify the pluralistic and distinct practices that emanated from each...

DAVID RIMMER

Much has already been written about Rimmer's work which, by most accounts, represented one of the most significant influences in sixties-seventies' avant-garde film practice in Vancouver.¹³

Rimmer's work also grew out of the rapidly evolving Intermedia film environment and the CBC's commissions for *Enterprise*. However, his work was marked by a fiercely innovative conceptual approach and individual style. His initial films, also influenced by the work of Brakhage and Conner, featured the dualism of mythopoetic interests and a developing structuralism.

Square Inch Field (1968) was inspired by the Oriental conception of harmony of opposites and utilized images that collapsed the macrocosm and microcosm into one unified field within a state of awareness. What stood out most in this film was Rimmer's use of the frame (as a building block for montage) and his

refined conceptions of rhythm and design. *Migration* (1969) continued his interest in montage and extended his work into a "writing" process that utilized dynamic camera movement and extreme variations in scale, proportion, and contrast. In *Migraton*, Rimmer began to explore a structuralism that featured predominance of rhythm and compositional patternings over content.

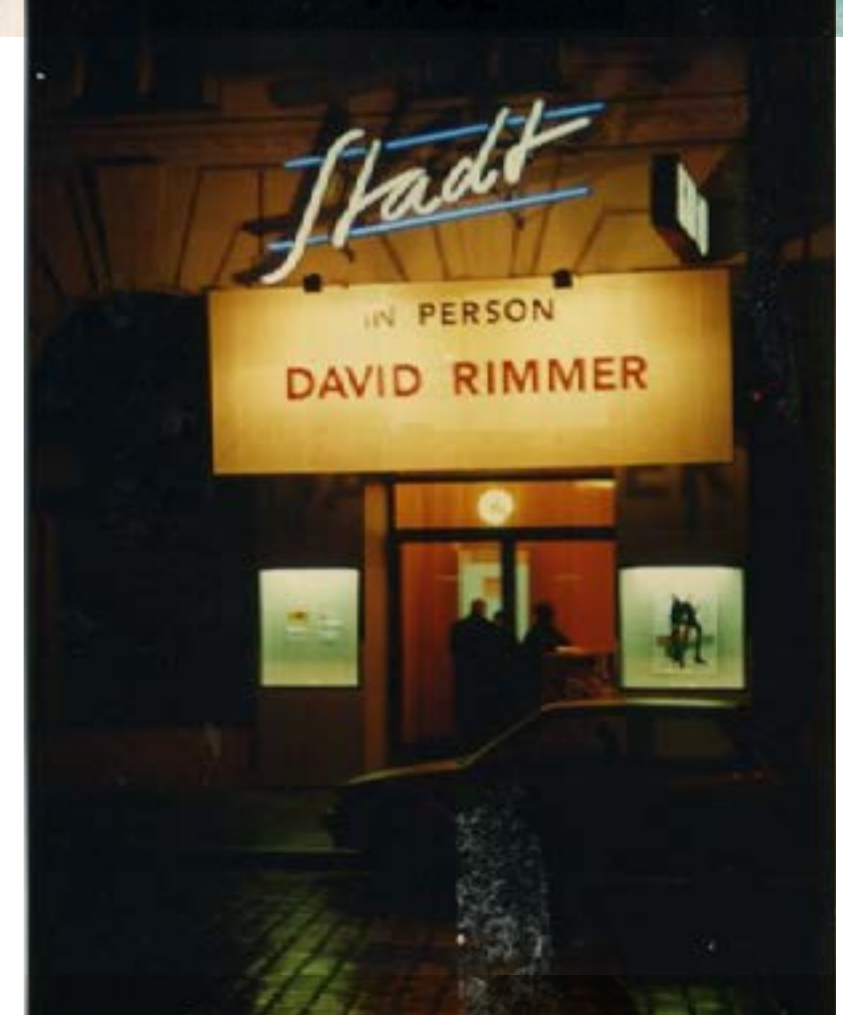
Rimmer's initial structuralist-constructivist interests¹⁴ were alluded to in his obscure *Head/End* (1967), a film featuring sprocket holes and leader sections in montage. The structuralist interests became dominant in his *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* (1970), *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970), *The Dance* (1970), and *Seashore* (1971), and would be continued into the early seventies by other films.

Rimmer, unlike Snow, was primarily concerned in a "structuring" of the cinematic apparatus on the basis of appropriating anonymous stock footage and submitting this footage to experiments in the structures of projection and perception.

Rimmer's propensities for choosing footage that would metaphorically relate to the conceptual design arose from his earlier synaesthetic work and lyricism. This metaphoric condition provided a kind of "affective" (emotive) space for the procedure itself.

Structuralism, as I have remarked earlier, represents reduction; in Rimmer's use of the process it represented a reduction to a "term" that was both contained (within the structural procedure) and outside it (by the ability of metaphors to evoke paradox and ambiguity).

His propensity for the looped image, a loop that undergoes variations and degrees of abstraction, is most clearly evident in *Variations*. This design is subjected to further mutations in structure and combinational possibilities in *Seashore*.





The use of image loops produces an effect not of repetition but recombination. To cite Gertrude Stein: "There is no repetition; every time a word is 'repeated' it is a new word by virtue of what word precedes it and what follows it." The looped cycles in *Variations* are predicated on mechanical repetition, displacement of rhythms, and finally abstraction. The woman constantly repeating her "stacking" action in a cellophane factory is evocative of human labour and repetition. The tendency towards abstraction suggests "metaphysical" directions, but I would posit that this suggestion is largely the effect of the soundtrack rather than any predisposition to the "purity of abstraction" (Orphism).

Seashore is structured by temporal displacements achieved by inserting black and clear leader fragments which interrupt mechanical repetition; it is also characterized by a "flatness" to the image that is exploited by old stains and water marks on the surface of the film. The "historical quality" of the Edwardian bathers, when subjected to a "modern" restructuring, produces a paradoxical view of both history and current art process.

Surfacing on the Thames develops Rimmer's most minimalist notions of reduction and materials of the cinema. He takes a short strip of old footage (a boat on the River Thames) and subjects it to an "enlargement" in time by freeze-framing every frame and chaining together these freeze-frames with long dissolves. The normal, and expected, duration now becomes analyzed and exaggerated to produce another paradox in viewing film: what we see is not

what the projector "normally" produces but what a conceptual re-evaluation has designed for us. In other words, Rimmer uses a simple image of a boat horizontally moving across the frame to show us each shift in the movement (and the shift is exaggerated by dissolves) that is "slide-like" and a denial of the projector's ability to mask the intervening point of transport. What he creates is a conceptual model with which we can compare cinema and non-cinema.

Rimmer in the late sixties experimented with films as part of dance performances (for example, *Treefall* was presented in anamorphic cinemascope along with Karen Rimmer's dance compositions), as projections onto geodesic domes (*Blue Movie*), or as ironic puns concerning figurative landscape art (*Landscape* — a time-lapse film intended for "wall framing" installation). His most successful work, however, redefined structural film as exemplified by *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*, *Surfacing on the Thames*, and *Seashore*... ■

NOTES

1. Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1970), p. 76.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
3. A full discussion of analytic and synthetic judgements and their effect on linguistic analysis is found in Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Muskogee, Indian University Press, 1976), pp. 158-159.
4. The wide gulf between lyrical and synaesthetic conceptions concerning "consciousness" and "reality", and those harbored by structuralists, can best be illustrated by citing the comments of Annette Michelson ("Toward Snow", *Artforum*, June 1971) and Michael Snow (*Film Culture*, Autumn 1967). To Michelson, Snow's film *Wavelength*, featuring a 45-minute discontinuous zoom into a photograph of the sea, represented a metaphor for consciousness itself and turned "cognition towards revelation." Similarly, Snow asserted that he was trying "to do something very pure and about the kinds of realities involved."
The structuralist conceptions of "reality" and "consciousness", as represented by Snow's thoughts, depend on analogy and mystification as much as reduction. In the Spring 1971 *Film Culture*, Snow indicated the following:
"I've said before, and perhaps I can quote myself, 'New York Eye and Ear Control is philosophy, Wavelength is metaphysics, and <---> is physics.' By the last I mean the conversion of matter into energy. E = mc² La Region continues this but it becomes simultaneous micro and macro, cosmic-planetary as well as atomic. Totality is achieved in terms of cycles rather than action and reaction. It's above that."
5. R. Bruce Elder, writing in "Redefining Experimental Film: Postmodernist Practice in Canada," *Parachute* #27, Summer 1982, and more recently in *Cinetracts* #17, 1983, attempts to consolidate the structuralism of Snow within critical strategies that invoke phenomenology of representation (the reduction to invariants), Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of "absence," and what he feels is the pre-eminent status of landscape art in Canadian culture. More thought is given to the theoretical constructions than to the work itself.
6. The notion of code is used in place of the more familiar term "grammar" for useful reasons. A code designates channels and constraints, whereas a grammar constitutes a body of rules (which prescribe what is in the language, what is not, what can be added, what is linguistic as opposed to "noise" or "information".) A grammar-oriented practice such as dramatic-narrative cinema, a practice based on the "shooting script", is more severely constrained at the level of expression than its code-governed avant-garde counterpart. A grammatical culture is more content-oriented; a textual culture (employing generative codes and models) such as the avant-garde is more expression-oriented.
7. Hanna Segal, "A Psychoanalytic Contribution to Aesthetics", *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 33, 1952.
8. "Destination: Death", *SW Magazine*, May 6, 1967.
9. The "activation" of the brain which LSD induces (synaptic inhibition is itself inhibited) is related to the dreamwork that researchers such as Dr. J. Allan Hobson of Harvard have studied. Hobson's work, published in "Film and the Physiology of Dreaming Sleep: The Brain As Camera-Projector", *Dreamworks*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1980), identifies "activation-synthesis" along with the more traditional Freudian concepts of "condensation and displacement", as major contributions towards mutations in language, image systems and cognition. In other words, the dreamwork contributes to a changing conception of language as realized in both dream and film.
10. Quoted by Tom Driver in *Romantic Quest and Modern Query: A History of the Modern Theatre* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1970).
11. Gerry Gilbert's use of "deep structure" refers to his sense of combinational strategies (in written and filmic expression) that reminds one of synaesthetic norms of syncretism. Synaesthetic deep structure is radically different from grammatical deep structure (a term used by Noam Chomsky) which prescribes for logical word ordering and allows for shifting and "play" only at the level of syntax (the "surface structure"). I make note of these two models since they reflect back on analytic and synthetic judgements (noted earlier in the text).
12. In 1983, *Mini-Media* runs approximately 12 hours continuous — a reduction from the planned 24 hours of film and video.
13. The reader may refer to "David Rimmer: A Critical Analysis" by Al Razutis (published by the Vancouver Art Gallery as part of the exhibition catalogue for Rimmer's 1980 retrospective film exhibition) for a closer reading of his films and background.
14. I hesitate to call them "materialist" since this term (under Peter Gidal's influence) has taken on an expressed ideological (leftist) position. Rimmer's work does not align itself directly with ideological positions. It tends toward "neutrality" and formalist detachment from political issues.

2. UNDERGROUND FILM EVENING

UNDERGROUND FILM EVENING MAY BRING SURPRISES

by John Driscoll

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

The Victoria Times Colonist, June 1969

An evening of underground films is like a blind date. It may prove boring or filled with surprises. And you can't be sure until it's over whether it's been worth it.

Close to two hundred jammed into the Art Gallery Monday to watch nine short films distributed by Vancouver's Intermedia group. Most of the films were financed independently by the young film makers. Many of the films contained an overdose of murky symbolism and all showed a lack of discipline in editing. But for those who attended there were several pleasant surprises. All of the films were technically on a high level with some excellent photographic effects. And while they may be short on continuity the young experimenters are long on imagination.

"Some of them are using techniques we'd never have dared to use," said Intermedia director Werner Aellen who was trained in more conventional film techniques with the National Film Board.

Aellen chose two of the best films to close the evenings. Vancouver Poet Al Razutis' *Inauguration*, given its Canadian premiere in Victoria was described by him as "a visual tapestry of life twisted and rearranged into abrasive and harmonic patterns." What came across was an anti-war statement, a beautifully photographed montage of pleasure, youth, decay and destruction. One of the most effective sequences shows a group of young people religiously passing around a joint of marijuana, superimposed on a film clip of a second world war battle.

In Dave Rimmer's *Migration* the camera moves with blurred speed in an attempt to capture the rhythm of nature, death and rebirth. The 27-year old Rimmer, a former economics student calls this, his third film, an energy film. The electronic background music is well suited to the style.



Danny Fisher's *Seatta* and Tom Shandell's *El Diablo*, a photo essay of a fire swallower, were exceptionally well photographed.

Other films included Arnold Saba's *Euphoria*; Gordon Fidler's *Phase Two*; Peter Bryant's *Felix*; Bill Fix's *Underground*; and Al Sens' *Cartoon*.

Certainly the evening did much to bolster museum curator Colin Graham's claim that Vancouver "leads Canada and much of North America in experimental film making."

Intermedia is sponsored by a Canada Council grant, and grants from industries and universities. ■

3 LETTER FROM VANCOUVER

LETTER FROM VANCOUVER

by Tony Reif

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN
Take One, October 1969

The Intermedia Film Co-op got off to a rousing start early this year with a marathon benefit retrospective/preview of independent and student filmmaking in Vancouver. About 600 crowded the Art Gallery between 7:00 and 11:00. Most paid a dollar but no one was turned away for lack of bread. The proceeds — \$450 — will allow some of the more under-supported filmmakers to deposit prints with the Co-op. Hopefully the result will be the wide exposure of, for instance, some of the excellent little cartoons made at the Art School — whose workshop, under John Taylor, operates on a very limited budget. Films of the SFU Workshop (under Sheila Reijic) will be available too, and such well-known local independents as Al Sens, Gary Lee-Nova, Al Razutis, and Gordon Fidler and Arnold Saba will also be in the catalog, which is now being prepared. (Intermedia's address is 575 Beatty Street, Vancouver).

The evening itself was a somewhat frustrating affair, great for pattern recognition but hard on details and continuity, due to simultaneous projection in two adjoining galleries. Independent films being what they are — i.e. usually diffuse — the temptation of course was to wander back and forth, or stand in the doorway (nudged by people moving back and forth). X is dull so let's try Y, but by the time it's over you've missed Z and the beginning of A — and that's okay since you saw A when it was shown in the other room... Some highlights: a simple, gently humorous cartoon about a fisherman and his dog — who deserts his master to frolic with the fish; another, shaggier cartoon in which a little man ascends to the heavens only to discover the world in God's toilet bowl (Wayne Morris' *Thank Heaven*); and then there were Bill Fix's subtly iridescent circles (*Phase 2*).

But by far the most exciting of all the films shown were Dave Rimmer's *Square Inch Field* (1968) and *Migration* (1969). Rimmer, who came to film via economics, math and graduate English (UBC and Simon Fraser) didn't start making films seriously till about a year and a half ago. *Square Inch Field*, which was only his second in 16mm, has been called the best film





ever to come out of Vancouver. Composed of thousands of very brief images edited almost entirely in the camera, it is a 12-minute celebration of human life, of the multiplicity of Creation, and of the interconnectedness of all things. The film opens with shots of faces — all races, ages, expressions — accelerating up to 24 different faces per second. We then enter the square inch field — the mind of a man that both contains and is contained by the universe — through the windows of the eyes. And here we are confronted with life in all its aspects. In quick succession the images flash by and are compounded: images of earth, air, fire and water, of birth and death, creation and destruction, the land and the city, the micro and the macrocosm. And through it all the eye-globe-circle image reappears, uniting man and the universe in a band of being. It appears variously as a mandala, a galaxy, or a spider web, but its chief representation is the iris, the circle of vision through which things are seen, alternated and related. As the film progresses the images tend to become more anguished: war, burning, violence, a death mask. Then, sunset, a gull taking off from the waves, clouds; images of the various religions; the universe is a flower, and now we are pulling back from the eyes to see faces again, first a blur then separately discernible, slowly and finally coming to rest on the happy, lively face of a child — a moving statement of faith.

Migration — which Rimmer is completing for the enterprising Stan Fox's new series of local films ("New World," CBC-Vancouver Saturday nights) — was shown silent. It too is about the relation of the human and the natural, is composed of many disparate images, and is structured using a framing device — but in other ways it's quite different. It's less a film of associations than of startling visual effects and rhythms. The film opens with a duped, monochromatic, slow-motion shot of a bird in flight, dark and serene against a grainy green sky. Suddenly the image stops

and burns up, seemingly caught up in the gate of the projector. Now we're into the body of the film — a kaleidoscopic survey of our environment, natural and man-made. The continuing migration is expressed in two ways: shots of the bird matted in white "through" various scenes; and by a unique method of editing which seeks to emulate the rhythms of flight, and gives the film at times a powerful organic rhythm, a heartbeat of its own.

Two other filmmakers to watch are Tom Shandel and Peter Svatek. Shandel's recently completed (1969), 25-minute *Hum Central* (produced for the CBC) is a frequently brilliant collective improvisation on a given triangle — Pia Shandel, Roger Dressier (a Vancouver actor-folksinger), and the director himself (off-camera but occasionally heard). Very little happens, narratively speaking; what counts is the evolution of roles and relationships over the three days the film was shot in. Shandel's approach is very personal and interior so that the film is somewhat impenetrable, yet it retains its fascination as it veers from symbolic action to horseplay to talk to mystical consciousness. Shandel's next project is rumoured to be a colour-and Techniscope feature about his wife's pregnancy.

Svatek's short, *Harry the Hummer*, is by contrast a straightforward reconstruction of a day in the life of an ex-Beat alcoholic junkie who incredibly happens to live in Vernon, B.C. While we watch Harry acting out stealing a car or sitting at the end of diving board in a trench coat getting high, we hear his spontaneous reflections on the soundtrack, and their utter candor gives the film a force it might have lacked otherwise. In the gray world of the documentary where even with the techniques of direct cinema people too seldom come across as individuals, Harry is a true original, a sort of practical philosopher of nihilism. Svatek's refusal to compromise Harry's language for some time kept the film off the airwaves and out of the theatre. ■

4. IMAGES FROM THE AGE OF PARADOX

THE NEW CANADIAN CINEMA: IMAGES FROM THE AGE OF PARADOX (EXCERPT)

by Gene Youngblood

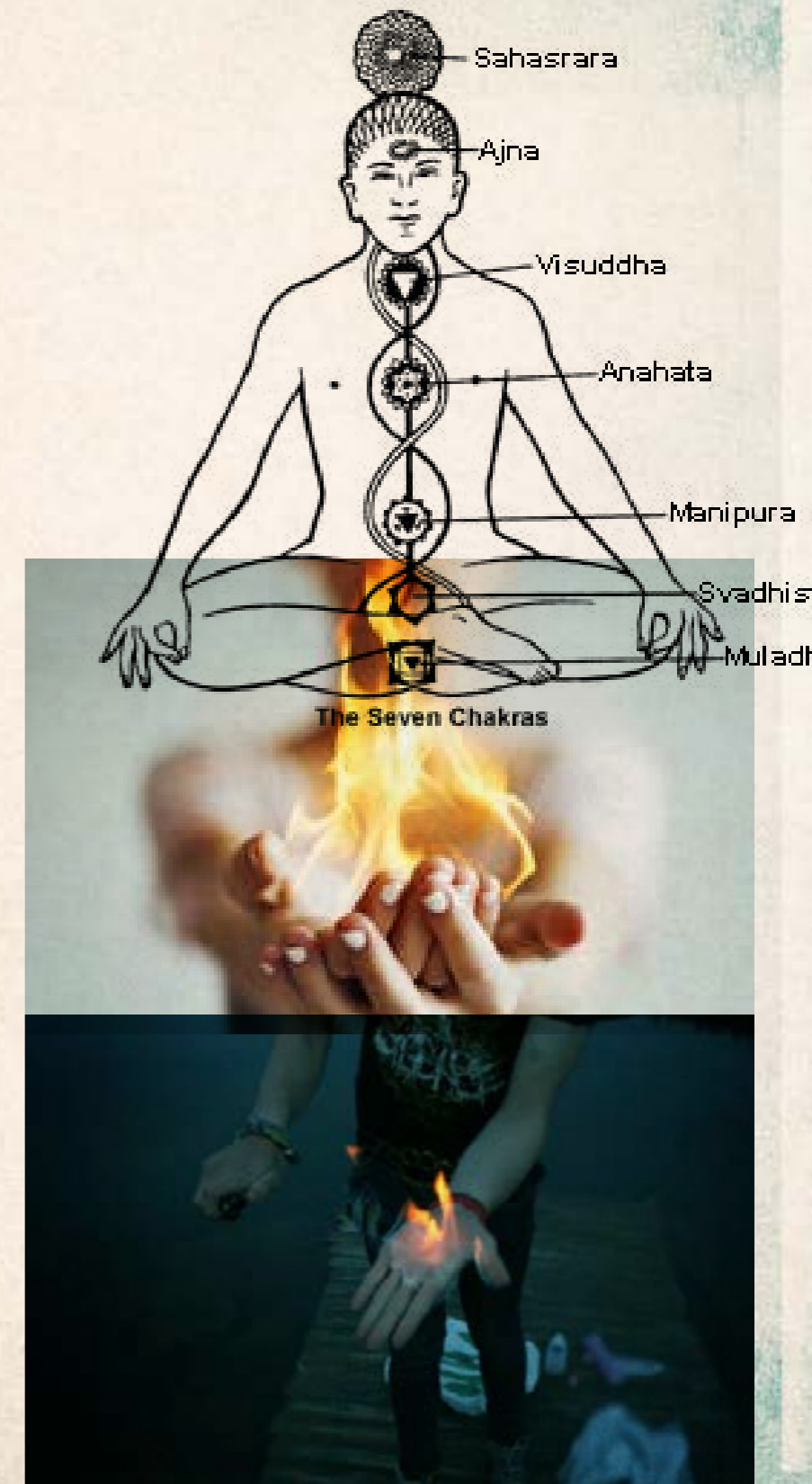
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN
Artscanada Magazine, April 1970

[...]

The highlight of my introduction to the new Canadian cinema came with my discovery of 27-year old David Rimmer, a really major talent. I can say with some authority that Rimmer is making movies of much greater merit than many filmmakers who have reputations only because they happen to work in cultural centres like New York, Toronto and San Francisco. *Square Inch Field* (1968) and *Migration* (1969) are poems in the finest tradition of synaesthetic cinema. They represent post-stylization of unstylized reality at its most refined level of intuitive language, striking deep in the inarticulate consciousness. Rimmer exerts a masterful command over a syncretistic field of complex image-events, suffusing the whole in synaesthetic alloy.

In thirteen closely packed minutes, *Square Inch Field* surveys the micro-macro universe as contained in the mind of man. In that square inch field between the eyes known in Kundalini Yoga as the Ajna Chakra, Rimmer projects a vision of a great mandala of humanity's all-time experience in space/time. A collection of archetypal faces accelerates to 24 per second and we're thrust into a cosmos of the elements, earth, air, fire, water, metamorphosing with icons, molecular structures, constellations, spider webs, snow crystals and a time-lapse sunset over English Bay. All this is viewed through a kind of telescoped iris aperture — peering outward from the mind's eye. The final image is the smiling face of an innocent child. This description does not begin to communicate the powerful aesthetic integrity with which Rimmer has compounded and orchestrated his universe of harmonic opposites: a revelation of cosmic unity.

Whereas *Square Inch Field* was composed largely in the camera, Rimmer's next film, *Migration*, made full use of rear-projection rephotography, stop-framing, multiple-framing, and slow motion. The migration of the title is interpreted as the flight of a ghost bird





through aeons of space/time, through the micro-macro universe, through a myriad of complex realities. A seagull is seen flying gracefully in slow motion against a grainy green sky; suddenly the frame stops, warps and burns, as though caught in the gate of the projector. Now begins an alternation of fast and slow sequences in which the bird flies through time-lapse clouds and fog and, in a stroboscopic crescendo, hurtles into the sun's corona. Successive movements of the film develop rhythmic, organic counterpoints in which cosmic transformations send jelly fish into the sky and ocean waves into the sun. It concludes with stop-frame slow-motion of the bird, transformed once again into flesh.

Rimmer also showed three short workprints, *Dance Film*, *Cellophane Wrapping*, and *Surfacing on the Thames*, all dated 1970, all approximately five minutes long. *Surfacing* is a brilliant film that, in its way, belongs in the same class as Snow's *Wavelength*. I've never seen anything like it. Rimmer rear-projected a 10-second sequence of old World War II footage showing two ships passing on the Thames. He rear-projected each frame, filmed it for several seconds, then lap-dissolved to the next frame, filmed it for several seconds, etc. The result is a mind-blowing film of invisible motion. The ships pass one another like the hands of a clock, without apparent motion.

Surfacing on the Thames is the ultimate metaphysical movie, the ultimate post-minimal movie, one of the really great constructivist films since *Wavelength*. It confronts empirically the illusions of space and time in the cinema and, in my estimation, is at least as important as *Wavelength* as a statement on the illusionistic nature of cinematic motion. If *Surfacing* had been made in New York, Rimmer would be famous today. As it is he'll have to wait a bit; but this young artist is destined for recognition.

[...■]

5. VANCOUVER LETTER

VANCOUVER LETTER

by Kirk Tougas

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN
Take One, May-June 1970


Filmmaking in Vancouver has for many years been a half-hearted myth perpetuated by the CBC: an over-generous invention simply because outside of that organization's documentaries there existed a wasteland. Yet within the past few years, from nothing a virtually unheralded activity has taken root, an explosion of activity which is providing an impressive foundation for a New Canadian Cinema.

While the emphasis of the Quebec cinema has been in the feature film, the Vancouver filmmakers have developed a concise, imaginative, evocative and intense work, the highly personal/individual concentration permitted only in the short film. And headed by such filmmakers as Dave Rimmer, Keith Rodan, Al Razutis, Gordon Fidler, Peter Bryant and many others, the evolution of a West Coast cinema has reached such a level of accomplishment that recognition is long overdue.

Even more so in the immediate present, for the active filmmakers have had an opportunity to develop their first works and refine ideas and penetrate into new perspectives, with each new film. Such is the case with Dave Rimmer and his four latest films.

The first, called *Landscape*, is single-framed during 18 hours, dawn to dusk, from an unchanging camera position, its drastic compression of time permits participation in a vision of the sculpture of land-water coming alive with otherwise imperceptible motion and colour fluxes. However, what is perhaps more important to this work is a positive force deriving from a negation. For the film asks for a response: the contemplative attitude associated with nature, the aura of peace and the realm of tranquility inhabited by any person fortunate enough to restfully settle down on a deserted seashore. The film asks for relaxation, for thought, for dreams, for drifting, for humanity... Without pretensions, without theories or logic, it is a film, a technological medium, used to reach an audience which seems to more frequently insist upon the involvement and entertainment of technology, rather than the





simple charms of a landscape. It is a film that requests the renouncing of concrete, the negative of fumes and electronic pulses for at least a few minutes, and without being pompous, is a warm reminder to live.

Following are *The Dance* and *Surfacing on the Thames*, two works which, like *Landscape*, gain energy from a precise focus — the reduction to a basic — which exposes a previously unseen vision. *The Dance* is composed primarily of a loop of two dancers, rapidly careening around a dance floor in perfect step. The distant, unchanging repetition of the loop accentuates the ridiculous (and thus hilarious) aspects of their mesmerizing twirling patterns and synchromesh footwork. The result is an unbalancing comedy.

Surfacing on the Thames is, however, a more profound engagement. A frame-by-frame progression of a short clip revealing two ships passing on the Thames, this film denies normal time to emphasize a continuing motion. By expansion (the reverse of *Landscape*), Rimmer captures the illusion of the film medium, the twenty-four-frames-per-second fiction of motion: the breathing between each frame. Moreover, this film penetrates into the emulsion itself with its vivid and ever changing abrasions and scratches, and, through the denial of its 24fps reality, expounds on its own celluloid life.

But although Dave indicated to me that *Surfacing on the Thames* was his preferred film, I feel the ultimate progression of his four recent works is more completely contained in the last: *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*. Firstly, whereas *Landscape*, *The Dance* and *Surfacing* are intricate units which modulate only within very restricted limits, this last work follows a process, embracing the intuitive concepts of the previous three

films but juxtaposing their ideas, feeling for relationships. It is an odyssey into subject, motion, colour, image and medium. The breakdown of these intrinsically becomes a constructive power within a changed dimension, the division/manipulation of elements evolves an accentuated whole.

Commencing with an image-loop of a young woman shaking a large sheet of cellophane, Rimmer explores and rearranges the inherent reality of image, motion and sound present in a piece of film. The film rips at visual and sound relationships... elicits positive and negative image and defines the tensions and motions between them... breaks down colour and reveals visual/emotive intensity in staccato bursts... sculpts darkness and light, and the contrast of spaces. Ultimately, as the image in motion links with the breaking of waves on a shore, the image of cinema arrives at a redefinition in two dimensions, linearity.

As ever in Rimmer's work beginning with *Landscape*, perhaps the greatest pleasure is in each film's (apparent) simplicity. *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*, for those closely involved with filmmaking, is an ecstatic experience, an intense and fulfilling moment. But perhaps more valid in some ways is the fact that the casual audience also can be engrossed in the absorbing simplicity and power of this film. It is for anyone a most beautiful initiation (and invitation) to the New Canadian Cinema and a fine artist. ■

6 SIMPLE GENIUS

SIMPLE GENIUS

by Andreas Schroeder

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

The Province (Vancouver), July 31 1970

Some of the best art has had so humble or negligible an origin that artists often prefer not to even bother disclosing their artifact's place of birth though, to my mind, it is to their credit to have been able to salvage their art from such a source in the first place. In this connection I was particularly impressed by David Rimmer's latest film *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*, which uses as its central (and only) image a few frames of a woman piling billowing sheets of cellophane onto a table. Rimmer found the clip lying around somewhere, quite unconnected with anything else he was working on (it looks like a scrap piece from an industrial film or TV commercial), and saw in the woman's gesture the possibilities for a barrage of metaphor.

About a dozen processing experiments later, *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* had become an unexpectedly startling series of images depicting the human being with his back against the various inhuman environments he has suffered through the ages — the sea,

the storm, war, factories (the machine), natural and man-made disasters, and the violence of a maddened or out-of-control brain.

Bi-packing, solarizations, colour saturations and similar techniques were used to achieve these effects, much like in the case of Al Razutis's latest film *Aeon*. *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* excites not only because of its wide-ranging attack on the anti-human forces of the universe, but also because of the amazing depth which has been drawn from such a nondescript source. The naked achievement of such a thing alone is impressive.

Rimmer, a Vancouver-born, Vancouver-based filmmaker, with some six films under his belt, made the entire film for little over \$200, adding another body-punch to the idea that films are of an absolute necessity a ridiculously out-of-proportion branch of the arts. They are often expensive and often necessarily so, but Rimmer's film puts many a film shot on five times his budget to shame. His next production will concern a perusal of Sechelt's ecological implications, both metaphoric and realistic. The film will be shot in 16mm colour. ■



7 IN CONVERSATION

CONVERSATION WITH DAVID RIMMER

by Michael de Courcy

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED ONLINE AS AN AUDIO FILE IN
The Intermedia Catalogue, March, 2005

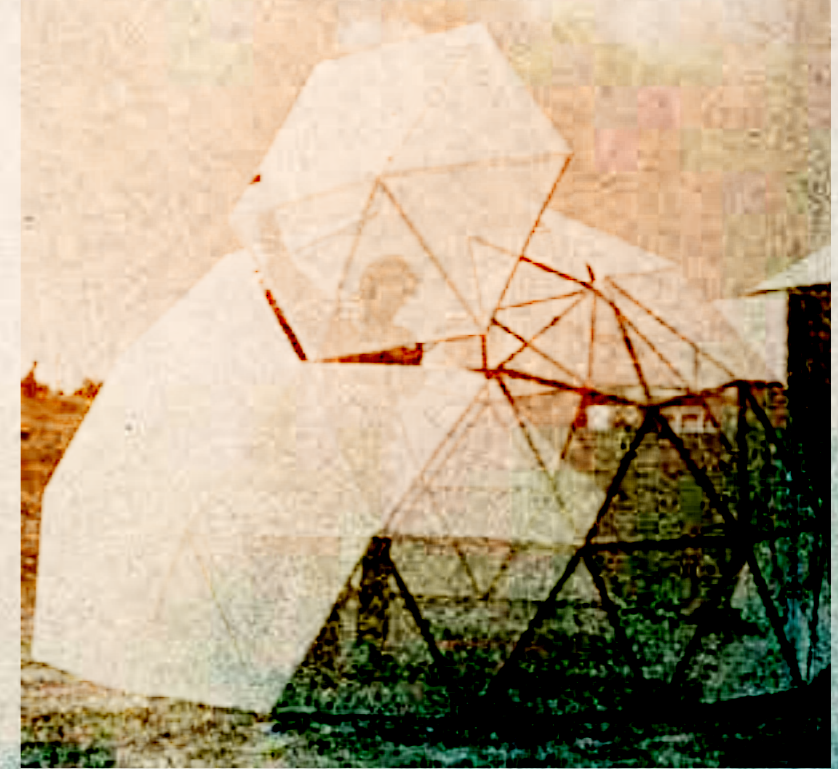
"It is our intention that Intermedia be a place where creative exploration could take place on an interactive basis between artists, between technologists and between seriously interested people. The only criteria that we have is that it is far out, creative and exploratory... I don't think it's very desirable to try and define Intermedia in too great detail at the moment because it's exploratory — we are, in a sense, discovering this thing into existence... We have tried in the setting up of this to create as unstructured an environment as possible. This is the essential difficulty involved in working within an existing institutional structure."

— Victor Doray + Joe Kyle
on CBC radio in 1967

* * *

DAVID: I was beginning to play around with film in a naive way. I didn't really feel comfortable doing English because I wasn't writing myself. I looked around me at the other students and they were all trying to write the definitive essay on Yeats or Eliot or somebody and I thought, "Oh fuck, I don't want to do that. I want to be Yeats, I want to be the guy that makes it, not the guy who writes about it." So I quit.

I started playing around with film, mostly on my own. I'd seen a few films, I'd seen a Brakhage film, I'd seen some Bruce Conner films, so I knew that kind of film-making existed, what's called experimental film. And then one day I heard that there was this place called Intermedia that had a bit of film equipment. So I went down and timidly walked through the door and nobody stopped me. I looked around and there was Johnny Neon playing with these fluorescent tubes. I walked up to another floor and I think it was Kenny Ryan had some very complex electronic machines. He was trying to measure auras, something very esoteric like that. Al Neil was playing and Helen Goodwin was





dancing and I thought this is a great place. So I just moved in and nobody said boo to me. They didn't ask my qualifications, anything like that. I just began working there in the film area, we had a projector and rewinds and a tape recorder. I integrated myself into the group eventually and started working with the group and putting on shows like the ones we did at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

MICHAEL: I remember film showings too. I saw Buñuel's *L'Âge d'or* and Godard films in the Intermedia building. I guess it was the third floor.

DAVID: Well Al Razutis had come up from California.

MICHAEL: Was he a draft dodger?

DAVID: Yes. He brought films up from California and showed them at Intermedia. That's how the first showings of current avant-garde films started. It had been possible before to see the classic Dada/Surreal films at the University of British Columbia and the Vancouver Film Club I think it was called. But Razutis brought the more contemporary stuff. I realized there was something going on in the cinema that interested me much more than English as a trade, as something to do.

MICHAEL: Did Razutis own copies of these films?

DAVID: No, he rented them. He knew where to rent them.

MICHAEL: Where was he coming from? Was he a filmmaker?

DAVID: He was coming from science really. He studied I think chemistry and physics in the States, probably in L.A., and got disillusioned with everything, particularly the war in Vietnam, and came up to see what he could do up here.

MICHAEL: So he wasn't necessarily making films.

DAVID: He was making films too. We were both at the same point in our filmmaking careers. Both trying to figure out what to do, both quite naively exploring the possibilities of film. I say naively as a positive thing because I always say that I'm very fortunate that I didn't go to art school or didn't go to film school because I was able to go and make things which people would have told me were impossible to make. Out of this blessed naivety really. That's something that's continued to influence or affect me from the Intermedia days, the idea that I can do anything I want in film. There's no rules, there's no theory. I can do anything. And I have the confidence to do it from those Intermedia days. Intermedia was really my art school because I never went to art school. Spending five years with Intermedia people taught me all I needed to know at that point about art and artmaking. It was exciting, too, that those people, those few people who did have careers, who did know something about art, were very accepting of the rest of us. We weren't blocked from entering into the scene. We would do great extravaganzas at the Vancouver Art Gallery and everybody was participating. There was nobody saying, "Oh you can't come in. We have to shape this show. It has to reflect some kind of theory." We all just went in and did it.

This video wall as we called it, I made for the Electrical Connections show. I worked with Tom Shandel and Bill Fix. We got together 40 or 50 old television sets.

MICHAEL: Where'd you get them?

DAVID: We went around to television repair stores and asked them if they had any old broken TVs. There weren't really monitors available then. Nobody had them except the television stations. So we made up this huge wall of televisions. Some of them worked, some of them didn't. Some had the glass smashed out of them. Some had mirrors or little scenes inside



them. Some of them at the far end that you can't see here were smashed out with a sledgehammer that lay on the floor. So it starts out kind of regular and then it collapses.

What we had on the screens of the TVs were pre-recorded images that we'd recorded on 1/2" black and white portapak, television stations which are coming through the air, and close circuit cameras that we stationed in the gallery. This was all collaged onto this video wall. We didn't use switchers, we didn't collage it that way; we collaged it quite by accident. We were trying to hook up all these television sets together and we didn't know how to do that. We didn't know what a coaxial cable was, that shielded cable you need for transferring video. We got some brown house wire, ripped it apart and stuck it into one TV, and stuck the other end into the next TV, and went to another one and another one. The whole back of this thing was a mass of wires, all the wrong kind, and the result was that any image coming into the system would kind of jump out of the wires and go into another wire. There was a whole field of video imagery hopping from tele-

vision to television. We might have a double exposure of the CBC news and a Helen Goodwin performance. But it was all out of naivety and not knowing how to hook these TVs together. I remember Werner coming back and saying, "Oh my God. You can't do that!" I think that was the first big video installation in Vancouver.

MICHAEL: The Dome Show was Intermedia's third and final exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery taking place from May 19th-May 31st 1970. The unifying structure of the Dome Show was the geodesic dome. Intermedia members were invited to build a dome individually or communally. A variety of art events and community events took place in the gallery and in the geodesic domes.

DAVID: I have a film, a time-lapsed film, of one of these domes going up. It was a commercial I made for the Intermedia Dome Show. Taki did the soundtrack in Japanese. It's all high contrast black and white. That would be fun to put on a loop on a DVD: The Dome Show.

MICHAEL: And who is this?

DAVID: John Greyson is a filmmaker — it's not him. This guy's name is something like John Greyson, or John Greeson. What did he do? Was he a writer? What's he doing? He's typing.

MICHAEL: I think he was a magazine person, like a writer.

DAVID: I thought he did strange musical instruments. That's what he did. He made these strange instruments with strings and electronic pick ups. He worked with somebody, some important American musician of that type.

MICHAEL: John Cage?

DAVID: No, not that type. More of a funky type.

MICHAEL: This is where the dancers did dance and stuff and then they involved the audience by dragging the surveyor's tape around.

DAVID: Karen did the choreography on that I think. They started in the first room, and then moved to the main room, and the audience followed the performers through the gallery.

MICHAEL: They were moving through all the various domes.

DAVID: Yes, they were interacting in various ways. I remember in my dome I had a videotape of a dancer, I can't remember what he or she was doing. And they came and interacted with that.

MICHAEL: So your dome, you had projection on it, right? You projected from inside it.

DAVID: No, I projected from up above, from the ceiling of the gallery.

MICHAEL: Oh, how did you set the projector up?

DAVID: Well, conveniently there was a skylight up there. It was one of the small rooms in the gallery. I don't know how we did it, we just took it up and taped it in, you know. (laughs) You could take the skylight off to work on the projector. It was inside. Somehow we built a platform up there and there must have been a mirror.

MICHAEL: It's funny — you think you'll remember these things forever, but 30 years is a long time. 35, 40 years.

DAVID: I had foam on the floor. I remember walking into that dome one morning. I came down to check the film loop to make sure it was working. And there was a tour of the gallery from an old age rest home, they were being shown through The Dome Show. There were five or six of them laying on the floor of

the dome looking up. Gerry Gilbert described it as being inside an eyeball. And over the top was coming all these images of clouds and water and various other things.

MICHAEL: Nice. I always liked that, the poets entering the gallery on their hands and knees. This must have been poetry night. And meetings. But this is poetry with tape recorders and stuff.

DAVID: Dennis and I made sound art with reel-to-reel tape recorders. We did a noon hour concert at the Vancouver Art Gallery on Georgia Street. We closed the main doors to the gallery. People came off the street into the lobby, where we had hung six or eight microphones in the ceiling, and we kept the audience waiting there for about twenty minutes. So they were talking. And meanwhile we were recording, with long 1/4" tape loops sticking out into the space. When the people came in we played a mix of them being outside in the lobby and all the things that they said. We echoed it and did all the cheap tricks you could do in those days with tape recorders and looped it. That was the performance.

I guess it was during The Dome Show, as we were saying, a lot of people were invited to come in from the outside, ordinary people in a way. Helen Goodwin who was a dancer and choreographer decided to bring in some strippers. There was a club down on Main Street, I can't remember the name. It was the only club in town that had what were then called go-go dancers. She brought the whole club, the

patrons and the dancers. So here we had the Vancouver Art Gallery, people packed in so tight you could hardly move, and go-go dancers gyrating onstage. It was interesting that she got away with this. You couldn't get away with that today, well you could in a way because you're contexting it in terms of, you're quoting in a way.

I think if one of us males tried to do that we could have got into trouble, even at that time. Feminism wasn't as strong as it is now, not as accepted. I think that... There was some discomfort amongst the women at Intermedia. Although they were included, the organization was still dominated by males to a certain extent. You could just sense it. Women were not as strong as they are now. They felt somewhat intimidated by the situation. And they weren't really doing things that were related to women and feminist ideas. They were just involved, they weren't critiquing the process in the way that women might do now in the same situation. ■



8. INTERMEDIA MAKES WAVES

INTERMEDIA MAKES WAVES

by Brad Robinson

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN
Artscanada Magazine, June 1970

The primary metaphorical context of Vancouver is coastline and waves. Edges, particles, waves. Boundaries giving advantages to adventurous thought and the implementation of that thought in a field somewhat larger than the circumscribed individuality of the artist as a single figure, isolated and alone. The artistic experience of the city is a binding process involving, directly or indirectly, each citizen in it. An active interchange between artist, art and community, the delta redefining the boundaries, the sea likewise returning. The motion is eternal...

"... a movement your eye may see..."

— From Robin Blaser's poem,
Bottom's Dream

And as movement, as thirteen waves, the Intermedia spring show was a congruent response to the experience of Vancouver. Drawing on the total resource of the city — from individuals to organizations to corporations — Intermedia put together a thirteen day long exhibit that molded and unified these resources in a way both new and unique.

In many ways the show was extra-art, implementing talents not usually found or even sought out to reside in an art situation

A short catalogue to suggest: the Salvation Army Band, karate groups, topless dancers...

But the essential resource used was the audience themselves. Intermedia offered a space where there could be a fusion of energies, where the meeting of artist and audience could occur on grounds lacking pretense and where the two could work together in an energetic transference to create something, create an art, a tangibility that would shove around the boundaries of convention.



The contingencies of place, space and attitudes.
The common denominator of assumptions: that all are human and that the category artist is a post-nomination after, and only after, the initial instance of being human.

To begin with that assumption Intermedia organized the space in the gallery with an eye to freedom of transit, where the ambience of activity was given almost total access to the resource of space that gallery offered.

The only static objects of the entire two weeks were ten geodesic domes. Domes equaling homes, places to stay, or wander around, inspect, feel, touch and wonder about. Sited in each room of the gallery of domes, each an extension of a person, a personality, displayed this fact through the materials used in their construction.

Another catalogue: aluminum, foam, plywood, mecano, papier-mache, vinyl...

The day as wave sweeping in at the shoreline predicated, urging new definitions of activity, new verbs....

Theater Night. Dada-surreal Seven Acts... no one quite sure if they got the seven acts off... #1. Throwing oranges at the audience. Audience returns gesture. #2. Under the big dome entire cast eats a meal of crab and saki. Throwing white flower around. Cast leaves, audience eats leftovers. Taste of saki. #3. Might have been the last act. Bicycle riding. Tandems. Wailing women wandering through the audiences, frantic music. Intensity of pitch dislocates. Where are we?

Dance Night. Helen Goodwin Dancers. Karen Rimmer up front. Under the main dome (aluminum tube) in eerie blue light struggling around the periphery of the dome. AGON — Greek 'struggle for the prize.' Received in the next dance as the entire troupe unwinds white tape through and around the audience

and as they pick it up and join the dance. All dancing, a sea of heads bobbing. People as verb. Activity. Non-object.

Poetry Day. Vancouver poets swoop upon the Gallery to read their work in smaller domes. Gerry Gilbert, quiet gentle suction of his magic. Judy Copithorne, singing, melos of word. George Heyman and Scott Lawrence, evidently Buddhist bhakti howling chants. Love of the divine graces from all.

At night the Vancouver Poetry Front operates word dramas in the big dome. Wild, madly funny parody of melodramatic love. Gerry Gilbert satire of heartsick lover a precision of balance. Great comedy.

First Film Night. Energy flags for the first time, perhaps because of the demand of single attention, less mobility of action. Yet Dave Rimmer's *Variation on a Cellophane Wrapper* comes through as a masterpiece. To be seen again and again. A confirmation that the concentration on the particle will summon forth a multiplicity of meaning. An escalator of statement and technique dragged out of a film loop.

Al Neil Trio. With Gregg Simpson on drums and Neil's wife Marguerite on violin. Space Music. Neil's brilliant command of the piano is perhaps unmatched except by only the most highly trained. But do they have his imagination, his intelligence, his innovative and creative powers? Marguerite Neil the first real goddess to make an appearance on the B.C. coast.

Like the great sitarists, Neil's technique is so highly developed that he can catch on the piano all that his inner ear whispers to him. The primary improvisatory demand. How much longer can this music be ignored by other than Vancouver audiences?

City Feast. Singular. A true Bacchanalian rite beginning in private homes throughout the city. Eating, drinking, priming. Converging at the gallery at nine, meeting

with others. Close to a thousand people, drinking, waiting till the band starts. People as an infinite verb. A stasis of energy, quiet enjoyment. And then all the people began to wildly exuberantly joyously dance. The infinite spilt. Bad Grammar. The explosion that makes all boos irrelevant that say so... Michael de Courcy shaking his head in amazement. Topless dancer writhing high above the dancers. The dancers writhing. The energy released is not dissimilar to that of a split atom. A benevolent explosion in which the entire exultancy of spirit establishes the event as a work of art — a living organism alive and mutually harmonious.

The final evening was a total success that changed as many peoples' perceptions as any other work of art with the significant difference that it was the people themselves who made the art. In many instances, this was the case throughout the entire show. It was the attentions of Intermedia and the subtle organization and planning of the group that made the entire show such a success as a dialogue with 8528 people who in return gave Intermedia tactile approval from their point of view to continue in their adventures. To make more waves. A wavering that our eyes might see... ■



9. AN EVENING OF FILMS

AN EVENING OF DAVE RIMMER'S FILMS

by Gerry Gilbert

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

Form and Structure in Recent Film,
ed. Dennis Wheeler, Exhibition Catalogue.
Vancouver Art Gallery and Talon Books, 1972

The eye is hollow and the lining inside is called the retina, from Latin 'rete' net; Greek 'eremos lonely, solitary. Connected to the mind inside by the optic nerve (which meets the retina at a place called the blind spot) and to the light outside through the lens. Images flow in both directions like fish through a net in the sea, and some get seen, caught. The image the mind looks for in the light, and finds, is a face, eyes. I see you, I am alone, all two, with you.

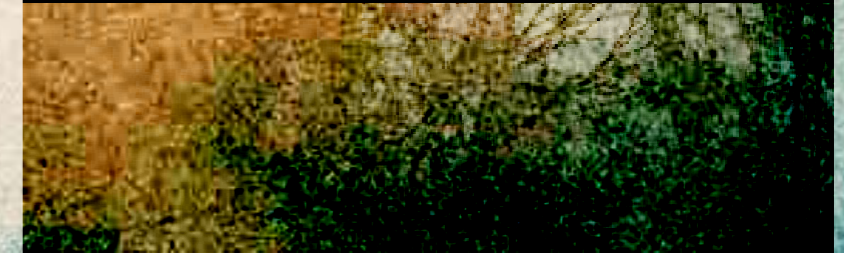
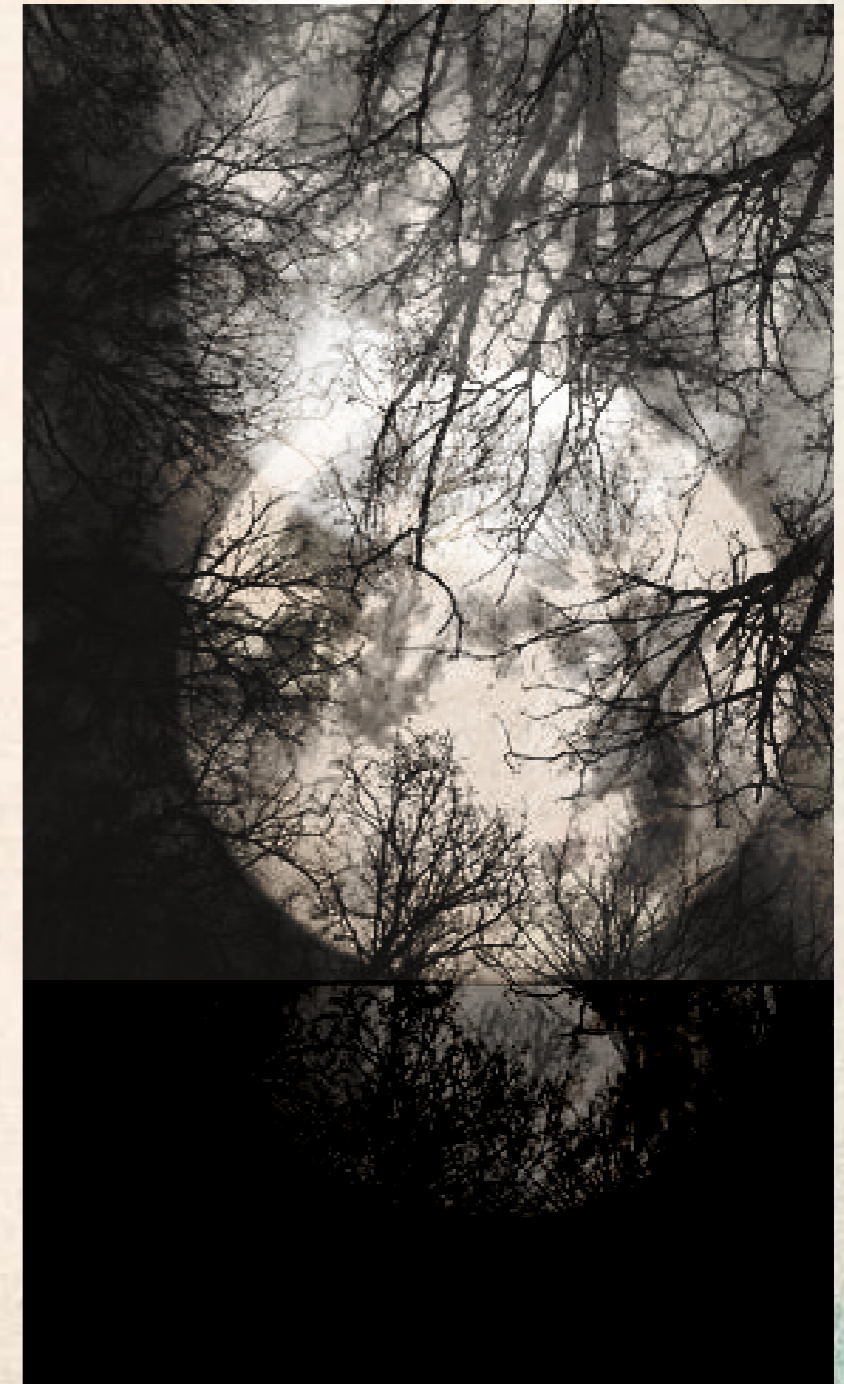
Dave Rimmer showed ten films in the sequence they were made over the last four years, two hours, beginning with *Square Inch Field* (1968, 12 minutes, colour and sound). A face appears, becomes another after another, and faster than I can see each I see them all. The movie sees me enter the eye and dance on a field of skies and galaxies in circles of fire, hole life time death time, meet the golden Buddha his self, gasp,

this is everything, the face, the faces, faces, a face, one boy's face, locked there, looking slightly cock-eyed. I we you he, recognized. The Ceremony of Yes, believe your eyes. As the first nickelodeon films flattened the audience with freight trains roaring out of the screen.

Migration (1969, 12 minutes, colour and sound). This bird found a way out of and into the city. Of course the world has to be round to a bird of course. The wild world below the hungry eyes of a bird. Migration begins. The film is a search for sights, landmarks, finds. The first man to make movies was a magician.

Blue Movie (1970, 5 minutes, colour, silent) was made for the Intermedia Dome Show where it was projected down onto the muslin surface of Dave Rimmer's geodesic dome. The audience lay on the floor looking up at it, the inside back of each eye finishing the globe. The first colour movies were tinted black and white horror films.

Intermedia Commercial (1970, 1 minute, black and white, sound). When Dave commented that it actually got on broadcast TV a couple of times, the audience cheered. The first stereo video.





Surfacing on the Thames (1970, 8 minutes, colour, silent) is a frame by frame examination across five feet of an old yellowed movie. Eight seconds. The secrets of time and space unlocked, or, how long has it been since you watched what you're seeing? Eight minutes flat to witness mind and eye working out co-ordinates for a new ancient language of light. The most beautiful movie you can see.

Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper (1970, 9 minutes, black and white and colour, sound). We get to where we are by climbing a stare. The simple image of a woman waving a sheet of cellophane, and with each wave transforming herself, until she is the image of God. I'm not pretending, that's how "much" light this film feeds to the eyes. I see her now. She is the work, subject and object, of art. To think that Dave Rimmer found her amongst scraps of old NFB footage. The structure of *Cellophane Wrapper* and of the next two films, is the loop, a piece of film joined to itself and repeated, round and round. The first film shown in a New York theatre, between vaudeville acts, was a loop of waves washing up on the beach.

Dave Rimmer's first films are powerful. *The Dance* (1970, 5 minutes, black and white, sound) is something else. It's funny, a delight, and that is a measure of his strength as a filmmaker. I didn't "watch" *Seashore* (1971, 10 minutes, black and white, silent) so much as "read" it. I'd trade Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* for it. We aren't watching films now, we are seeing people, we are wonderful.

The evening closed with two works still in progress. They are portraits of communities. *Real Italian Pizza* of New York City, and the other (untitled) of a new community being built now up the B.C. coast. Dave Rimmer has quietly placed the camera in the blind spot everyone walks past. A fire engine, lights flashing, stops for the firemen to dash in and get some pizza and take to the fire. A woman in the forest sits herself down in it, not watching her baby crawling around her shadow. The name of each place people make is the name of a dance. You haven't been to New York till you've seen *Real Italian Pizza*. ■

we all fear the unknown

10. THE FILMS OF DAVID RIMMER

THE FILMS OF DAVID RIMMER

by Roger Greenspun

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN
New York Times, February 26, 1972

David Rimmer is a 30-year-old Canadian filmmaker whose work is not likely to be known to most New York moviegoers. A selection of his short films, made between 1968 and 1971, opened last night at the Film Forum in a program that should interest anyone who cares about what movies look like and who wonders where they may be going. Rimmer has adapted several of the styles popular during the last few years, and he has done so with charm as well as skill.

The earliest and the latest of these films are the least impressive — the earliest (*Square Inch Field* and *Migration*) mainly repeat the expanded-mind imagery adventures that by now seem generic to the independent cinema; the latest (*West Coast Workprint*), a diary film about communal living in the Pacific Northwest, being a work in progress on which more progress has to be made.

It is what I guess should be called middle-period Rimmer (1970 through 1971) that I like the best. *Surfacing on the Thames*, loop films such as *The Dance* and *Seashore* and the storefront study *Real Italian Pizza* — all play gently and rather elegantly with the idea of film itself, and all investigate the moving image with a kind of concentration most appropriate to a short film.

Both *Seashore* and *The Dance* are loops made of old-movie footage, and they become ghostly evocations of lost energy, broken records of a life long past, as a pair of whirling ballroom dancers repeat the same steps beyond the limits of endurance, or as happy bathers timidly disappear again and again into the same line of surf.

Surfacing on the Thames, on the other hand, sees the great river as almost motionless, caught in a misty, monochromatic print like a Whistler painting — while on the surface of the film, little changes take place. Wrinkles appear, or a small smudge in one corner — and you find yourself moving between the sublime and the ridiculous without budging an inch.



In *Real Italian Pizza* Rimmer covers six months of sidewalk life in front of a New York City pizza parlour in eleven minutes, not by speeding things up but by slowing them down in a kind of stop-action selectivity. Schoolchildren pass by, a football team passes by, panhandlers beg, some youngsters are picked up by the police, it snows, snow melts — and a cheerful, slightly crazy jauntiness prevails that may be as close as film form can come to really capturing a mood of the city. ■

QUICK — WHO ARE...

QUICK — WHO ARE DAVID RIMMER AND JAMES HERBERT?

by Roger Greenspun

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN
New York Times, October 8, 1972

If you walk into a room full of movie nuts — if you can find a room full of movie nuts these days — and drop the names James Herbert and David Rimmer, nobody is likely to help you pick them up. Probably not even the most knowledgeable enthusiast — the friend, say, who is studying, really studying, the career of Joseph H. Lewis (*Gun Crazy*, *Terror in a Texas Town*, etc); or the specialist who can read almost as much from each frame of Stan Brakhage as the filmmaker put in — will have heard about Rimmer or Herbert.

Of course, they aren't totally unknown. Some useful articles about David Rimmer have already appeared, and James Herbert has had his share of awards, honours and foundation grants. But because they don't make commercial movies, and because they don't really belong to the establishments of either the East or West Coast independent cinema, they haven't received much general attention yet. But they should; they are very, very good.

I first got to see their work last spring at Film Forum, a little weekend theatre on the Upper West Side. Herbert's films can now be seen again, this week, at a Museum of Modern Art Cineprobe program Tuesday night. Both Rimmer and Herbert are scheduled for further showings at the Museum early in December.

David Rimmer is a 30-year-old Canadian and part-time New Yorker, whose collected works, all ten of them, date back as far back as 1968. James Herbert, now in his mid-thirties, is a painter (he will have a one-man show at the Poindexter Gallery next month) as well as a filmmaker, and he teaches art in the University of Georgia at Athens. His filmography also goes back to 1968, but his most important work is contained in four films made in 1971-72 under a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation. Herbert calls them the *Guggenheim Quartet*, and their individual titles are *Fig*, *Pear I*, *Pear II*, and *Plum*. They don't have anything to do with fruit.

Rimmer is currently working on a rather long movie, a diary film about life in a commune in British Columbia. But if you leave that out, you can see all his films, none lasting more than 12 minutes, in a single concentrated sitting. James Herbert's films run longer





(about 26 minutes for *Pearl*), but there are fewer of them, so a complete program is also a reasonable possibility. I think this is worth mentioning, because you can experience these filmmakers in somewhat the same way you might experience a volume of collected poems, which gives you very extensive contact with an artist's vision at one time. It is a pleasure and a privilege of its own sort, one not available from a full-length fiction movie.

It should be obvious by now that neither Rimmer nor Herbert makes fiction films. They don't exactly make abstract films either, and both of them — especially Herbert — remain rather importantly in touch with a real, if attenuated, dramatic content. But on a scale of diminishing realism that might run from the idea of film as window-on-the-world to the idea of film as self-supporting artistic object, both Herbert and Rimmer are closer to object than they are to window.

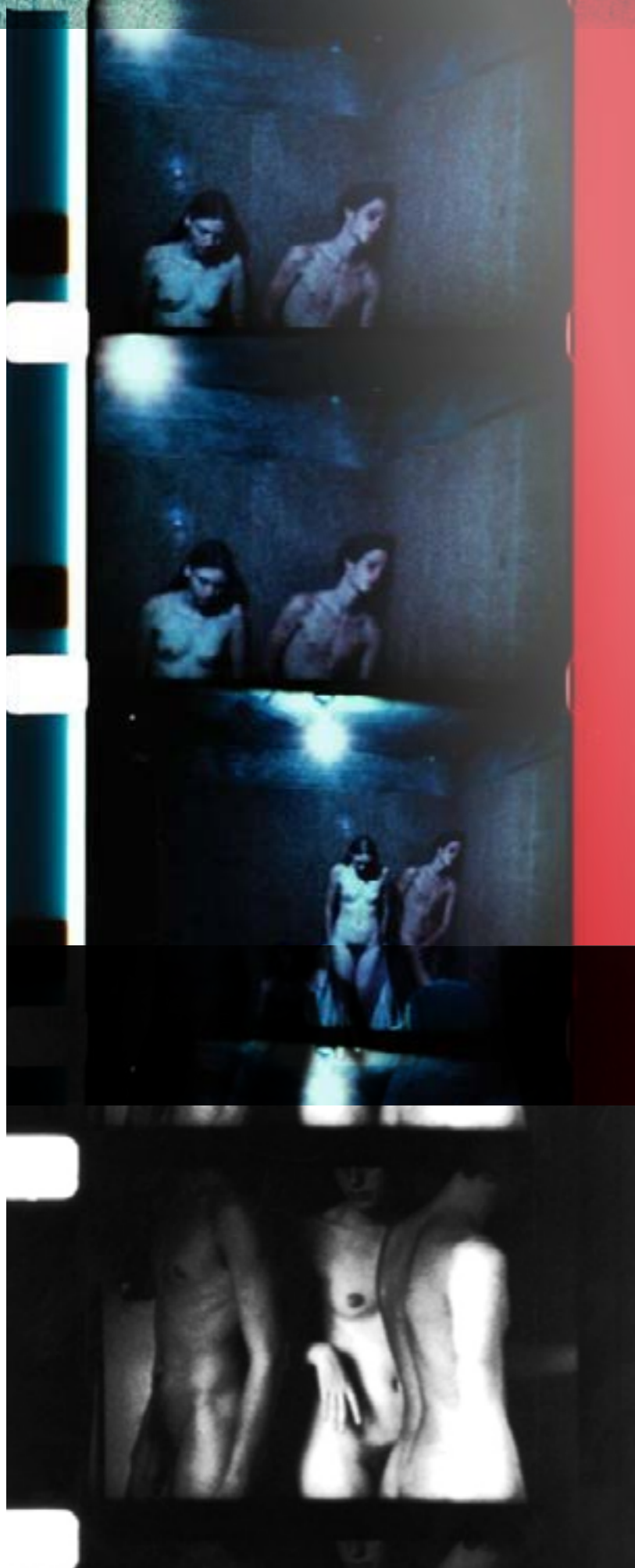
That metaphor happens to be directly applicable. Windows appear again and again in Herbert's films, often suggesting memory, as if retaining an access to vistas of nostalgic attraction. And one of David Rimmer's best films, *Real Italian Pizza*, a 10-minute look at nine months of street life outside a Manhattan pizza parlor, was literally photographed through a friend's apartment window. But except for the unfinished diary film, *Real Italian Pizza* is Rimmer's only close approach to the material of life as it is actually lived. More often he does something else.

That "something else" is usually a kind of playing with film — film he has shot himself, or bits of old film stock that he repeats, with certain variations, through a series of continuous loops. For example, *The Dance*, a five-minute movie in which a stylish 1920s couple spins around a dance floor to the music of a jazz band with a solo saxophone.

It all seems normal enough until you realize that the dancers are dancing the same steps over and over again, with perhaps a slight acceleration, until there is a final twirl, a bouquet of flowers arrives, then a shot of an applauding audience, and a curtain falls to end the film. If you think about those dancers, who danced before a camera maybe half a century ago, and who are now imprisoned in a repetition of those same few lively steps, it is tempting — and I think dangerously tempting — to see in the mere concept of the loops a kind of instant profundity. That Rimmer is aware of the profundity — and of the temptation — seems likely from what he does in *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*.

A single very brief shot of a young woman lowering a sheet of cellophane across a table is repeated, it would seem, to infinity (actually, eight minutes) — while the film darkens, lightens, changes from one monochromatic colour to another and another, goes from positive to negative image, finally leaves only a hint of a recognizable figure; until the young woman with her sheet of cellophane takes on the quality of a prime mover in an endlessly varying universe and on the soundtrack we suddenly hear a choir of what might well be heavenly voices. This may sound like strained seriousness, but I think it is really a kind of cosmic wit — indicating what the film is about then kidding it a little at the same time.

Perhaps Rimmer's best quality is his immensely appreciative irreverence for the filmed image and for his own ways of reshaping it. Thus *Surfacing on the Thames*, the loveliest Rimmer film (and the cleverest Rimmer title) shows a river boat slowly steaming past the Houses of Parliament — so slowly that it almost seems not to be moving, and surrounded by such a grainy luminous mistiness that one critic is supposed to have thought he was looking at a Turner painting



rather than at film footage. Gradually the surface of the film begins to wrinkle slightly, to spot, to show minor blemishes — in a sense, to assert *itself* above and before the rich density it contains. The gesture is tentative and discreet, but it is also unsettling and liberating in ways that seem central to the gentle invocations of dissolution that are a basic feature of David Rimmer's world.

A feeling for dissolution pervades James Herbert's work also, but it is much more mysterious, less witty, more difficult, less rational, more sensuous. Herbert's subjects, at least in the *Guggenheim Quartet*, are couples, a girl and a boy, usually naked, and usually alone in a room, near a window and near a single source of artificial light — say, an unshaded bulb. These elements are by no means invariable (*Plum* uses the bodies of several couples splashing in a mountain stream), but they are typical.

There is a strong element of eroticism — an earlier film, *Porch Glider* is more openly and even defiantly erotic — but I don't think the ultimate aim is erotic, though I have rarely seen movies so aware of the mortal sadness of beautiful young bodies, not even in the late lamented heyday of Eighth Avenue skin flicks.

Herbert's films are also grainy, with the original footage greatly worked over by the filmmaker. The films are generally dark with a prevailing hue — blue, or perhaps brick red — and to a large degree they are made up of successions of still rather than moving pictures. There is always an intimation of drama, sometimes of great tension, but it is never resolved or even very specifically expressed. In *Fig*, for example, we see a young girl, naked and pregnant, and a young man, also naked. Sometimes they are together, sometimes apart. They sit or stand with downcast eyes, but

occasionally exchange a glance that may suggest complicity or perhaps great apprehension. Nothing really happens. Everything has happened or is about to happen, and the picture space seems alternately full of memory, and charged with potentiality. The figures are at once immensely weighted and strangely insubstantial; skin texture dissolves into film texture, and the most solid body may suddenly become a ghostly presence passing like a shadow out of a scene.

If David Rimmer in one film suggests Turner, James Herbert in several films seems to invoke the expressionist vision of Munch or Ensor — though his movies look like a merger of pointillist painting and the earliest efforts in 19th-century photography. Such a return to spiritual and technical sources may not be intentional, but I think it is no accident. Both Herbert and Rimmer are superb and highly innovative technicians. In this they resemble a good many other independent filmmakers.

But they are also very conscious artists, or perhaps it would be better to say, artists with a very strong regard for the energy inherent in mental images. I think that at least part of what they are attempting is to re-identify and reunite film image and technique in a way that assures the dominance of neither but the interaction, and perhaps the transformation, of both.

I don't think that many movies are ever going to look like *Pearl* or *Surfacing on the Thames*, or even that the next films of Herbert or Rimmer will look like them. But they are very lovely things in themselves. And they do seem to stand for a particularly rich intermingling of mind and matter — a temporary symbol for the marvelously impure art of film, which lives by the union of man and machine, truth and illusion, memory and desire. ■

12. THE FILMS OF DAVID RIMMER

THE FILMS OF DAVID RIMMER

by Kristina Nordstrom

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

Village Voice, April 6, 1972. Reprinted in *Film Library Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Summer 1972

David Rimmer, a young Canadian from Vancouver is one of the most exciting current avant-garde filmmakers. His films were exhibited last year in New York City at the Millennium Film Workshop, the Museum of Modern Art, and, more recently, at the Film Forum. Although working in a disciplined style of restructuring cinematic forms, his highly orchestrated creations have inspired great admiration from both cineastes and the more general public.

His first film, *Square Inch Field* (1968), is a rapid-fire montage, a dynamic juxtaposition of the world's vital and destructive forces. The title originated in a Chinese book called *Secret of the Golden Flower* in which the Square Foot House describes the human head, while the Square Inch Field refers to the Third Eye. The filmmaker's own excellent eye is revealed in his beautifully composed nature shots and his forceful images of human life. Close-up shots of various faces

open and close the film, the very last shot holding on the innocent face of a young child. By quick cutting and fast zooms he telescopes a dazzling variety of visual material together into a kaleidoscopic survey of our world.

Migration (1969) appears to be a vision of motion described from the point of view of a bird flying through space. It opens with the black silhouette of a seagull flying in slow motion against a white background. Suddenly the film stops, burns, and bubbles appear on the surface. This is followed by a more abstract, white silhouette of the bird, again in flight. Rapid dolly shots past trees and fast pans over the earth's surface vegetation symbolize the bird's speed. One particularly impressive shot records glimpses of the sun flashing behind a dark web of foreground trees, these flittering lights being visually analogous to the rapid wing motion of a bird in flight. At one point the bird's journey is interrupted; he falls from the sky as a bloody mass of flesh. Other carcasses of dead animals are cut in to remind us of the immobility of death imminent in life itself. The film essentially celebrates the movement of natural forms: birds, seals, a jellyfish, the weaves, clouds, trees; it is a poem of



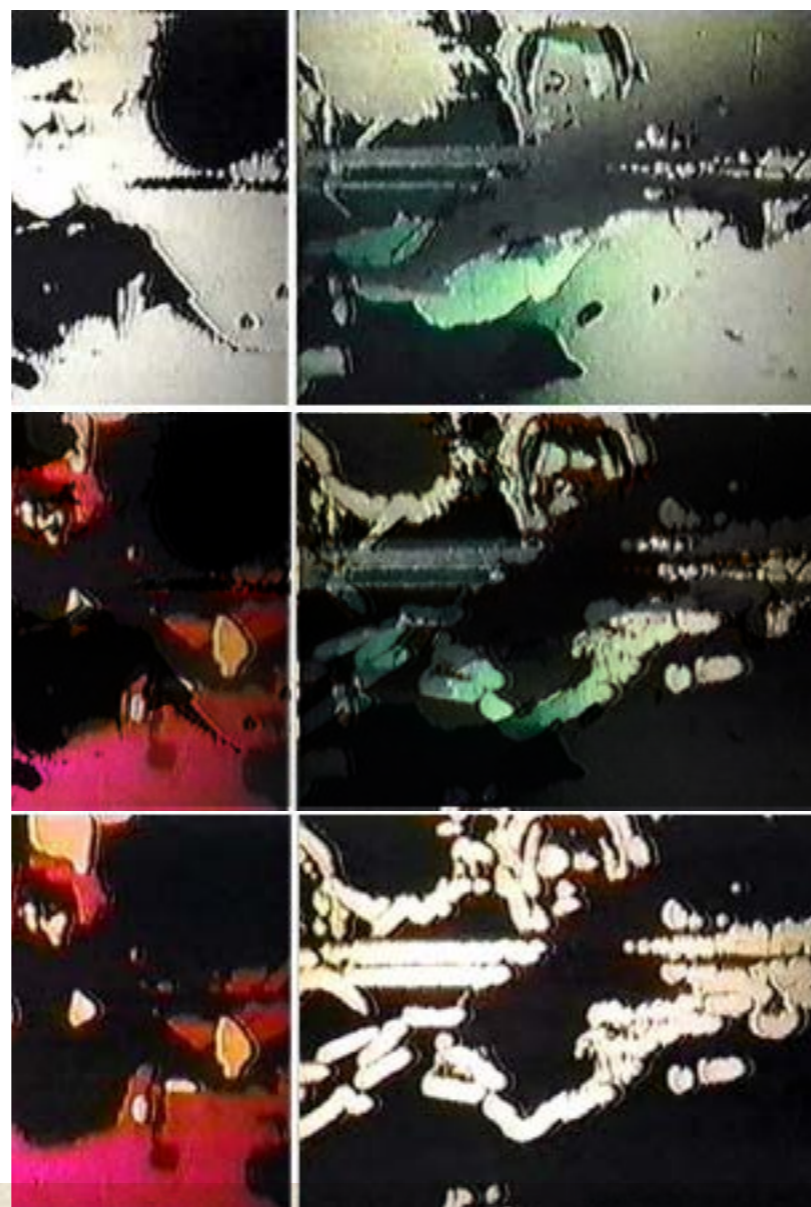
motion. At intervals the film stock itself dissolves into bubbles, or the grain dances over the film's surface. Even the opening title and closing credit lines were made to vibrate by scratching the words by hand onto each individual frame.

Blue Movie (1970) is a more abstract study of natural motion, in which blue and white forms continually displace each other. It opens with a solid frame of bright blue. Suddenly clouds appear and move rapidly over the surface until the frame is totally white. Immediately another mobile pattern is introduced, that of ocean waves, which sweep white froth over the intense blue ground. The stylization is increased by looping some of the shots to repeat the same wave patterns again and again. Sometimes, the colours are arbitrarily reversed. In the final segment the ocean appears more serene; the colour do not compete as violently as they had in the two earlier sequences, but vibrate quietly on the surface.

This brings us to *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970). Much has been written about this movie; one critic wrote that it was a study of a painting by the nineteenth-century English artist, Turner. It isn't, but the film does resemble Turner's work in its golden coloration, its soft focus and its interest in the texture of the space lying between the spectator and a distant object. The basis of the film is the shot of two ships passing each other as they move in opposite directions along the river Thames. By projecting it and rephotographing it frame by frame, Rimmer slowed down the film's speed so that the movement of these two boats becomes barely perceptible. He concentrates the viewer's attention on the grainy texture of the film stock itself, the lens through which it was projected, and the movement of hairs and specks of dirt in the gate. The shot was originally black and white, but the filmmaker created its golden tonality by printing it on colour stock. The graininess, too, was increased through laboratory techniques.

Many of David Rimmer's films started with film loops. A couple of years ago he acquired a box of old black and white films from which he selected shots that would maintain continuity when the head and tail were spliced together. He projected these film loops and rephotographed them, gradually changing their visual design: by increasing the graininess, by heightening the contrast between light and dark areas, by superimposing negative and positive images, and by introducing colour.

In *Treefall*, a silent film made in 1970, Rimmer took the shot of a falling pine tree and made high contrast positive and negative loops in different lengths. He then



projected them together and reshot the combined images to create a choreographed series of dark and light trees falling in rhythmic patterns.

Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper (1970) is Rimmer's most popular film, and I consider it to be the most exciting non-narrative film I've ever seen. The basic image is a female factory worker unrolling a large sheet of cellophane. The woman shakes it out in front of her a few times. The cellophane grows darker each time it is shaken, and as it passes between her face and the camera, it veils her features momentarily. Rimmer begins the film by introducing the eight-second shot as he originally found it; then he starts his variations. First he increases the light-dark contrast, reducing the three-dimensional forms to simpler black and white patterns. Then he introduces negative images, a further abstraction away from the original design. Mechanically repetitive, factory-like sounds increase in tempo, building up to a machine-gun-like effect. As the sound intensifies, he introduces a flicker to heighten the visual excitement. Then he gradually adds colour — blue and green at first, building up to a climax with bright flashes of yellow and red. The sound changes to crashing ocean waves with a choral interlude. Gongs ring to announce the final sequence in which the images become polarized into grainy outlines, like drawings in white or coloured chalk which gradually disintegrate and disappear. The film resembles a painting floating through time, its subject disappearing and reemerging in various degrees of abstraction.

WHEN LOOPING IS MOST SUCCESSFUL

In *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* the filmmaker chose a shot which is particularly suited for looping, since the stylistic repetition strongly expresses the mechanical nature of factory work. In *The Dance* (1970) Rimmer re-creates the repetitive movements of a

dance contest. The film begins dramatically with the shot of a theatre curtain being drawn open to reveal a full house. Then he introduces the film's basic image, a dancehall scene with a jazz band playing in the background and couple whirling around the dance floor. The picture is looped so that the dancers repeat their steps over and over again, while the music is allowed to develop into a finished jazz piece. The dancers end with a flourish (a smaller loop with the dancers twirling in one spot) and receive a huge bouquet of flowers. The film closes with the first shot of the film run backwards drawing the curtains together again.

In *Seashore* (1971) Rimmer also repeats actions to set up a series of rhythmical patterns. The basic image derives from a shot from an old movie depicting

women in long dresses standing along the edge of the ocean. Within this eight-second loop, he cut shorter ones, so that the film actually contains loops within loops. For example, the activity of a central group of three women is cut so that the figures repeat certain motions over and over again: one woman keeps kicking out her foot, the person in front of her continues touching her hand to her leg, while at the edge of the frame another woman keeps tidying her hair. Rimmer also chose to use the forms of surface imperfections, the scratches and dirt patterns, as bases for his loops. Other ways of stylizing the images include: freezing the frame in which a distinct pattern of dirt appears, contrasting positive and negative images, and reversing the entire picture. At one point the original scene is confronted with its mirror image to create a bilaterally symmetrical pattern.

ELIMINATING THE NON-ESSENTIALS

Other avant-garde filmmakers have experimented with film loops and have combined positive and negative images to create new rhythmical structures. Charles Levine's films *Bessie Smith* (1968-69), *Apropos of San Francisco* (1969), and *Horseopera* (1970) come immediately to mind. Standish Lawder used old cartoons to obtain abstract effects in films like *Road Film* (1970). His most recent work, *Raindance* (1972) takes off from an animated rainstorm (taken from *History of the Cinema* [1957] by John Halas) to become an infinite variety of reticular patterns. David Rimmer uses other techniques in *Real Italian Pizza* (1971), a film diary of the façade of a New York pizza parlour recorded from September 1970 to May 1971. On the soundtrack we hear street noises and popular music. In this film Rimmer combines the cinema vérité approach of capturing actual people in segments of real life with stylized abstractions of those people (if you can imagine it, Henri Cartier-Bresson, plus Alain

Resnais). As figures saunter past, enter, or leave the restaurant, the film suddenly jumps ahead in time to find them in a new posture. Their moments have become fragmented, set off, isolated, as if their bodies had been lit by strobe lights. In these scenes Rimmer condenses time, eliminating all inessential activity in order to emphasize certain special moments. In other sequences Rimmer expands time by capturing figures in slow motion. The shot of one young man gracefully dancing along the sidewalk is particularly memorable. The filmmaker has capsuled into this 12-minute film several months of New York life. People walk by carrying packages. They dance and fight (in the dancing and fighting sequences he looped some of the individual movements for a rhythmical effect.) A fire truck stops so that the firemen can buy some pizza. We even witness an arrest. In one humorous sequence two men shovel snow off the sidewalk, the filmmaker speeding up the action as the job nears completion. One of the men suddenly twirls his shovel in a delightfully human way. This interest in anecdote combined with the film's formal structure reminds me of the paintings of Edward Hopper. Actually, there are many artistic analogies one could make to Rimmer's work. Turner has already been mentioned. Another is Franz Marc, who is best known for his paintings of animals, but whose later work was more abstract. Rimmer's *Blue Movie* recalls Marc's *Fighting Forms* (1914), a powerful exercise in dynamic movement. Comparisons of Rimmer's work with such diverse artistic styles speaks for the great richness of his films.

His latest film, tentatively titled *West Coast Workprint* is still in progress. It contains many candid shots of his wife and friends at home and in the woods. The film indicates that Rimmer is heading in a new direction. He is moving away from highly stylized patterning toward a freer, more narrative approach. It will be interesting to see how his talent for orchestrating film images will permeate this more open style. ■



13 SHORT FILMS

SHORT FILMS (EXCERPT)

by Rick Hancox

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN
Cinema Canada, June-July 1974

[...]

The National Gallery [of Canada] selected three of David Rimmer's films [for their Canadian Filmmakers Series]: *Real Italian Pizza*, *Blue Movie* and *Migration*. I liked *Migration* (1969), but I liked *Real Italian Pizza*, his latest film, even better. I don't think *Blue Movie* (1970) belongs in the Series, since Rimmer is otherwise represented by two fine films so superior to *Blue Movie* they make it look like just another decorative artifact. *Real Italian Pizza* is, beyond a doubt, one of the best films I have ever seen. It's one of those films you can see over and over again, and each time thrill to new discoveries.

The film documents the life of a pizza place in New York City (called "Real Italian Pizza") from the fall of 1970 to the spring of '71. The images are all high-angle shots of the store's façade filmed from Rimmer's apartment window across the street. From a lot

of footage that was doubtless shot over the eight-month period, Rimmer has cut in only particular takes — as opposed to single-framing the whole thing, which was my understanding when I first met him in New York in 1970 — and then with typical Rimmer el-cheapo-home-optical-printing finesse, step-prints, freeze-frames, loop-prints and otherwise rephotographs some of his footage. It all adds up to only ten minutes, but I understand there exists somewhere a longer silent version some say is better. Well, as much as Rimmer has hacked and hewed away at it, I'm convinced a few minutes here and there aren't going to make much difference to an already successful concept which isn't communicated primarily through temporal structure anyway, as is the case with Rimmer's *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*.

Real Italian Pizza works with the same real-life fascination of simply staring at something — but it's even more compelling because we are obviously getting a candid look: a police raid, a false fire alarm, all manner of people passing — from two high-school football teams to Rimmer himself, eating pizza. And throughout it all, like guards of their rightful territory, the local





“bad dudes” hang out — panhandling, intimidating, making deals, laughing, dancing. In winter you recognize the same ones, this time all in identical long, dark overcoats, and again in spring wearing shiny red or green pants rendered fluorescent by Rimmer’s rephotography. These are the real “heroes” of the film — the guys posing every day under the sign which reads: “Pizza-Heros;” the guys brave enough to wrest some spontaneous joy out of the New York cityscape.

The film’s magnetic hold over our interest has more going for it than just candid staring. It flows over with Rimmer’s mastery for the kind of paradox in a camera composition with “Buy Pepsi” in each of the frame’s upper corners, and “Drink Coke” in each of the lower,

of the kind of tension created by a rephotography technique which freeze-frames the scene after the panhandler walks out-of-frame on another try — and thereby never brings him back from his “victim;” and of the kind of perception which reveals a façade like “Real Italian Pizza,” when there is no pizza in Italy, and no Italy in the pizza stand, and the statement itself a sign on a store façade. But the ultimate compelling puzzle in Rimmer’s film is the trapped and diminutive psychological rendering of the “anti-heroes,” as caused by the unchanging tight compositions and high camera angle, when seen against theirs — and Rimmer’s — free and gargantuan creative joy.

[...■]

14 MOVIE JOURNAL

MOVIE JOURNAL (EXCERPT)

by Jonas Mekas

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN
Village Voice, January 1975

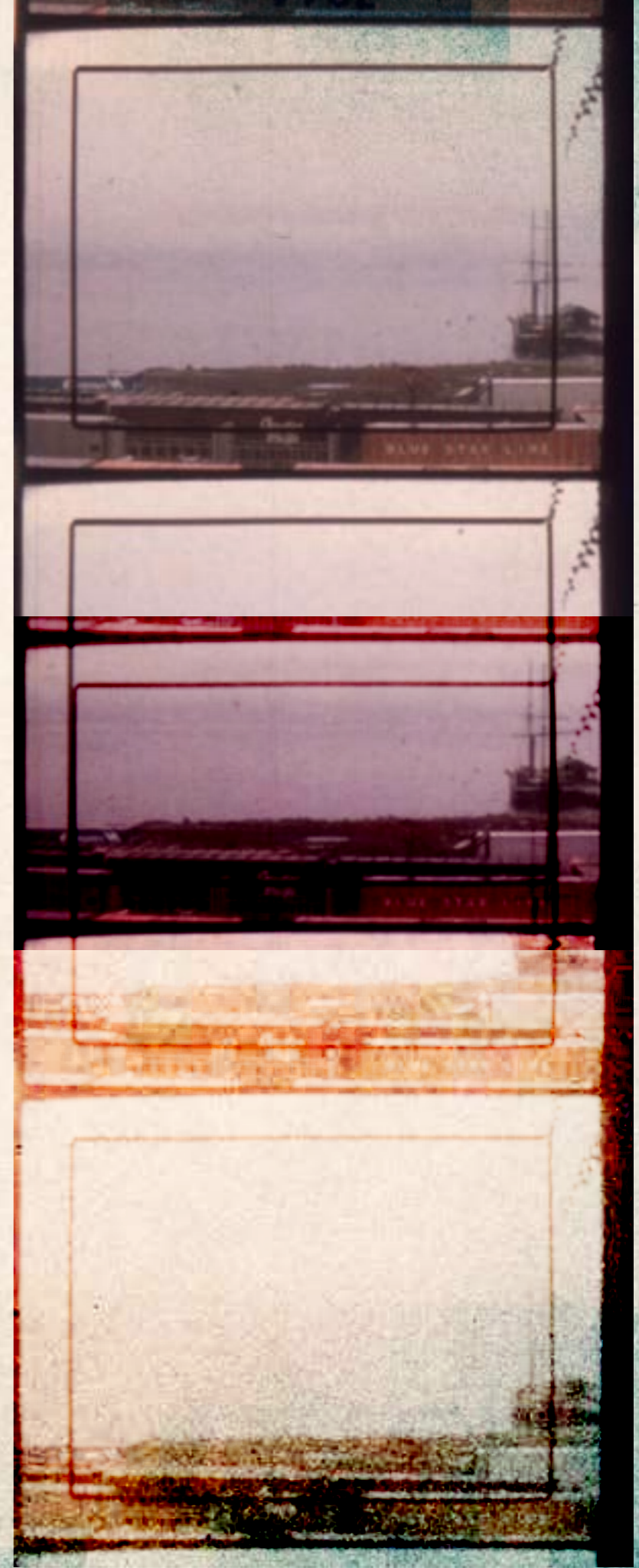


[...]

Went to the Single Frame Dance program at Film Forum. I liked two films. One was James Herbert's *Apalachee*. I wrote about it two weeks ago, about its sensuous qualities. Second viewing confirmed my first opinion — *Apalachee* is a perfectly executed formal work of the first order. The other film I liked was David Rimmer's *Canadian Pacific*.

Canadian Pacific (10 minutes) is a one-shot film, or rather one shot that is made up of a series of slowly dissolved shots done from the same camera angle, same framing, during a period of several weeks. Camera frames a window with a railway yard in the foreground, a bay in the space behind it, and misty mountains in the extreme distance (top part of the picture). Trains occasionally pass by in the foreground. Huge ships move across the bay. Blue mists hover over the mountain heads. Very impeccably executed, very formal film. But its formalism is very unimposing, like in a Hudson School painting. I'm looking forward to seeing it again.

[...■]



15. ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS-

ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

by Leonard Horowitz

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

Soho Weekly News, January 9, 1975

David Rimmer is showing two films, *Watching for the Queen*, and *Canadian Pacific*. Rimmer is a very accomplished young Canadian who has made a number of remarkable films using a simple homemade optical printer based on a prototype schematic originally detailed in *Canyon Cinemanews*, July 1967. Many of Rimmer's films are restructured "found footage," as is *Watching for the Queen*, which is not more than two seconds of old newsreel film. This means he has 48 still frames to play with, and it is remarkable to see how he reinvents the real time of this footage into an 11-minute film. For about two minutes, you are confronted by a still frame of a sea of smiling, expectant faces, filmed from a balcony. Then, one frame flickers. Gradually, the time between each frame increases, and Rimmer doubles back on a sequence by loop structuring it (repeating the image over and over).

The anatomy of what film is composed of really comes across. By carefully manipulating these 48 frames in arbitrary sequences, Rimmer has created a delightful and penetrating film.

In *Canadian Pacific* Rimmer condenses three months into a ten-minute "time-lapse" film. One enters into a dream state — the same situation is filmed under changing conditions that very subtly and slowly and silently dissolve into one another.

I see a relationship between Rimmer's vision and the altered states that occur in the work of Robert Wilson (*The Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds*). I love Wilson's work, and it is my guess that in some strange way, Wilson may have been influenced by certain possibilities inherent in filmic time, which he has re-invented into staged presences. There is that same magic in Rimmer's film — an involvement with a vocabulary of seeing and feeling by subtle transitions of the passage of time. ■



16. HONESTY OF VISION

DAVID RIMMER: HONESTY OF VISION

by George Csaba Koller

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN
Cinema Canada, February 1975

His films have a clarity of purpose that is the mark of a true artist. Whether they depict the entire macro/microscopic universe — his first film *Square Inch Field* — or simply the view out of a Vancouver warehouse window — *Canadian Pacific I and II* — David Rimmer's cinematic works possess an honesty of vision from concept to execution. He is perhaps the best known Canadian film artist, next to Michael Snow, outside this country. He has gained the mandatory recognition in New York. Gene Youngblood, the author of *Expanded Cinema*, wrote of one of his films in 1970: "If *Surfacing [on the Thames]* had been made in New York, Rimmer would be famous today. As it is he'll have to wait a bit; but this young artist is destined for recognition." Roger Greenspun in the *New York Times* called him, "very, very good," and the *Village Voice* lauded him as "one of the most exciting current avant-garde filmmakers."

A native of Vancouver, David Rimmer graduated from the University of British Columbia in 1963, majoring in economics and mathematics. He had a vague idea of going into business eventually, but took two years off to hitchhike through Asia and Europe. During his travels he picked up a regular 8mm movie camera in Gibraltar. He returned to Vancouver with the realization that he did not want to be a businessman. Instead, he returned to UBC to get a BA in English, then on to Simon Fraser for an MA in the same subject. He felt frustrated, since he wasn't doing anything creative, so he picked up his movie camera and proceeded to make a film with some friends.

He quit university, and decided to try filmmaking full time. Joining the industry did not appeal to him, but an opportunity arose when Stan Fox invited him and some other beginners (Tom Shandel, Gary Lee Nova, Sylvia Spring) to contribute films to an experimental series on the CBC. They were given some out-of-date colour stock, and Rimmer took 600 feet of film and made his first serious film, *Square Inch Field*, in 1968. This happens to be my personal favourite of all his work. It's a staccato montage of faces and mystical



symbols, embracing earth, water, fire and air in cosmic balance. The mattes and double exposures were all done in the camera by Rimmer, who was learning while he was doing the film.

"I've never been to film school, and I didn't know that you weren't allowed to do certain things. So I was able to improvise and find short cuts. I learned how to do my own opticals, my own traveling mattes. Then I made *Migration*, which was mainly an editing film. A lot of very, very short cuts, two, three, four frame cuts. I showed it and people seemed to like it, and I got some more confidence and applied for a Canada Council grant. To my surprise I got it, and that encouraged me more. So the next year I made three films: *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*, *Surfacing on the Thames*, and *The Dance*. These all originated from stock footage."

Stock footage of a certain action is looped in the optical printer and rephotographed at various speeds with different filters to create an entirely new film. How did the idea of using loops first occur to Rimmer? "I guess it began when I first started making films in the late sixties and people were doing light shows and multi-media presentations. I started using loops there just as a constant image. You have a number of loops on a number of projectors going at the same time. We'd be playing with the loops while they were being projected, putting colour filters over them and superimposing two loops. I must have wanted to preserve that somehow, to make a record of that, because multi-media things are transitory. By making an actual film recording those changes, it goes through a process of overlays and it becomes another film."

The basic image in *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* is a simple one of a woman raising and lowering a sheet of transparent plastic in front of the camera. This is repeated many, many times, and eventually positive and negative loops of the same action are

overlaid and colour filters are added until the image disintegrates into an abstract pattern of dancing particles of light. Although it looks like an optical printer was used, Rimmer achieved the outstanding special effects just by the use of two projectors and rephotographing the screen. Kristina Nordstrom, writing in the *Village Voice* considers *Cellophane Wrapper* the most exciting non-narrative film she has ever seen and goes on to describe it: "Mechanically repetitive, factory-like sounds increase in tempo, building up to a machine-gun-like effect. As the sound intensifies, he introduces a flicker to heighten the visual excitement. Then he gradually adds colour — blue and green first, building up to a climax with bright flashes of yellow and red. The sound changes to crashing ocean waves with a choral interlude. Gongs ring to announce the final sequence in which the images become polarized into grainy outlines, like drawings in white or coloured chalk which gradually disintegrate and disappear. The film resembles a painting floating through time, its subject disappearing and re-emerging in various degrees of abstraction."

Cellophane Wrapper affords an experience to the viewer, which is not unlike taking the drug LSD. Were drugs at all influential in Rimmer's artistic vision? "No more than drugs affected everybody at that certain point in time. The mid and late sixties were acid times and everybody was taking drugs. Even if you weren't, it was in the air, you couldn't avoid it. So in that sense I guess I was influenced. But I got tired of that psychedelic kind of film. People stopped doing light shows. And the film after *Cellophane* I tried to simplify more, to narrow it down, make it more subtle. The acid revolution was like an explosion, nobody could escape it. And when it settled, it had changed a lot of people. I think a lot of people just started to look more closely at things. Even one at a time, rather than everything at once."

Certainly *Surfacing on the Thames* is an example of looking at one thing very closely. Roger Greenspun wrote in the *New York Times*: "Thus *Surfacing on the Thames*, the loveliest Rimmer film (and the cleverest Rimmer title) shows a river boat slowly steaming past the Houses of Parliament — so slowly that it almost seems not to be moving, and surrounded by such a grainy luminous mistiness that one critic is supposed to have thought he was looking at a Turner painting rather than at film footage. Gradually the surface of the film begins to wrinkle slightly, to spot, to show minor blemishes — in a sense, to assert itself above and before the rich density it contains. The gesture is tentative and discreet, but it is also unsettling and liberating in ways that seem central to the gentle invocations of dissolution that are a basic feature of David Rimmer's world."

Kirk Tougas, writing in *Take One*, describes Rimmer's next film. "*The Dance* is composed primarily of a loop of two dancers, rapidly careening around a dance floor in perfect step. The distant, unchanging repetition of the loop accentuates the ridiculous (and thus hilarious) aspects of their mesmerizing twirling patterns and synchromesh footwork. The result is an unbalancing comedy." By this time Rimmer had built his own optical printer. He also got involved with a group called Intermedia, a Canada Council funded experimental arts lab and workshop. "We did a lot of things together, a lot of multi-media type events, where you'd have filmmakers and dancers and poets and painters and sculptors all working together. I made a couple more short films: *Blue Movie* and *Tree-fall*, which were made as part of a big performance Intermedia would have each year at the Vancouver Art Gallery. *Blue Movie* was done as an environmental piece; I made a small geodesic dome twelve feet in diameter, and this five-minute loop was projected from the ceiling of the Gallery down onto that dome.

The image was visible on the outside of the dome and also the inside, since it was covered in cheesecloth, so it went right through and was visible on the floor which was white foam. So you could go into that dome and lie down and watch the movie on the inside and it would also be on yourself. And *Treefall* was done as part of a dance performance. It was projected on a very large screen in the middle of a large room in the Gallery and the audience sat on either side of the screen. The screen was actually made up of strips of surveyors tape side by side so the dancers could pass through it. And that worked on a loop too."



After that Rimmer went to New York, because his wife is a dancer and that's where the big choreographers are, and also to get his own films shown and to see other films. He lived and worked there for three years, making *Real Italian Pizza*, *Seashore*, *Fracture* and *Watching for the Queen*. Several Canada Council grants kept him going, as well as freelance film work. Also, by this time, he was getting paid to show his films at such places as Millennium, Film Forum, Yale, Harvard, Sarah Lawrence and Bard, as well as Toronto, Montreal and Halifax.

Real Italian Pizza was photographed over a period of nine months, using a fixed camera, looking out the window of Rimmer's New York apartment at the pizza parlour across the street. There's always a little group of street people gathered in front of the store, and the way they relate to one another provides the dramatic content of the film. The passage of time is the other key element, as snow falls, is swept away, a fire truck pulls up, the firemen go in for coffee, while on another day the police come and arrest one of the street people. Passersby scurry past, a black youth does an improvised dance, and all the while the Coca-Cola and Pepsi signs are ever present. Rimmer fragments the movements of the people as they fight, embrace and hustle each other, sometimes even speeding up the action, or slowing it down, always concentrating on little human touches that make the viewing of *Real Italian Pizza* a worthwhile experience.

Seashore and *Watching for the Queen* are again loop films made in the optical printer, while *Fracture* was blown up from 8mm and deals with the play of light on a very simple series of events. In *Seashore* a group of women in long bathing costumes approach the water and gingerly test it with their feet, over and over again. The permutation of this basic image, optically doctored and layered, raise this simple action to a meaningful level. In *Watching for the Queen* we see a

crowd of faces peering expectantly at approaching royalty, but the frames go by painfully slowly at first, then faster and faster. In *Fracture* the slight movements of a woman and a baby rising somewhere in the woods and the opening of a cabin door are repeated to enable us to study the changing light patterns and colours.

Four years ago David Rimmer returned to Vancouver to assume a teaching position at the University of British Columbia. He has been teaching film there ever since in the Fine Arts Department. In 1974 he again pointed a camera out a window to film *Canadian Pacific* over a period of time. The film shows a railroad yard in the foreground, usually with a box car or two with *Canadian Pacific* signs on the side, a stretch of water in the middle, and mountains in the background. Time passing paints a different picture each time, as trains pull in and out, fog rolls over the water, mist blocks out the mountains entirely. A year later Rimmer found a window slightly higher up and made a similar film *Canadian Pacific II*, which can be projected side by side with the first one for a different perspective. A writer in *Cinema Canada* commented: "Watching the space and noting the rhythmic dissolves of the trains passing, the slower paced movements of ships, the natural rhythms of days and climate, the viewer is mesmerized by the motions and their rhythms."

"I've always been interested in that kind of film. That kind of window film where you place your camera and leave it, over a long period of time. *Canadian Pacific* took about three months. When I moved into that studio I immediately saw the window and thought there could be something done there. What interested me about the shot were the horizontals: train tracks, the water, the mountains, the sky. Very few verticals in it. In a way those four elements would change. From one shot to the next the railway tracks may stay the same, the trains may be in the same position, but the

sky would change, the water would change. In some cases the mountains would disappear. Each shot was changing one or more of those elements."

The economics of David Rimmer's type of filmmaking are quite different than the exorbitant costs of making normal movies. *Cellophane Wrapper* cost only \$500 to make, and it has been sold to quite a number of galleries and universities. "With film you can keep selling it over and over, because what you're doing is just selling prints, unlike a painting which you sell once and that's that. I'm still making money on my first film. And the rentals from the Distribution Centre, which is something you can't count on, it's sort of a bonus that comes every once in a while. But you have to do something else to make money, either get a Canada Council grant, or go on welfare, or drive a taxi, or teach. For the last four years, I have been teaching at UBC, and that seems to be enough money. My films are not expensive to make. It's a big difference from making a feature film. I work in the hundreds, and they work in the tens of thousands.

"The expense in filmmaking comes if you work with actors where you have to reshoot a lot of things, or in a documentary where you have to do a lot of shooting, or where you work with other people, where you have to pay wages. Since I do all the technical stuff myself, except for sound, I don't have all those wages to pay out. I try to do as much of the printing as possible. They just built a contact printer here at the university; it cost us \$23 to build. And it works very well. It takes bipacks, and the registration is perfect. I try to encourage my students to do that and not to rely too much on the industry, on the labs. Trying to find ways around it. Try and skip a lot of those stages that the film industry says you have to go through, stages like workprints. Most filmmakers I know can't afford workprints, and that's quite a saving if you're working on that kind of budget."

Rimmer makes the most of his limitations. Working with original footage sometimes leads to scratches and dirt on the film, but he considers that part of the art, as in *Surfacing on the Thames*. What about a project sometimes referred to as *West Coast Workprint*, which is a diary of a commune in British Columbia? "That's a very long term project; it's been going on for about eight years. I'm involved with a group of people who communally own a piece of land up the coast, and the film is really about that community and those people. It's like a portrait over a long period of time, and I'm going to shoot film there as long as I'm involved with that community. Which could be twenty or thirty years. It's a document of those people and the children and how they're growing up. It's all shot quite straight; I'm not getting into any complicated printing techniques. It's about two and a half hours long now."

How does he classify himself: as a structuralist, conceptualist, minimalist? He'd rather leave that up to the critics to decide. The work comes first, criticism comes later. Does he feel that he has to return to New York to gain further recognition? He doesn't think so, since films travel well, ideas and images can be moved around quickly. How has British Columbia influenced him in his artistic endeavours? "That's where I was born and I grew up. It's the place I feel most comfortable in. You always work from a center, from a place that you know best. In New York I felt a little without roots. I was visiting. Most people in New York are visitors, just passing through. I live in Vancouver at this particular time, and that should be reflected in my work."

Does he find himself working less now in film? "At this particular moment, yes. In the last couple of years I've been doing other things. Last year I did some holography, sculpture and some work with video. This year I'm dabbling in painting. I never considered myself as





a filmmaker, but rather as an artist who's working with film. So I'm free to work in any other kind of medium that I want to. In the past I have worked with environmental sculpture, with sound, and with performance. Film has just been the thing that I've concentrated on. And I have a couple of film projects that are going on now, but they're going slowly, because the painting is more exciting to me. At this moment, it's more immediate. I can go to my studio and paint, and there it is, you can put it on canvas right away, there is no time delay, there's not that machine in between. Technology is not in between, although brushes and canvases and paint are a technology, but it's easier to deal with somehow, than the technology of film."

A lot of people claim that experimental film is a dying art form that was trendy in the sixties and out of place in the seventies. Dealing with young people on a daily basis, as Rimmer is, does he feel that this is true? "The kind of students that I'm working with are fine arts students. They're doing painting and drawing and sculpture and ceramics and film and photography. So they're approaching film in the same way they would approach painting. They're not concerned with making documentaries or features. They're interested in pushing the medium and how they might renew it somehow. Their attitude is still experimental. And some of the students are doing very good work. One of them just got a Canada Council grant. There will always be people who want to present their own vision, their uniquely personal vision of things. Whether it's on film or canvas or as sculpture. They will never be absorbed by any industry." ■

17 IT'S FILM ALL RIGHT, BUT IS IT ART?

IT'S FILM ALL RIGHT, BUT IS IT ART?

by Natalie Edwards

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN
Cinema Canada, March 1976

A couple of cans of spicy, unusual, experimental film fare are available through the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre, for loan to interested galleries and organizations across Canada.

Last year four programs of films were packaged, distributed and solidly booked into a dozen centres (from late September 1975 through March 1976) from the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown, P.E.I., to the Victoria Theatre Box in Victoria, B.C. New audiences were introduced to a selection of the most innovative, fresh filmmaking in Canada today.

This year's package of two reels of film, or two "programs" comprising only a dozen films by eight artists, is a much reduced selection compared to last year's abundant offering of some thirty films representing two dozen filmmakers. This is too bad and gives the impression that there is now less activity in the experimental field. Actually, however, since the size of the

package last year represented a backlog of seldom seen and therefore often unappreciated work that had accumulated over the years, this year's lesser amount simply may mean the National Gallery is settling on a quantity that they will be able to afford to back consistently for a long-term yearly program.

The first reel contains six short films. *Boardinghouse*, an animated surreal work in strong rich poster colors, is the creation of Neil McInnes and Ken Stampnick who made it in 1972-73 after graduating from the Manitoba Institute of Applied Arts. Although it seems influenced more by European animation rather than North American Studio Styles, its thick texture and Magritte-like approach make it totally distinctive, and its purely visual non-story gives it the feel of a very solid strange daydream. It is an excellent opener for the series, entertaining and totally logical in its own terms.

The second film is actually titled *Surreal*, and is a four-minute study of views and relationships caused by size and framing and imposed by the artist on sea and landscapes. Kim Cross uses frames within frames: on a sandy beach for instance, we see what at first glance



appears to be a picture or a mirror, in which we see waves crashing or windblown trees. Against the water we see inner frames of land or sky. Music by John Mills-Cockell is more than a background. In many ways in fact the intriguing visuals work as an accompaniment to his delicate and sinuous sounds.

Second Impressions (1975) by Lorne Marin is the third film on reel one. Marin involves the viewer in his process: the rushing sound of the projector dominates the opening sequence in which we see within the frame, the projector screen and the ill-defined nostalgic home-movie projection. After the "show" the screen lights up momentarily on its own, as a clue, and despite its removal, the images of the past take over. The fading, appearing, disappearing moments of time, the varying views from the window, the shifts of size and importance in objects, the passing of people, recapitulated actions and endlessly repeated movements have a life of their own, and in a brilliant synthesis of fades and overlaps and superimpositions and time lapse sequences Marin constructs a lyrical flow of sound and memory, ephemeral, transient and touching.

Reel one, fourth film. *Le Voyage* (1973) is Al Razutis' seven minutes of sound and colour explosion, with high contrast reds and yellows blossoming to an eerie electronic sound track. A cloud shape passing over the moon triggers all the sound and fury, and the thunder, flame and lightning effects are partially a ballet of flame and fury, modified and muffled as if distanced by passing eons. It is like watching the surface of the sun or the history of the end of the world from a very long distance emotionally and physically.

Another 1973 experimental film is *Fracture* by David Rimmer. Two more of his works are on the second reel, making him the most represented of the artists included. *Fracture* is partly a simple breakdown and study of the separated frames of a movement. A girl

with a baby in a woods stares, moves, rises, gestures. The baby begins a movement. This piece of film is intercut with a person opening a cabin door and looking out. The fracture here is of light and space. At first insufficient light and too magnified a view make the visible mysterious, but gradually in each inserted section we see a little more and understand more of what we see. The girl with baby sequence is shown both forward and backward. We have an opportunity to examine almost every frame separately as the action jerkily proceeds and is repeated, each time with slightly more added. Suspense, mystery, curiosity, multiply as bit-by-bit the full cycle of action is revealed. Then, we examine all the components of the movement and the emotional reaction evoked, aware of body language, the implications of gesture and gaze, the tension of protracted time. This 11 minutes illustrates more of the basic nature of film, and its semiotics than many a lecture series, and would be intriguing to use as a short in combination with a good Hitchcock for a study of applied technique.

Finally, reel one concludes with Veronika Soul's 1973-74 *Tales from the Vienna Woods*. This amalgam of impressions, cut-outs, clippings, inserts, photos, action sequences and so on, offers an avalanche of information and trivia culled or inspired from the letters of Sigmund Freud. Once you know that, you can enjoy its muddled, deliberately obscure and often hilarious happenings, but for a first viewing one must be content with the medley rather than the meaning, unless more hints are given than this soul of wit offers in the early frames.

The second reel opens with *Seeds*, a long 3 1/2 minutes by John Gang of mathematical variations of black and white patterns on graph paper, disconcertingly accompanied by Handel's music, under the common impression that the stately, orderly and genteel patterns of the music somehow relate to the repetitive,

nervous and even crude reordering of space offered by multiple exposure of twelve drawings in a variety of permutations and combinations. Many people find this playing with patterns and combinations enchanting.

Visual Alchemy (1973) is the second short on reel two. The frustrations of attempting to capture the essence of the holographic image and its being-non-being in space affects the viewer despite the fascination this effort compels. Crimson images on black, the rushing tick of a clock sound, indistinctly heard information, just out of reach of understanding (sound text is written by Al Razutis, the filmmaker, and includes excerpts from the writings of Carl Jung) and dimly understood visuals in the end create an eight minute fluctuating, pulsing, light and sound voyage that can too easily become a background for private daydreaming rather than maintain interest solely on the basis of its own explorations.

Watching for the Queen, a 1973 silent film by David Rimmer, on the other hand, commands attention despite the fact its 11-minute study of a sea of human faces is structured entirely out of two seconds (48 frames) of film. At first the viewer examines the hundred or so faces for their expressions, their differences, their mass emotion, using the variety of ways we have all learned to keep interested, discover information, search for clues. At the point when the prolonged picture creates resentment and impatience, there is also a compensating sensation of reluctant admiration for the almighty gall of Rimmer, forcing this examination on the viewer without explanation. Thus the jerky broken zoom bringing the group steadily closer comes both as a relief and as a new way of manipulating attention. Time is stretched now as patience was formerly. Faces at the front begin to disappear; those at the last row become less indistinct. The film forces terrific concentrated inter-reaction

between viewer and picture. Using slowly receding or approaching zoom until the viewer discovers the pattern of the exercise, Rimmer takes his time until every variation of almost every expression of almost every face is noted by the intense viewer. At this point sad faces seem sadder as they sustain expression, laughing faces seem happier as the expression continues, smiles broaden, disappear and reappear and as the jerky spaced-out motions continue, the crowd seems to pulse, quiver with life; heads weave and bob like a field of flowers, the loop repeats and repeats, then finally gains a "normal" momentum before becoming a dizzying vertical tumble like a sliding TV picture, and then fades out.

Rimmer, like Peter Wollen, explores and dissects the substance of film, its actuality and its interaction with human perception. His work is brilliant and essential; his explorations of the language of film crucial to a real understanding of the medium. In my humble opinion he is one of the most exciting film artists in North America today.

Ice, (1972) the next short on the second reel provides a 2 1/2 minute break between the Rimmer films, as Nicholas Kendall's sensitive camera and sound equipment collaborate on a visual and audial study of ice. *Canadian Pacific* was made by Rimmer in 1974. The camera is stationary and the view, as in *Real Italian Pizza* (1971), is constant. But everything changes. The frame on the screen is doubled by a line of burglar tape around the window, which provides an inner frame (with two intriguing breaks) to the view. Everything is there: sky, clouds, weather, light, water, ships, tugs, freighters, passing trains, passenger and freight, and even, once, a man running. It's a symphony, no, a cantata without the drama. The movements are entirely horizontal, but all of the frame is full of interest to the viewer. The changes in light, angle of

the sun, hues and shades resulting from the time of day and type of weather, the foggy veiling of the mountains, colors like a Turner landscape, or a Jim Dine poster, create a constant shift of mood and a reciprocal shift in the audience's reactions. Watching the space and noting the rhythmic dissolves of the trains passing, the slower paced movements of ships, the natural rhythms of days and climate, the viewer is mesmerized by the motions and their rhythms. A second film, *Canadian Pacific II* (1975) has been made by Rimmer of the same view from a block away, two stories higher. It can be run simultaneously with the first on a separate screen for a particularly fascinating echoing effect, reinforcing the first and adding another dimension to the view.

Finally, the second reel concludes with *Surface*, another study by Nicholas Kendall. This ten-minute examination of water, backed by electronic music, involves abstract water surfaces, and the glistening reality. Little light dunes, dancing reflections, tinkly sounds, have a sweet fascination and the bronze globules of rain, the onomatopoeia and the melodic electronic intervals all are attractive too. It's restful but at the end of such a series, something stronger and more precise seems required. A recommendation one might make for this worthy and enterprising series, is that the films should be titled more clearly, with information concerning for instance, the source of the music, the players and the names of compositions clearly noted. Some few extra words on the production would also be gratefully received, i.e. made at so and so campus, with university equipment and crew, winner of blank and blinkety awards. Might it also be possible to have a little longer leader between films so the effect of one is not wiped out by the opening of the next? More complete notes on who the filmmakers are, what they have done and where they work would also be appreciated.

The Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre in Toronto, which distributes the films at a rental of \$100 for the two-reel package, and the National Gallery of Canada, whose astute selection committee chooses the program, are to be congratulated for once again making a select group of important short films available across Canada. ■



18. DAVID RIMMER

DAVID RIMMER

by Eleanor Beattie

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

***A Handbook of Canadian Film* by Eleanor
Beattie, Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1977**

Born in 1943 in Vancouver, David Rimmer has worked there independently (and, with video, in 1971-72 in New York). An experimentalist, Rimmer exposes the possibilities of the film medium. He has an uncanny ability to take a film cliché, often in the form of a stock shot, as in *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*, *The Dance*, and *Surfacing on the Thames*, and discover — through spatial and temporal manipulation — a fresh and wonderful image. His work has a precision that is infused with a droll sense of humour. Rimmer won numerous awards at the 1969 Vancouver International Film Festival and has had showing at the Museum of Modern Art.

■



19 SEEING THROUGH THE FOG

SEEING THROUGH THE FOG: EXAMINING NARROWS INLET

by Clint Enns

(written for this publication) 2012

The first time I saw David Rimmer's *Narrows Inlet* (1980) was at the Winnipeg Cinematheque.¹ The film was shown on its original 16mm with the first half entirely out-of-focus. Normally, this would be quickly noticed by, and cause concern among, the audience members — even in a city like Winnipeg, where experimental screenings are informal affairs attended mainly by local filmmakers and diehards. However, due to the nature and structure of the film, it was impossible for this uninitiated audience (and projectionist) to be aware of the “error.”

Mike Hoolboom describes the film as follows:

In *Narrows Inlet* [Rimmer] takes his camera out on a boat and click clicks a frame at a time though he can't glimpse a thing. He's caught in the fog and there's nothing at all until a sliver of colour appears, and then slowly, oh so very slowly, the fog lifts and the tree line lives again, staring back at the camera with all of its colour and height resolved. Another small miracle of looking.²

According to Rimmer, the film was shot on British Columbia's West Coast, in Storm Bay, a location just north of Vancouver. He explains the film's development this way:

Starting with a boat swaying on its anchor at the head of an inlet, a landscape of pilings, shore, and forest is slowly revealed by time-lapse photography as the morning fog lifts. While the deep space of the landscape evolves out of the fog-enshrouded flatness of early morning, the camera skips from fixed point to fixed point — suggesting the motion of the human eye while reading.³





One can easily read the film as a poetic expression of subtle beauty: the white flat veil of morning fog lifts to reveal the colour, textures and splendor of the coastal forest. However, the Cinematheque projectionist's unintentional and virtually unnoticeable error points to an alternative interpretation.

The version of *Narrows Inlet* that was screened at the Winnipeg Cinematheque on March 6, 2010 began with a second or two of the film's title card, reading "Narrows Inlet." During this brief moment, the projectionist attempted (in vain) to focus the title, but it came and went too quickly, leaving the viewer in a murky world of white wonder. At this point, the filmmaker, audience and projectionist were all essentially in the same boat, surrounded by fog. As Catherine Russell observes in her essay, "The Inhabited View: Landscape in the Films of David Rimmer,"

Wooden pilings in the middle ground are evidence again of an inhabited natural environment, and the first half of the film is so drenched with mist and fog that the shore and rising mountains of the background are entirely hidden.⁴

As the fog begins to dissipate, the coast is revealed and the projectionist, noticing her mistake, started to correct the focus. The film became a living object, a play between the technician and the material. The projectionist thus became involved in the rhythm of nature as captured by Rimmer. Russell provides an eloquent description of how the coastal forest is revealed:

When the lushly coloured pine forests emerge from the blue-grey fog, a landscape appears to emerge from the grain of the image; an abstract expressionist surface composition of line and texture materializes to gradually clarify as a photographic image. The horizontal pans inscribe a centralized but unstable point of vision, constructing a shifting apparently "floating" subjectivity within this painterly landscape.

The legible "photographic image" of the coast line offered a window of opportunity to refocus the projector. In essence, the coast line provides an integral structural component to the film by becoming a stable focal point, both for the projectionist and the audience.⁵

In considering this projection error, it seems that *Narrows Inlet* utilizes a structural technique as a means to examine the patterns and rhythms found in nature, thereby bridging the gap between the phenomenological experience of the film and the mechanical aspects of the camera and the projector. It can only be assumed that the extremely short title sequence in *Narrows Inlet* has led to viewing experiences similar to the one I have just described. As Russell argues, "*Narrows Inlet* represents landscape as a phenomenological production of an invisible but determining seeing camera/subject/viewer."⁶ To this grouping I would add the unseen projectionist. The focusing of the projector becomes a natural part of the film, as organic as the waves swaying the boat; the projectionist, like the filmmaker and the audience, waits patiently for the morning fog to clear, allowing a hidden world to slowly and sharply emerge into focus.

NOTES

1. The film played as part of *Cinema Under the Western Influence* curated by Alex MacKenzie on March 6, 2010. See <http://cineflyer.wordpress.com/2010/02/27/cinema-under-the-western-influence-curated-by-alex-mackenzie/>
2. Mike Hoolboom, "David!" in *Loop, Print, Fade + Flicker: David Rimmer's Moving Images*, Pacific Cinematheque: Monograph Series No. 1 (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2009), 24.
3. *David Rimmer*, Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre Catalogue.
4. Catherine Russell, "The Inhabited View: Landscape in the Films of David Rimmer," in *Landscape and Film*, ed. Martin Lefebvre (New York: Routledge, 2006), 157.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.

20. AL NEIL: A PORTRAIT

AL NEIL: A PORTRAIT

by Joyce Nelson

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN
Cinema Canada, 1981

“There will always be people who want to present their own vision, their ultimately personal vision of things. Whether it’s on film or canvas or as sculpture. They will never be absorbed by industry.”

— David Rimmer, 1978

In certain ways, *Al Neil: A Portrait* (1979) seems to summarize all of David Rimmer’s previous film work. At the same time, it is quite strikingly different from any film that, to my knowledge, he has made in the past. This possible paradox may be resolved by suggesting that the ostensible subject of this film, jazz musician Al Neil, is the living embodiment of Rimmer’s own wide-ranging cerebral explorations. As a result the filming of this subject, this remarkable human being, has jettisoned Rimmer’s work to a new plateau. In this sense, *Al Neil: A Portrait* is clearly a landmark, both for Rimmer’s filmmaking and for alternative Canadian cinema.

Arguably, Rimmer’s films have always challenged conventional Western ways of thinking — particularly Cartesian dualism. In other words, his films have continuously offered us opportunities to break through and transcend the rigid categories and boundaries which Western thought has drawn around such apparent opposites as self and other, life and death, space and time, mind and body. In the place of this dualism, Rimmer poses an Eastern orientation centered in wholeness and integration — the fluidity of yin and yang. In his films, this wholeness is often experienced in meditative repetitions, the dissolution of “realistic” images into abstractions, the quiet contemplation of a seemingly minimal frame, the dissolution of normal time. Through these techniques we are reminded of the arbitrariness in our own mental sets, and the fragility of our perceptual biases. Not surprisingly then, Rimmer has come to be known as a metaphysical filmmaker. This label may carry with it the sense of abstract and cerebral mind-games that are witty and provocative, but bloodless. It is precisely here that *Al Neil: A Portrait* changes everything.



There are certain works of art — especially among those that unfold through time — that erect subtle barriers by which to dissuade the unready members of the audience. For example, Thomas Pynchon's novel, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), sets up a series of such barriers, challenging its readers to either struggle through these difficult sections and thereby gain access, as initiates, to subsequent illuminations, or to lay aside the book. Similarly, the opening passages of *Al Neil: A Portrait* erect subtle barriers of displeasure for the audience, as if to say quite openly that this film is not for everyone. The initial piano music which Al Neil plays seems harshly dissonant. The style of the film may immediately disappoint our expectations of a Rimmer work. It seems like a documentary, but then it seems to be subverting our expectations of that form.

The "takes" of Al Neil at the piano may seem boringly long, the lighting "incorrect," the close-ups of his face and hands disconcerting. The man himself appears bizarre, slovenly, and his music equally off-putting. In other words, quite early on, the film tends to sort the audience into those who have mentally turned-off and stay only for politeness and those who have passed through their own displeasure, relinquished any rigid expectations or categorical mind sets, and are open to further unfoldings.

Subsequent early passages are even more challenging, offering us visual and auditory experiences that are unsettling, frightening, grotesque, and even painful. At the same time, these passages are gradually revealing of the complexity of the man, Al Neil — through his surroundings, his possessions, his words and gestures, his music. The style of the film warns us away unless we are also prepared to move into closer touch with our own core feelings, our own inner being.

For those who are open, the film's center of pain and illumination is simultaneously a personal, inner journey for the viewer. There, for a few extraordinary moments of the film, we are in almost total, harmonious empathy with the human being on the screen. Real time, space, dimensions, individual differences momentarily fall away. We are privileged to share, through the illusions of film, the central agony of death that is at the root of human life. Once we have shared in the depths of this pain, the film releases us into its final passage. The lighting is transformed. Al Neil, surrounded by an audience, plays his incomparable music that we now hear as though for the first time, with transformed senses; music which releases us into extraordinary heights of joy and a celebration of life. *Al Neil: A Portrait* is the most intricate, powerful and personally rewarding film I have seen in years. Unfortunately, this is only a review. A beautifully complex work like this film deserves a full critical response as impassioned and intelligent as the work itself. ■



21 WEST COAST FILMMAKING

WEST COAST FILMMAKING: HISTORY (EXCERPT)

by Tony Reif

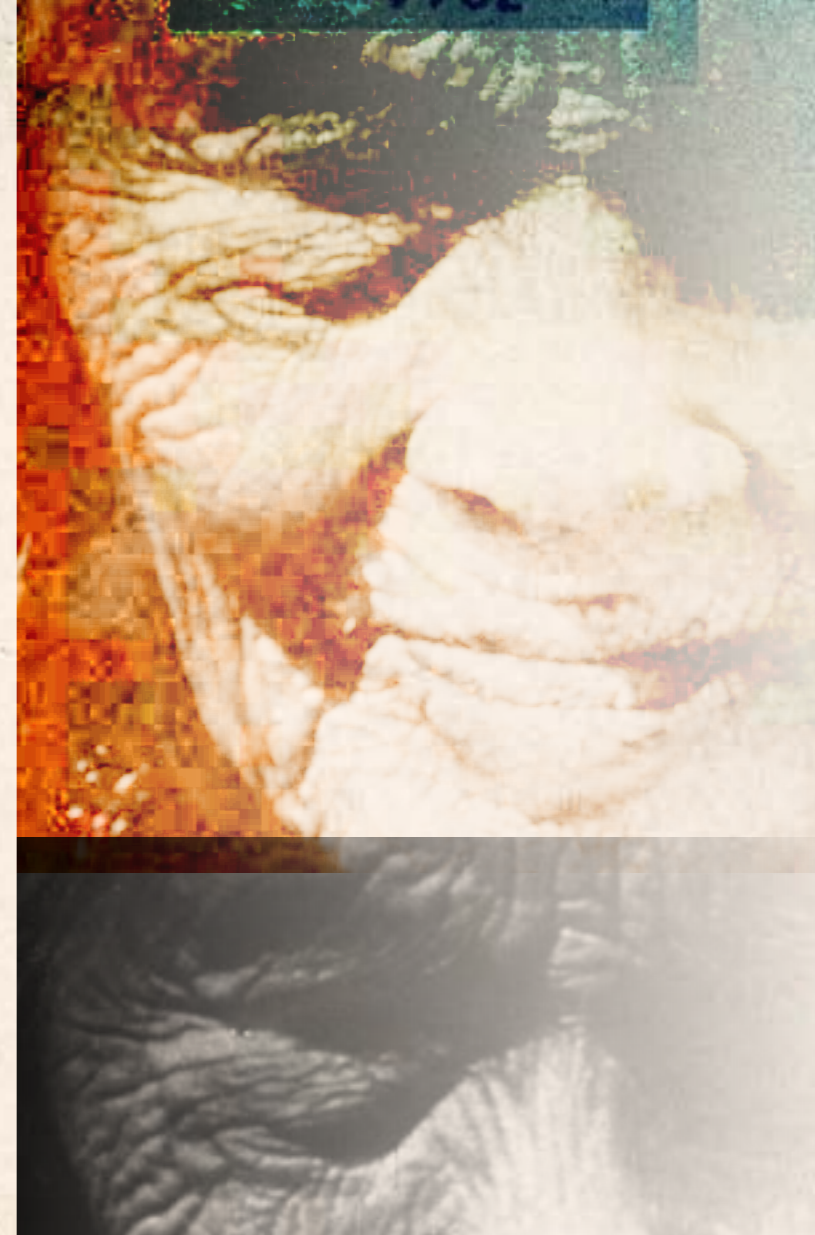
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

"West Coast Filmmaking: History," by Tony Reif
in Pierre Véronneau and Piers Handling, eds.,
*Self Portrait: Essays on the Canadian and Quebec
Cinemas* (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1980),
122–38.

[...]

David Rimmer is the first Vancouver filmmaker to have created a career for himself as a film artist, although he came to film almost accidentally after his university studies. His first widely-seen work, *Square Inch Field* (1968), is influenced by the fast collage aesthetic, but *Migration* (1969) expresses its pantheistic consciousness in a more original way. Rimmer's imagery was then dominated by natural forms, his editing and printing searching for the rhythms that would express nature's motion in cinematic, not just representational terms. As he gained technique, his films grew more ascetic outwardly but richer in subtle, inner motion. His frames became stiller, eliminating camera movement for the film-controlled movement of the optical

printer. (This is true even of his landscape films such as the beautiful *Canadian Pacific* [1974], in which the movement of trains, ships, birds and weather over a three-month period is first set within a fixed frame of reference — a view from a loft window — and then selected, recombined, orchestrated into filmic gestures, without however violating the autonomy of the original motion). More and more, Rimmer's work took on qualities of contemplation, of looking so closely at something, often old found film footage, that the looking opens the viewer to the meaning that is waiting in the image for him. That meaning will of course be different for different viewers. Some of Rimmer's films directly confront this act of creating meaning in film, an act shared by filmmaker and viewer. Thus *Fracture* (1973), in which the shot of a woman and child is contexted and recontexted with a shot of a man, is "about" the bare elements of film narrative, the creation of meaning through juxtaposition; conversely it is also about the ambiguity of magic shadows and the power of image transformation, here through step printing and graininess, to turn representations into



things-in-themselves. (This is also the process-meaning of Kirk Tougas' *The Politics of Perception* (1973), which runs a movie trailer for the Charles Bronson *Mechanic* through continuous optical and sound degradation to the point of white noise and white light).

Rimmer's effect on younger filmmakers has been great; through his films and his teaching, the east coast minimalist aesthetic has been given a lyrical inflection that accords with the rich west coast soil.

[...■]

22. GARBAGE

GARBAGE

by Mike Hoolboom

EXCERPTED FROM

**"Ann Arbor Film Festival: Mask, Garbage, Sangha,"
2012**

David was born and raised in Vancouver, and his movies recount the stories and the histories of that place. Walter Benjamin said that there are two kinds of storytellers. There is the one that is always on the move, bringing the story of one place to another. And then there is the storyteller who lives their whole life in the same village, who knows the rites and rituals, the secrets, the doubts and shame, of that village, and is able to spin their stories, the masks of those stories, from that place. David Rimmer is the stay-at-home guy, the one who parks his camera in a window for several months so that he can shoot a few frames every day, gathering up a record of moods and inclinations that look like the climate of the inside and the climate of the outside.

David became the garbage collector of the avant-garde. He would take people's garbage and turn it into something miraculous. Do you remember the instruction the Buddha gave to his sangha — his group, his audience — about the clothes they should wear? It's India, it's hot, and if you were part of the growing clutch that gathered round the Buddha, you owned a single piece of clothing, a simple robe. The Buddha asked that these robes be sewn out of material scraps that had been used to clean floors, or as menstrual pads, or diapers. The disgusting and unwanted parts of our lives, can we say yes to that? Can we wear them where other people will see them? David said yes, he was a magician with materials, he would take a small scrap of film and loop it and make it dance. He could find a whole universe in the corner of a room. And he had this friend, this eccentric, quintessential loner friend. For much of society this man was garbage, his music, his art was incomprehensible noise. But this man taught David how to listen, and this listening, this act of opening, particularly to the unheard voices, the difficult voices, the disgusting voices — this is the beginning of democracy.





I remember the first time I saw this movie, *Al Neil: A Portrait*. Wait. Wait a minute. This is a David Rimmer movie? Are you sure? It looks like... a documentary. And of course it was. It was a portrait about old Al Neil, the poet, sculptor, piano iconoclast that David had met up with in the old Intermedia days. Formative moments. He's just a kid, hit the eject seat on his endless university requirements and walks into a big old warehouse where everyone is doing their own thing, in their own way, and nobody much minds that he's around. Perhaps it's necessary for every artist to leave home, and when they do they might reconvene a new kind of family, a very different kind of family, and maybe after laying down some licks of your own, it's time to say: thank you dad. Not because Al Neil had taught him how to wind up a Bolex or anything. The way an artist teaches another artist is by the way they walk into a room. It's the way they hold their beer with two hands. It's the way they notice the light glinting off the window frame. It can cause a turn, just the smallest shift, and that shift means the hook is in you, there's no escaping that kind of noticing, that sort of awareness. You're part of the new family now.

David replays jazz as a family story. His fellow travelers ask Vancouver jazz pianist Al Neil to "play the changes man" but Al can't hit the breaks, off in a moment-after-moment that didn't adhere to those timings. Perhaps he was trying not to decide, to keep this moment free of habitual preferences, even by the long lines of jazz maestros that had preceded him. And then later in the movie, Al rasps out the memory of his mother's funeral, filled to the brim with strangers, with family he hadn't seen in years, and he walks away from them too. This history of refusal becomes a strange and solitary music, as he moves away from the habit patterns of his own muscles, the happy making tricks and easy licks that too quickly become home, even for the avid improviser. The stuttering stops, the abrupt shifts in tempo, the reaching into the piano to find a more direct relation to the strings, all this is a way for him to find himself again at the piano as if for the first time, even as he continues to carry the refusal of the familiar in each note. ■

23. SURFACING ON THE THAMES

DAVID RIMMER'S SURFACING ON THE THAMES

by Blaine Allan

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Revised May 2012

"I think that it would be profitable to speak about the special nature of any film, of the fact of images unwinding off a machine. Until that's understood (I have some theories about it myself), we can't begin to create, on a methodical basis, an aesthetic for that film. We don't understand the psychological meaning of images — any images — coming off a machine. There are basic problems, it seems to me, that could be discussed here. I've probably added no end to the confusion, but that's what I have to say at the moment." [Applause.]

— Arthur Miller,
in "Poetry and the Film: A Symposium,"
Film Culture 29 (Summer 1963)

So apparently elementary in design, David Rimmer's *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970) has depths to be sounded. Rimmer's film is compact, and yet it addresses many broad questions. It can fit several categories, each of which narrows the field and sets up *a priori* standards and criteria for examination. Categorized generally in the independent or experimental tradition, at a finer level it falls into P. Adams Sitney's classification of structural film. As defined by Sitney, "The structural film insists on its shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline."¹ Rimmer's film, however, is an interesting corollary to Sitney's rule in that *Surfacing* appears to raise particular questions of balance between form and content. In turn, the film must also be considered in the context of a tension between the realist and illusionist tendencies of all cinema.

When we speak of realism and Rimmer, we are not discussing realism in the sense of a "realistic" image or one that might be characterized as faithfully reproducing the pro-filmic event, a realism in the Bazinian sense. Instead, his concern in *Surfacing on the Thames*



is even more fundamental: the film material itself. Rimmer explores the qualities and components of the raw materials with which he works, and in his consciousness of and articulation of those qualities he speaks firmly of the finished product and of any film.

Even though it has a highly controlled form and structure, *Surfacing on the Thames* appears to validate the use of the term “experimental” in reference to film. Sitney eschews using the word on the grounds that “experimental cinema... implies a tentative and secondary relationship to a more stable cinema.”² Peter Wollen, on the other hand, offers an opposing view, echoing recommendations formulated by Paul Sharits: “Sharits develops the idea that the most fruitful research procedure lies in making films which are indeed, in the strict sense of the word, experimental. Such films, made by ‘researchers,’ would produce information about their own linguistic (‘cinematic’) structure. Thus the self-referential film is a tool of inquiry into the problems of film language and film being, united at the level of the minimal unit.”³

In these differences concerning terminology and purpose, we can see the fundamental distinction in Sitney’s and Wollen’s approaches to this mode of film. Sitney, caught up in a concern for aesthetic and artistic unity, sees “experimental” as implying incomplete. Wollen, on the other hand, views the experimental film as necessarily tentative and actively working toward a definition of cinema and its components. As practicing filmmakers, Sharits and Rimmer fulfill both functions, examining and researching the components of the medium and creating a film as an organic whole.

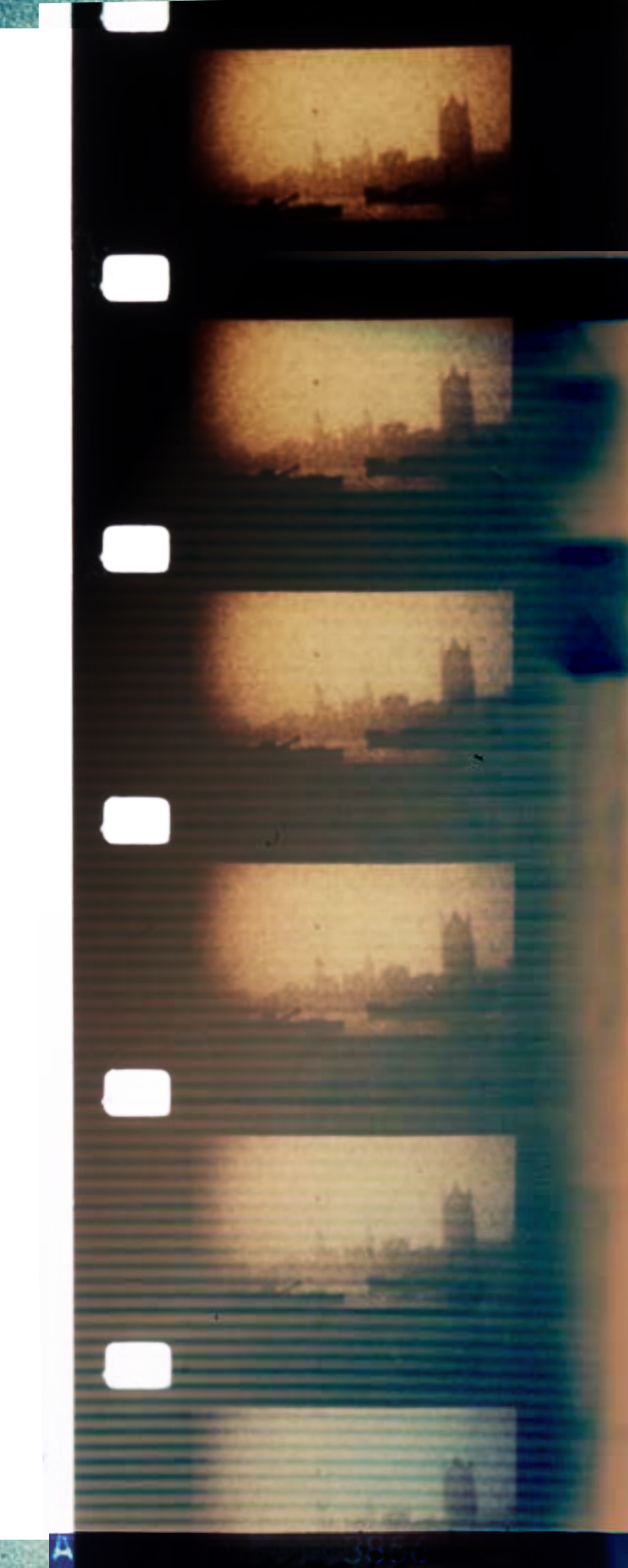
Surfacing poses the use of the word “experimental” in a more internally contained world. The film, both the creation and the experience of it, explores a truth about the nature of cinema and qualities of perception. In this latter concern, it is related to the works

of many other experimentalists, from Brakhage to Breer. Whereas the non-structural filmmakers may try to illustrate or exemplify preconceived aesthetics or theories through their work, Rimmer’s film appears more tentative than that. *Surfacing* seems more an exploration of the possibilities of the medium through a set manipulation of a fixed piece of material.

Running nine minutes, *Surfacing on the Thames* is the finished product of craft starting with a short length of archival footage, which I refer to as the “parent footage.” The footage is at once arbitrary, in that it was not conceived of or shot by Rimmer himself, and yet calculated in that it was chosen for its specific and peculiar qualities. Rimmer examines the properties and components of the material with which he is working and tries to instill in the viewer a conception of what both the parent footage and *Surfacing on the Thames*, the offspring, are about. As a result of his research and experimentation, he examines some fundamentals of film as a whole. As a component in an optical printer used to rephotograph the source material, Rimmer’s camera is to the parent footage what the unknown first cinematographer’s camera was to the shot, of a barge floating on the river Thames. Through the copying process and manipulation of the image, the realism of the shot is transformed into a commentary upon realism itself. As well, concern is lifted from the event that was originally recorded on film — the ship on the river — to another event, the film as an object of enquiry. In the modernist film, according to Wollen, “light is no longer seen as the means by which the pro-filmic event is registered on film, but as the pro-filmic event itself, and at the same time part of the material process of the film itself, as transmitted through the lens and indeed the strip of celluloid in the projector — so that the strip can be seen as the medium for the transmission (and absorption) of light, the basic raw material.”⁴ Illusion grows out of the components of the image, which are themselves real.

To make *Surfacing on the Thames*, Rimmer expanded five feet of film into just under 200 feet of finished 16-millimetre motion picture. Each of 200 frames is repeated for 200 frames, and each frame, thus transformed into a shot, is joined to the next by a 96-frame dissolve. The mathematical precision of the film — the exact duration of each shot and the regularity of the transitional dissolves — creates in the experience of the film a pendular rhythm. Here dependent upon the fixed rate of projection, the temporal device of rhythm is generated by the quantitative series of images and the determined number of frames per shot and per dissolve.

Comparing traditional Hollywood cinema to experimental film, Peter Wollen points to the relationship of screen time to story time: “In most films — Hollywood films particularly — story time is longer than screen time and hence the basic operational figures are those of compression and ellipsis. In contrast, independent and experimental films have tended more to suppress imaginary time entirely and to work with screen time alone, often with great complexity, or else they have chosen to move towards isochronicity (Warhol) or, through repetition, for instance, to have story time shorter than screen time (Conner)... In general terms, too we can say that Hollywood cinema has tended to suppress consciousness of screen time, to transport the spectator into the realm of the imaginary.” Related to much of Bruce Conner’s filmmaking, at least in its use of previously existing footage, *Surfacing on the Thames* is also clearly an example of “screen time greater than story time” and of what Wollen names “elongation.”⁵ If the suppression of screen time sparks the realm of the imaginary in the spectator, then at least for *Surfacing* the converse would seem to be true. Each frame of the parent footage is perceivable for just over eight seconds in the “offspring” film, and we are called upon to examine each frame of the parent film in detail. Although the film lacks a narra-



tive as such, it does have a simple dramatic structure. This is common to a number of Rimmer's films and may make them more readily accessible than some other structural cinema. Such a structure is probably most evident in his loop-based *The Dance* (1970), which begins with an image of curtains opening and a shot of an audience within the film and concludes with the end of the dance as the twirling dancers stop to take their bows, the curtains close (reverse action of the opening), and the audience again. Similarly bracketed, *Surfacing on the Thames* starts with exposure flare at the head of the roll of film and zooms out from an unresolvable (in representational terms) view of a severely restricted area of the field of the frame of the parent footage. At the end, Rimmer zooms in on the field of the last frozen frame, again to an unresolvable image, and flare from the end of the roll appears. In so framing the film, Rimmer creates an interior world, but one that is put at a distance. The flare and the zoom are indicators of the film as film, as much as any of the elements included in the centre section of the film. The zooms out and in also create the impression of a three-dimensional space in a movie that in concept would seem to be militantly two-dimensional, given that it is a cinematic examination of a piece of cine-film — a two-dimensional medium doubled over, as it were.

If we consider the quality of the image itself, several components stand out. Among chemically generated phenomena are the enhanced grain and the coloration. The grain has been brought out largely through the process of rephotography itself. The grain that is notable is not only that of the older, black-and-white parent footage, but also the coloured particles of Rimmer's film. Although the aesthetics behind the visual effects are different, one might compare the graininess in *Surfacing on the Thames* to that of

Stan Brakhage's *The Machine of Eden* (1970). Brakhage's effect was gained by baking the film stock in an oven, Rimmer's by less-than-Hollywood quality optical printing.

The softness of the image, the grain, and the colour of this film evoke a painterly tradition. The resemblance to the work of Turner has been noted several times, and Kristina Nordstrom has attributed this association to the film's "golden coloration."⁶ The emphasis on the grain of the film as a compositional element perhaps also suggests the dots that make up a Pointillist painting.

With the colour's antique quality, Rimmer seems to speak with respect and affection to the age of the parent film. In that the 19th century of Turner that *Surfacing* might suggest has nothing to do with the origins of the footage, more evidently World War II-era, the film has no discernible historical logic. The traditions evoked, the setting represented (readily recognizable, even without the film's title, as London), and the historicity of the parent film, however, all combine to connote the past and provide the image itself an "Old World" quality. The evocation of such a cumulative quality counterbalances the modern, analytic dimensions of the film.

Another component of the image, the frame also receives distinctive creative manipulation. The film starts in the standard 1.33:1 aspect ratio of the 16mm format. The zoom-out that opens the film, however, also reduces the image to 1.85:1, masking the top and bottom of the screen in black. In so doing, Rimmer complements the horizontality of the image, but also actively calls the frame lines to the attention of the spectator, putting the question of the relationship of the frame lines to the image as a whole. In fact, the black bands at top and bottom of the screen become integral parts of the whole image, especially notable

when the space defined by them is invaded by the shifting of the top and bottom frame lines of the horizontally oriented internal frame. This displacement of the whole frame was an accident according to the conception of the film — the registration was not supposed to change — but becomes an essential element of the realization.

Surfacing on the Thames gains half its title from the representational image and the other from the concentration on extra-cinematic phenomena that in any other case might be cited as impurities or imperfections. Both Regina Cornwell and, citing her comments, Peter Wollen point to the structural potential behind such impurities. With reference to Paul Sharits' *S:TREAM:S:S:ECTON:S:ECTION:S:S:ECTIONED* (1970), Cornwell notes, "Sharits purposively uses the scratch and a system of scratches which eat into the otherwise representational images below, and create their own illusions out of the film emulsion itself."⁷ Like the frame lines or the grain of the image, traditionally elided in the experience of a film but in Rimmer's film brought to the forefront, so are the scratches, hairs, dust and all the other markings that are, in conventional films and their projection, normally regarded as flaws or distractions if they are perceived and cognitively registered at all. These phenomena originating in the parent footage are frozen in *Surfacing* and must be grounded as an element of each shot and of the film as a whole. The individual marks may be random in their occurrence in the parent footage, but because of their duration in the finished film they take on a sort of order. They appear and disappear in regular rhythm. The order that they create becomes especially evident when a mark stretched over several frames in the parent footage is reproduced by Rimmer. For instance, at one point in *Surfacing* a line that originally crossed only four frames, perhaps a hair passing through the gate, is transformed into four lines in

four separate shots. The lines, in successive shots and through the dissolves which connect them, appear to shift laterally from left to right until, after the fourth, the last line is not replaced by another in different orientation and is thus lost.

Through the technical facilities available to him, Rimmer creates the impression of physical levels in the film: one, the emulsion containing grain and the representational image of the ship and barge and the London skyline; another, the extra-cinematic phenomena — the scratches, dust, and the like. As well, although only at the start of the film, there is the additional layer of the white "Surfacing on the Thames" title. As the image becomes more readily resolvable, especially determined by relative clarity of focus on respective levels, one may be perceived as farther in the foreground than the others. The image of the ship and barge has little, although some, depth in itself. The whole image is soft and the forms nebulous (another source of the Turner allusion). Some sense of depth is generated by grades of light and dark in the image: the darkness in the lower area of the frame; the lighter area containing the river, the ship, and the barge, and the relative lightness of the skyline, putting it perceptually in the background; and the even lighter non-definite sky behind and above that. The image is not primarily notable for its pictorial recreation of a sense of depth, however. Instead it is quite flat. This quality combined with the imposed frame lines at top and bottom lend a uniplanarity to the image. Rather than a tunnel or window effect implying a view into space with depth, the image remains an image. Over the level of the image, perhaps on the same level as the mat formed by the black bands at top and bottom, are the scratches and dust and such, which appear sharper than the image itself. Putting so-called impurities such as dust and scratches into sharper focus than that of the representational image suggests a

sense of irony and wit fundamental to Rimmer's work as a whole. Perceptually, however, the device adds a layer to the film in its illusory three-dimensionality. The superimposed title card becomes yet one more plane — especially because the title remains stationary and unchanging during the zoom that opens the film. Here, the title card is clearly related to the titles used in other structural films, notably *1933* (1967), *Reason Over Passion* (1969), and *Solidarity* (1973), all by Joyce Wieland. Simply by putting a static title over a moving image, Wieland too creates the impression of the planar levels of film.

If Rimmer presents something of the paradoxicality of the simultaneous presence of two- and three-dimensionality, then another paradox he explores is that of cinematic movement. Because at the outset of the film the ship is at point A and at the conclusion it is at point B, then one can say that it must have moved, but to attempt to point specifically to that motion directly involves the paradox at hand. Movement in *Surfacing* becomes not movement, but displacement in relation especially to the frame lines set up as reference points. Through the use of dissolves and the ability to see simultaneously prior and following positions of the image, Rimmer indicates the perceptual apparatus at work. Cinematic movement here is not so much between frames, as it has been concisely explained away in the past, but rather a product of the interaction of the serial presentation of the frames and the viewer's perception of those frames. At points in the film, our perception is confounded, for if we follow a rule that displacement leads to a realization of movement, then sometimes the ship moves backwards. In point of fact, the entire frame has shifted out of registration to the right. Again, the inclusion of this technical flaw becomes a demonstration of Rimmer's ironic sense of play with the images as well as demanding a re-evaluation of the phenomenon by the

perceiver. This type of error, like the scratches on the parent footage (but unlike the projection scratches on random prints of *Surfacing*) functions as a component of the film as a whole.⁸ While the reproduced scratches suggest the apparent three-dimensionality of the image, so the shifting of the frame (along with the opening and closing zooms) intensifies an experience of three-dimensionality as it relates to the historically verifiable space between Rimmer's optical-printer camera and the projected image it is recording.⁹

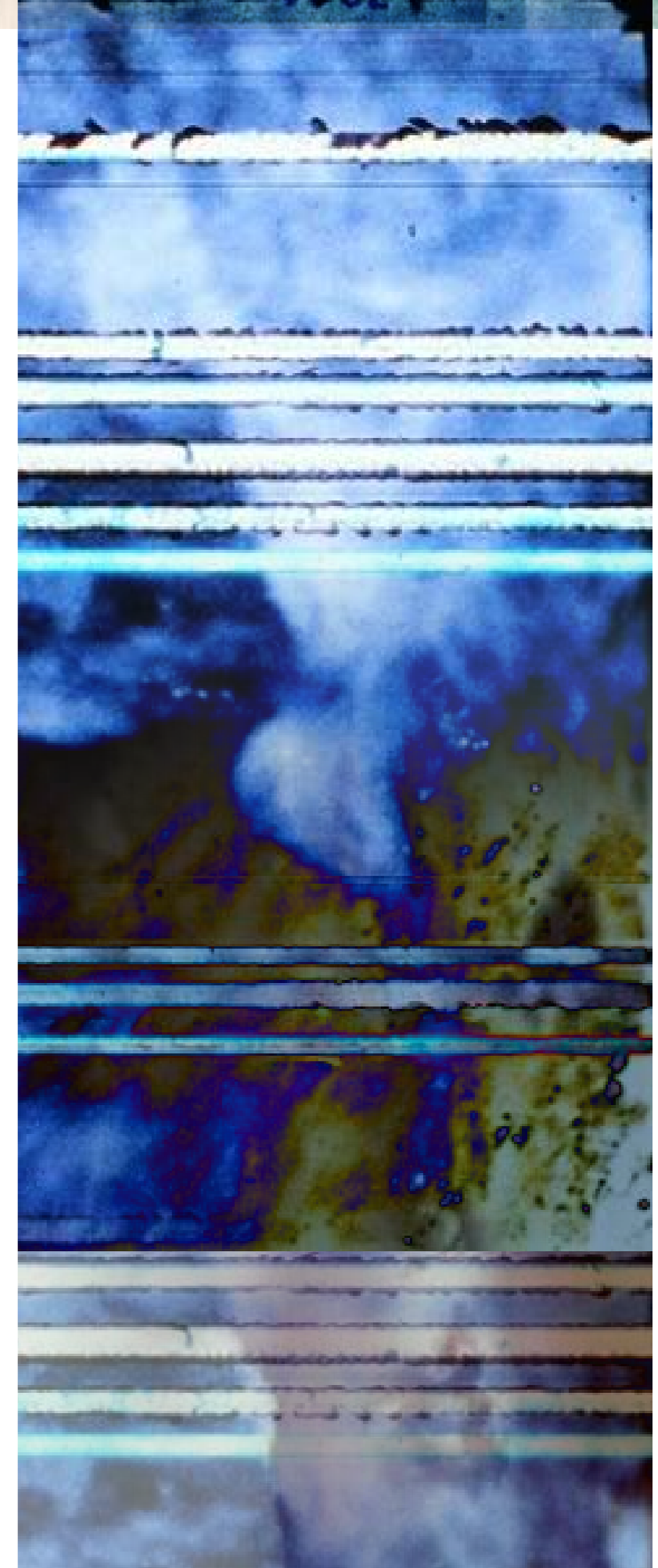
The dissolve, especially because at 96 frames it is relatively long, is an integral part of the film's schema. The length — or, as it's experienced, the duration — of the dissolves, puts the unifying effect in structural harmony with the film, as an example of elongation, as a whole. In fact, almost the whole film is dissolves in process. The image is in virtually constant transition. The dissolve allows the viewer to see simultaneously two frames of the parent footage, and the device calls into question not only the placement of movement in the film, but also the very existence of movement. The film as a whole deals directly with what might be called "cinematic fact," in the order of material, and concerns itself directly and more obviously with the illusions of the film experience. What we see are the individual images that created the illusion of movement in the parent footage. By connecting frames of expanded duration with a dissolve, Rimmer affords a privileged view of preceding and following images at the same time and in transition. We see concurrently where the ship on the river has been and where it is going. Putting this process on an extended time scale, the purpose of extending the dissolve over 96 frames — in durative terms four seconds — the concept of movement arises.

The dissolve then becomes an optical effect, in that its precise end is to elide the "cuts" between individual frames of the original footage. Rather than presenting

images serially in order to generate apparent motion (the theoretical and practical aim of all cinematic hardware), with the dissolve Rimmer attempts to create continual movement, or at least an equivalent. But of course paradoxically, the former, the desired end, is impossible because Rimmer's source is not actual movement, but individual images (the pro-filmic event is not the action of the ship or of the landscape, but another film), and because Rimmer's chosen medium is another generation of film, a serial presentation of fixed, individual images.

With the technology available to him, Rimmer cannot fill in the spaces. The ship does not appear at the points at which the motion-picture camera was originally unable to capture its image. But Rimmer elides this space by means of an expansion of time. Although the ship cannot be where it never was in the film, it can appear and disappear gradually and virtually constantly.¹⁰ With continual appearance and disappearance of successive images, there is in the film an equally continual change. The movement, almost imperceptible, but undeniably present in *Surfacing*, is opposed to apparent motion. Apparent motion is dependent upon seriality, images replacing images in succession and within tolerance bounds of time and space. (If A follows B, A cannot be too different in form or nature from B, nor can A be too distant from B, nor can the space of time between appearances of A and B be too great.) The continuous change in *Surfacing* becomes effectively equivalent to continuous movement. And continuity is characteristic of real movement. In effect, then, the result is a type of movement that is more like real movement than cinematically conventional apparent motion.

We might compare Rimmer's later *Watching for the Queen* (1973), in which the transitional device between frames reproduced for an extended duration is a cut. The chosen footage depicts a field of faces, which covers the screen entirely to the limits



of the frame. We see the first frame of what originally was a 48-frame shot for one minute. Cut to the next shot, the second frame. The impression, less than the movement of the faces, is cutouts of faces in a collage having been moved between shots. The lack of apparent depth, especially in the first frames of the parent footage (the camera tilts up during the shot so that the faces at the top of the field become more blurred, thus generating a sense of depth) aids in this impression of a photographic, two-dimensional assembly, rather than of a cinematic shot of figures in three-dimensional space. *Watching for the Queen* is a prime example of Rimmer's experimentation with movement, testing its limits, rather than subverting and replacing it as in *Surfacing on the Thames*. It is not until later in *Watching for the Queen* (although before the film reaches "speed," that is, reprinting the footage at a one-frame to one-frame rate) that we perceive movement, as distinct from spatial shifting. Only after the image changes with readily accessible regularity, or more rapidly, at least, than at the start of the film, do the figures appear to move. At the outset, when the cuts between successive images are so far apart (a minute, then thirty seconds, then fifteen seconds, and so on), the cuts appear as changes rather than as movement. The image is fixed for so long a time that the change is almost imperceptible and yet, again, it undeniably does not take place.¹¹

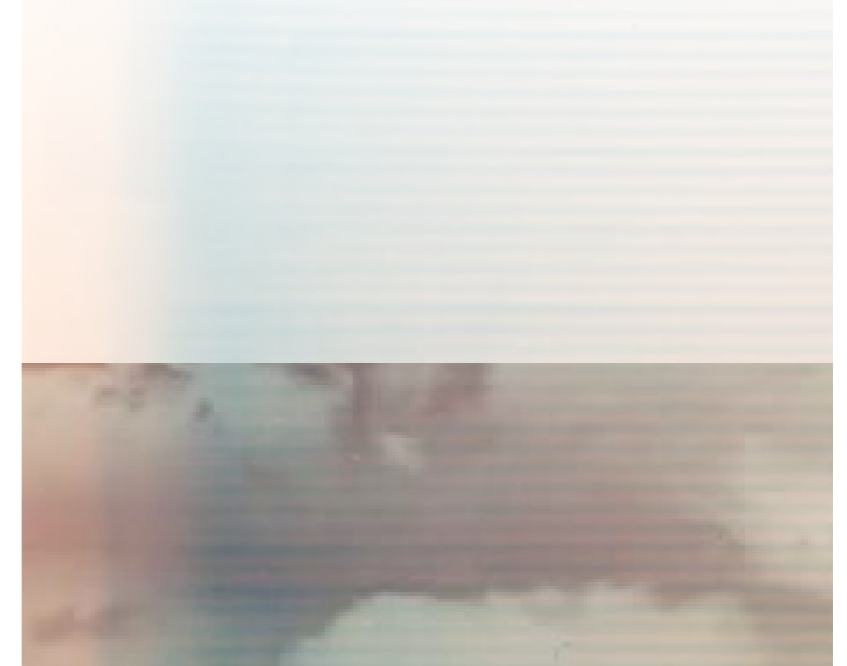
The device of the dissolve used as it is in *Surfacing on the Thames* need not be analytic in intent. Chris Marker's famous exercise in cinematic narrative using still images, *La Jetée* (1962), also offers a clear-cut example of the expressive use of a dissolve between similar still images to approximate filmic motion. In Marker's film, the camera setups are the same and the only difference between the two images is an altered orientation of a sleeping woman's head. Indicatively, for a

more strikingly emotional effect, Marker utilizes a dissolve of shorter length than Rimmer's. Marker's quick dissolve, in fact, comes close to bridging the actual time of such a turning of the head as is perceived. Thus screen time and story time are maintained as equal despite a technical ellipsis.

While distancing the spectator from the actualization of apparent motion, the dissolve Rimmer uses in *Surfacing* serves to break down the structure that generated the appearance of motion in the parent footage and transform it into a different form of movement. The reproduction of the action of the original footage's pro-filmic event — the movement of the ship — extends in length and duration. The spectator is deprived of the device necessary for the generating of movement and perception of apparent motion, the serial and instantaneous presentation of successive images. Instead, those single images are reproduced in cinema form 200-fold, and they are presented and withdrawn gradually rather than instantaneously. The spectator is prohibited from perceiving apparent motion in the sense that is endemic to motion pictures. But in a function which relies on a relationship between time and space, Rimmer manipulates one with respect to the other and provides valuable data on that relationship and a type of movement that is asymptotic to real movement, and which is based on temporal continuity rather than seriality.

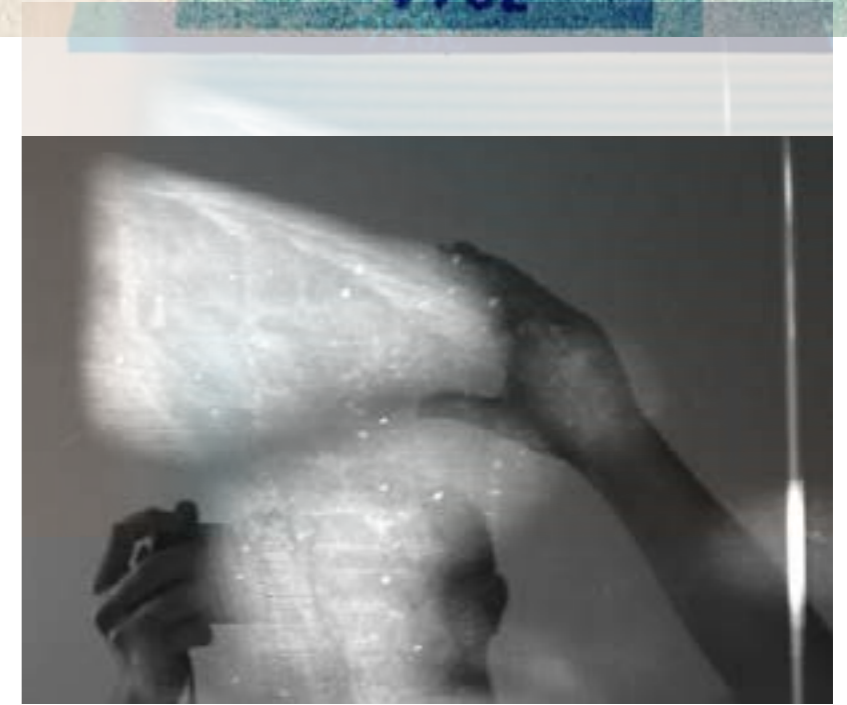
To return to the writing of the person who coined the term "structural film," P. Adams Sitney has written, in comparing the consciousness of perception in the work of Stan Brakhage to that of the structural filmmakers, "In Brakhage's art, perception is a special condition of vision, most often represented as an interruption of the retinal continuity (e.g., the white flashes of the early lyric films, the conclusion of *Dog*

Star Man). In the structural cinema, however, apperceptive strategies come to the fore. It is the cinema of the mind rather than the eye."¹² To an extent Sitney is correct, although it would be dangerous to extend the idea too fully to *Surfacing on the Thames*. Regina Cornwell cites Alain Robbe-Grillet on the Nouveau roman, "It does not express. It explores, and what it explores is itself."¹³ Rimmer puts his exploratory energies to work on five feet of film footage some three decades old and in *Surfacing on the Thames* presents the results of his examination. In so doing, he compounds the observations of both Sitney and Robbe-Grillet. He is not simply exploring how we see nor solely what we see, but the space between the two and the interaction and processes of what we see and how we see it. The spectator is called upon to share in the experiences of the exploration, and, while a filmmaker such as Brakhage may demonstrate the way he sees, Rimmer shows us the multiplicity of ways of seeing.



NOTES

1. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 407–08.
2. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, viii.
3. Peter Wollen, "'Ontology' and 'Materialism' in Film," *Screen* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 15–16.
4. Wollen, "'Ontology' and 'Materialism'": 14.
5. Wollen, "Introduction to *Citizen Kane*," *Film Reader* 1 (1975): 12, 13.
6. Kristina Nordstrom, "Film: Celebrations of Life and Death," *Village Voice* (6 April 1972): 79.
7. Regina Cornwell, "Some Formalist Tendencies in the Current American Avant-Garde Film," *Kansas Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1972): 66, cited in Wollen, "'Ontology' and 'Materialism'": 17.
8. After having viewed the same print, which was in virtually immaculate condition, several times, I saw another copy which was marred with a persistent small mark near the centre of the frame. As the film was projected, the mark vibrated and oscillated. It operated in a temporal scale different from the marks reproduced from the original footage copied to produce *Surfacing* — it remained onscreen throughout the film, not disappearing or appearing from shot to shot — and so it became a distraction rather than a unifying element, even though the mark was constantly visible. Perhaps because of the foregrounding of the marks on the parent footage, this projection scratch took even more precedence as an invader than a similar defect might have done in a conventional narrative or even a non-narrative film.
9. In the two parts of *Canadian Pacific* Rimmer also links with lengthy dissolves static images, taken from a single camera position, that look out onto a view where ships on the water are prominent features. In the final shot the camera and filmmaker are reflected in the window glass at which the camera has been pointed and through which scenes beyond had been shot, suggesting the similar relation between camera and planar object and similar results in *Surfacing on the Thames*.
10. Rimmer originally conceived of the film as continual dissolves, the shots constantly fading in and out, never leaving one image without another superimposed. Laboratory processes required optical effects to be separated by at least four frames. That is, four frames of black had to separate the end of the fade-out of shot A and the start of the fade-in of the following shot B. Corresponding to those four frames of black leader on one print roll, on the other print roll the image is fully exposed, without superimposition. Though unachievable, this plan testifies to Rimmer's intent to create continuity. In execution the effect of the four frames is neither evident nor appreciable, especially considering the basic elongation process. Four frames of a 200-frame "shot" at 24 frames per second equals only 1/6 of a second out of 8 1/3 seconds.
11. In *Watching for the Queen*, the image is fixed by elongation. Each frame is extended from what originally would have been 1/24 of a second of viewing to, at its greatest length, one minute. In the time needed for one frame to be replaced by another in the projection gate, each shot is replaced by an image of a similar form in slightly different orientation, and effectively this is similar to the classic experiments used to demonstrate the phi-phenomenon. Form A is presented, followed by a similar form B in a different position in the field of vision. A seems to move to the position at which B appears. In experimental conditions these forms are often lights.
12. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 408.
13. Cornwell, "Some Formalist Tendencies," 69.



AFTERWORD (2012)

Reading this more than 30 years after its publication and more than 35 years after its first composition as an undergraduate project, I am struck by the extent to which one type of understanding of Rimmer's film calls for awareness of technical processes that now, to students and others immersed in digital image production, might seem abstract or alien. Frames of black leader between optical effects? Rephotography and optical printing? Scratches and dust on the surface of the film? Hair in the gate? Gate? Film?

I have taken the opportunity offered by this virtual reprint to clean up some errors. The endnotes turned out especially confounding in the original published version, but I've now corrected them. I've also not been able to resist modifying and clarifying some of the prose, I hope improving the results. ■

24 A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

DAVID RIMMER: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

by Al Razutis

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

Vancouver: Art and Artists,
Vancouver Art Gallery, 1981

CONTEXTS AND INFLUENCES

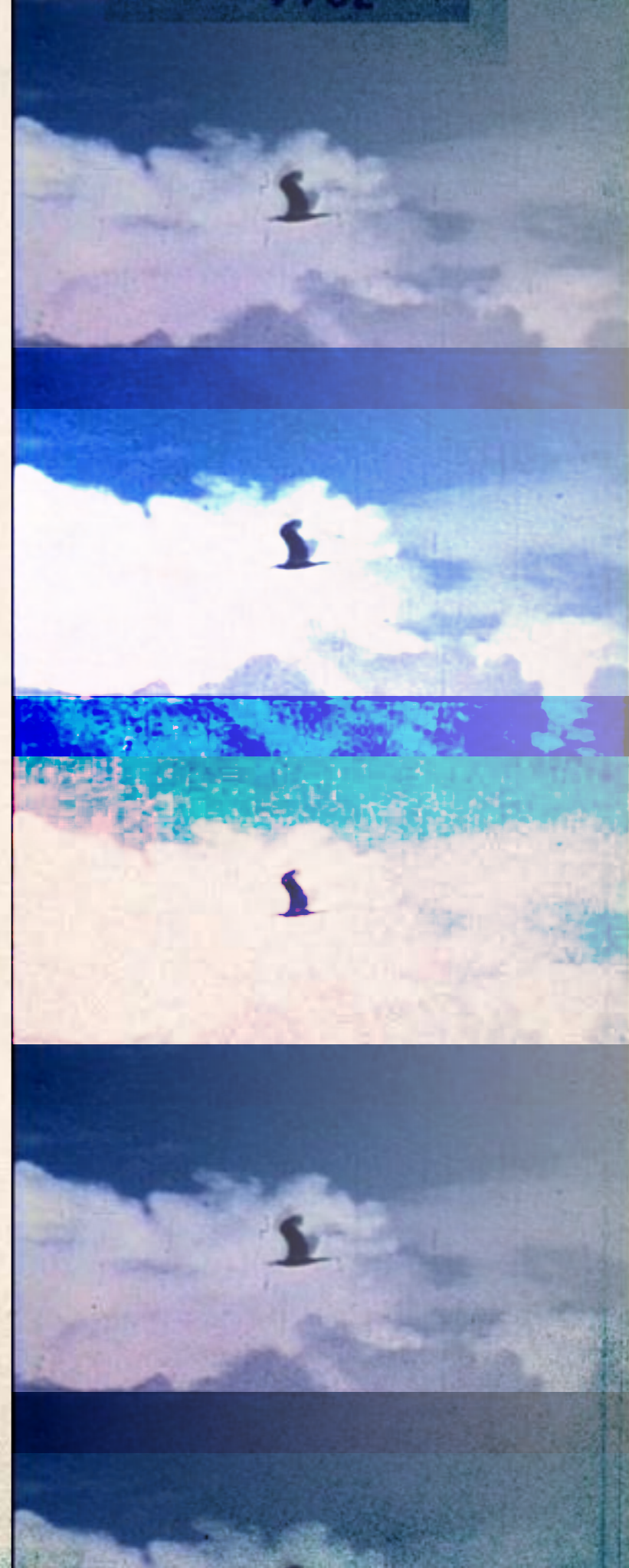
To appreciate the significance of David Rimmer's films, we should consider first the general context within which they were created. In the sixties an avant-garde movement sprang up throughout North America. The dominant features of this movement were: multi-media experiments; a rejection of formal art history (notably Modernism); a rejection of intellectual art "establishments"; and a focusing on experience and the ideology of intervention. Though it can be located historically (1963-1973), it is predominantly ahistorical in nature, owing more to the Surrealist and Dada traditions of severance, political action and provocation.

On a political front, the sixties featured open revolt against militarism, authority and the capitalist state; and on a social front, revolt against middle-class mores and conventions in the form of alternate

dress-appearance and communal-family social interrelationships. Traditional religion and Western philosophy were displaced by Eastern cosmology, self-realization and consciousness-expansion (via drugs, diet and meditation). With the shattering of traditional institutional values came the emergence of individual forms of expression through the support of communal organizations. The sudden availability of portable media instruments (16mm cameras, video portapaks, music synthesizers) made expression possible on a non-institutional and non-corporate basis. Social acceptance of counter-cultural expression was evident, especially in major urban centres. A parallel network of "underground" institutions suddenly sprang up. Cinemas, cinémathèques, distribution co-operatives and publications helped the avant-garde to begin to consolidate its position. The nature of this consolidation bears some attention.

THE WEST COAST NETWORK

Vancouver artists in the sixties suddenly were involved in a network of activity that encompassed Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle and Vancouver. The University of British Columbia imported



American poets, artists and filmmakers for special exhibitions and events. These persons travelled up and down the coast with a sense of international comradery. Influences from New York and Europe were felt less often and usually in the form of critical publications.

The developing forms of West Coast avant-garde films were influenced most notably by two American filmmakers: Stan Brakhage and Bruce Conner. Brakhage in his landmark book, *Metaphors on Vision* (1963), which served as a complement to his already vast body of films, implanted a sense of personal discovery and authorship in the minds of younger filmmakers. He elevated the notion of personal or home film to artistic levels and, more importantly, drew attention to the fact that the fundamental unit of film construction was the *frame*, rather than the shot.

Conner, on the other hand, brought forth social-political satire in the form of compilation or stock footage that was organized into discursive and structured forms. The basic unit of Conner's filmic constructions was the stock footage shot. These shots were arranged in such a manner (distinct from "pop art" serialization) so as to allow a deconstruction of that mythic realm which Western media had treated previously as sacrosanct truth. The viewer could now participate in the process of fabricating history and meaning.

David Rimmer's initial propensities toward independent views, self-expression and cross-disciplinary modes of investigation were supported by the prevailing conditions. His attitudes were not molded by film schools, since few, if any, existed at the time. He was inspired by radical techniques and concepts. Brakhage and Conner were among these sources of inspiration. The availability of inexpensive production methods allowed him to engage immediately in filmic discovery

and expression. A definition for the term "film art" had not been determined and thus all work was "experimental" and legitimate.

Rimmer's methods of production were initially very "unprofessional" by CBC, National Film Board, and industry standards. His projector doubled as a projector and rewinds. His viewer was, in fact, a studio window. His optical printer was comprised of a rear-projection screen and camera.

There was also a community of individuals that provided support. Stan Fox, a producer at the CBC, who later became an educator, provided production costs for the films, *Knowplace* (1967), *Square Inch Field* (1968) and *Migration* (1969). Another important factor was the Intermedia Artists' Co-operative, which was organized by Joe Kyle, Bud Doray and Bill Nemtin; and later, administered by Werner Aellen. It provided space, facilities and equipment for a variety of media artists whose interactive contributions provided much creative energy.

It is evident that Rimmer was able to benefit from this supportive community during his formative years as a filmmaker. In addition, although the Canada Council for the Arts had not yet established a film section in 1968, his application for monetary assistance in the invented category of "film as art" was accepted. This acceptance of Rimmer's work, as well as that of certain others, would benefit an entire generation of future filmmakers.

A critical context, however, was lacking in Vancouver in the sixties. Non-critical acceptance was largely the method of interaction between artist and institution or between artists themselves. It is interesting to note that Rimmer's residence in New York (1970-72) provided him with not only an overview of what was occurring throughout the avant-garde world, but also enabled him to gain a perspective on his own work, along with deserved critical acclaim.

THE CONTEXT FOR ANALYSIS

The nature of Rimmer's films suggests that the best critical and analytical approach is structural analysis. I have already located his work (in its inception) in the "post-modernist" era of avant-garde expression. The tasks of this essay will be the analysis, criticism, and assessment of the work with the intent of informing the reader as to the aesthetic and formal structural characteristics contained within it.

Much of the work is highly "cinema-specific" — that is, referential to the actual materials and properties of cinematic production, image-representation and viewing-perception. Much of the work, at first glance, is "minimalist" (i.e., the content is subsidiary to, and limited by, strict formal parameters), and "industrial-constructivist" (i.e., the content and form proceeds from the actual materials used in production). Both of the previous categories fall within the Modernist tradition, and are acknowledged because it is important to note that these films do not represent a total severance with art history. Rimmer's films do not lend themselves overtly to cine-linguistic (semiotic) analysis because of an inherent subordination of the visual sign to structure and materials.

Sound is usually a subordinate element in his films and often nonexistent. With the exception of *Al Neil/A Portrait* (1979), the visual components of his films were completed prior to the introduction of sound.

Rimmer approaches the art of filmmaking from a conceptual and problematic point of view, one that is usually located around a specific stock footage ("anonymous") shot or its equivalent — an anonymous point of view, setting or event. He then immerses himself in a process of aesthetic discovery by analyzing and modifying the given elements of this footage and their initial parameters. The locus of his specific film "narratives" usually centers around the re-telling of the details of the concept, rather than a literary story

line. To fully understand the nature of his “narrative exposition,” we must come to terms with both problem-concept and cine technology.

Ordinarily, film does not lend itself easily to analysis. The average viewer cannot stop it and review it time and again. The mere fact that projection formats feature an inexorable progression of images, always “forward” in time and without the opportunity for sampling, tends to divorce many analysts (and viewers) from its rich aesthetic potential. Rimmer’s work is, however, made for analysis. Within the exposition of their narratives, the films contain reflexive and analytical components. In fact, this is part of their design. Their austere, minimal qualities draw attention to subtle aspects of filmic structure and aesthetics, without the melodramatic embellishments common in “mass entertainment” films. They are also the work of an auteur who, by design and necessity, has been the primary agent in all aspects of their creation.

The films that I found to be most intriguing are those that contain an element of poetic ambiguity or a non-literal quality within the complex of their aesthetic. It would be tedious indeed to analyze simple didactic exposition of a linear nature. Conversely, it is rewarding to examine the depths of poetic content, image metaphor, and the very discursive nature of filmic design. The quality that differentiates Rimmer’s work from much of what is called “structuralist-materialist cinema” (notably and loudly emanating from New York and London), and its tedious didacticism, is precisely the presence of metaphor and poetic content.

THE BREAK WITH SYNAESTHESIA — EMERGENCE OF THE ART

Rimmer’s work, grounded in the sixties, initially featured the influences of the synaesthetic audio-visual culture. Although the avant-garde had begun to offer “declarations of aesthetic import,” notably through Brakhage’s writings, Jonas Mekas’ criticisms and Maya Deren’s recovered writings, the formalization of aesthetic principles was yet to be seen.

Within this general backdrop, Rimmer produced *Square Inch Field* (1968), which, by his own observation, suffers from “pop mysticism” and a grounding in “imported” (Eastern) iconic-mystical systems. Yet, *Square Inch Field* displays an intrinsic awareness of filmic rhythm and design. It also heralded the beginning of Rimmer’s use of the frame as a building block in montage. Rimmer’s work, however, took a new direction, representing a significant break with existing “pop norms” and synaesthesia, with the completion of *Migration* in 1969.

Rimmer describes *Migration* as “organic myth,” and he recalls that shooting began with the central image of a dead deer on a beach. Subsequently, he worked on either side of that image (shooting and editing) towards a composition that predominantly featured

visual rhythms. The visual rhythms to which he refers are the result of an integration of two interesting techniques — flash-frame montage and “writing” with the hand-held camera. The flash-frame montage punctuates the dominant rhythms as a percussive element. The camera-stylo “writing” is precise (almost calligraphic) and maps out the region of cinematic expression that is both impressionist and expressionist. The influence of Brakhage also is visible — especially Brakhage’s *Sirius Remembered* (1959), not only in the scratched-on titles, but also in the aggressive interaction between camera movement and subject matter.

In *Migration* there are but few moments of a contemplative nature. Naturalism is subordinated to a kinetic interaction with organic life processes and decay. The variety of camera movements and points of view is startling. Swish-pans, sudden tilts and snap-zooms, as well as interpretive “writing” devices create a participatory / interpretive texture. Mimetic images become part of the cinematic kinesis. Not only are contrasting motions juxtaposed, but also extreme points of view. The camera pans down a cliff face to the clouds! Solar flares are juxtaposed with a bird in flight and sunlight, as seen through trees, dissolves to sunlight reflected on water. The last example, that of relating opposite points of view, becomes the *modus operandi* in the film’s construction. Thus, it is not surprising that temporal points of view, in their opposite states, are equally present such as accelerated time or time-lapses being cut with “normal” or extended time. The rhythmic and contrasting elements of the film, and their use in montage, are reminiscent not only of Brakhage, but also of Dziga Vertov. Rimmer’s camera-stylo successfully liberates itself from the confines of the literary narrative. But liberation is relative. *Migration* still contains remnants of the “old world,” and its break with pop-symbolism is not total. The symbolic “elements” of earth, air, fire and water



certainly are present in both content and form, but this presence can best be read as narrative loci (i.e., the "threads of interaction").

The "organic myth" that Rimmer referred to is thus comprised of four mythic/elemental domains, which feature four narratives. Yet some images of ambiguous symbolic value such as the thorns of a rose, a diving seal and birds in flight remain. Perhaps the resolution of the film's symbolic content is alluded to in the beginning and end. In the opening section, the familiar West Coast image of a seagull in flight (the "unconscious liberation" pop-symbol) is frozen, caught and burned in the projection gate. This act, though symbolic in itself, focuses the viewer's attention on the plural characteristics of cinematic representation: image; symbol; projection; grain; focus and texture. We are encouraged to see, beyond mere representation and experience, to the materials of the cinematic enterprise. *Migration* is a form of iconoclastic "heresy," a violation of the rules and etiquette of cinema. But it is also a heresy with a purpose — growth and development of style. The burning of such a cliché image becomes an introduction to future materialist and conceptual concerns, which dominate Rimmer's films for a large part of the seventies — a "migration" towards post synaesthetic structural cinema.

Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper (1970) represents a further breakthrough in the development of experimental aesthetics. Its structure is disarmingly simple: proliferation-variation-abstraction. But Rimmer's method and form of exposition is rich and complex.

The film is based on an endless ("closed") loop of a black and white stock footage shot that features a woman stacking cellophane sheets in a factory. This loop is repeated, reversed from positive to negative to positive and transformed via optical printing techniques. The paradigm or "category of choice" that

Rimmer employs is limited by the range of optical and contact-printer possibilities inherent in both technology and design. There is more than one version of the initial "parent" stock shot. The initial variations include low contrast positive and negative, and high contrast positive and negative copies. The structural organization of these elements along the time track is of major importance. The closed loop (a complete cycle) when featured as a series of successive shots, forms an obvious pattern of repetition and proliferation. In 1969, Rimmer had experimented at The Edmonton Art Gallery with a simultaneous projection of four loops. These experiments suggested not only graphic variations, but also compositional variables in time — ones that featured "synchronicity" and "asynchronicity" between each loop element. This latter condition became one of the key features of *Variations*.

The film begins with the "normal" (low contrast) image loop repeating and setting up a rhythm. Within a short time, higher contrast copies are introduced and these begin to alternate between positive and negative, normal and high contrast. The negative cycle of image-proliferation follows, proceeding from low to high contrast, and also features positive and negative alternations. Up to this point in the film, the structural qualities of proliferation and variation have been quite simple (I would term the beginning as being purely expository). The exposition is now followed by "complication," especially in terms of the variable components of graphic and temporal organization. Rimmer begins to superimpose positive and negative copies of the parent loop, slipping in and out of sync, to achieve partial and total solarization of the image. This phase of *Variations* also alternates high contrast, positive and negative images. At this point in the film, a notable change occurs. Positive and negative strobing is introduced, accompanied by step-printing of each frame to slow the action, as though to

stimulate the optical retina of the viewer towards an intended goal of colour perception. Only subsequently is colour introduced in the film, proceeding from fragmentary moments to complete colour separations and overlays. The film's progression through complex variations to complication, reaches a state of abstraction — a denouement or climax in which the image is resolved as a disintegrating line drawing.

In *Variations*, the central image of the woman is always present, the rhythm is nearly constant (even though a slowing down of movement occurs); and the motion is always one of vertical "wash"; that is, the cellophane sheet is tossed upwards. *Variations* is a departure from the domain of synaesthetic light-show loop projections because of its structural organization and simplicity as well as its aesthetic assertions. Rimmer chose, as parent footage, a shot by an anonymous author and an equally anonymous point of view. He then contrasted this anonymity with overt manipulative techniques that display both investigation and aesthetic. He has succeeded in combining both synchronicity and asynchronicity as aesthetic functions in time. The sound, by Don Druick, serves chiefly as accompaniment, loosely following the previously determined design. The ambiguity of the content-message permits the viewer to experience and interpret the film in a variety of ways. Some viewers, as Rimmer has pointed out, see the film as a "spiritual" message and some see it for its "political" or "feminist" content.

Whereas *Variations* featured the closed-loop as a primary unit of construction, *Seashore* (1971) utilized an "open loop," where the completion of the action does not synchronize with the beginning. The maximal length of the loop was pre-determined by the length of original stock footage. Again, proliferation and variation are dominant features. However, the short, fragmented shots of Edwardian bathers are not generally tied end to end but, rather, punctuated with

black leader. Rimmer's decision in this regard seems quite logical. If the primary building unit is "open" or incomplete, then the absence of image (black leader) becomes the necessary structural correlation.

Instead of building graphic variations (as in the previous film), Rimmer fragments the shots themselves, reverses screen direction, freezes on watermarks, repeats loops and fragments within the shot and superimposes asynchronous elements. Rather than proceeding towards "complication," he engages in deconstruction. He even extends his investigation into the process of mechanical or optical image reproduction. Intermittent registered motion with each frame held still for projection, is contrasted with non-registered or streaked and blurred motion. The two levels of content operating in this film, cinematic representation and mechanical ordering of motion, never seem to totally fuse. In that sense, I think it is less successful than either *Variations* or *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970). The structural integration of the bleached out image of bathers and the black leader is also problematic. The black contrasts with the whiteness of the original shot, and rather than integrating with it, becomes a counterpoint (I would think that clear leader would have been appropriate). The visual pulsations or raising and lowering of light levels, is referential to the pulsation of the waves breaking on the shore, yet its overall structural ties are not clearly delineated. However, in a gallery installation the structural characteristics of *Seashore* will be more referential to kinetic "painting in time."

Surfacing on the Thames shocked the avant-garde community. It was as if the structuralists had "missed the boat" prior to this film. *Surfacing* is an elegant, restrained essay on cine-narrative and exposition. The structure and form employed is once again disarmingly simple — "found footage" of anonymous origin, and chronological narrative is used in a way that is austere, mythic and minimal. The parent shot

is expanded in length from five feet to approximately 250 feet. The film's narrative functions on three levels — spatial, temporal and contextual.

Spatially, a barge travels from right to left in a mist of grain and surface texture. Ostensibly, this action once took place on the Thames, perhaps in the thirties. More curiously, Rimmer's recording and rendering place this action in the realm of myth, rather than history. The "mythic" movement is precise, with each increment carefully measured. Temporally, each frame of the original shot is rendered as a brief pause between a continuing progression of dissolves. The dissolves are 96 frame or four second transitions between previous and latter frames. The sensation is one of clockwork motion, seen as both increment and process. It is a chronology of events, normally occurring in real time, but seen in this film from an intensely magnified perspective.

The film opens with white frames, referring to the screen and a slow zoom out from the grain and image. The initial edge fogging announces "the beginning of the roll" and the "beginning of camera-image representation." The zoom back locates the Thames landscape as an object, situated almost like a painting on some gallery wall. It is notable that Rimmer used a wide-screen aspect ratio for this composition — one which is in keeping with landscapes. At this point, a series of 96 frame dissolves commences, locating the image both in changing space relationships and in a process of expanded time. The approximate age of the parent shot can be surmised by the predominance of surface texture such as grain, watermarks, scratches and dust. The ageless qualities can be surmised by the fact that it is an object of contemplation and beauty. The time expansion that Rimmer utilizes can be seen in contrast to the incessant flicker of the projected image. In this sense, and it is crucial, the film is not equivalent to a series of dissolving slides. It is highly cinema-specific and cinema-chronological. While the



locus of the film is parallel or has a narrative and chronology, the meaning of the film includes the "precious object" context of rendering or representation.

One question that often has been overlooked in various critical essays on *Surfacing on the Thames* is the question of what comprises the elements of its narrative. To even the most casual observer, the predominant event is the dissolve rather than the freeze-frame hold. With this consideration in mind, it is reasonable to propose that Rimmer has succeeded in constructing a narrative from a series of transitions. He has succeeded in challenging the accepted notion that the "shot" is the basis of any narrative. (Ten years later, we can see the commercial cinema equivalent to an aspect of this discovery embodied in the extended dissolves of *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). Rimmer also has succeeded in redefining the parameters of the cinematic landscape film. In 1968, he created a time-lapse cinema-landscape entitled *Landscape*. This film featured a compressed rendition, from dawn to dusk, of water, clouds and mountains, from a fixed camera point of view. In 1970, *Surfacing* presented the viewer with a completely unique view of what a cine-landscape could be.

As in all his films, *Surfacing* relates to earlier and later work. The zoom-out and zoom-in, which initiate and complete the film, are related to the opening and closing procedure used in *Migration*. The vertical displacements of image during dissolve, which re-occur several times, I find curiously inconsistent, if not disconcerting. It draws us out of the structural simplicity of the work and directs us to filmmaker's technique. But these criticisms are minor. *Surfacing on the Thames* remains a bold, innovative and important film in both Rimmer's body of work and contemporary cinema-culture.

Watching for the Queen (1973) continued Rimmer's investigations of minimal narrative and the anonymous/autonomous shot. The results are quite interesting and innovative, and can be approached best from three main considerations.

The first is the original shot, a crowd of expectant, smiling faces, which features little camera motion. As in *Surfacing*, each frame is subject to time expansion. There is little indication at the onset as to what will constitute movement, and in what capacity. What is initiated (along with the familiar trademark of edge fogging announcing the "beginning of the roll") is a curious form of visual analysis, proceeding along the lines of segmentation and collage. Each change in perceptible movement, which corresponds to a change in original parent frame number, appears as a spatial rearrangement, segmented by a cut. In *Surfacing*, each frame is joined via a dissolve. In *Watching for the Queen*, each frame features a displacement. It appears as if the cinematic cut has found its graphic correlation.

Secondly, this "collage" changes in the process of projection according to defined time constructs, which are based on arithmetic progressions. For example, the first frame of the original shot is frozen for 1200 frames (approximately one minute), the next two for

600 frames, the next four for 300 frames, etc. The result is a slowly accelerating montage and a concretization of the "real" event through time. It is as if a re-invention of the motion-picture domain of "reality" was being undertaken. The transformation of a "sea of anonymous faces" into a "narrative of personalities" becomes a distinct possibility as movement and reflexive action are consolidated. In a psychological sense, as we become more familiar with the details of the scene, our attention shifts to identifying reflex actions and changes in the crowd.

Thirdly, Rimmer creates a parallel narrative between specific people in the crowd. For example, the first stage of the narrative concerns identifying individuals in the crowd. This is accomplished by noting, or having our attention drawn to, the person who exhibits the greatest motion. As the freeze-frames lessen in duration, other degrees of more subtle movement engage our interest. The narrative elements that each character represents are parallel, because they are only connected by the theme of "watching for the queen" (as we, in turn, are "watching for the characters"). Over several viewings, I arrived at the following ordering of the narrative "story": the crowd is composed of... a bald man smoking a cigarette... a man with a cap looking up... a man holding a pair of binoculars over his head... a man stretching to see over the crowd, etc. It is curious, indeed, that I saw these characters in the present tense, rather than the past. I would attribute this last point to the fact that Rimmer requires the viewer to discover the narrative and participate in it through this discovery.

Pattern recognition, saccadic eye movement and feature rings are well known phenomena in the behavioral sciences. However, in *Watching for the Queen*, Rimmer has succeeded in employing these mechanisms in the telling of a story, by employing mathematical ordering in an aesthetic manner.

In contrast to *Watching for the Queen*, the short sketch entitled *The Dance* (1970) displays expansion of time by the use of an invisible cut. The parent footage featured a pair of dancers, seen from a fixed camera point of view, rapidly pirouetting across the foreground. Rimmer's use of the invisible cut proliferated this motion to the point of humorous exaggeration. The dancers become both spinning tops and an Astaire-Rogers duo performing feats beyond human endurance. The frenetic rhythm of the dancers, and its proliferation, becomes a distinct foreground effect in contrast to the background musicians. Although the use of the invisible cut historically belongs to the domain of "découpage classique" or "Hollywood" action cutting to condense the scene, Rimmer uses it for the purpose of montage or the "building of an idea." Once again, as in earlier films, the anonymous event is the cause for analysis and celebration; once again, the dance motif figures prominently. The presence of this film also supports the notion that Rimmer's filmmaking exhibits links to both sculptural and painterly concerns. Typically also, this film features formal opening and closing movements; in this case, curtains which open and close as an auteurist gesture.

Fracture (1973) presents the viewer with a narrative riddle, one that is related directly to the nature of parallel construction. The concept of parallel narrative is not new and has been often used in novels and in film. Both *The Great Train Robbery*, made by Porter in 1908, and many of Hitchcock's films illustrate the use of parallel narrative to build tension and suspense. In comparison, Rimmer's use of this technique is conceptual, minimal, and proceeds along the lines of construction rather than exposition. Two 8mm home-movie shots are used as "scenes" to comprise the basic elements of his parallel construction. These shots seem related, but they may have originated from two separate films. The extreme granularity of the shots suggests 8mm home-movie origin and

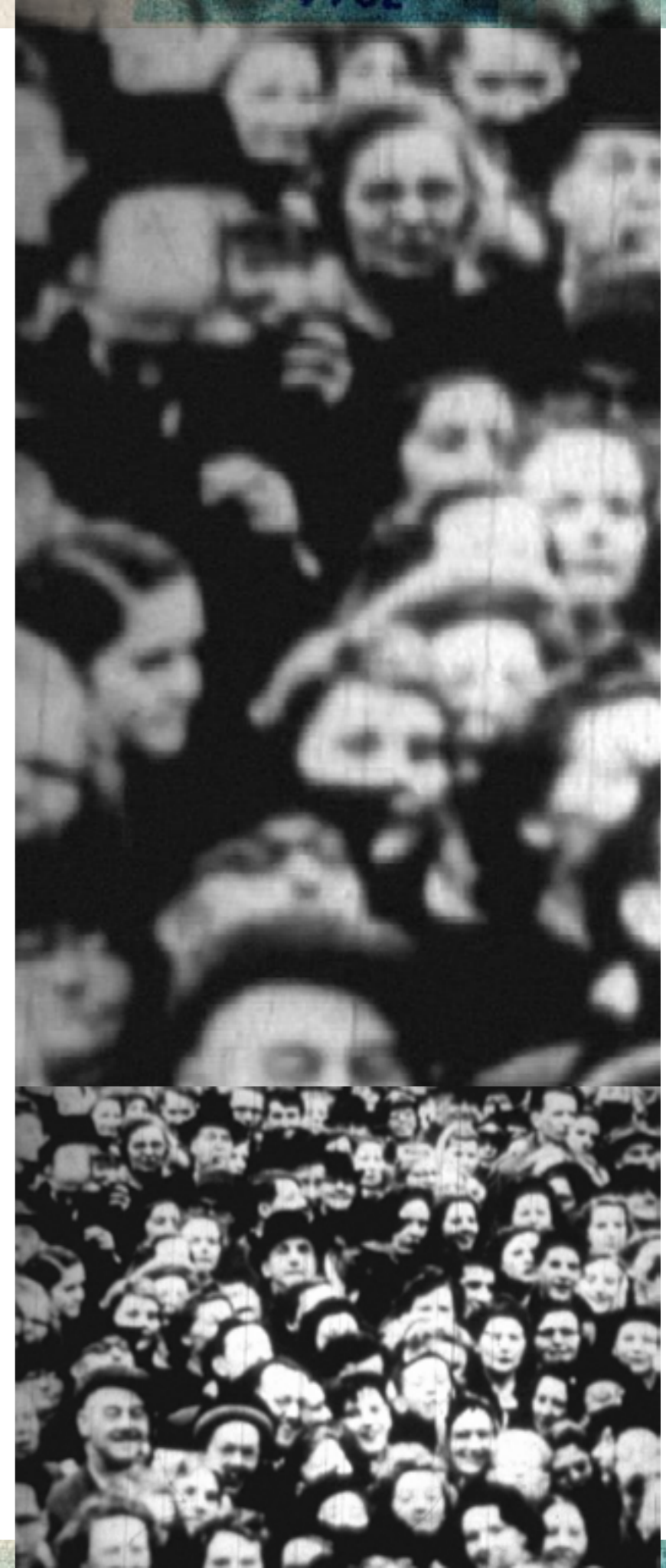
the viewer may assume that the people depicted are friends, relatives or the filmmaker's immediate family. This ambiguity prompts the viewer to examine possibilities rather than actualities. Rimmer's structuring of the implied narrative is strikingly reminiscent of the interpretive ambiguities found in Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966), in which the artist accidentally discovers, attempts to solve, and finally abandons the riddle.

The narrative construction (and I emphasize the latter word) of *Fracture* is comprised of 18 shots. These shots are, in fact, optical renditions of two primary shots or scenes which are the woman and child, and the male "intruder." Each shot is a partial segmentation and deconstruction of the parent scene, and they are presented as fragments that allude to the content of the whole. Shots 1-9, in chronological order, feature direct cross-cutting (a form of "parallel montage") between the woman and child scene and the "intruder." The woman looks toward the direction of the male and approaches the child in a protective manner. The intruder's hand, in an extreme close-up, opens the door and closes it. Shot 10 suddenly reveals to us the possibility that the action in shots 1-9 may have been in reverse. The implication is inescapable — our assumptions regarding the meaning of the narrative may be completely wrong. Shot 11 seems to corroborate this — the woman now sits and reverses her previous actions. Shots 12-17, also presented in parallel montage, contrast the forward and backward actions of both persons, suggesting that the notion of "threat" is simply illusory and based on the manipulation of innocuous events. However, the final shot (18) repeats the earlier suggestion of "threat" and prompts a further reconsideration of the film's narrative.

Rimmer's *Fracture* successfully isolates and exploits basic cinematic codes and conventions, such as screen direction and open-frame composition, in the creation of an implied and poetic narrative. The use of optical

step-printing allows the viewer to analyze the meaning of the actions. And since the actions proceed at a slower rate than the viewer's interpretation, Rimmer has structurally defined a process in which the "riddle" and "mystery" reside primarily in the viewer's mind. *Fracture* also is notable for its unique manner of ordering events non-chronologically and reversing them in time. Indeed, this is a unique combination of two categories of syntagmatic shot relationships — bracket and parallel syntagma, as described in *A Semiotics of the Cinema* by Christian Metz (1974). The lack of "plot" resolution is not overly disconcerting, unless one is waiting for a "punchline." Obviously, these disconnected fragments or shots did not, in themselves, contain the resolution to the parallel narrative. But neither did *Blow Up* contain a full resolution of its narrative. The elegance and simplicity of *Fracture* is notable in that during the course of 10 minutes we can observe both the deconstruction of parallel narrative and the mechanisms of the concepts behind it.

Canadian Pacific (1974) straddles both the categories of structural essay and interpretive documentary. This film is intrinsically related to Rimmer's earlier landscape films, *Landscape* and *Surfacing on the Thames*, by the presence of formal rules of framing, composition and temporal organization. It features, however, some interesting variations. In *Canadian Pacific*, the basic unit of construction is the shot as a scene, which is presented as a formal sample of a lengthy time-lapse. The camera point of view also is not neutral. It features the filmmaker's studio and personal point of view, which is specifically alluded to in the last shot. The composition contains a tension between "open form" (foreground action emanating from and proceeding to outside of the frame) and "closed form" (action contained by the frame, or framing devices such as mountains, shoreline or, even, frames within frames). The use of chain-dissolves brings out similarities to *Surfacing*, but no clear chronology is



established through either external or internal time referencing. *Canadian Pacific* (and its companion piece *Canadian Pacific II*, 1975) is best seen in its true context as a framed wall installation piece. In this context, previously on display at the Winnipeg Art Gallery during a Winnipeg Perspective exhibition, *Canadian Pacific I* and *II* were situated within window frames as part of a “domestic” environment.

INTERPRETIVE DOCUMENTARIES

Real Italian Pizza (1971) initiated a long-term project in relation to Rimmer’s evolving film style and conceptual concerns. Although this film is nearly ten years old, it displays a curious “totality” embracing both structural and documentary concerns.

Real Italian Pizza documents and interprets the social rituals of the transients and patrons of Tom’s Real Italian Pizza shop in New York City. The film is episodic in construction and features a series of “movements” which are identifiable and demarcated by fade-ins and fade-outs or black frames. There is one camera point of view — Rimmer’s fourth floor studio window. Several lens focal lengths are used to bring out the details of the setting. Similarly, several attitudes toward the ordering of time and “detailing” are evident. Actions within the frame feature both compression (pixilation)

and expansion (step-printing or slow motion). The cinematography and editing is primarily comprised of a “sample and hold” quality. As interpretive documentary, *Pizza* samples and holds various characters, their gestures, the nature of their interactions, the changing seasons, and the arrival and departure of external social influences, such as the police and members of the fire department. There is both detachment (the action is left to unfold) and intervention (the action is interpreted). In the final exposition of the film’s narrative, the original footage is segmented, analyzed and organized. The opening “movements” serve to establish episodes, proceeding from rendition of detail to wide-angle, integrating gestures. The lateral movement of passers-by is integrated into mass movements or parade — a condition that further underlines Rimmer’s propensities toward dance and gesture. There are a variety of episodes that focus on black youths dancing, gesturing, panhandling or simply watching. There are episodes that feature the ritual of patrons entering and leaving. Winter rituals of human interaction are related to summer rituals. But this film is more than a sociological essay. It is interpretive, poetic and lyrical.

The structural locus for the film is determined by the paradigmatics of setting and time interval. By reducing these choices to a fixed point of view and a given period of time, Rimmer enables us to look at what is happening and how it is rendered with greater detail and insight. *Real Italian Pizza* established Rimmer’s direction towards an evolving film style, one that includes the drama of social and human interaction.

Al Neil/A Portrait (1979) was created after a lapse of several years in filmmaking. Perhaps a period of integration and reflection had to elapse before Rimmer embarked on this significant change in direction.

Al Neil, the musician, poet, sculptor and “shaman,” has been virtually an institution in West Coast art mythology. His work has spanned more years than most could accurately recall. He was considered an inspiration to many artists in the sixties and he was featured in several avant-garde films including *How the West Was One* by Gary Lee-Nova (1970). Whether he is a recluse, mystic or Dadaist is only of historical concern. The task facing Rimmer was the creation of a portrait of both an “institution” and a friend. This task has been carried out eminently.

Al Neil/A Portrait is more than a documentary profile of a man engaged in a life and death struggle with his genius and his obsessions. And while the narrative thread is centered around pathos, the film represents a coming to terms with what these generalizations really mean. During the course of the film, Al Neil is coming to terms with Rimmer the filmmaker; and Rimmer is coming to terms with Al Neil. The manner in which Rimmer chooses to address the viewer is both intimate and distanced. The episodic construction is one such “distancing” device. The long close-up shots are examples of intimacy and patience. The chiaroscuro of the profile shots, which render highlights against blackness, produce an emotional tone of almost medieval, gothic quality. Totemism, in both a West Coast and Al Neil context, is delivered to rapid montage sequences that feature hand-held tracking shots up equally totemistic doll assemblages. The film is notable for the absence of extraneous sound and visual elements. It retains a focus on the integrity of its narrative without embellishments.

Al Neil/A Portrait features the presence of two “narrators,” Neil and Rimmer, who complement each other. Al Neil, as the narrator, or spinal column, which he describes in his work, is more than the source of music or verbal text. He is the “mythic location” for



the film, identified by music, recollections, artifacts, gestures and presence. This mythic location, in the tradition of Alfred Jarry and Antonin Artaud, can be reached only through an understanding of its mosaic form where each fragment does not constitute the whole. Rimmer, as narrator, not only presents the points of view, organizes the elements and interprets the results, but locates the events within their mythic domain.

It is evident immediately that Rimmer has relaxed many of his previously more formal structural concerns in the making of this film. There is less manipulation and overt structuring. His camera style is at times informal; at times conventional. Visual transitions usually rely on sound or text transitions, as in traditional sound-overlap cutting. There even are examples of images which function as direct support of verbal exposition, as in the exterior shots of Al Neil's house. This process of formal "relaxation" serves to provide greater emphasis on the subject rather than on technique.

There is one expanded sequence, among many, that merits specific analysis. In this sequence, Rimmer's genuine ability to structure film exposition and locate that "mythic" domain becomes evident. The sequence begins with a complex montage passage as a sub-sequence featuring superimposition of keyboard, sculpture, details in the room; and Al Neil reeling, intoxicated, away from the camera. The visual elements act as a complement to the staccato sounds of the piano.

In contrast, Rimmer then presents us with a view of Al Neil's public performance, ending with applause. Then, via sound transition, he brings us back to one of the most personal episodes of the film, with Al Neil's recollections of family, relatives and his mother's funeral. There is pathos and bitterness when he relates that "she'll die with her own love... they took the casket away... I hit my sister for two bucks... they continued their journey," it is like a journey down the River Styx, an "interview" on its ghostly barge. At this moment, there is a totality to the pathos — a totality that includes the many personas of Al Neil: the private, intoxicated and poetic man; the public performer and musician; and the family outcast. Rimmer's integration of these levels is masterful. Al Neil's poetry is compelling: "Masks leaving me... god among fools..." The film finishes with a public performance, employing conventional, reflexive techniques such as the presence of the filmmaker in a shot, title superimpositions and a freeze-frame shot as an ending. The irony is compelling and pronounced.

Al Neil/A Portrait is a monumental construction on many levels, and it tends to render some of the previous work as scale models or fragments in the pursuit of a life-long artistry in film. But whatever their scale, they are eminent works. One needs only to look at the scarcity of original film art to fully appreciate the place that these works occupy in our contemporary vista. ■

BIOGRAPHY (TO 1980)

- 1942** *Born in Vancouver on January 20, 1942.*
- 1963** *Received B.A. from the University of British Columbia in Mathematics and Economics.*
- 1963-65** *Traveled around the world, with the exception of South America. Decided he was not interested in working in business.*
- 1965-66** *Returned to Vancouver. Did a make-up year at the University of British Columbia in order to receive a degree in English.*
- 1967** *Started a Master's program in English at Simon Fraser University. Took a short filmmaking course from Stan Fox, a producer at CBC. With Fox's support and a supply of rough film stock from CBC, he made his first film, Knowplace, which was broadcast on CBC. Became involved with Intermedia Artists' Co-operative. Decided to drop out of Simon Fraser University in order to concentrate on filmmaking. Spent the summer, and each summer thereafter, with a group of people that own collectively a piece of land on the Sechelt Peninsula, north of Vancouver.*
- 1968** *With rough film stock supplied by Stan Fox, made his first completely independent film, Square Inch Field, which won awards at the Yale Film Festival and the St. Lawrence Film Festival.*
- 1969** *Made Migration and Landscape. Received assistance from the Canada Council for the Arts this year through 1973.*
- 1970-72** *Lived in New York, returning in the summers to Vancouver; saw many filmmakers and their work. Made Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper, Surfacing on the Thames, The Dance, Real Italian Pizza and Seashore. Showed his films at several places in New York, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Millennium Film Workshop and the Film Forum.*
- 1973** *Toured Holland, Germany, Italy and Great Britain in order to show his films. Returned to Vancouver. Made Fracture and Watching for the Queen.*
- 1974** *Began teaching part-time in the Fine Arts Studio program at the University of British Columbia. Made Canadian Pacific.*
- 1975** *Made Canadian Pacific II.*
- 1978** *Started to work on Al Neil/A Portrait. Received a Canada Council grant.*
- 1979** *Completed Al Neil. Left the University of British Columbia and started teaching film production part-time at Simon Fraser University. Received a Canada Council grant.*
- 1980** *Made Narrows Inlet. Continues to live and work in Vancouver.*

25 MY FILMS ARE DIFFICULT TO WATCH'

'MY FILMS ARE DIFFICULT TO WATCH'

by Jamie Lamb

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN
The Vancouver Sun, January 8, 1981

Comments from the ever-changing audience at the Vancouver Art Gallery were as revealing as the films on display. People drifted out of the David Rimmer exhibition dropping remarks that ranged from "interesting perceptual attitudes" to "utter crap" from "heavy stuff" to "fine repetitive motif."

Well, nobody said a continuous showing of David Rimmer's experimental films was going to be easy or comfortable viewing, least of all the filmmaker. "My films are difficult to watch, sure," Rimmer said in an interview. "They are more in an art context than a film context. By that I mean I'm more interested in the brush strokes; the techniques used to form the image and how one perceives the image. I do not tell a story in the traditional film sense."

Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper is a case in point. It is a closed film loop of a woman stacking cellophane sheets in a factory. Over and over, the woman snaps the cellophane in the air. Over and over, the viewer watches as Rimmer alters how we see the woman and the cellophane with the use of high and low contrasts, positive and negative images, solarization and colour. It's an interesting work. It has been lauded and praised in numerous film festivals. But reaction from gallery visitors was sharply divided between "artsycrafty rubbish" insults and praise.

Such differences of opinion are inevitable in the work of a filmmaker who believes in taking chances with viewers. Rimmer maintains that using short film "clips" over and over in marginally altered forms is worth the risk of alienating many viewers. What's important is the way we see an image, Rimmer said. Each frame is critical and the way the frames are put together to present an image provides him with his fascination for and satisfaction with film. Or, alternatively, how each frame can be used to mislead a viewer into seeing





something that is not there at all. In his film *Fracture*, Rimmer shows a woman reacting to a possible threatening occurrence, but then suggests the woman's movements may not be a reaction. It's all in the way the film is constructed and how the eye reacts to the construction.

The effects of Rimmer's films are difficult to express in words. Friend and fellow filmmaker Al Razutis, in his analysis of Rimmer's *Fracture*, said: "Indeed, this is a unique combination of two categories of syntagmatic shot relationships – bracket and parallel syntagma, as described in *A Semiotics of the Cinema* by Christian Metz." These words, like Rimmer's films, will leave many viewers cold and scampering for the exits.

"I make my films from an art background," Rimmer said. "I'm interested in time and perception, forms which probably appeal more to an art audience. I wouldn't like to see one of my films in a commercial theatre. That wouldn't be fair to an audience coming to see a feature commercial film. They would be expecting one thing, a film with a story, and my work would not be what they're looking for. Which is why I'm pleased that my films are in the art gallery here. People seeing these films for the first time are better prepared for them because they're expecting, or should be expecting, something different from a film in exhibition in an art gallery." ■

26. RIMMER TURNS FILM TO ART

RIMMER TURNS FILM TO ART

by Art Perry

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

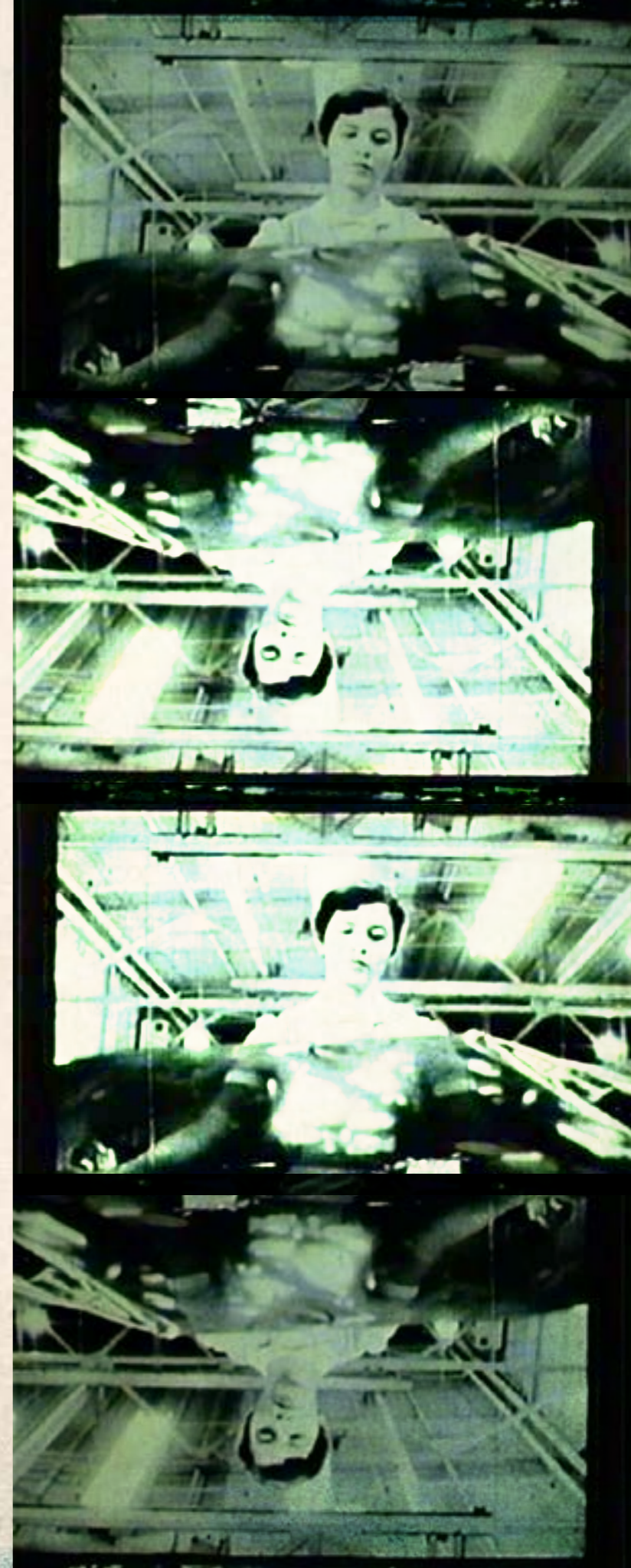
The Province (Vancouver), January 7, 1981

The films of Vancouver artist David Rimmer are constructed to go nowhere: they are not meant as journeys through time or as narrative stories about yesterday, today or tomorrow; rather, they telescope the moment when you view his films into the only time-frame.

As another local filmmaker, Al Razutis, notes in his informative catalogue essay for Rimmer's retrospective (on until Sunday at the Vancouver Art Gallery), Rimmer's films are anti-commercial works dealing more with film as a means of making art rather than making entertainment. "Their austere, minimalist qualities draw attention to subtle aspects of filmic structure and aesthetics, without the melodramatic embellishments common in 'mass entertainment' films," says Razutis.

What Razutis is pointing to is Rimmer's quiet controlled technique, in which one select image is manipulated by the art of filmmaking and not by an underlying storyline. For Rimmer, a few seconds of film can be repeated again and again with slight changes in focus or colour or zoom each time to produce a long film that, as I said, goes nowhere.

One of the best examples of Rimmer's intense disciplining of the viewer is his 1970 film *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*. From a small length of black-and-white film showing a woman stacking cellophane sheets in a factory, Rimmer has created a masterful eight-minute explosion of colour and movement. Because Rimmer's loop of film shows her flicking the plastic sheet every few seconds, the worker soon changes from figure to form, from worker to war victim. Within a couple of minutes, Rimmer's rhythmic repetitions turn a human action into a formal filmic device. Instead of wondering if she will ever stop flicking the sheet of plastic, we become mesmerized by the vertical cascades of colour and folding forms, the result of Rimmer's film changing the natural events captured on film into unnatural events captured within the dictates of the film process.





The resulting layers of Rimmer's filmic rather than natural reality is somewhat akin to the manipulations of film-time used by Michael Snow and Andy Warhol. But Snow may be minimalistic in works like *Wavelength* and Warhol may be contemplative and true to his medium in his eight-hour vigil of the Empire State Building, but neither of these contemporary film innovators has the restraint and honed-down purity exhibited by Rimmer.

Rimmer abolishes all references to sequential time, image as narrative, and film as an extension of reality. Rimmer makes film its own reality.

This is again exemplified in *Variations* and many more of the eighteen films at the VAG, such as *Seashore*, where Edwardian bathers repeatedly move towards the water but are looped back to the beach every few seconds. The old piece of film used by Rimmer, like so many of his works, is not his own. Its source is anonymous.

Rimmer's new film on Vancouver musician Al Neil is completely human. I can remember the jolt I experienced after viewing a string of Rimmer's still-point films and then being invited into the warm and very

personal world of Al Neil. To again quote Al Razutis, "*Al Neil/A Portrait* is more than a documentary profile of a man engaging in a life-and-death struggle with his genius and his obsessions. And while the narrative thread is centered around pathos, the film represents a coming to terms with what these generalizations really mean."

What the Al Neil film points to is a further sense of still-observation and a continued reliance on quiet introspection that has guided many of Rimmer's earlier works. So, taken as a whole, the collected films of David Rimmer show an immensely self-disciplined talent that views film as a medium that doesn't need endless car chases, heavy enforced drama or heightened reality to touch or reach its audience. For Rimmer, one uneventful moment can be transformed by the film process into a microcosm of awareness. ■

27 RE-FUSING THE CONTRADICTIONS

DAVID RIMMER: RE-FUSING THE CONTRADICTIONS

by Colin Browne

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN
Parachute, Spring 1981

In a country of young civil service art hacks whose best work, for the most part, was completed in the late sixties and early seventies, one becomes increasingly suspicious of retrospectives. The past few years seem to have been dedicated to the tired trotting out of old exuberances indicative of more carefree, more spontaneous days. Someone unfamiliar with David Rimmer's films might therefore be forgiven a pang of nausea on approaching the recent retrospective of his films at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Rimmer is best known for the "experimental films" he made in New York during the early seventies, and until recently he appeared to be inactive. He has challenged his own bright history, however, with the completion of two new films, *Al Neil/A Portrait* (1979) and *Narrows Inlet* (1980). Both were on view at the VAG, and both confirm Rimmer's position as a vital, working film artist.

Rimmer's short films have always been instructive. Working on a personal scale, he has managed single-handedly to have a very profound influence on how we all look at movies. Early filmmakers, from Méliès on, were fascinated by the metamorphic possibilities of cinema, and Rimmer is no different. His fascination, however, has not been with the transformation of narrative subject or content in a conventional way, but rather with the kind of transformations that occur in film on a very seminal, structural level, ie. from frame to frame, from dissolve to dissolve, from scratch to scratch, from low contrast to high contrast, from torn sprocket holes to blistering emulsion. Rimmer has been concerned with the texture and the surface of film, with how the illusion of movement is achieved, with the fascinating, clichéd language of conventional film, and with how all of this translates to our emotions.

Rimmer is a muscular filmmaker, his films intelligent and poetic in the best sense, and though his concerns have been for the most part formal, he has never sacrificed heart. It's this I admire and enjoy most. No matter how minimally he plays the changes, he never



seems to forget that film is only a medium, regardless of how cleverly manipulated. This is one of his greatest assets, for his films retain a human scale, his experiments mean something beyond technique.

The VAG retrospective consists of eleven films, a rich and representative selection from the eighteen listed on Rimmer's filmography. The earliest piece, *Migration* (1969), tends to be very heavy on symbolism à la the sixties, juxtaposing images of dead animals and dead vegetation with, among other things, diving sea lions, revolving thorns, soaring birds and flickering, fiery water which becomes stars. This is the most consciously "poetic" of the films shown, even down to the fact that Rimmer uses the camera like a pen to "write" across the encountered world of decay and rebirth. The film is significant for two reasons. The first has to do with the nature of revelation, which is Rimmer's objective in all of his films. The second element of *Migration* important to Rimmer, but which does not actually turn up again until his most recent film, *Narrows Inlet*, is the B.C. coast. It is as if he has had to explore the farthest reaches of cine-manipulation in order to secure the faith which would allow him to accept the manipulations of nature.

Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper (1970), *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970), *The Dance* (1970), *Real Italian Pizza* (1971) and *Seashore* (1971), all made in New York during Rimmer's winters there from 1970-72, have remained his best-known works. Well received critically, they defined new possibilities for cinema, much as Gertrude Stein's investigations into language gave writing a new vigour and sense of itself. Each of the films above, as well as the later *Fracture* (1973), *Watching for the Queen* (1973), and *Canadian Pacific* (1974), owe a great deal to Stein's methodical inquiries, and like Stein, each works by exploring and demonstrating rather than proving its point. Rimmer's use of open and closed loops of archival and found footage in most of the above films is the cinematic equivalent of Stein's fascination with repetition.

As should be evident by now, Rimmer's early films do not suffer greatly by being ten years old; they stand up very well. *Variations*, *Surfacing*, *Real Italian Pizza* are like old friends who still have a lot to say. *Watching for the Queen* is another experiment with an anonymous loop and a long precise unraveling, and is actually a very dramatic film about waiting and watching for something to happen. At some points it was even exciting, although the movement is minimal. *Fracture* is also an investigation into the nature of cinematic drama, ie. parallel montage. Two incidents from a home movie shot on 8mm film are blown up to 16mm and the result looks like nothing so much as famous Washington State sasquatch footage. They are juxtaposed against each other to suggestion relation, which is then broken down and finally restored, to the point where we put our own doubt into question. The best moments in Rimmer's films consistently provoke us to question our own perceptions and pre-established assumptions, an important gesture in a medium entirely dependent upon illusion.

Al Neil/A Portrait I found to be a completely marvelous film, absolutely compelling, and it should be shown to everyone in the National Film Board. In some ways it appears to be a very conventional film, but it is also very personal, and it gets in very close to its subject, an almost impish west coast jazz musician, writer, and sculptor known for his huge heart and his huge appetite. And it's precisely because of its quiet personal style, its slow fades to black under which voices or music continue, its insistence on the integrity of the musical pieces, and its refusal to artificially blast everything with light, that it succeeds so well in giving us a portrait of a man whose legend threatens to obscure his humanity. Few shots are not close-ups, we are from the beginning among friends. There is no history, no attempt to fill in a life, to tell of a man by showing the things around him. Al Neil speaks for himself. By being fully present without the whim to manipulate, Rimmer succeeds in becoming almost invisible, in other words, totally integrated. And when Neil tells an anecdote about his mother's funeral, two segments of the story are marked on the screen by fades to black, taking us away from the storyteller's face and leaving us to imagine what we wish to imagine. Donald Brittain might presume to illustrate someone's story with "appropriate" or parallel images, but we have the feeling that Rimmer's respect for the story and the subject of the story would never permit him to go for a false but personally aggrandizing shot with which to hammer us over the head.

Rimmer's most recent film, *Narrows Inlet*, marks a return to formal concerns. It consists of a repeated series of jerky, dissimilar pans back and forth across a beach in front of which, in shallow water, a large number of dark, creosoted pilings stand. No doubt they once held up a cannery or a wharf, but today make one think of house poles in deserted Indian

villages. To begin with the pilings are barely visible through the fog, and it is difficult to orient oneself. Horizontal pans, vertical stripes, and at first few jerks. Rimmer was anchored in a boat which, as the fog begins to clear, begins to bob up and down increasingly. Trees, pilings, beach, and sky take on their expected colours, and at the end a herd of seals splashes in the water in front of the boat. The horizontal panning continues, and, with the jerking, eventually evolves into an unpleasant visual experience. I felt that the film was a little long, that its point was quickly made. Even so, I found the beginning enchanting. In all of Rimmer's films, something hidden is revealed. Usually the revelation comes as a result of manipulating an image through looping, cutting, optical printing, repetition, etc. In this case, Rimmer lets the fog act as a curtain, prefacing the dance of the waves. The same faith he placed in Al Neil he invests in the elements.

Rimmer is seeking new areas to explore. The seemingly conventional approach of *Al Neil/A Portrait* would not have been possible without the earlier films (*Al Neil* contains some pretty remarkable double-exposure camera style work). But Rimmer, it occurs to me, may have developed his film technique to the point where he will have to interrogate his comfortable facility; he may have to start making films that are open to mistakes he cannot program. *Narrows Inlet* insists on the chance element of fog and waves. It also seems to mark a new visual awareness in Rimmer; the opening images have an almost painterly quality. And they feel very close to home. ■

28 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES 1970-83

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON VANCOUVER AVANT-GARDE CINEMA 1970-83

(EXCERPT)

by Al Razutis and Tony Reif

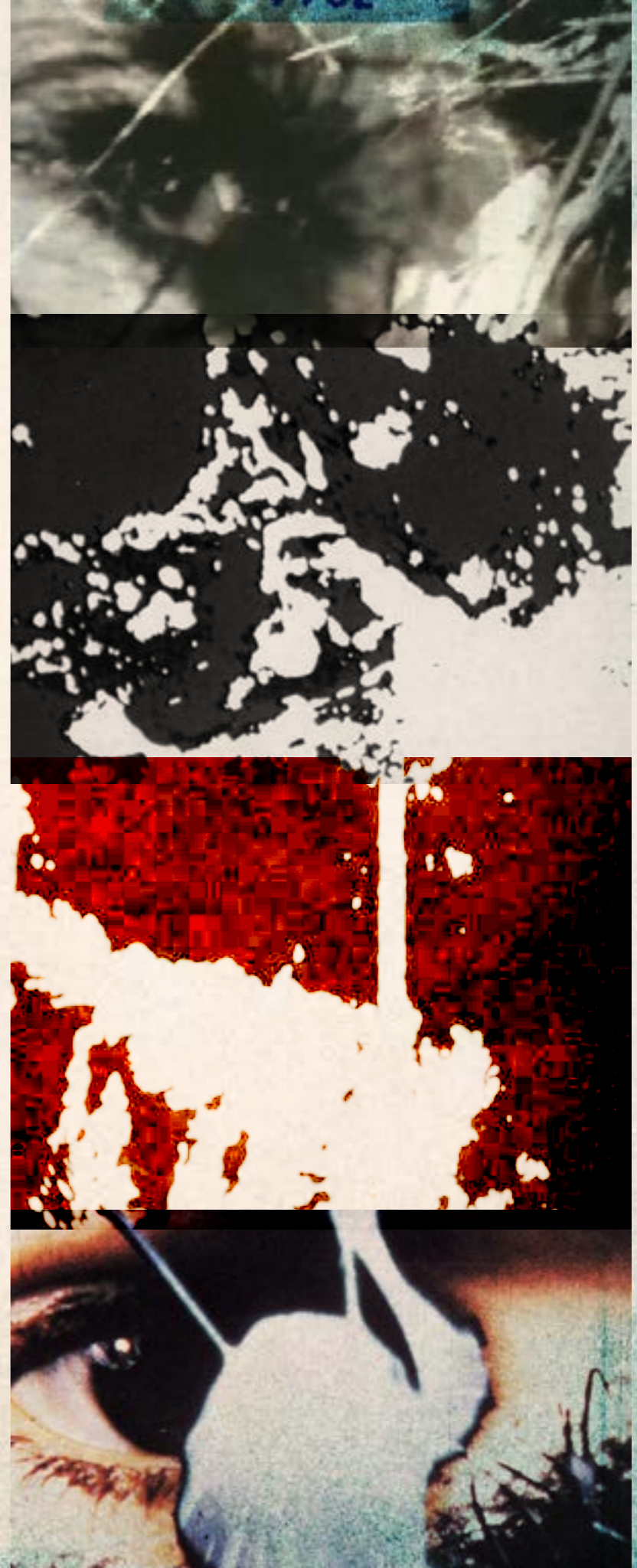
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

Vancouver: Art and Artists,
Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983

Avant-garde film of the seventies saw an initial dispersal and fragmentation of earlier influences and practice. Lyrical, synaesthetic, and mythopoetic film found itself in the minority, subordinated to a growing interest in consolidating formalisms and implanting definite shapes to the work. The structuralist film enterprise was predicated on idealized conceptions of the cinematic apparatus. Structuralism employed strategies of formal reduction, created paradigms of forms and rule-governed procedures, and invoked analytical judgments towards a definition (of cinema) that is hermeneutic in origin. Thus, a personal and diaristic film form (of the kind found in Gerry Gilbert's work, and later Gordon Kidd's) was less evident than its structural-minimalist counterparts (Rimmer, Tougas, Gallagher) or its poetic-structural synaesthetic

(hybrid) counterparts found in the work of Razutis and Lipskis. Many filmmakers shared a predisposition for iconoclasm and counter-culture. Razutis' iconoclastic practices emanated in the late sixties (and have been acknowledged in the sixties' essay); a major contribution in the seventies' developments of mythic and iconoclastic cinema is evidenced by the films of Byron Black.

Cinema was by and large the most important audio-visual art form in Vancouver during the seventies. It overshadowed video and appropriated many video processes within its development. The video-film hybrids of the seventies were an attempt to extend synaesthetic technology and form beyond more antiquated (optical printing) methods and to counter the pre-eminence of structural cinema. However, the most significant gains in the seventies came from stratagems directed towards a more socially-oriented practice of media critique and deconstruction. The films of Kirk Tougas, Tom Braidwood, and Al Razutis were exemplary of the political avant-garde. In effect, there were many avant-gardes operating within Vancouver during the seventies.



Some processes terminated by the mid-seventies; some directions continued into the eighties. An irreducible plurality existed in both the work and ideology of the seventies.

DEPARTURE FROM THE SIXTIES: DAVID RIMMER

By 1971, Gary Lee-Nova had virtually discontinued filmmaking. Keith Rodan, after his 18-film retrospective at the Vancouver Art Gallery, left for New York. David Rimmer also temporarily relocated to New York (in 1970) and it was there that his work was promptly discovered by Roger Greenspun (*The New York Times*) and Kristina Nordstrom (*The Village Voice*). After exhibitions at the Millennium Film Workshop and Film Forum, Rimmer was accorded critical acclaim, and his reputation in experimental film rose dramatically.

While in New York, Rimmer shot footage for a film entitled *Real Italian Pizza* (1971). He utilized a stationary camera (shooting through a window) and varied this view slightly by shooting scenes from several floors of his studio building (and with attendant variations in lens focal lengths). The street action in front of "Tom's Real Italian Pizza" was subjected to additional time compression (pixellation) and expansion (step printing or slow motion) as a formal response to the actions themselves.

The film represents Rimmer's emerging interest in episodic construction; the compression of time (September 1970-May 1971) is revealed in sample episodes. Episodic demarcations are largely accomplished by fade-out, fade-in gestures by black leader "spacing." *Real Italian Pizza* is also an essay in structured voyeurism: the action is always seen from a distance (through a window) and is qualified by both a funk soundtrack and formal interpretations.

On his return to Vancouver in 1972, Rimmer completed *Fracture* (1973), *Watching for the Queen* (1973), and *Canadian Pacific I & II* (1974 and 1975). *Fracture* was based on an 8mm home movie, which provided the raw material for the construction of narrative that followed. Rimmer's propensity for structuring narrative and for setting in motion the question of viewership and meaning remained a dominant interest in *Watching for the Queen*. *Canadian Pacific I & II* represent the termination of his previous (stock-footage) interests and a return to landscape and poetic sampling of events in time. Both are shot from a fixed window perspective; the rectangular frame is given importance by an inside (window) frame within the screen's boundaries. The complementary films reveal Rimmer's ongoing interests in horizontal motion (as foreground) and the scene as unifying element of construction.

By the mid-seventies, Rimmer felt that he had exhausted his "materials" and he left several projects unfinished. Rimmer's approach to both structural issues and materialist concerns (the physical and perceptual materials of the film medium) was predicated on the joining of conceptual models with "pro-filmic facts." The "joining" was usually accomplished by using home-made rear-projection technology (a kind of primitive optical printer)¹ and the pro-filmic facts were usually of a stock-footage nature. Rimmer's interests did not extend to the construction of synthetic technology or the collection of large amounts of stock footage. His processing work directly derived from the immediate realization of the concept and his stock-footage materials were usually extremely short (and subject to loops or freeze-frame expansion). Thus, it is hardly surprising that he discontinued his structural filmmaking by the mid-seventies. The conceptual framework he employed had limits, and he terminated work before it became redundant.

The single exception to Rimmer's departure from structural film is *Narrows Inlet* (1980). *Narrows Inlet* situates the viewer within the paradoxical meeting of nature and machine/eye. The fog-bound natural environs of a B.C. inlet are photographed in time-lapse using a fixed camera mounted on a boat that is anchored in the inlet. The tidal movement (of the camera-boat) produces a staccato rhythm that mimics saccadic eye movement. Surprisingly, *Narrows Inlet* is contemporary with Chris Welsby's *Estuary* (1980) which also features a camera mounted on a boat (and four-second samples of time exposures).

In 1979, Rimmer completed a remarkable documentary "portrait" of friend and cultural legend, Al Neil. The film is episodic and interprets the subject matter intimately and with somber emotional tones. Rimmer engages to find the "mythic location" and "spinal column" of Al Neil's world from an impassioned and patient perspective. He juxtaposes long takes (from a set camera), black leader, and energetic passages of montage. The context significantly informs the expression; there is a relaxing of formal concerns. The film's intimacy is provided by an honest subjectivity that allows Al Neil time to reveal himself in contrasting states of emotion, engagement, and detachment.

[... ■]

NOTES

1. Rimmer's processing equipment usually featured a camera and projector system that allowed him to rephotograph existing film frames. Although his technology was crude, his technique was sufficient to render quality printings of the original footage.

29. DAVID RIMMER

DAVID RIMMER

by Peter Morris

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

The Film Companion by Peter Morris,
Toronto: Irwin, 1984

Vancouver-based experimental filmmaker and teacher who is, next to Michael Snow, the best known and internationally recognized Canadian film artist. His often contemplative films investigate both the nature of the film medium and the quality of perception. They are films that go beyond the structuralist/materialist approach to film, in that they explore the structure of the medium, yet simultaneously operate on a metaphorical or poetic level. "(Rimmer) is not simply exploring how we see nor solely what we see but the space between the two and the interaction and processes of what we see and how we see it. The spectator is called upon to share in the experiences of exploration and, while a filmmaker such as Brakhage demonstrates the

way he himself sees, Rimmer shows us the multiplicity of ways of seeing in general" (Blaine Allan). Each of his films is a unique experience and it is difficult to cite any one of them as central to his work, but *Surfacing on the Thames* is a film that belongs in the same class as *Wavelength*.

SURFACING ON THE THAMES

1970. 6 minutes at 24 frames per second. Colour.
16mm. Silent.

This elegant, austere and innovative work by Vancouver filmmaker David Rimmer utilized methods similar to those in his later and earlier films (minimal narrative, "found," anonymous footage) to create an experience that is at once "unsettling and liberating" (Robert Greenspun). It is now widely acknowledged not only as one of Rimmer's major works, but as a key film in the Canadian experimental tradition. ■



30. 'SAFE SEX FOR THE LITERALLY MINDED'

THE REPRESSION OF THE EROTIC IN EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA OR 'SAFE SEX FOR THE LITERALLY MINDED'

by David Rimmer

**Presentation made at the opening of the new
Pacific Cine Centre in Vancouver, March 1986,
as part of "Avant-Garde Film Practice — Six Views"**

(Maria Insell, Michael Snow, Patricia Gruben, David Rimmer, Ross McLaren and Joyce Wieland and Lenore Coutts, Al Razutis)

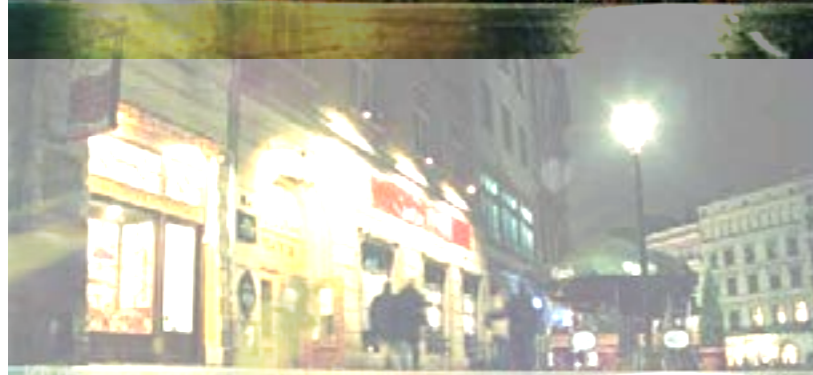
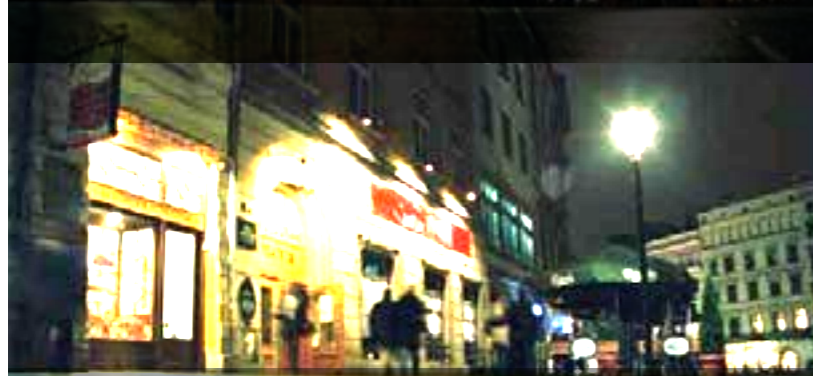
For me cinema begins with the image, and one of the problems, I think, with cinema today, with experimental cinema, is that it is starting with the word rather than the image. This is a problem in experimental film but even more so, I think, a problem in video. I think we've all seen, or been forced to sit through long video tapes with a lot of indecipherable text rolling over the top without any visual appeal at all.

So somehow the image has lost out to the word and the image has become something that accompanies the word, a kind of a visual aid, almost a slide show to go along with a lecture. This kind of filmmaking has been bothering me for a long time. I see a lot of these

illustrated lectures masquerading as films whereas I don't think these should be films at all. I think they should be lectures, or talks, or books, or something in a different form. They really don't have a place up there on the screen. And this problem is compounded even further: we have the word being translated into the image which is bad enough, but then, at the end of the film, they want to translate it back to the word again. There are a number of reasons for this. There seems to be a fear amongst people of the naked image: a fear of the erotic power of the visual image, an inability to deal with this image on a direct level, a need to neutralize the image, perhaps, to translate the image to another medium, the convenient one of course being words; to analyze, to interrogate, to investigate, to demystify, and ultimately to sanitize the image; an attempt to reduce the erotic power of the image to a more manageable form.

This then, to me, is a refusal of people to accept the image for what it is, a refusal to accept the direct experience of looking at an image. It is a denial of the image. It's actually a puritanical response, I think, to the image and it comes up in all sorts of strange ways





with the sort of writing that goes on about film these days. A need somehow by a number of analysts and writers to repress what's really happening up there, and, as I say, to neutralize that image, and rob it of its energy — a denial then of the pleasure of the image.

For me, why I like cinema so much is because it gives me pleasure. It gives me visual pleasure, and it doesn't mean because it's a pretty picture, obviously. I don't mean that. There is a certain sensuous quality of light and dark and colour and shade up there on the screen. It doesn't really matter too much what's being said. If that quality, that sensuous erotic quality of the image is not there I'm not interested.

So I see a need, an erotic need, to strip the image of its mystery, of its ambiguity, of its soul, its spirit, to classify, categorize it as something which is easier to digest. Perhaps it's that way with a lot of things in society today, that desire not to confront reality or anything directly. We want to mediate it, we want a lesser

version of it, almost a *Reader's Digest* version of reality. I think that as filmmakers we must look at our images. I feel a lot of filmmakers don't see. They can't see their images at all. They've no idea of what they're putting up there. It's in their head and not in their eyes. Audiences must listen to the images and try to experience those images in a much more direct way. Resist the temptation to explain them away. As soon as you've explained an image away it's forgotten. Dead. That's the end of it. The beauty of an image is that it cannot be explained or that it's ambiguous, or that it's maybe this or maybe that, and it sits and it revolves and goes round and round in your head for quite a while after you've seen the movie.

Cinema then must be freed with the obsession of meaning and words. Not that cinema can't mean anything. That's all I'm going to say in terms of words because I think if I talk any more I'm going to defeat what I'm saying. So I want to show a film, and after I'm not going to talk about it. ■

31 TERROR

TERROR

by Stan Brakhage

EXCERPTED FROM

"On Canadian Painting and Cinema"

by Stan Brakhage, *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*,
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[...]

David Rimmer also is a case for me of a filmmaker who I was only allowed to see under the dominance of structural aesthetics. Those works that could be co-opted into that aesthetic were the only ones that circled into the U.S. or came to my attention. Though I had great respect for him as I do for many structural filmmakers, I really didn't get to see the wide variety of his workings and makings until just a month ago. So that was a wonderful revelation, again another casualty of an aesthetic that essentially dominated the art world for over twenty years. There is something too easy and probably utterly hypocritical in the way in which it is taught, in which it is written about. That it's easy to write about has permitted that dominance, certainly over film and most of the other media, for that length of time. It's deadly in my opinion and it must be jettisoned. Then of course the sad thing will be that people will want to jettison everybody that ever had anything to do with structuralism or something like that. It's the politics: they do so interfere.

[Screening of **MIGRATION**
(11 minutes, 1969) by David Rimmer]

This very unstructural work. I don't want to turn his beautiful art into an illustration totally, but at least to see if it joins these words that we've been exchanging. And to see if it can be felt that it has what I saw as a vibrant terror in relation to nature, with regard to what we usually call nature: natural images from the wilds and so on. Let me just follow up on something: I think that it isn't fear of death that's the greatest terror of all. I fear, far more than dying, terror of nature in myself, even without any idea of salvation, or afterlife, or continuance in any sense whatever, or even the sense of purpose of my having been here in the first place; robbed of all those spiritual benefits that people had as easy assumption in earlier times. Robbed also of any sense that there may be any continuance of life on earth as we all sit under the threat of nuclear extinction. But these are not to me anyway, the greatest terrors, and where I feel terror it is terror of nature in myself. For me, I fear, for instance, insanity worse than death. That I'll lose my mind and even more than that, that I'll be overwhelmed by such proliferation and attention as you've just seen. I fear



more than that, that I'll betray integrity — that is, the integrity of my being, that somehow I'll be tricked out so that I can no longer, I will no longer carry my form as that bird carries its form through migration. I will have lost my form so to speak... I'm in most terror or far more than of death: of losing the integrity of form.

[... ■]

32 REPRODUCTION AND REPETITION

REPRODUCTION AND REPETITION OF HISTORY: DAVID RIMMER'S FOUND FOOTAGE

by Catherine Russell

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"As the world of memory breaks up more quickly and the mythic in its surfaces more quickly and crudely, a completely different world of memory must be set up even faster to oppose it. That is how the accelerated pace of technology looks in the light of today's prehistory."

— *Waking*, Walter Benjamin¹

In a postmodern culture, with its slippery signifiers and disseminated subjects, history has perhaps replaced desire as the Great Repressed. Memory stunted by nostalgia struggles against the myths of style and the fence-Posts of Critical Theory. What we need, indeed, is "a completely different world of memory," another historiography, which would not simply be a vision of the future with a rear-view

mirror, but an historiography of the images within that vision and its mirror. The different dimensions of such a world, with all their paradoxes and contradictions, are suggested in the films of David Rimmer.

The two principle frameworks that have been offered for Rimmer's work are, to some extent, characteristic of this tendency to repress history. Rimmer's short, cinema-specific, non-narrative films have first of all been situated within the category of "structural-materialist" cinema.² As P. Adams Sitney originally defined structural film (as works in which "shape is the primal impression" attained through the use of fixed camera position, flicker effect, loop printing and rephotography off the screen),³ Rimmer's work would seem to fit fairly comfortably into that category. In a major essay on the pre-1980 corpus, Al Razutis maintains that "the presence of metaphor and poetic content" distinguishes Rimmer's work from the "tedious didacticism" of structural film,⁴ and yet Razutis's analyses of the films privilege the formal elements over their imagery, as he points out in detail the diverse and complex ways in which Rimmer works upon the materiality of the cinematic signifier.



The second critical paradigm in which Rimmer's work has been situated is Bruce Elder's theorization of Canadian experimental film. Elder has suggested that the Canadian avant-garde is characterized by a pervasive concern with the nature of photographic representation.⁵ The relationship between absence and presence implicit in photography is construed as first of all, a phenomenological relationship between the subject of vision and the object seen; secondly, as off-screen and on-screen space; and thirdly, as past and present. Rimmer's films, along with those of a number of other Canadian filmmakers, is thus discussed by Elder in these terms. Again, the description seems to fit.

The formalism of both critical approaches is symptomatic of the literature on avant-garde film in general, and in the case of the rich imagery of Rimmer's films, is particularly striking. If Rimmer's films are "postmodern," as both Elder and Razutis claim,⁶ they are so by virtue of their pictures as much as by their structures. I would like to sketch an alternative critical framework, in the terms of a representation of history, that might account for the images that underscore Rimmer's formal achievements.

Most of the films that Elder and Razutis consider were made between 1969 and 1974. Since the early '80s, when this criticism was published, Rimmer has made a number of films, including *Bricolage* (1984) and *As Seen on TV* (1986). These films hark back in crucial ways to Rimmer's 1970 film *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* and five subsequent films from that period insofar as they are made up of "found" or archival footage.⁷ *Along the Road to Altamira* (1986), includes both Rimmer's own footage and images that were originally shot by other people.

Razutis has identified Bruce Conner as a major source of influence on Rimmer's use of found footage, and yet there are significant differences between the two filmmakers' recourse to the cultural image bank.

Where Conner's footage can often be traced to well-known historical moments and figures, such as the Kennedy Assassination, Rimmer's images tend more toward anonymity. While styles of representation and costume may be recognizable as specific to given decades, the fragments of movements are pulled from unidentifiable, and yet provocative sources. They are glimpses into a history buried under a continuum of images, quotidian moments brought briefly to the surface of a new, historically distant consciousness.

Rimmer's treatment of this found footage invariably involves both reproduction and repetition. It is rephotographed and often altered in crucial ways, and it is also repeated in the form of loops, in which fragments of film are edited with the end cut to the beginning. An isolated movement or action is thus repeated over and over, as well as being reproduced by means of optical printing.

The difference between reproduction and repetition is arguably crucial to the politics of postmodern representation. When Frederic Jameson, for example, says that in pastiche, "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts,"⁸ the implication is that these texts can be repeated ad infinitum in all the various forms of intertextuality, but the historical referent which lies beyond such repetition cannot. Jacques Lacan points out that "in Freud's texts repetition is not reproduction... To reproduce is what one thought one could do in the optimistic days of catharsis. One had the primal scene in reproduction as today one has pictures of the great masters for 9 francs 50."⁹ Representation has a relation to the Real that is lacking in repetition, which takes place on the level of the signifier.

Paul Arthur has argued that if independent filmmakers avoid the worst features of pastiche in their use of stock or found material, it is "through the

foregrounding of material and ultimately social differences" between the production values of the original footage and those of the filmmaker's recombination. Found images tend to be appropriated along with an historical context, consisting of an economic, social and aesthetic apparatus that lies completely outside the technical resources of the independent filmmaker.¹⁰ While I want to look more closely at the representation of history in *Bricolage*, *As Seen on TV* and *Along the Road to Altamira*, the production codes that distinguish the found footage in Rimmer's earlier films might be briefly summarized as follows: in *Variations* it seems to be industrial; in *Watching for the Queen* (1973), newsreel (and is specifically designated as such in Phil Hoffman's use of the same footage in *?O, Zoo!* [1986]); in *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970) either a travelogue or WWI newsreel; and in *The Dance* (1970) a narrative film. Of course, production codes can be faked (as in Woody Allen's *Zelig*), and in the last two films the sources are extremely ambiguous. Nevertheless, as Arthur points out, the images are all outside the filmmaker's own social, economic and technical sphere of production and are brought into it by processing of rephotography.

Where the earlier films each employ a single length of found footage, which is then either looped, fragmented into constitutive frames (*Surfacing on the Thames*) or both (*Watching for the Queen*), *Bricolage* incorporates five such lengths. Different sounds, or kinds of sounds, accompany each fragment, emphasizing the collage structure. The title of *Bricolage* refers most immediately to the plurality of images in this film, as well as to the image of bricks and a brick wall.

Vsevolod Pudovkin once equated filmmaking to brick-laying in a famous articulation of narrative construction, and in *Bricolage*, Rimmer extends the analogy to the frame itself, which is of course, shaped something like a brick.¹¹ Unlike Pudovkin's bricks,



these frames contain other frames, and the female image is repeatedly that which is contained, as it has been in the history of narrative film. *Bricolage* is a film about cinematic signification, and yet the signified content, the referent, constantly intrudes on the play of signifiers. Puns have always been central to Rimmer's work, linking title, image and structure on the level of the signifier, a feature which alone points to the postmodern aspect of his films. While the brick is a signifier that slides all over the film, the women in *Bricolage* remain the objects of representation, lurking behind this playfulness.

The 10-minute film opens with an image of a woman's face seen in the opening of a kinoscope, with a hand turning the knob attached to the box. Where screen and lens are virtually equated in the kinoscopic apparatus, Rimmer further analogizes the frame around the woman's head to a shooting target by superimposing a graphic white target on the circular frame around the woman's face. The woman in the box is targeted as being at a spatial and temporal distance from the viewer. Moreover, the few frames of her movement are repeated by way of Rimmer's repetition which includes the hand repeating the movement of turning, thereby acknowledging not only the historical nature of the original apparatus, but its participation in the genesis of movement.

In another section of *Bricolage*, the original movement, which seems to be taken from a 1950s action/adventure narrative film, is itself edited together "seamlessly" so that when it is looped with a cut on action, the repetitions are literally circular. Through fourteen repetitions, a hermetic self-enclosed unit is extracted from what was once a continuous flow. A boy smashes a window with a hammer, confronts the occupants of the house, gets punched, returns to his friends,

smashes the window, etc., while a slightly disynchronous soundtrack, escalating in dramatic suspense, is also repeated and anticipates the phases of the action. In the course of the repetitions, a graphic white outline is superimposed on the smashed window, recalling the shape of the brick and the previous placement of the target/lens. This time it is on the site of violence, which is emphasized when it flashes red a couple of times.

By means of displacement and replacement, the smashing of this empty frame as brick and window is related to the female image. A sequence which recurs in the course of the film begins with a black and white brick wall that fragments into a crumbling mass of chiaroscuro rectangles, so that the dissolve into the subsequent abstraction of a woman who seems to be addressing the camera creates the effect of her being behind this "wall." Fragments of the phrase, "Plus ça change, plus ça reste la même" are spoken by a woman's voice over the looped indecipherable action. The graphic white rectangle, metonymically related to the brick, target, and window, slides over the woman's solarized image as it is reduced to linear flashes of white and coloured light.

In the last shot of the film this disintegrated image gradually coalesces into a representational image which seems to come from an advertisement for a window cleaning process. A woman holds a rectangular piece of glass in front of her and moves it back and forth to reframe her face in one half and then the other half. This is the image that was first revealed behind the brick wall, but the abstractions of Rimmer's optical printing have until now withheld the referent. The voice-over continues, the phrase now recognizable, although still fragmented by a variety of tonal articulations.

Several parallels exist between the final sequence and Rimmer's 1970 film *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*, which begins with a black and white shot of a woman lifting a huge piece of cellophane in a factory. The brief movement is repeated on a loop, while the graphic components of the image are repeated in variations of rephotography and solarization. In *Variations* the original image is left behind; whereas in *Bricolage* it is finally disclosed, literally reproduced from its components of light and celluloid. The material substratum of celluloid and cellophane is absent from *Bricolage*, the final image of which is far less stable than that of the brief originating image of *Variations*. It has been "found" by the viewer at the end of the film rather than (or as well as) by the filmmaker in the archive.

Two other mid-sections of *Bricolage* are both sepia-tinted and are not repeated, thereby privileging the singular actions that they contain. One of these (the second segment of the film), begins with a close-up of a high-heeled shoe and a stockinged ankle turning provocatively. Cut to a long-shot of a group of men and women dressed in 1920s style fashions, including the woman who continues turning her ankle. Then she reaches down and removes the artificial leg to which the high-heeled shoe is attached, and hands it to one of the men.¹² The other singular action, which occurs before the final repetition of the woman and the wall, is simply of a woman dressed in a wedding gown disappearing in a cloud of smoke.

These sequences effectively deconstruct the notion of the fetish. In both cases, the woman's body, by disappearing, is cast as an empty signifier, a failed attempt at disavowal of the cinematic illusion. The eroticized foot, revealed to be artificial and detachable, is a joke on the spectator; the body fragment becomes just that, leaving empty space behind its phallic presence. Likewise, the disappearing woman, "contained" in a domestic frame, seems to escape between frames.

The fetish is repeated, something that can be contained, like a photograph where the absent referent (lost to history) can be at once recognized and misrecognized (disavowed). The disavowal of the photograph, for Christian Metz, is a disavowal of the absence of the referent, its loss in time, the past tense of its presence. "Film is more capable of playing of fetishism, photography more capable of itself becoming a fetish."¹³ Rimmer's practice of looping found footage is perhaps a transposition of photographic fetishism to the cinematic register, isolating fragments of narrative and movement. However, these two singular actions in which the women pull the symbolic rug out from under the imaginary fetishism of the female image, effectively splits recognition from misrecognition with their avowal of difference.

By triumphantly shirking the narrative context of these tricky images, Rimmer parodies the "magical misogyny" of Méliès with his vanishing woman. Lucy Fisher writes of Méliès's films: "the rhetoric of magic is one of those disguises, one of those cultural artifacts in which the male envy of the female procreative powers is manifest."¹⁴ Fisher's analysis of Méliès' "vanishing woman" trick films suggests that, taken out of the context of Méliès' (and Bergman's) filmmaker-as-magician narrative context, we have here a surfacing of another form of power, that of reproduction.

Reproduction is, after all, a biological term. For Freud, instinctual repetition derives from a desire to return to an originary state of being, pre-Oedipal and ultimately pre-natal. Harnessing this desire is a key to the psychoanalytic method of returning to moments in personal history.¹⁵ The mother and the womb are thus figured as the "parental" basis of reproduction, while the fetish is the vehicle for the repeated disavowal of the parental memory. (This is what Lacan alludes to in his distinction between reproduction and repetition quoted earlier.)

In much of the critical literature on Rimmer's early films, the found footage, such as the factory scene in *Variations*, is referred to as the "parent" footage. *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970) is perhaps the best example of the historical relationship that is constructed between parent and "offspring."¹⁶ In this film five feet of found footage are expanded into nine minutes through the use of freeze frames and dissolves which retard the original movement. The single image is of a barge on a river with the London skyline behind it and something else, something indecipherable, something that looks like a gunship in the foreground. As the barge passes this object, the increments of its movement are marked by particles of dust and scratches that literally "surface on" each frame as it is fixed and then dissolved into the next one.

History is figured on both the level of the signifier in *Surfacing* insofar as the film stock is itself "old," displayed frame by frame for another, newer, audience, and on the level of the referent, the suggestion of British Imperialism and its "parental" relationship to Canada. *Surfacing* is thus an expression of the hermeneutics of historical knowledge, the past being reproduced from an explicitly present perspective. The photographic properties, however, of the image of the boats and the London skyline are belied by the movement that is perceived, literally, between frames, a movement that is indexically related to the movement of the referent. The image belongs to the past, but the movement occurs in the present: it is reproduced, not simply repeated. The film does have a profound relationship to photography in its use of fixed frames, but the analysis of movement cannot be accounted for by the parallels it bears with photography.

Reproduction, in Walter Benjamin's sense, involves a memory of the aura of the original and thus embodies an historical relationship. Although Benjamin describes film in "The Work of Art In the Age

of Mechanical Reproduction,” as having eclipsed this notion of aura, in “A Short History of Photography” he describes the photograph as encouraging us to search for the “long forgotten moment (in which) the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.”¹⁷ It is this indexical relationship between signifier and historical referent that is restored to film through Rimmer’s rephotography of found film footage.

And yet, this material is inevitably repeated by Rimmer. Repetition in the form of loops is a “demand for the new”¹⁸ in its incorporation of reproduction and allegory. Paul de Man points out that “The meaning constituted by the allegorical sense... consists only in the repetition... of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority.”¹⁹ For Benjamin, the illusion of novelty is the quintessence of false consciousness until, or unless, it is perceived allegorically as a commodity lacking its use-value.²⁰ Likewise, an action, separated from its narrative, is alienated from its meaning and becomes *écriture*, it is allegorical in the sense that its signified content lies elsewhere, in another movie in another time.

Moreover, through the repetition of an action (such as the window-breaking in *Bricolage*), the illusion of infinite sameness is belied by a fragmented temporality that demonstrates a “multiplicity of times.”²¹ For Stephen Heath, this is something quite different from the notion of duration which informs much of the discussion of structural-materialist film.²² Heath alludes to the status of the referent in this mode of film practice as that which is supposed to be “forgotten” but which in fact acquires a “veritable intensity of meaning” through its minimizations.²³ This is a central means by which structural film and the discourse generated by it “covers over questions of history”: the history of the subject, as Heath would have it, but also the history of the referent. Rimmer’s films might be described as a return of the repressed of structural film.

Issues of sexuality, representation and history are also addressed in the 15-minute film *As Seen on TV*. The autonomous movements and gestures which comprise this film are not looped or reduced to component frames, but in keeping with their video sources, subject to various forms of image processing. Movements advance, are retarded, advance a little more, are retarded and so on, in a dialectic of forward, reversed and stopped time in which the continuity of the movement is nevertheless preserved. Scan lines periodically traverse the screen vertically and a couple of sequences are framed in a way that includes the boundaries of the monitor. Thus, the sequence of disjunct found images that also characterizes *Bricolage* is here specifically designated as a televisual flow.

The first and last images of *As Seen on TV* are of the “Toni Twins,” two identical women advertising a hair permanent product, although the image is so distorted that it is hard to tell what they’re doing/selling unless one recognizes the source. The women’s hairdos and dresses are in the style of the early ‘60s, and their movements are closely synchronized. These movements are slowed down and repeated while electronic muzak, equally distorted, emphasizes the ephemeral quality of the image. The most striking thing about these sequences is the play of looks which survives Rimmer’s treatment of the original footage. In their appearance in the middle of the film the women seem to be wiping a sheet of glass that stands between them and the camera, after which they look at each other with big smiles. The film opens and closes with these two women looking out at the camera, at us, but of course not at us. We are not the audience that might have bought this product. It is as if they were looking out from an historical space in which they are trapped and we have the privilege of meeting their distant gaze.

For Benjamin, the perception of aura involves the investment of an object “with the ability to look at us in return.” Baudelaire’s description of eyes that



“have lost their ability to look” are, in Benjamin’s reading, central to his representation of modernity. The unfocused or “faraway” gaze is a gesture of reaching into the past, a correspondence of past and present in which history is registered as loss. This is precisely the effect of Rimmer’s use of found footage. The signifier is, as we know, only an object, a piece of celluloid, and yet, here, it looks at us.

Crucial to *As Seen on TV* is an image of a naked man lying horizontally, apparently masturbating, framed in a space that looks almost like a TV monitor. The orange and blue tones of the image, the video noise and ominous audio track, plus the figure’s apparent fatigue and impotence make this an extremely powerful image. It is repeated four times in the course of the film, strategically placed within the bricolage of diverse fragments of found footage. There is a scene in which this image is a cliché of desensitized video culture, the monitor a virtual fish-tank of alienation and annulled desire. And yet it stands out by virtue of its ahistorical source.²⁴

The other images are peculiar, but they are, for the most part, performances and include production codes that point to their status as having been “found.” Like *Bricolage*, this imagery is for the most part designated as “spectacle” in its direct address or incorporation of genre conventions. It includes a shot of a man kissing a woman taken from a black and white film, a bizarre dance sequence featuring long rows of women holding enormous bananas, a man jumping through a burning hoop, two men dancing together, and a man trying to touch the breasts of a slowly gyrating dancer.

The naked man, however, places us in an uncomfortable position, partly because, unlike the other images, it is not a performance but a private action. The fact that our look is not acknowledged and the fact that we cannot place this image come together in its

ahistoricism. The other fragments, such as the ones of the Toni Twins, embody an historical difference which, like the photograph, “suppress from their own appearance the primary marks of ‘livingness,’ and nevertheless conserves the convincing print of the object: a past presence,”²⁵ the play of looks further animating this presence with subjectivity. Most of Rimmer’s dispossessed loops restore that ambivalence of photographic loss and preservations to what might be called “photographs of movement.” In the case of *As Seen on TV*, these are culled from the even more “live” source of broadcast TV, caught and preserved as dead and gone in an avant-garde film. But the images of the naked man give a “semblance of life” back to the dead in a very different manner. He seems unable to die, and is trapped within the temporality of desire as the imaginary antithesis of the allegories that make up the rest of the film.

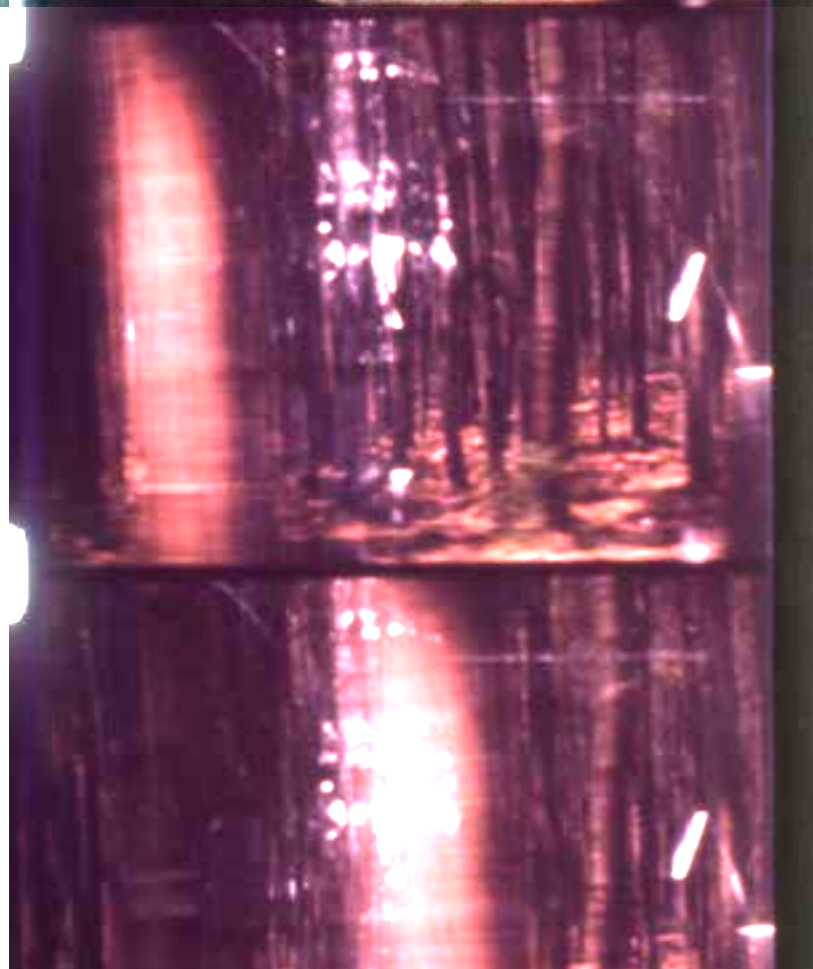
The rephotography of video images onto film in *As Seen on TV* has the further effect of eliminating the anonymity and instantaneity of television image production, and asserting a subject of vision associated with both projector and auteur. If a film practice such as Rimmer’s is to be understood as a hermeneutic enterprise, the place of the subject of vision and of knowledge has to be acknowledged on some level. Rimmer takes this paradoxical relocation of subjectivity one step further in *Along the Road to Altamira* in which the explicit nature of rephotography, which includes even the sound of the projector, as well as the extensive use of his own images rather than those of other people, reintroduces the problem of the subject within the tenets of structural/materialist film.

The representation of history and the history of representation are central tropes of *Along the Road to Altamira*. The only found footage in this film is a Super 8 projection of the interior of the caves at Altamira, in which prehistoric cave drawings are barely visible. An

unsubtitled German voice-over, presumably from the same documentary source as the images, narrates the original discovery of these images. The bulk of Rimmer’s film, however, involves fixed shots, lateral plans and stroboscopic images of contemporary Europe. A pile of postcards of a single city, stacked in rapid succession under an animation camera, encapsulates the fragmentary vision of the tourists who we hear babbling in muffled tones periodically through the film.

If the tourist is hopelessly distanced from that which he or she portends to engage with, Rimmer represents that experience and at the same time the longing for a mastery of history that motivates tourism. Images of this desire include the recurring centrality of the hill-shaped city topped by a church spire that reappears in the pile of postcards, as well as the dark recess of the cave in the Super 8 film, the mysterious authority of a traffic cop gesturing in an unknown language and the long fixed shot of a towering crucifix, all of which are given to us at a fixed distance. When the unstable flickering long shots of the tenements and houses are cut in close-up, the imagery remains unstable, strobified and indecipherable. The film’s compositions and techniques demonstrate an impossible desire for knowledge of this “other” culture and its history.

In *Along the Road*, the formal tropes of structural materialist film are placed in the service of the footage Rimmer shot in Spain. The structural difference of photographic representation is played out in all its parameters of off and on-screen space, observer and observed and past and present. And yet the soundtrack is equally responsible for this dialectic, and all three paradigms are conflated in the absent figure of the tourist. The traveller’s object of desire is, moreover, a cave which is represented at the beginning of the film as a deep black recess into which the camera zooms, and at the end of the film, as a flat wall with prehistoric representations scratched on its surface.



The linear trajectory of *Along the Road* is strategically undermined by the closing return to the cave. If the principle of return in Freud's death drive is, as Lacan suggests, an impossibility that is taken up in language's mimicking of reproduction, here it is explicitly so in the final image of the film of the cave drawing. The prehistoric signifier is almost indistinguishable from the bluish shades of the cave wall, while it is the Super 8 film which is actually repeated. In this chain of signifiers, the past is situated at a distance which is at once spatial and epistemological.

Of the various tenets of photographic epistemology that Elder has described, the difference between past and present tense is most important in Rimmer's films. The repetitions of these movements and looks belong to the strategies of duration that characterize structural film, registering the present tense, the time of viewing, as a "multiplicity of times," a temporarily that is extended to the historiographic sense of the found footage as coming from a different, other, time.

"The more things change, the more they stay the same," intoned after the last image of *Bricolage* has faded to black, is an extremely rare instance of spoken language among Rimmer's films. It is significant that it is an expression of historiography, pointing to the dialectic between repetition and reproduction that informs these films, and yet this is a rather conservative and pessimistic view of history. In fact, the films' strategies of recombination and rephotography articulate a very different historiography. The analysis of movement in Rimmer's treatment of found footage, through its indexicality, reproduces both historical material and the distanced difference between past and present.

As such, they are truly dialectic images. As Benjamin says, "It isn't that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past: rather, an image is that in which the past and the present

moment flash into constellation."²⁶ Contra Lacan, Benjamin still holds out the possibility of reproduction in his conception of history as the image of the future. Allegory is for Benjamin a spatialization of temporality, the grafting of the new onto the ruins of the old, an expression of history that is neither teleological nor mythical.²⁷

The referents of Rimmer's images that are framed and reframed are designated as the ruins of film history, reanimated and reproduced. *Bricolage*, in these terms, is not a film about images of women, but the women themselves who offered themselves to the camera and cannot magically disappear like genies. If there is an apocalyptic tone to *As Seen on TV*, it is due to the loss of the sense of loss produced in its allegories. The reproduction of movement in Rimmer's treatment of found footage goes beyond repetition to "mortify," in Benjamin's words, the parent: the past and those who populated it. To see the past as dead is to see it differently, in its singularity, and is a means of challenging the mechanisms of forgetting that infest post-modern culture. ■

NOTES

This paper was originally presented at a Theory Workshop sponsored by the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* at the Learned Societies of Canada at Windsor, Ontario on June 6, 1988.

1. Walter Benjamin, "Theoretics of Knowledge, Theory of Progress," from the unfinished *Passengen-Werk*, in *The Philosophical Forum* vol. XV, nos. 1-2, 1983-84: 7.
2. Al Razutis, "David Rimmer: A Critical Analysis," *Take Two*, ed. Seth Feldman (Toronto: Irwin, 1984) originally published by the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1980; and Blaine Allan, "David Rimmer's *Surfacing on the Thames*," *Ciné-Tracts* 3, no. 9 (Winter 1980).
3. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974), 370.
4. Al Razutis, 278.
5. R. Bruce Elder, "All Things in Their Times," *Ciné-Tracts* 17, "Image: Representation and Object — The Photographic Image in Canadian Avant-Garde Film," in *Take Two*, op. cit.
6. In Elder's case postmodernism is implied in his larger project of designating the Canadian avant-garde preoccupation with photographic epistemology as postmodern. For Razutis, postmodernism refers to the historical genesis of Rimmer's aesthetics in the rejection of institutionalized modernism in the 1960s. For both critics, writing in 1982 and 1980 respectively, the "postmodern" appellation serves as a rhetorical means of valorizing some films, including Rimmer's, over other, primarily American, avant-garde practices.
7. Besides *Variations* these include: *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970), *The Dance* (1970), *Seashore* (1971) and *Watching for the Queen* (1973).
8. Frederick Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146, (July-August 1984): 66.
9. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1973), 50.
10. Paul Arthur, "Intertextuality and/as History: The Case of the Straubs' Schoenberg Film," paper delivered at the Florida State University 13th Conference on Comparative Literature, Tallahassee, January 1988.
11. See Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting* (London: Vison Press, 1929). Actually, the brick analogy is Eisenstein's characterization of Pudovkin's theory of montage and that of Kuleshov school's in general, against which he advocates his own theory of dialectic montage: "Linkage - P and Collision - E" (*Film Form*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949), 37. In this context Rimmer's use of the brick analogy is somewhat ironic as his montage principles of disjunction are much closer to Eisenstein's conception of the collision of autonomous units.
12. Although the sequence is not repeated, this motion of handing-over the leg is momentarily reversed, delayed and replayed.
13. Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetish," *October* 34 (Autumn 1985): 90.
14. Lucy Fischer, "The Lady Vanishes: Women, Magic and the Movies," *Film Before Griffith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 349.
15. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 48-49.
16. Allan, 57.
17. Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," *Screen* 13 (Spring 1972): 7.
18. Lacan, 61.
19. Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, eds. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 210.
20. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn, (London: NLB, 1976), 172.
21. Stephen Heath, "Repetition Time: Notes Around Structural Materialist Film," in *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 167. Heath cites Lacan in his discussion of repetition: "Everything which varies, modulates in repetition is only an alienation of its meaning." (FFC, 61.)
22. Heath is concerned to shift the discussion of structural-materialist film from notions of duration as identity to a sense of temporal difference. For Heath this pertains to the viewing subject, who is not the same from one moment to the next and is therefore put in process by any film, including this kind of film.
23. Heath, 174.
24. Rimmer has identified the image of the naked man as an epileptic seizure that he did in fact tape off the air, from a documentary source.
25. Metz, op cit., 84-85. Metz's argument is based in a fairly familiar designation of photography as "mortal" and film as a disavowal of the stasis and sense of loss of its photographic base (familiar, in its different versions, from Sontag and Barthes).
26. Benjamin, "Theoretics," 8.
27. Benjamin's most thorough discussion of allegory can be found in the *Origins of German Tragic Drama* (London: NLB, 1967), although he also describes Baudelaire as possessing the allegorist's gaze: "As spleen he shatters the ideal. But it is precisely the modern which always conjures up prehistory." Charles Baudelaire, 171.

33. NEW WORKS SHOWCASE

NEW WORKS SHOWCASE

by Blaine Allan

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AS

"Program Notes," Princess Court Cinema, 1989

This series presents recent, independent productions by Canadian filmmakers. It includes all types of film — narrative, documentary, animated, and experimental — and highlights work that, like the best art, dares to challenge its viewers. The challenges range from formal innovation and rigour to investigations of social taboos. The series, which runs from Autumn 1989 to Spring 1990, includes a diverse selection of artists, with appropriately varied concerns and approaches. It offers a profile of independent filmmaking that cannot be comprehensive but which suggests the concerns of contemporary artists.

In the 1960s, it became commonplace to talk about an artistic or cultural "underground." The term suggested the clandestine or dangerous nature of the activity, the idea that it was hidden from view because something was going on that was intolerable to orthodox standards. Whether they were bucking the standards of content or the acceptable limits of form, artists were discovering meaning in making art that stood as

an alternative and as a challenge. During the 1960s, Canada has had its own "undergrounds" at the same time it experienced an awareness of nationalism that has since penetrated its culture. The time was also a period of acute development for cinematic culture and experimental film.

When we talk about experimental cinema as we point our collective selves into the 1990s, we are talking about a type of filmmaking that stands alongside narrative and documentary, and which has had a significant impact on those conventionalized film forms. In a country like Canada, the "industry" of filmmaking is largely in the business of producing labour for runaway Hollywood productions, or of manufacturing U.S. locations out of Canadian cities and countryside. Many of Canada's own best feature films of recent years, such as Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, Atom Egoyan's *Family Viewing*, and William MacGillivray's *Life Classes*, all made on modest scales appropriate to our market, also all bear unmistakable traces of the experimental tradition. The "radical otherness" of an avant-garde may no longer be so radical or so other, but has worked its way into the fabric of filmmaking.



The inquiry into the material and processes of film-making, and the refusal to see the cinema as “transparent” or a neutral medium for stories, facts, and ideas, has led to a cinema that turns questioningly onto itself as it has turned outward to look at the world anew.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 18, 1989
FILMS BY DAVID RIMMER

Bricolage

(14 minutes 1984)

As Seen on TV

(15 minutes 1986)

Along the Road to Altamira

(20 minutes 1986)

Divine Mannequin

(7 minutes 1989)

***Black Cat White Cat It's a Good Cat
If It Catches The Mouse***

(35 minutes 1989)

The first films of David Rimmer date from the late 1960s. His earliest extant films are rapid-fire collages. From 1970, he started working with an optical printer to reprint and manipulate “found footage.” He could freeze individual frames that normally would pass in a twenty-fourth of a second in order to retard movement or to permit viewers to see the details, or he could “loop” a shot, reprinting a small fragment of film over and over. He separated light and dark areas within the image, and added his own colours to scenes originally shot in black-and-white. His work ranged from the colourful and vibrant *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* to serene and precise meditations like *Surfacing on the Thames* or *Canadian Pacific*. Many of his films employ archival film, from newsreel or other “anonymous” sources. They represent his responses to the visual properties and to the content of the film. Then, in the 1980s, he introduced videotape into his repertoire, exploring in particular the ways in which video images could be reproduced on film to exploit the distinctive visual properties of each.

As his technical range expanded, so has the range of his subject matter. The elegant simplicity of his films of the 1970s always yielded depth under consideration, but *Bricolage* (1984) suggested a more overt critical engagement. When Rimmer had previously used archival footage he had exhaustively explored a single piece of film. By contrast, *Bricolage* is a complex combination of images from different sources. The title refers to the process of organizing the pieces of the physical world into meaningful structures, but also puns (like so many Rimmer titles do): one visual motif is the image of a brick wall, which suggests the metaphor that compares film editing to bricklaying, though Rimmer’s “brick-collage” takes apart as much as it puts together. *Bricolage* explores film as an organization of visual and aural blocks using images from documentary and narrative film, as well as TV commercials.

As its title suggests, *As Seen on TV* (1986) also employs television imagery, most prominently the “Toni Twins,” the women who symbolized Toni hair products twenty or so years ago. A second set of images, as if reacting to the first, depicts a man who appears to be masturbating, though he is actually in the throes of a seizure, in either case, in the words of Catherine Russell, images “of alienation and annulled desire.” Rimmer channels the images — from the days when black-and-white was the common form of television — through a video system and introduces a luminous colour more characteristic of contemporary TV, before refilming them. The video technology that Rimmer employs in *As Seen on TV* obviously stresses distinctive and recognizable qualities of the TV image, to the point of strategically including the dark bar that rolls across the screen as a result of filming from a video screen. By contrast, his most recent blending of video and film, *Divine Mannequin* (1989), generates the subtle effects of an animated pencil sketch by bleeding out colour and details and retaining outlines.

While one of Rimmer’s preoccupations may be connected to the development of his interest in video, another derives from travel. *Along the Road to Altamira* (1986) was shot in Spain and his newest film *Black Cat White Cat It's a Good Cat If It Catches The Mouse* (1989), in China. Both incorporate the strangeness of encountering a culture different from one’s own, and the alienation that ensues from that experience. In *Along the Road*, the Spanish culture is linked mainly to artifacts of the past. In *Black Cat White Cat*, Rimmer attempts to capture the impressions of an ages-old China becoming suffused in modern Western culture. The surface of appearances that Rimmer’s camera can catch thinly conceal tensions of history that broke in the student demonstrations of spring 1989, and the brutal government crackdown in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square.

David Rimmer will be present at the screening. ■



34. EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA SERIES

EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA SERIES OPENS TONIGHT

by Jennie Punter

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

The Whig-Standard, October 18, 1989

Experiments are being conducted at the Princess Court Cinema during the next month, and they're looking for volunteers. Actually, you may feel a little like a guinea pig watching the various installments of the theatre's New Work Showcase — especially if you normally take your films in large Hollywood helpings. This program of recent experimental productions by Canadians begins tonight at 9pm with a showing of short pieces of Vancouver filmmaker David Rimmer. He will be present at the screening.

With help from a large Ontario Arts Council grant, the cinema has put together six film presentations, spread over the next five months. "The Princess Court has always supported the showing of independent experimental films," says Blaine Allan, president of the cinema's board of directors and a professor at the Queen's film department. "But there haven't been many showings since they moved into the new theatre."

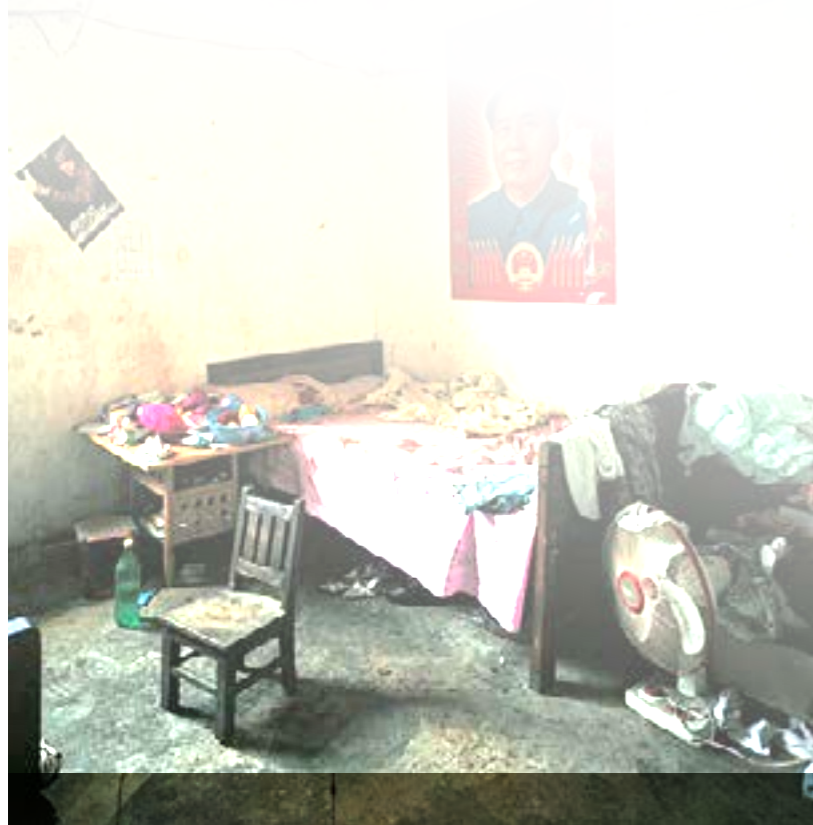
The New Works Showcase is changing all that. Tonight filmgoers can see five stunning works by this internationally renowned filmmaker. His works have shown at festivals around the world. Challenging, hilarious, shocking and often beautiful, those on tonight's program are non-narrative and hard to describe briefly.

The filmmaker constantly explores the nature of the medium itself, using archival footage, other people's home movies, slices of '60s television commercials, his own shots — anything. And he manipulates the technical components of a piece of film: the layering of images, sound, lighting, colour and their inter-relationships.

Bricolage (1984) uses several short sequences that are repeated continually or returned to, creating an almost hypnotic effect. It is a great example of the importance of editing and how this aspect alone can build suspense or incite laughter or rage.

As Seen on TV (1986) has some really chintzy sequences. The most memorable, perhaps, is footage of the Toni Twins, blonde bombshells that sold hair products on TV in the '60s. But the images are altered so





the twins look like they've suffered from extreme radiation exposure; this is further emphasized by the eerie, burbling muzak. In this film, as in the others, Mr. Rimmer is also concerned with the framing of the images and makes the viewer constantly aware of what's being looked at.

Along the Road to Altamira (1986) is no ordinary travelogue. Shot during a journey in Spain, the film puts the viewer in an interesting position. Rather than identifying with the person holding the camera, you feel as if you are the camera. This happens, for instance, in the sequence in which the camera is set on the side of the road, across from a tall monument; cars whiz by, someone in a hat plays with a yo-yo and you can hear all the sounds in the distance.

Divine Mannequin (1988) seems to be an exploration of surface, texture and perspective. The viewer looks down on a pair of feet running; the image has been altered by removing much of the colour and it gives the whole thing a ghostly feeling.

The fifth film on the program, *Black Cat White Cat It's a Good Cat If It Catches The Mouse*, is Mr. Rimmer's most recent work. It explores the tension between age-old China and energy of the student demonstration there this spring.

The New Works series continues on Wednesday, Nov. 8, with a showing of John Greyson's *Urinal* at 7pm. Here the filmmaker combines fiction and documentary styles in this story of an assortment of historical and fictional characters who investigate a crime.

On Wednesday, Nov. 22, a program of three recent narrative films start at 7pm: *The Mysterious Moon* *Men of Canada* (1987) by Colin Brunton, *The Scientific Girl* (1988) by Kim Derko and *Inside/Out* (1988) by Lori Spring. The second part of the showcase begins in January. ■

35. NEW EXPERIMENTS

NEW EXPERIMENTS

by Catherine Jonasson (ed.)

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

***New Experiments*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1990**

DAVID RIMMER

THURSDAY, 17 MAY 1990

CANADA HOUSE, LONDON

David Rimmer is a Vancouver based filmmaker and teacher who along with Michael Snow was active in the sixties and continues to produce experimental film of quality and innovation. Perhaps the most lyrical of Canadian filmmakers and certainly one of the most beloved among those audiences who are less familiar with the avant-garde film. Rimmer's work is varied and has been divided into three categories by critics: the interpretative documentary, the media critique, and the structural films. This program has been selected from the last two groups.

Migration (11 minutes colour 1969)

A film atypical of Rimmer's oeuvre, *Migration* explodes outwards from an early image of a deer on the beach juxtaposing in extremely fragmented images evidence of natural cycles against images of technological accomplishments. The rhythm of *Migration* is anxious and desperate in great contrast to the majority of Rimmer's films.

Surfacing on the Thames

(9 minutes 16fps colour silent 1970)

"The loveliest Rimmer film (and the cleverest Rimmer title) shows a river boat slowly steaming past the Houses of Parliament — so slowly that it almost seems not to be moving, and surrounded by such a grainy luminous mistiness that one critic is supposed to have thought he was looking at a Turner painting rather than at film footage. Gradually the surface of the film begins to wrinkle slightly, to spot, to show minor blemishes — in a sense, to assert itself above and before the rich density it contains. The gesture is tentative and discreet, but it also unsettling and liberating in ways that seem central to the gentle invocations of dissolution that are a basic feature of David Rimmer's world."

(Roger Greenspun, *New York Times*)





Canadian Pacific (11 minutes colour silent 1974)

The quintessential landscape film in a country that is obsessed with the land, *Canadian Pacific* presents a scene of a train yard, shot repeatedly from a window and backgrounded by the magnificent Rocky Mountains of British Columbia. At intervals the trains, boats and planes pass across the frame of the natural space beyond. Our access to the natural space beyond is limited and sometimes denied although the rain, snow and sunlight continually permeate the image. *Canadian Pacific* is a contained, rhythmic and beautiful look at the vastness of the landscape that is so unsettling.

Narrows Inlet (10 minutes colour silent 1980)

A quiet and meditative film that seems initially to be focusing on a completely abstract image. As the film unfolds, however, the fog slowly lifts to reveal a horizon also backgrounded by the coastal mountains. The rhythms of the film are slow and somewhat confusing to identify (the wave against the boat, the slow-motion jittering of the time lapse device and then the large overall rhythm that reveals the space) so one gradually abandons oneself to the gentle motion expecting the camera to lead in articulating the experience. While a considerable panorama is unveiled there remains a deep, impenetrable space beyond.

Bricolage (10 minutes colour 1980)

Rimmer takes a piece of film/television footage and repeats it in slow motion with the sound gradually falling out of sync with the image. The focus gradually shifts to the soundtrack as the viewer anticipates the eventual reunification of image and sound.

As Seen on TV (15 minutes colour 1984)

One of the media critiques, *As Seen on TV* takes elements of the television experience (scan lines, grainy image, trite and banal imagery) and repeats them for the viewer in what might seemingly be an equally banal presentation except for the recurring image (also from television) of a naked man, contorted on the ground. This passes between repeated images of Busby Berkeley girls and commercials in disconcerting and distressing moments. While it remains unexplained itself, it points very clearly to the power of the image and to the extraordinarily poor use that is made of the opportunity.

Divine Mannequin (8 minutes colour 1989)

Footsteps resound behind art-school pencil drawings of purposeful feet traversing the screen. The soundtrack gives evidence of three dimensional space as do the drawings, even in their simple form. The viewer is drawn into the Renaissance perspective space even though we know better and even as the filmmaker occasionally reminds us that it is not so.

Black Cat White Cat It's a Good Cat

If It Catches the Mouse (30 minutes colour 1989)

While this may be considered a media critique, it is also a disconcerting look at the China of Deng Xiaoping and the China of the students of Tiananmen Square. Shot just prior to the events of June 1989 and somewhat re-edited after the massacre, *Black Cat White Cat* attempts to present the face of Chinese culture that even to a Western eye is full of contradictions and enormous potential problems. In rapid montage the Chinese are shown backgrounded by huge commercial images on billboards that display foods and goods beyond the reach of the ordinary worker. They visit the Great Wall and are tourists in their own land. Deng Xiaoping's intertitled dictates (To Get Rich is Glorious) seem in contradiction both to their Communist heritage and to that of Confucius as the heavy hand of the country's rulers is constantly present on the screen. The rhythm of the country seems blurred and confused although the iconography of the country is familiar (i.e. the thousands of bicycles passing on the street). Western influence intrudes constantly particularly in the form of a voice-over engaged in an endless English lesson. Even without the Tiananmen Disaster, Rimmer has presented a frightening composite of problems confronting the Chinese people. ■

36 INTERVIEW

DAVID RIMMER INTERVIEW

by William C. Wees

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

***Recycled Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* by William C. Wees, New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993**

DAVID: ...(In the late 1960s) I was associated with the group Intermedia in Vancouver. The National Film Board had given us two boxes of old film. So I began going through them, and we were also at that time doing performance events with film projection, music, dance performance. And I would take some of these stock images and just loop them and project them during the performances. *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* began as part of a performance where I remember quite distinctly that I had four projectors, each with the same loop projected on the walls, and I was putting colour gels over it and laying around, and then I just thought why don't I fix it and make it into a film, and began working with it and worked it up to the film it finally became. I just became interested, I guess fascinated, with all this old footage. I also made *Surfacing on the Thames* and *The Dance* at the same time, both with stock footage. So since then I've been looking for it and collecting it and stealing it. I have lots of it!

* * *

I'm an editor. I love that part of it where it begins to make sense. But I usually feel that it's my footage because of how I rework it — through either optical printing or whatever I do to it. It's no longer just somebody's straight footage. And I don't feel guilty about manipulating other people's images, especially when they're so far in the past — some of the ones — so it doesn't bother me.

* * *

Some of my work has to do with a critique or a deconstruction of the image, but hopefully in a poetic way rather than in a didactic way. Because I don't want to just deconstruct it, I want to transform it into something else. So that's what I look for in some kinds of work: an appreciation for the old stuff. I like the old stuff. ■



37. FILM AND TAPES 1968-1992

DAVID RIMMER: FILM AND TAPES 1968-1992

by Dawn Caswell & Jim Shedden

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

David Rimmer: Film and Tapes 1968-1992

by Dawn Caswell and Jim Shedden, Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1992

The work of Vancouver artist David Rimmer constitutes a key contribution to film as an art form. His use of divergent styles, from structural practices in the late 1960s to his latest endeavours, often involves a crossover between film and video. Rimmer explores film and video montage with results that are both effective and compelling. [...]

Rimmer's work explores issues that range from the representation of gender, spatial and temporal dislocation, to notions of framing and containment. In his recent work, particularly that of 1984 and onward, this exploration is broadened to include the effect of electronic media imagery and the attendant issues surrounding its proliferation. [...]

David Rimmer began making films in the late 1960s when he emerged as a young visionary. The work of Stan Brakhage and Bruce Conner influenced his initial approach to film, as did a youthful interest in oriental mysticism. Vancouver filmmakers in general were attracted to the poetic lyricism forged by Brakhage and West Coast contemporaries such as Bruce Baillie in the early 1960s. *Square Inch Field* (1968) and *Migration* (1969) are Rimmer's contributions to the genre, both of which "celebrate the interconnectedness of all things." (Tony Reif, *Take One*, vol. 2, no. 2)

The early 1970s marked Rimmer's developing engagement with formal issues in such films as *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970), *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* (1970), *The Dance* (1970) and *Seashore* (1971). In a manner similar to his American and Canadian contemporaries but unlike numerous European and Japanese structural filmmakers, Rimmer's so-called "structural" films are actually explorations of perceptual issues and meditations on the nature of consciousness and its relationship to visual representations. Like the work of Michael Snow, Rimmer's *Surfacing* and *Variations* tackle these issues by posing questions about





the film frame; these films, however, were acclaimed for taking structural film in new directions by incorporating anonymous stock footage. *Surfacing* involves the enlargement of time, the manipulation of the freeze-frame effect with long dissolves and the conceptual re-evaluation of the mechanics of editing, which challenges the conventional way in which time is perceived. *Variations* is similarly concerned with spatio-temporal relationships; however, in this film, the looping of a strip of footage is not a simple representation of form, but rather a metaphorical recombination of events.

Rimmer spent time in New York between 1971 and 1974, where he engaged a variety of media including video, dance, performance, installation and film, often with such vanguard artists as Yvonne Rainer. *Real Italian Pizza* (1971), *Watching for the Queen* (1973), and *Fracture* (1973) were produced during this period, and each demonstrates Rimmer's examination of the unfolding of time. In *Real Italian Pizza*, for example, Rimmer compresses six months of New York street life into a twelve-minute film. "In these scenes, Rimmer condenses time, eliminating all inessential activity in order to emphasize certain special moments. In other sequences Rimmer expands time by capturing figures in slow motion." (Kristina Nordstrom, *The Village Voice*, April 6, 1972).

The time Rimmer spent in New York helped him refine his film technique and more successfully merge it with his artistic ambitions. *Canadian Pacific* (1974), made after Rimmer returned to Vancouver, helped establish him as one of the world's foremost film artists. Filmed from Rimmer's studio, which overlooked Vancouver harbour, *Canadian Pacific* is based on the movement of horizontal lines formed from moving ships and railways cars. The visually fluid motion is contained within the frame of the studio window, resulting in an ambiguity of form emerging from a stabilized motion.

Canadian Pacific II (1975) was designed as a companion piece to the first film; they can be projected alone or in twin-screen format, which suggests another studio window, either adjacent to or above that of *Canadian Pacific*, although both films were shot from the same window. Both films possess a distinct nostalgic sensibility that marks his poetic romanticism.

In fact, Rimmer's work remains remarkably consistent throughout his career in its investigation into different modes of perception, whether the raw footage is landscape imagery or found footage. As his work develops, however, these issues are explored with a less reductive technique, giving way to a more meditative approach. Although Rimmer is often cited as a structural filmmaker — his name is woefully missing from the so-called canon of similar artists, established by P. Adams Sitney in *Visionary Film* and the pages of *Film Culture*, such as Paul Sharits, Tony Conrad and Ernie Gehr, all cited in Sitney's classic essay "Structural Film" — the bulk of his work is perhaps best understood as lyrical or romantic. *Narrows Inlet* (1980), in fact, is the last film one would properly understand as employing structural means. This film mimics the viewing action of a human eye as it scans the shore of an inlet and the surrounding landscape. Rimmer emphasizes the command he has over the camera, self-consciously revealing his role in the film's construction.

In the early 1980s Rimmer spent most of his time teaching film and video at Simon Fraser University, finishing *Bricolage* (1984) after a four-year hiatus. *Narrows Inlet* provides an appropriate break in the chronology of Rimmer's career. His films from 1984 onward, although addressing similar themes found in previous films, can be described in terms of their overall conceptual design. Rimmer is a master of the collage aesthetic, and the title *Bricolage* is a tip of the hat to that tradition in art making. In the film a woman's voice repeats: "plus ça change, plus ça reste

38. HANDMADE, OR...

HANDMADE, OR DAVID RIMMER'S DIVINE MANNEQUIN

by Blaine Allan

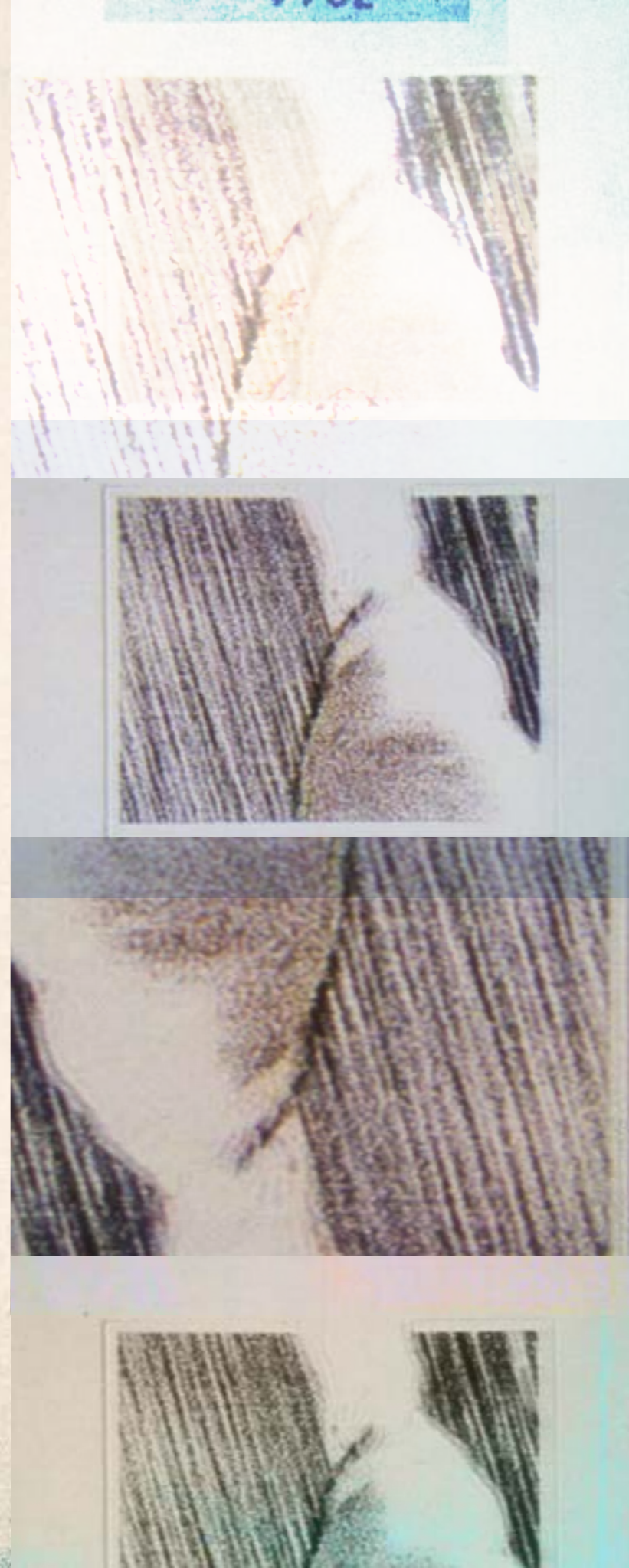
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

Canadian Journal of Film Studies 2, no. 1
(Spring 1992): 63–80

Experimental films made by Vancouver artist David Rimmer in the late 1980s fall into loosely defined and distinct categories, but among them *Divine Mannequin* differs. *Bricolage* (1984) and *As Seen on TV* (1986) demonstrate a critical perspective on media images only hinted at in the analytic approach Rimmer took to film material in the 1970s. *Along the Road to Altamira* (1986) and *Black Cat White Cat* (1989), respectively shot in Spain and China, stand as impressive examples of experimental travel documentary. Compared to the allusions to television and Hollywood in *As Seen on TV*, or the view of modern Beijing in *Black Cat White Cat*, the themes and preoccupations of *Divine Mannequin* remain more elusive and enigmatic. In part, it harks back to the Eastern spirituality found in some of Rimmer's earliest films, such as *Square Inch Field* (1968) and *Migration* (1969), as well as the investigation of

cinematic materials, processes, and techniques that marked much of his work in the early 1970s.¹ Despite suggestions of peace and stillness in its title, it bears symptoms of anxiety about the relations of technology, tradition, and art. The cinematic and video-based techniques and visual effects Rimmer employs in this 1988 release, which I relate specifically to the pictorial qualities of drawing and methods of film animation, address this apparent rupture. Embedded in the film, such themes arise as strongly in an installation, devised by Rimmer with image and sound materials that comprise the film, that underlines the significance of human intervention in the making of art during the video era.²

The advent of video has suggested the loss of physical contact between the artist and his or her materials, known to filmmakers. Loading a camera no longer means threading from a spool through loops and gates, or wrestling with a magazine in a darkroom or black bag; it is now just a matter of popping a cassette into a recorder or camcorder. Video images are not separate pictures that can be viewed when held still, against the light, but a continuous stream invisibly





imprinted on a band of opaque plastic, to be electronically scanned while in motion; otherwise they remain beyond the capabilities of human perception. Editing no longer entails the physical assembly of strips of photographs, but the copying of magnetically encoded signals from one tape to another, possibly with the intermediate stage of storage into invisible, electronic memory. Perhaps the immediacy of video was bought at the cost of film's tactile qualities, but in more general terms video appears to threaten the mystique of a unique relation between a person and a work of cultural production.

Rimmer's reputation as an artist has rested on filmmaking, and was built in the second generation of the structural film, in P. Adams Sitney's term, or in the mode of "pure film," in David E. James's.³ Yet Rimmer teaches video production at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design, and although film remains his principal medium he has, for example, collaborated with Karen Jamieson to make two dance videotapes, *Sisyphus* (1984) and *The Road Show* (1987). Though produced on tape, *The Road Show* suggests an intersection with cinema techniques. Shooting in a studio, Rimmer used a Steadicam, more generally associated with film and location shooting than with a studio video production. Gyroscopic Steadicam technology permits smooth, handheld camera movement in difficult terrain or situations; in other words, it minimizes the irregularities of human intervention in the making of moving pictures. One standard history of film affirms its conventional role "to record images as smoothly as if it were a crane or dolly."⁴ For Rimmer, though, the stability of the camera literally allows the camera operator to move amid the dancers and play a part in the performance, thus significantly restoring the impression of the human body behind the camera.

Divine Mannequin incorporates images first made on both videotape and film, then manipulated with video technology. By Rimmer's account, he shot one part of the film on eight-millimetre video while running, and the other parts originated on black-and-white, 16-millimetre film. He achieved the film's visual effects by copying the first generation visuals twice through a time-base corrector and video switcher. First he reduced the video levels, then put the tape through the system again, amplifying the visual information that remained. The net result is a reduction of pictorial gradation and detail and an increase in contrast — often in the form of lines on a white field. In addition, he keyed white into some segments of the images and cropped the picture, superimposing a white border resembling a mat used to frame a photograph, in part to conceal what fell outside the screen of the editing table from which he had rephotographed the film images on video. Modifying the sounds of running, recorded in a studio, and wind noise taken from a sound effects recording, he added them to the picture, completing the work on videotape. The video images were used for the installation *Divine Mannequin*, but they were transferred to 16-millimetre film for distribution as a motion picture.⁵

In its linking of film and video, *Divine Mannequin* resembles another of Rimmer's recent films, *As Seen on TV*, though the two films are very different in style, subject matter, and theme. In *As Seen on TV*, Rimmer invests images with striking, non-natural colour, or enhances them with the luminous qualities of the video image. In *Divine Mannequin*, he draws colour from the original images, or sets a uniform hue to images that were originally black-and-white, leaving them with black and grey outlines on a white field, surrounded by a rectangle, all held within the film frame. The process involves selection of detail from

the complex original images. In the opening sequence of the film, for example, we can recognize an outline of running feet against a white background, seen from the point of view of the runner. (The accompanying sounds of footsteps and the chuffing of the runner reinforce an image that might otherwise remain less distinct.) After a few moments the white field fills with hatched lines that indicate a roadway. Later sequences suggest different surfaces with patterns of light that indicate grass and leaves, or an arrangement of solid black and white that denotes an asphalt road with a broken centre line.

The reduction of detail in the cinematographic image to line suggests the process of drawing. In fact, parts of *Divine Mannequin*, especially the opening moments — could be mistaken for rotoscoped animated drawing comparable to Robert Breer's. (In other segments, the image remains photographically complex, while retaining the qualities of outlining that characterize the film as a whole.) Rotoscope techniques involve tracing from projected, still images made with a movie camera, then shooting the resulting drawings frame by frame to produce animated sequences. They have been used for years to cheat animation or to make animated images that replicate properties of motion (especially the complexities of human and animal motion) captured by conventional cinematography. Breer, who has made rotoscoped films since the early 1970s, uses the technique the other way round, to select among the details of the photographic image and to invest the motion picture with properties of drawing. Frequently Breer draws only portions of the outline of a figure to represent the whole: in *Gulls and Buoys* (1972), for example, a bird may be rendered in a detailed pencil sketch or simply by a loopy line. Questioned about his techniques, he has significantly underscored the values of the process of drawing in itself by implying its distinction from more serial and

mechanical properties specific to the cinema: "I could enjoy myself with drawing for a change and not have to worry about the relationships from one image to the next."⁶ In its similarity to Breer's treatment of the image, Rimmer's film also suggests the hand of the artist in the construction of an image and invokes properties of drawing to select from and otherwise.

"For the artist drawing is discovery." That is how John Berger starts one of the "essays in seeing" collected in his 1960 book *Permanent Red*. He elaborates, "A line, an area of tone, is not really important because it records what you have seen, but because of what it will lead you on to see. Following up its logic in order to check its accuracy, you find confirmation or denial in the object itself or in your memory of it... [E]ach mark you make on the paper is a stepping-stone from which you proceed to the next, until you have crossed your subject as though it were a river, have put it behind you... A drawing is an autobiographical record of one's discovery of an event — seen, remembered or imagined."⁷

Berger may write generally radical commentary on art, but the position he takes on this specific subject is in many ways traditional: drawing is provisional, personal, and reaffirms the significance of the artist's hand and presence. As Breer's method of actually drawing seems to restore to the filmmaker some of the values of traditional picture-making from the realm of the photomechanical, so the image qualities of *Divine Mannequin*, in their formal affiliations with drawing, suggest a corresponding restoration of traditional values to the high-tech artist working in film and video.

Moreover, the process of drawing, in Berger's terms the making of a "private work," as distinct from the "public" status of a "'finished' statue or canvas" extends from the artist to the viewer in a structure

of identification: "In front of a painting or statue [the spectator] tends to identify himself with the subject, to interpret the images for their own sake; in front of a drawing he identifies himself with the artist, using the images to gain the conscious experience of seeing as though through the artist's own eyes."⁸

Though the techniques and methods of video may be relatively recent in Rimmer's career, the theme of the artist's intervention in the construction of an image, or the idea of building a relation between artist and spectator as sharers of a view, should come as nothing new to viewers acquainted with Rimmer's early films. He produced a remarkable set of films completed between 1970 and 1975, with an optical printer that allowed him to manipulate motion and reorganize footage drawn from archival sources or original material. While none involved drawing, and his techniques might not be strictly called animation, many of his films were built painstakingly from one frame to the next, and endorse the individual frame as the fundamental unit of the cinema. One Rimmer title, *Watching for the Queen* (1973), suggests the themes of observation and investigation that many others share. Some, such as *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970), *Seashore* (1971), and *Watching for the Queen*, involve intense scrutiny of the materials and content of the source footage. Although the films concern the processes of filmmaking, the images — of two ships with Westminster in the background, women in old-fashioned bathing suits by the water, people wearing hairstyles and fashions suggesting the World War II era — also depict a historical past.⁹ On the other hand, *Real Italian Pizza* (1971) and *Fracture* (1973), for which Rimmer shot most of the footage himself, are contemporary. Though the process of copying the original shots to manipulate them optically implies a separation in time, they describe moments purportedly in the present moment. Optical manipulation comprises the

method by which Rimmer investigates the content and qualities of the images and of properties of motion potential to the images. The finished films, the results of his investigation, suggest that the viewer can share his discoveries within those findings.

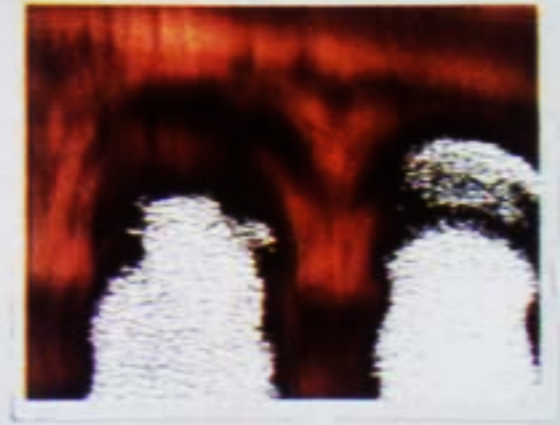
One of the most appropriate precedents for *Divine Mannequin* among his films is probably *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* (1970). Rimmer put a fragment of archival film through its optical paces, using high-contrast colour separations to alter a shot of a woman flipping a large sheet of clear plastic. The opening shot sets the theme, apparently reproducing the original footage frame for frame. The variations that ensue include a wide variety of manipulations, ending with a sequence that reduces the complex original image to its outlines. The resulting image can barely be recognized, except through the filter of a memory of how the image used to look. Having bipacked dense, high-contrast positive and negative elements in the optical printer, Rimmer was left with the light that leaked through images imperfectly registered in a homemade optical printer, suggesting the handmade qualities that augment the elegance and formal beauty of many of his films. The picture that results is a broken outline marking the borders between objects, or between objects and fields, comparable to the apparently drawn and handmade images in *Divine Mannequin*.¹⁰

Divine Mannequin also recalls other, earlier films by Rimmer, including *Surfacing on the Thames*, the two films titled *Canadian Pacific* (1974, 1975), and sequences in the more recent *As Seen on TV*, that include an internal frame line. In each case, the internal frame relates positively to the properties of the image it contains. The upper and lower borders of *Surfacing on the Thames*, for example, reinforce the horizontal orientation of both the picture and the apparent movement of one of the ships; each *Canadian Pacific* offers a view

through a window with an alarm strip that echoes the frame lines and underlines the presence of the windowpane as a solid surface between the camera and the railyard scene it records; and the image set within the film frame of *As Seen on TV* refers to the film's concern with television. In *Divine Mannequin*, the internal border appears as a finely drawn, black rectangle. Unlike the earlier films, however, there are no specific properties of the original images that the internal frame echoes. With added detail in the image, the line adopts greater prominence, marking out the white margin between the image and the projected film frame, also suggesting the artist's hand in describing the limits of the image.

Divine Mannequin contains four distinct and recurring images, two combined in a pair. One, the shots he made while running, looks down from the point of view of the runner at his feet and the road beneath them. Another tilts up, following two spheres as they rise alongside the arches of a tall Italianate building, evidently the Leaning Tower of Pisa. In the third, a closer view of the second scene, the two balls drop into a person's hands. The fourth, perhaps the most difficult of them all to discern, is a close-up of a Japanese man's face, divided down the middle and mirrored like the folded ink-blot of a Rorschach test; in his last appearance in the film, he puts on a pair of glasses.¹¹

Although the images diverge in subject matter, they share formal traits. Common properties of motion and constancy, as well as doubling within each shot, join the images. Each depicts vertical movement on the screen — the road beneath the runner's feet appears to rush downward, and camera movement similarly causes the wall to appear to drop. The globes rise and remain suspended in air, and the figure raises his head. At the same time, they position an object in constant relation to the centre of the frame. The



running feet thud over and over into place; followed by the camera, the balls stay in the centre of the frame; and the head, optically split down the middle, is oriented around a centred, unmoving, vertical line. Moreover, each shot incorporates division — between two feet, two spheres held in two hands (also doubled as a related pair of images), and the mirrored halves of a head.

The film gains additional coherence from the effects contained on the soundtrack, which consistently represent physical movement and the movement of air. Running footfalls and breathing arise with the opening images and are associated with the images of running feet. The regularly rhythmic effect occasionally fades out and returns from quiet passages. By contrast, the second component of the soundtrack, a resonating wind, cuts abruptly into the track to correspond with cuts to shots of the building and rising spheres. In both cases, sound and image link to generate the impression of a space and to suggest cause and effect: the runner whose feet are visible makes the sounds of running and breathing, and the gale force wind implicitly surrounds the tower and potentially lifts the two spheres.

The pictorial technique of the film suggests the properties of drawing and the consequent implication of human action in producing film and video imagery, and the images themselves concern comparable human intervention. The act of putting on glasses connotes vision, and, especially with the opening shot of running feet and the passing road seen from above, and the shot that tilts up the building, it is remotely conceivable to join the image of the head looking downward and the others in a point-of-view figure. Such connection may be tenuous, not the least reason being the obscurity of the shot of the head, but it does suggest the most important association to lend coherence to this disparate set of images: the film combines images that incorporate the human

body from its extremities, literally from toe to hands to head. Moreover, the film's soundtrack, incorporating the sounds of the runner's footfalls and breathing, and of the whirling wind, intimates not only the body's activity, but also the breathing of life into the human figure.

The title *Divine Mannequin* suggests a body-like figure, and the film's imagery sketches in parts of a body. But the film's role as the construction and animation of an imaginary body is reinforced and extended in an installation that Rimmer constructed and showed in an annual exhibition by faculty members at the Emily Carr College's Charles H. Scott Gallery shortly after completing the 16-millimetre work, using the same visual and sound materials.¹² Discussion of the film, an unchanging, circulating work, can be informed by knowledge of the ephemeral, site-specific installation. But in any case, in an overview of Rimmer's work as an artist, the film and the installation are companion pieces. It comprised three video monitors, stacked with a glass cube as a base and smaller glass boxes separating them. The three monitors were fed by separate videotapes. The bottom one played the running image, putting the feet at the bottom of the structure, and the top one the head. The middle monitor ran the images of the balls rising alongside the tower, although the images of the head and feet on the top and bottom screens were interrupted approximately every five minutes, at which points all three monitors ran the shot of the rising spheres. Organizing the images spatially rather than serially, as the film does, the tall, narrow installation echoes the tower represented in the shots of the two spheres, and the vertically oriented structure reinforces vertical movement within the images. Most significantly, the column of images with the head on top and the feet on the bottom effectively becomes a body, conceivably contained within the video monitors.

The glassy surfaces of the stacked monitors (echoed by the frames within the images, also visible in the film), enclosure in such windowed structures, and the suggestion of resulting anxiety are not alien to Rimmer's films. His early observational film *Real Italian Pizza* looks down on New York's Columbus Avenue from a distance through the glass of a windowpane. In the typical position of the voyeur, seeing while remaining unseen, the filmmaker suggests his presence mainly through optical manipulation of the scene he has observed and recorded. The two *Canadian Pacific* films similarly look out at exterior scenes, of Vancouver railyards and the water and mountains beyond, but finally disclose the filmmaker and the camera in their final shots, made at night with the interior lights on. The view of the former film points out from an enclosed space, and the latter pair, literally reflexively, reveals the container associated with the camera. Later Rimmer films invest surfaces of glass, connected by type with the camera and the screen, with more loaded values. *Bricolage*, for example, links several images of people and glass surfaces, including a shot copied from a previously existing film and repeated fourteen times: a man turns, approaches a house, and smashes a window with a hammer. Highlighting it at one point with a graphic outline, Rimmer calls attention both to the window itself and to its status as a screen, to be repeatedly shattered. The organization of images in *As Seen on TV*, which opens with a video screen that grows in size to fill the film frame, casts television as a perverse electronic carnival with a variety of attractions to be sampled by the viewer. The film gains a structural frame from several shots taken from a 1960s commercial depicting young, female twins. Early in the film, they open a door to enter some sort of cabinet; later, evidently still inside, they wipe a window clean, enabling them to be seen; finally, near the end, they emerge. The constantly smiling women may seem immune to the trauma of

enclosure, but the same may not hold true of another recurrent figure in the film, a naked man in the throes of a seizure, enclosed by an outline like the edge of a television screen and resembling the frame surrounding the images of *Divine Mannequin*. Actually suffering, he is also, as Catherine Russell suggests, “apparently masturbating, framed in a space that looks like a TV monitor..., a virtual fish-tank of alienation and annulled desire.”¹³

The installation also included an enlarged reproduction of a page, which Rimmer found one day while running, that gave the film and the installation their title. The account of the divine mannequin starts, “Not all the people could afford to make love to a semi-divine. But they somehow vaguely heard [that] it is pleasing to the temple — and thereby pleasing to the gods — if o[ne] makes love in the temple to a female divinity or her stand-in or effigy.”¹⁴ This apparently Tantric text describes the construction of wooden or stone figures, “sometimes quite beautiful, sometimes schematic like a totem — and sometimes highly realistic as far as the female anatomy is concerned.” The account contained in the page likely has more metaphorical value than literal or historical, though its relations to Rimmer’s film and installation remain intact.¹⁵ Mythic fiction or not, the document incorporates the lure of realism, which evidently extended to the construction of figures that were hollow, with enough space to conceal a child whose duty presumably was to complete the illusion for men who participated in this fantasy of physical, sexual, and spiritual union.

The specific source of the text Rimmer found is a mystery, and corroborative literature on such effigies and their uses remains similarly elusive, but the account is consistent with some accounts of the sacraments of Tantrism and Buddhist practice. Sir Monier Monier-Williams’s 1890 account of idolatry and the construction

of statues by Buddhist monks, for example, describes similar extravagance in the service of both miracle and realism, presumably to render the experience of idol worship more vivid, convincing and effective: “The monks of Buddhism vied with each other in the ‘pious fraud’ with which they constructed their idols. They so manipulated them that they appeared to give out light or to flash supernatural glances from their crystal eyes. Or they made them deliver oracular utterances, or they furnished them with movable limbs, so that a head would unexpectedly nod, or a hand be raised to bless the worshipper. Then they clothed them in costly vestments, and adorned them with ornaments and jewels, and treated them in every way as if they were living energizing personalities.”¹⁶

The paper that Rimmer discovered and saved was crumpled, torn, and marred by rain. Some of the text is obscured or missing at what turns out to be the significant point of describing the role of a girl hidden in the figure: “The coolness of stone probably conveyed beautifully the majesty of the divine, looking down on the faithful with pearls [for eyes? ...*obscure*...] some of the public wished for more response and animation [...*obscure*...] made that were hollow inside, so that a little girl [...*obscure*...] hidden in them, who had to moan and pour sandle oil on [...*obscure*...] for a more naturalistic illusion.”

The breakdown of the text at this point has an allure that is partly pornographic, but largely exists as a result of the draw of the story and the sudden, traumatic loss of detail in the text. The chance degradation of the page corresponds to the construction of the installation and the film, the gaps in the physical text suggesting the gaps in the construction of a body out of discontinuous parts, in the stacked video monitors of the installation and in the serial images of the

film. Rimmer himself has discussed the theme of the film as one involving different types of “energy”: physical, spiritual, and sexual. They include the physiological exertion of running, or the physical conundrum of metallic globes apparently rising in air, against the force of gravity (perhaps blown upward by the wind implied on the soundtrack), the spiritual connotations of the Italian architecture, or the sexual allusion of a pair of spheres, which he has compared to testicles or to women’s breasts.¹⁷ Placed in the centre of the imaginary, male body built by the film, and of the installation that schematically represents that body in a three-dimensional form, the two balls rising alongside the Tower of Pisa might more likely be read as formal analogues for male arousal. The hands into which the globes float, moreover, suggest the masturbation implicit in the account of the hollow mannequin. The association in the film of the images with a resonating wind implies that the suspension and upward movement of the balls results from the force of air currents. While the images may refer symbolically to sexual potential as its own form of energy, contained in a body, they are also associated with other forms of physical energy.

Significantly, in comparison with Rimmer’s other films, the cost of the artistic and technical achievement in the construction of such effigies of semidivines is the trauma of enclosure, in this case of a child literally acting “as a representative of the divine graces,” but mortal enough to suffer additional abuse, as the author of the document speculates: “It is for us to image that sometimes such a poor little girl, concealed within a statue as in a dark broom closet, might have fallen asleep and missed her appointed duty and that the true believer might have kicked the divine statue to wake her up in the way malfunctioning apparatus is kicked into action again.”



According to the text Rimmer discovered, the motivation for the peculiar twist in the ceremony it describes was a desire for “more response and animation” — perhaps a lucky word in the context of this discussion. In any event, encasing a child in the effigy as part of the sexual and spiritual fantasy had as its effect animation, the investment of life into an inert figure. The doctrine affirms the Tantric theories, according to Kenneth Ch'en, that the human being “is sunk in ignorance but he still has a divine spark in him which is Buddha-nature” — an ignorance from which the human can be redeemed through “esoteric consecration” — and that “the cosmos is conceived of as a great being, with gods and goddesses as the symbols of its function, energy, and will,” a conception that invests particular significance for Tantrism in sexual symbols.¹⁸

But the rewards of the apparatus, the text suggests, did not belong solely to the supplicant and were neither simply carnal nor entirely spiritual. As Monier-Williams also implies, for the monks who oversaw the ceremony, the design and execution of the statue as a nirvana-making machine also offered the pleasures of ingenuity and invention. Although directed toward the achievement of transcendence on the part of the participants, the construction of the effigies that comprised tools for such rituals remained important for their exercise of human craft. The text Rimmer discovered goes on to suggest not only the importance of miracle, but also the significance of the hand-made manufacture of illusion: “The monks were fond of [such contra]ptions, because the priesthood was recruited from the most ing[enious] specimens of the population and loved deus-ex-machina effects. They invented and operated the mechanism which, suggesting a holy emission from the divine, flooded the temple to the delight of the pious believers, a signal to embrace each other to become one in spirit with the divinity and leave the temple in an alleviated state of mind and spiritual purification and nirvana-like wishlessness. The monks were masterful illusion-makers

of extraordinary gifts, and as miracles were at all times the fabric of which piety was made, they elevated the minds of the people to the transcendental for which their emotions were thirsting.”

Accounts of Tantrism and other esoteric Buddhism regularly include discussion of “sexo-yogic” rituals, which in some sects at different periods devised very extreme practices, though none describes the use of effigies or of children as described in the *Divine Mannequin* text, for sexual rituals.¹⁹ Lack of corroborative literature, however, may suggest reticence in both writers and their sources. Ch'en, for example, briefly describes an evidently real ritual ceremony involving union with a female consort, requiring the participation of a virgin female under the age of twenty-one, though his account remains sketchy because participants are sworn to secrecy and details of the practice are scarce.²⁰ Suggesting the metaphorical values of such incidents, as important as the specific ritual is the underlying Tantric principle, as Ch'en puts it, “that knowledge is useless unless transformed into action and experience.”²¹

Implicitly comparing them to the moving, graven images described in the document, *Divine Mannequin* both juxtaposes and divides film and video, modern methods of creating moving images. Although, as film and installation, it brings the two methods together, it also suggests some of the tensions between the technologies and their aesthetics, purporting to resolve them through implications of traditional justifications for art as the product of human skills and spirit. It reinforces those justifications through its content, manifest and latent, which constructs and animates a figure of a human body.

The connotations attached to the images of *Divine Mannequin* may be theoretical and generalized: the spiritual meanings written into the architecture of the Tower of Pisa, for example, or the physics in

the apparent suspension of solid spheres in the air, themselves acting as models for physical properties of gravity perceivable only in their effects on matter. Such apparent intangibles, rendered tangible through the intervention of the artist, are not unusual as themes and concerns in the field of the avant-garde cinema. Michael Snow, for example, has discussed his own films in comparable terms: "In various philosophies and religions there has often been the suggestion, sometimes the dogma, that transcendence would be a fusion of opposites. In <---> [a.k.a *Back and Forth*]'s possibility of such a fusion being achieved by velocity. I've said before, and perhaps I can quote myself, '*New York Eye and Ear Control* is philosophy, *Wavelength* is metaphysics, and <---> is physics.' By the last I mean the conversion of matter into energy. $E=mc^2$."²²

It is significant that Rimmer should see in the images of *Divine Mannequin* a figuring of such a property as energy, and that he should treat them with a technique that approaches the traits and suggests the effects of drawing. As a property, energy names a capability, a potential for change, movement, or transformation contained within a body or organism. The direct connections between the imagery of Rimmer's earliest film still in circulation, *Square Inch Field*, and its Eastern sources have led to its dismissal as, reportedly in the filmmaker's own words, "pop mysticism."²³ By contrast, the Buddhist doctrines to which the quasi-Tantric source of *Divine Mannequin* alludes affirm that transformation from potential to actuality and experience is a necessary end, and as John Berger suggests, as a method of visualization, drawing effects transformation of experience into material form, while retaining the traces of the experience and of the process of drawing.

While *Divine Mannequin*, including its attendant text, makes reference to spirituality, it is also rooted in the physical, perhaps from some points of view the profane. The central image of the spheres, unlike the other images of head and feet, refers only symbolically to the human body, although Rimmer's use of the two shots of the spheres in the installation version, where they periodically take over the entire video effigy, suggests their importance. Formally, they allude to the male sexual arousal and manual sex implicit in the account of idol worship, and they correspond to the recurring shot of the naked man in *As Seen on TV*. Returning at several points to the writhing patient, the earlier film places its disquieting image of pain and suggested sex both as part of and as a reaction to the hyper-intensified, video-processed spectacles that surround it. In *Divine Mannequin*, the shots are less emotionally charged, concealed to some extent by the symbolic replacement of body parts with balls and tower. Comparably, however, they also join parts of a body made of film and video.

Historically, the shots also refer concretely to physics, depicting Galileo's famous experiment on the equal velocity of falling bodies. By reversing the motion of the experiment, in which the spheres were dropped from the top of the Tower of Pisa, turning the shots into, apparently, an illustration of the equal velocity of rising bodies instead, Rimmer again insists on the commanding intervention of a human hand in shaping representation of the physical world, and the reformation of ideas of the natural. It may seem at first inappropriate to stretch the comparison to techniques of animation and elaborate on an experimental film from Canada by referring to Hollywood cartoons, but Rimmer's reversal of the action and defiance of a force of nature echo the subversive physics of Bugs Bunny.

In the disarming disguise of a sight gag and a punch line, he affirms the will of a human character — or at least an anthropomorphised one — and implicitly the capability in an animator's hands to manipulate forces, assumed to be natural, in the physical world. One famous case in the Warner Bros. catalogue, *Duck Amuck* (1953), affirms the potential of art to shape nature and science, concluding with Bugs in the role of the animator who, to Daffy Duck's mounting distress, can erase and draw Daffy's body and the world at will, and in *High Diving Hare* (1949), when Yosemite Sam saws through a diving platform and the supporting pole falls away to leave Bugs suspended in mid-air on the remainder of the platform, Bugs admits, "I know this defies the law of gravity... but I never studied law."²⁴ ■



NOTES

This paper originated in a presentation to the annual conference of the Society for Animation Studies, October 1990. The text of this presentation, substantially shorter than this current version, appeared in *Responses: In Honour of Peter Harcourt*, ed. Blaine Allan, Michael Dorland, and Zuzana M. Pick (Kingston, Montreal, Ottawa: Responsibility Press, 1992).

1. These themes are discussed in Al Razutis' catalogue essay in *David Rimmer Film* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1980), rpt. as "David Rimmer: A Critical Analysis," *Take Two*, ed. Seth Feldman (Toronto: Irwin, 1984), 275–86.
2. Among Rimmer's films, *Landscape* (1969), *Blue Movie* (1970), and *Treefall* (1970) also originated as components of installations or performances.
3. P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," *Film Culture* 47 (Summer 1969): 1–10; David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 237. For critical discussion of Rimmer's films, in addition to Razutis, see Joyce Nelson, ed., "David Rimmer: A Critical Collage," in *Canadian Film Reader*, ed. Seth Feldman, Joyce Nelson (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1977), 338–44; Gene Youngblood, "The New Canadian Cinema: Images from the Age of Paradox," *Artscanada* 142–143 (April 1970): 7–13, rpt. in *Canadian Film Reader*, 323–32; Al Razutis, "Recovering Lost History: Vancouver Avant-Garde Cinema 1960–69," and Razutis and Tony Reif, "Critical Perspectives on Vancouver Avant-Garde Cinema 1970–83," in *Vancouver: Art and Artists, 1931–1983* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983), 160–73, 286–99; and my "David Rimmer's *Surfacing on the Thames*," *Cine-Tracts* 9 (Winter 1980): 56–61.
4. David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 904.
5. David Rimmer, telephone interview, 14 September 1990.
6. Scott MacDonald, "But First a Little Ru-Ru: An Interview with Robert Breer — Recent Films," *Velvet Light Trap* 24 (1989): 79.
7. John Berger, *Permanent Red: Essays in Seeing* (1960; London: Writers and Readers, 1979), 23, 24.
8. Berger, *Permanent Red*, 24–25.
9. For implications of this point in several of Rimmer's films in the 1980s, see Catherine Russell, "Reproduction and Repetition of History: David Rimmer's Found Footage," *CineAction!* 16 (Spring 1989): 52–58.
10. For frame enlargements illustrating the pictorial technique of *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*, see *David Rimmer Film*: [8–9].
11. Rimmer, telephone interview. Rimmer described the film's parts. Though he did not indicate the source of the footage of the building, he suggested that it might be in Florence. From both the appearance of the structure and, particularly, the action in the sequence, it seems clear to me that the images illustrate the famous building in Pisa.
12. According to an advertisement, the Faculty Exhibition ran 16 September–2 October and 7–23 October 1988. *Vanguard* 17, no. 4 (1988): [51]. No documentation of the show is available from the gallery.
13. Russell, "Reproduction and Repetition": 56–57.
14. Obscurities in the original text, because of its degraded condition, and interpolations are indicated in square brackets. The published source of the page is as yet unknown.
15. I am grateful to Kenneth Eastman, a scholar in Eastern religions at Stanford University, for commenting on the text and its status in relation to literature and history. Letter to author, 12 March 1991.
16. Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *Buddhism, in its Connexion with Brahmanism and Hinduism and in its Contrast with Christianity* (London: John Murray, 1890), 469–70.
17. David Rimmer, public discussion, Princess Court Cinema, Kingston, Ontario, 15 October 1989; telephone interview.
18. Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), 326.
19. "There have been many sorts of sexual rituals in Asian religions, the most onanistic of which I'm aware originated in the Tachikawa-ryu in Japan. But from there all the way to the devadasi of southern India and the various Tantric ganacakras and sexual adhanas, I've never seen any reference to copulating with idols/icons." Eastman, letter.
20. "Tantric Buddhism boldly attempts to transfer the drama of cosmic evolution to the body of the disciple by considering the sexual act as the symbol of universal creation. Every Buddha or bodhisattva has his female consort who is worshiped together with him. From the concept of the female consort the Tantric School draws its idea that nirvana resides in the female organ. Union with the consort results in nirvana or the great bliss. For this secret baptism a virgin girl under twenty-one is necessary. Since this ceremony is secret, information concerning it is scarce, and will undoubtedly remain so as the participants are sworn to secrecy." Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 330.
21. Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 326.
22. "Michael Snow on *La Région centrale*," *Film Culture* 52 (Spring 1971): 61.
23. Cited in Razutis, [6].
24. See Jerry Beck and Will Friedwald, *Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies: A Complete Illustrated Guide to the Warner Bros. Cartoons* (New York: Henry Holt, 1989), 198, 245–46.

39. LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

by Colin Browne

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

**Canadian Filmmakers Distribution
Centre Catalogue, 1992**

David Rimmer's film *Local Knowledge* (33 minutes 1992) is at once a somber and celebratory meditation on time and place. Its title, "Local Knowledge," is marine terminology for what a skipper must know when navigating dangerous waters. Rimmer is an experienced sailor and the film's spiritual and geographical center is aptly named Storm Bay, where he spends his summers. But it's a troubled site. The camera, moving with tide and swell, seems to strain anxiously at its anchor and it becomes clear from here on in nothing will ever be at rest. *Local Knowledge* won't save anyone anymore.

Rimmer's film shatters the comforting dualities of nature/culture, public/private, home/away, time/space. Yet in place of easy references to apocalypse, the film suggests a simultaneously wondrous and dangerous world in flux. This is a mature work, pulling all of history through a moment, linking one's own sacred ground with distant fields of blood and joy. Playing with the unforgiving shifts between return and recurrence, Rimmer has fashioned a compelling vocabulary of processed local and found images and as a result of a remarkable collaboration with composer Dennis Burke the film has become a work of philosophical intensity. *Local Knowledge* embraces the human chaos around us without bitterness or finger wagging. It is a relentless voyage into the present, a territory too little inhabited. ■



40. TWILIGHT IN THE IMAGE BANK

DAVID RIMMER: TWILIGHT IN THE IMAGE BANK

by Catherine Russell

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN

David Rimmer: Films and Tapes 1967-1993,
Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1993

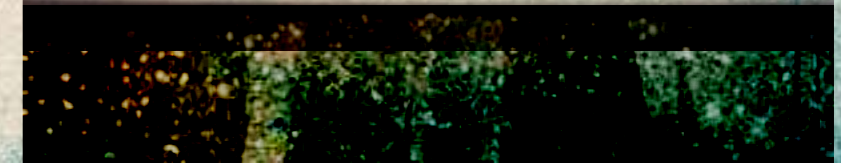
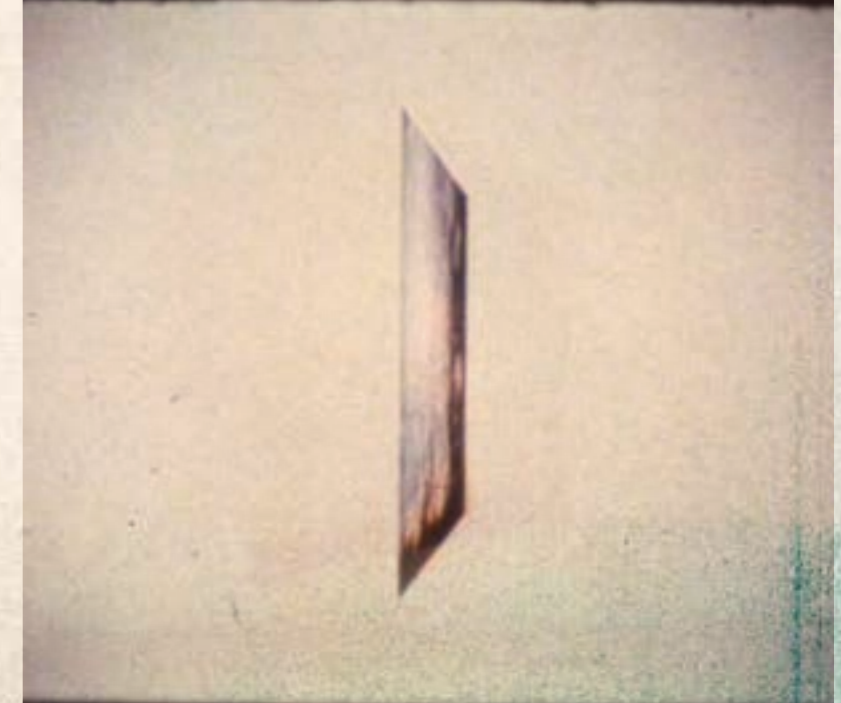
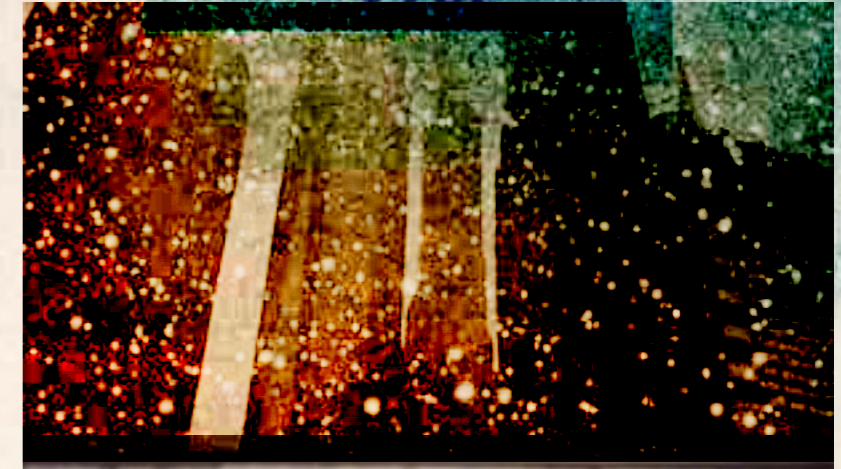
INTRODUCTION: EXPERIMENT RESULTS

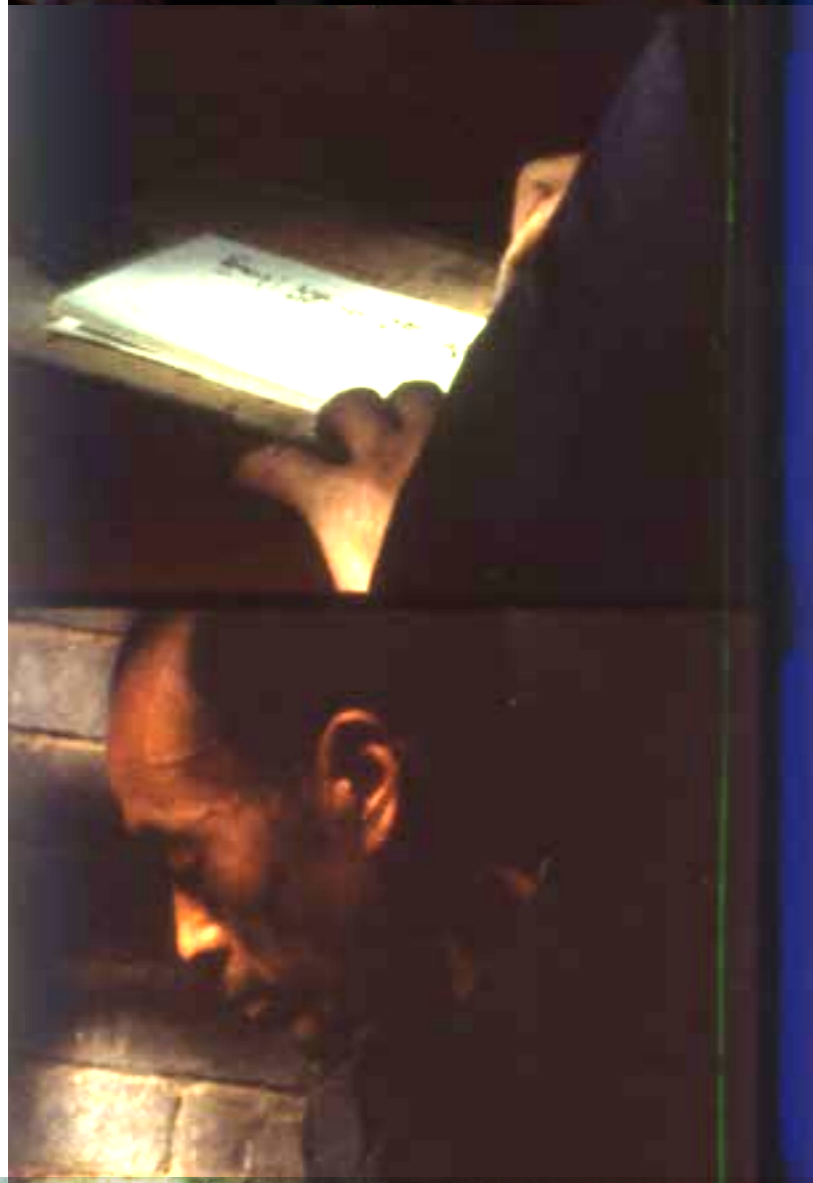
The avant-garde dies in discourse, as discourse, perhaps all discourse on the avant-garde is its death; it was never distinct from its death, indeed death was always its most abiding force; it sought death in order to reflect it better, to become the reflection of a reflection, to conclude nothing but to go on articulating its exhaustion. What we witness today is not a terminus, since advanced art appears in ever greater profusion, but the becoming-(death)-discourse of the avant-garde within an economy in which nothing is more vital than death.¹

On June 1st, 1989 David Rimmer screened his film *Black Cat White Cat It's a Good Cat If It Catches the Mouse* for the first time at the International Experimental Film Congress in Toronto. An experimental

documentary about mainland China, it captures the spirit of the Chinese people's belated emergence into a modern industrial democracy. The news at the time was full of stories about a popular resistance movement emblemized by the appropriation of the Statue of Liberty as the "Goddess of Democracy." It was the first brief suggestion of the dismantling of a communist state, and the film enthusiastically confronted the Chinese people as cultural partners in global communications. Two days later, on June 3rd, we heard about Tiananmen Square. Rimmer subsequently added a typescript from Radio Beijing English News Service as a coda to the film. The text gives the details of the massacre, appealing to all radio listeners to join the protest against the barbarous suppression of the people.

The coincidence of this screening and the tragedy in Beijing is significant to an appreciation of David Rimmer's filmmaking. At the congress in Toronto, the North American experimental film community appeared to be deeply divided over the theory, history, and practice of avant-garde film.² Tensions between political correctness and aesthetic formalism dominated the forum. Rimmer's work, however,





disproves the polarization of “generations” which emerged in the wake of the congress. As he has been making experimental films since 1967, he is a key figure in the canon, especially as it has been developed in Canada. Yet Rimmer’s work is exceptional in the way it has evolved over the last 25 years, expanding the parameters of experimental film. *Black Cat White Cat* is a brilliant example of experimental techniques, deployed in a socially and culturally engaged film. The uplifting evocation of the spirit of social transformation that dominates the film only makes the historical coda more deeply felt, and it is significant that Tiananmen Square is a space of culture and tourism in *Black Cat White Cat* rather than politics (the Goddess of Democracy never appears). In this film, as in so much of his work, Rimmer’s deep understanding of film language produces a highly poetic contribution to a politics of representation.

It is true that the textual coda of *Black Cat White Cat* is far more direct and “engaged” than most of Rimmer’s work. It operates as a “supplement”: an excess or appendage, not only of this particular film, but of the oeuvre as a whole, pointing to something which tends otherwise to be repressed by the structural formalism of the films. To say that history is repressed in this work is not, however, to say that it is denied or disavowed. It survives as fragments, as fleeting as that moment in modern Chinese history before Tiananmen Square; it persists as a politics of representation, visibility, and language. A documentary impulse has always informed Rimmer’s experimental films, but as the sheer volume of his imagery has expanded since the mid 1980s, this tendency has taken on a renewed urgency in his work.

Because the films of the last ten years still exhibit many of the key tendencies of structural film, Rimmer’s work provides something of an index to the

expansion and transformation of the avant-garde in postmodern culture. “Structural film” was P. Adams Sitney’s label for the minimalist experimental films of the late 1960s and early 70s, exemplified by Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* (1967). It was a mode of film practice which was ostensibly the most sophisticated refinement of the cinematic medium to its essential purities of camera framing and movement, celluloid surface and texture, and projection indices of light and framing. Fixed camera position, flicker effect, loop printing, and rephotography were the key elements of a form of film in which “shape” took priority over “content.”³ For some it was a film form that almost represented consciousness itself.⁴ British critics further theorized what they called structural-materialist film as a reflection on the cinematic apparatus, but in privileging the material signifier and its structuration of the spectator, they also eliminated “signifieds” from discussion.⁵

Few films are in fact as minimal as this description suggests, and yet the idea of structural film became the high-modernist cinematic equivalent to Greenbergian minimalism. Paul Arthur notes that, “it is increasingly evident that the unalloyed investigation of film’s material substrate exists as a tiny chapter in the history of the American avant-garde.” Nevertheless, he says, as an aesthetic theory it set up “an oscillating field which bracketed connections between materiality and narrative, between the formal and the social.”⁶ It may be because Rimmer’s work insists on these kinds of connections that it has received so little critical attention. Because the most thorough critical treatments of structural film have been in the context of American independent cinema,⁷ Canadian filmmakers — except for Snow — have been largely excluded from the canon. But it is also because Rimmer’s version of structural film does not evacuate “content” or

“signifieds” in the interest of formal experiments that his work has fallen through the cracks of avant-garde theory and criticism. On one hand, there are ways in which his films reverse and challenge both the metaphysical and materialist presuppositions about structural film. On the other, as we shall see, he is able to transform the structural mode into a politics of representation by bringing it to bear on a wide range of images of people, places, objects, and activities.

Rimmer’s films have been described as poetic versions of structuralist-materialist avant-garde film praxis precisely because of the evocative nature of the imagery. Writings on Rimmer’s early films would typically make this observation then proceed to focus on formal technique, virtually ignoring the effects of content and imagery.⁸ It is high time that this imagery is placed in the foreground of critical analysis, as this essay intends to do, in order to appreciate the narrative and social codes that are deconstructed in Rimmer’s work. The structural film form should emerge from this analysis as a crucial formal means of decentering the “authorization” of images in cinematic representation. The films from *Bricolage* (1984) to *Local Knowledge* (1992) retain the fixed frame, flicker effect, loop printing, and rephotography of the structural film. These devices, however, become the means of representing a subjectivity of perception in the contexts of the chosen imagery.

As Rimmer’s image bank has expanded to include the wealth of television, video effects have reinvented the formal techniques of structural film. With the increased volume of found footage, the documentary impulse is strengthened as a formal element in itself, to become a form of historical imagination. As *Seen on TV* (1986) and *Local Knowledge* are especially apocalyptic in tenor, in keeping with a tradition of collage filmmaking that would include Bruce Conner, Arthur

Lipsett, Craig Baldwin, and Leslie Thornton. Rimmer’s work differs in its approximation of historical time by retaining a strong rhythm of repetition within the collage structure. Narrativity becomes less a structural phenomenon than a mode of intensity as the violence done to the image is linked to the violence in the images and the histories from which they are drawn. The retention of structural film techniques within a complex and often dangerous image-world becomes a representation of a subjectivity that is increasingly placed in question.

Given the decentering tendencies in Rimmer’s filmmaking, it is important to deploy a critical model that does not reproduce holistic mythologies of artistic genius, despite the generic conventions of the gallery monograph. The body of Rimmer’s work may be linked by more than his name, but it is a fragmented and historical text. As the films continue to change, Rimmer can only be apprehended as a historical subject in a process of continual transformation. In the following pages, the sequence of twenty “experimental” films of varying length is further fragmented into three critical paradigms of landscape, ethnography and gender.⁹ As thematic material and stylistic tendencies, these paradigms are posited as intrusions into a 25-year teleology. As critical tools for situating the work within the changes in cultural politics that have occurred over those 25 years, they should provide the means of excavating the “contents” of Rimmer’s so-called experiments. Like all critical discourse on the avant-garde, this approach may be accused of killing its object; as the end of avant-garde film has already been declared,¹⁰ this murder is offered as a redemptive form of criticism. If, as Paul Mann argues, the avant-garde thrives on its own immolation as it struggles to renew culture,¹¹ we should welcome this crisis as a historical moment in which filmmakers such as Rimmer might be re-visioned.

LANDSCAPE: THE INHABITED VIEW

*The whole history of art is no more than a massive footnote to the history of film.*¹²

The 1969 film *Landscape* is the pure form, in the best structural tradition, of a theme that informs a great deal of Rimmer’s films. A continuous fixed shot of an ocean inlet, it was intended to be rear-projected onto a Plexiglas screen in a suspended wooden picture frame. Through time-lapse photography, a complete day from sunrise to sundown is condensed into 7.5 minutes. *Landscape* takes the great Canadian picture-postcard and re-naturalizes it, animating the scene with the rapid passage of clouds and shadows across the screen and progressive changes in coloration over the course of the “day.” The composition in depth, from foreground grasses to two levels of mountains dipping into the centre of the frame, is enhanced by the play of light on the middle-ground water surface which seems to move toward the viewer, while clouds travel rapidly above the horizon line. A critic in 1970 commented: “The film asks for relaxation, for thought, for dreams, for drifting, for humanity.”¹³ One does indeed become drawn into the scene, addressed more as a participant than a witness.

Bart Testa has argued that Rimmer’s landscape films are exemplary of Gaile McGregor’s “Wacousta Syndrome.” For McGregor, the representation of landscape in Canadian painting and literature exhibits a “garrison mentality,” as opposed to the American mythology of the frontier. A characteristic “anxiety about the horizon” is contained in an emphasis on framing and enclosure; a wilderness perceived as threatening and monstrous is held at bay through pictorial compositions in which “The viewer is protected from imaginative participation.”¹⁴ Of Rimmer’s *Canadian Pacific* (1974) Testa writes: “The enclosing

frame and the obstruction of the view by the box-cars in *Canadian Pacific* doubly articulate a Canadian mentality of perception and representation, namely what McGregor terms a 'boxed experience, a distinction between inside and outside.'¹⁵

The two *Canadian Pacific* films — the second (*Canadian Pacific II* [1975]) shot from a window slightly higher than the first, overlooking British Columbia's Burrard Inlet — are composed, like *Landscape*, in depth. Railways cars in the foreground, ships in the middle ground, and snow-covered mountains in the distance create a landscape that is thoroughly industrialized, as the title, which appears on several boxcars, suggests. Both films include weather stripping around the window frame, as a frame-within-the-frame, and both films end with the camera capturing its own reflection on the darkened window of nightfall. Losing the light, losing the image, the cinematic apparatus is made redundant, having nothing but itself to film. The strict separation of inside and outside in the two *Canadian Pacific* films may indeed suggest a garrison mentality, and yet both formal composition and the narrativization of daylight also refer to the structure of the gaze within the landscape.

Landscape in *Canadian Pacific I* and *II*, as in *Landscape*, completes the look, and is an extension of a gaze that in turn domesticates the scene of nature. Nature does not thereby become a "garden" (with its connotations of being tamed and controlled), but becomes a patterned, textured environmental space that changes according to the viewpoint from which it is framed. Far from being "monstrous," it becomes a home for the eye, a restful and welcoming sight that reaches forward to the vanishing points of the perspective, completing a structure of representation that includes and is predicated on

the viewing subject-position. In splitting the vantage point over two films in *Canadian Pacific I* and *II*, and in contextualizing both scene and seer as industrialized and technologized, the construction of subjectivity is materialist rather than idealist.¹⁶ Neither the "eye" of the camera nor the "nature" of landscape becomes a symbolic property, but both are bound into an apparatus of perception.

Despite the framing and inhabited foreground, two characteristics of McGregor's Wacousta Syndrome, it is difficult to see any evidence of a garrison mentality in Rimmer's landscape films. Testa's reading of the films not only misses the aesthetic point of Rimmer's treatment of landscape, but it also belittles the regional specificity of his West Coast reference points. In the interests of a "Canadian identity," McGregor's highly reductive and ahistorical formalism mimics the worst features of the American mythology it aims to counter. It ignores the vital differences within Canadian culture — and belittles the fundamental differences within the Canadian landscape — that are significant to the various Canadian regions.

A more appropriate context for the representation of landscape in Rimmer's films might be found in the local art history of Vancouver. Similar treatments of landscape can be found in the work of some of Rimmer's contemporaries in the visual arts, such as Tom Burrows' *Untitled* (1971)¹⁷ and Dean Ellis' *Ground* (1974).¹⁸ One can also include in a history of landscape painting in Vancouver the "Group of Seven" painters: F.H. Varley and Lawren Harris, as well as Emily Carr, and the abstract expressionist landscapes of Jack Shadbolt, Takao Tanabe, and Gordon Smith. Living in a remote outpost of a colonial culture, British Columbian artists who originated "somewhere else" have looked to their dramatic landscape for a sense of place and identity.¹⁹

One can no doubt find traces of McGregor's "themes" in Carr's dense forests and Varley's *Open Window* (1933), but what McGregor reads in the Manichean terms of hostile nature/safe enclosure can often be read as a domestication of the wilderness — domestication, not a "taming" but as a being-at-home-within, an inhabitation. Scott Watson says of the Vancouver painting scene of the 1950s:

It is ironic that the heroic, individualistic myth informing the New Yorkers often resorted to a nineteenth century image of man in the frontier while on the actual frontier, a place like Vancouver, the image is the urban present tense... (T)he painting of this period, although it has been characterized as landscape — by Shadbolt, Reid and others — is best understood as part of the desire to "become cosmopolitan."...(T)he "landscape" element of the Vancouver fifties painters was a compositional device, used to make images that refer to interior emotions as much as, if not more than, exterior places.²⁰

Rimmer's structural film technique, refined in New York from 1970 to 1974, is brought home to bear on the local scene in a very literal way. Like the Group of Seven's modernism and the abstract expressionism of the 1950s in British Columbia, it has the effect of familiarizing a landscape which is distinctively West Coast and making a place within it, transforming a "vista" into an environment.

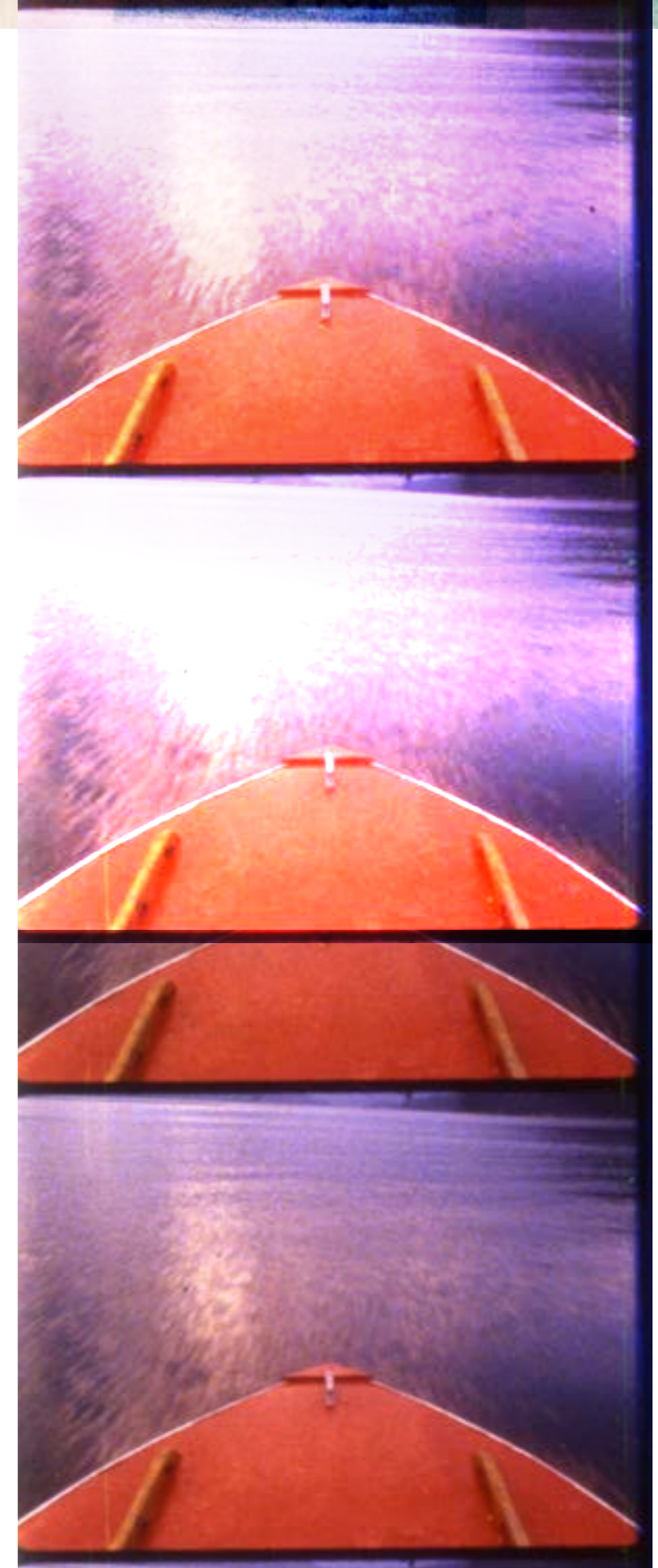
The perspectival compositions of the *Canadian Pacific* films and *Landscape* are complicated somewhat in *Narrows Inlet* (1980), a film in which the camera pans back and forth, completing at least one 360-degree movement around an unidentified centre. Unlike Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971), these camera movements are random and swinging, as if the camera were mounted on a boat.

Wooden pilings in the middle ground are evidence again of an inhabited natural environment, and the first half of the film is so drenched with mist and fog that the shore and rising mountains of the background are entirely hidden. When the lushly coloured pine forests emerge from the blue-grey fog, a Group of Seven landscape appears to emerge from a more abstract expressionist surface composition of line and texture. The horizontal pans inscribe a centralized but unstable point of vision, constructing a shifting, apparently “floating” subjectivity within this painterly landscape. All three films represent landscape as a phenomenological production of an invisible but determining seeing-camera/seeing-viewer. Landscape depends on point of view, and at the same time extends and embodies that point of view as part of its nature.

Landscape in Rimmer’s films is also much more than framing and horizon lines. It is a dynamic space of movement and light, often captured by time-lapse cinematography. The patterns and rhythms of cloud movement and the play of light and shadow over water surfaces are further examples of the domestication of the natural environment. A certain familiarity with landscape is evoked by the cycles of weather patterns and daylight that structure many of the films. In the later films *Along the Road to Altamira* (1986), *Black Cat White Cat*, and *Local Knowledge*, landscape tends to be lit with sunsets and sunrises, and functions as a powerful index of change, transformation and travel. In *Black Cat White Cat*, the Chinese landscape is repeatedly shot from a moving train, often as the sun sinks behind a silhouetted forest. This fiery imagery is fundamental to the film’s sense of social and historical movement. Towards the end, a huge industrial landscape is similarly silhouetted by a horizontal camera movement at sunset.

The title graphics in all three films crawl across the screen horizontally, announcing the filmic practice as a trajectory taking place in the time of travel and the space of landscape. In *Altamira*, the titles travel across the darkened bottom of an image of the sun rising over a desert horizon, to a light Spanish guitar soundtrack. Using various structural filmic techniques, this film represents the tourist experience as a fragmentary and decentered quest for an impossible knowledge of time and space. A rapid montage of postcards of Mont Saint-Michel collapses a multitude of perspectives into a single image. In seeking an alternative to this commodification of landscape, the filmic trajectory is toward the cave paintings of *Altamira*. The barely discernible drawings are a surface form of representation, and the rephotographed Super 8 film of the cave tends to conflate the screen surface with the cave wall. The tourists’ quest for authentic spectacle ends, finally, with a very literal inscription on the inverted landscape of the prehistoric rock face. Landscape usually implies depth of field, which is called into question by a natural sight/site that lacks perspective.

Local Knowledge is organized around the most complex representation of landscape, extending the surface/depth dialectic and the patterns and metaphors of weather and sunlight into an epic form. The title refers to the familiarity with landscape necessary for uncharted navigation in coastal waters. An image of a West Coast inlet surrounded by mountains dipping into the middle distance recurs throughout this densely textured film. In fact, this is the same scene as the one in *Landscape: Skookumchuck Rapids*, leading out of Storm Bay to the ocean beyond. Shot from the water, above the prow of a motorboat speeding into the centre where the horizon seems to part and reveal an opening, the scene is one of security and



home, especially when it recurs after sequences of mysterious and slightly threatening imagery. Again, it is the composition in depth, from a fixed vantage point which appears to be entering into and being received by the landscape, that breaks down mythic dualities of insides and outsides, nature and technology.

This coastal landscape is also shot from other less stable, less secure perspectives, radically transformed by fog, by clouds swirling in time-lapse movements, and by sunsets. The sun keeps going down in *Local Knowledge*, making the broad-daylight shots from the boat all the more comforting. An ominous soundtrack of Asian and electronic instrumentation increases the sense of foreboding as the landscape is lost again and again to darkness. Another key image of the film is a stand of trees behind which sunsets are reflected in rapid overhead cloud movement. This image has been digitalized in video and, as a frame-within-the-frame, revolves on a central axis at the beginning and end of the film. As it does to much of the imagery, video flattens the scene onto a two-dimensional surface, highlighted in this case by special effects.

Breaking down images in video and rephotographing them in film makes them literally “weathered.” The grain of the image, which in Rimmer’s films since *Canadian Pacific* has been somewhat analogous to the effect of weather on landscape (fog, rain, and mist), becomes a sign of transformation. The meeting of videography and landscape in *Local Knowledge* evokes not just formal transformation or mediation, but social and historical change of revolutionary and apocalyptic dimensions. In one shot, distinctively marked by video tracking signals, trees can be seen bending in violent winds (the footage is U.S. Army documentation of an atomic blast). Combined with further ambiguous and threatening representations of violence and technological weather — a weather station surrounded by

barbed wire, and a military weather report — the weather in this film becomes an iconography of danger and inevitability. It does so in part because of the codes of TV news embedded in its videographed representation.

In stark contrast to the landscape shots of *Local Knowledge*, a repeated image of fish fills the frame with a mass of writhing bodies. The flatness of the image is enhanced by superimposed geometric graphics, dialectically related to the depth of the mass. Intercut with shots of water surfaces, the fish suggest both the “repressed” content of the ocean and the erotics of the unconscious. Disorienting and vaguely disturbing, the image points to the industrial exploitation of the coastal waters and also to another depth besides that of depth-of-field. As another videographed image, it pushes the structural film’s preoccupation with screen surface to a certain paradoxical extreme, radically obliterating horizon(tal) space.

Blue Movie (1970), a study of ocean waves and clouds, is completely without framing devices, perspectival markers, or anything besides water and sky — not even a horizon. It is a study of the kind of image that Snow’s long zoom dissolves into at the end of *Wavelength*, an image of no dimensions, no perspective, no subjectivity. Camera angles and solarization flatten the water surface as the waves become patterns of movement, colour, and light. While this level of abstraction returns for brief moments in later films, it tends to be contextualized in order to refer back to the subject of vision. *Local Knowledge* contains a quick upside-down shot of water rushing under (or over, as the case may be) a boat-mounted camera with the sky on the bottom of the frame. The disorientation it produces is echoed in another shot from the stern of a boat traveling away from the shore; the reverse-action photography depicts a certain stasis, a rapid movement that goes nowhere. Landscape, along with

its various inversions, becomes a vital substance of vision for an iconography of emplacement, familiarity, and transformation.

Surfacing on the Thames (1970) is Rimmer’s most exacting experiment with movement in landscape, which in this case is the remote and foreign London skyline. The passage of a boat across the fixed frame, broken down into constitutive frames that are then dissolved into each other, is a retarded and almost mystical motion. Surface and depth take on historical significance as we look through the scratches and flaws of the rephotographed film to the found footage below. Critics have pointed out the resemblance of the slightly unfocused scene to J.M.W. Turner’s painting, and to the pointillists, and it is indeed an ironically romantic effect which is created through an analysis of the materiality of the film medium.²¹ Rimmer’s films often aspire to the condition of painting by way of imagery composed around a horizon, but even in *Surfacing*, that horizon refers to a subject of vision: the zoom out of the centre of the image at the beginning of the film, and in again at the end, penetrate the illusion of depth to reveal its dependency on structures of perception and composition. The use of dissolves in *Surfacing* is a device which few of Rimmer’s contemporary structural filmmakers used, and one which he favours in many of the later films, especially *Local Knowledge*. Dissolving images into each other is a means of merging film and landscape in this early prototype of cinematic “weathering.”

Nature and technology tend to be thoroughly combined in Rimmer’s films. Their dualism is transcended in the deconstruction of perspectival vision implicit in his structural film form, and the phenomenology of camera-vision is turned back on itself. In her discussion of *Wavelength*, Annette Michelson refers to the “‘horizon’ characteristic of every subjective process and fundamental as a trait of intentionality” to explain

the constitution of the viewer in time.²² When “horizon” is literalized in landscape, spatial determinants take priority over temporal ones and the viewer is located spatially within the perspective and the film. In the very limited freedom of the fixed camera position, the phenomenological “transcendental subject” is referred to, but not mobilized. The view of nature unsettles the instrumentalized gaze, rendering it dependent on the scene itself, which, through darkness and weather, also limits the field of vision. Landscape is a vehicle of and for movement, the movement of history and industry, and it is a receptacle for the eye, a home for vision, until it is transferred to video. With the loss of depth, the technologized landscape takes on a threatening demeanor, a vaguely discomfiting two-dimensionality. Even in *Local Knowledge*, though, this apocalyptic postmodernism is counterbalanced by recurring images of the security of a West Coast inlet.

ETHNOGRAPHY: THE POPULATED FRAME

*Otherness becomes empowering critical difference when it is not given, but re-created.*²³

None of Rimmer’s films can be described as “ethnographic films,” and yet people figure as importantly as landscape in his oeuvre. Neither characters nor documentary subjects, people’s images are visually explored and examined with an intensity and epistemological distance equal to that of the ethnographer. My use of the term ethnography should, however, be distinguished from the authoritative disciplinary context in which it originated as a branch of anthropology. Ethnography refers here to what James Clifford describes as “diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation.”²⁴ Rimmer’s interest in people and culture is in this sense symptomatic of what Clifford describes as “a pervasive postcolonial crisis of ethnographic authority.”

A modern “ethnography” of conjuncture, moving between cultures, does not, like the Western alter-ego “anthropology,” aspire to survey the full range of human diversity or development. It is perpetually displaced, both regionally focused and broadly comparative, a form both of dwelling and travel in a world where the two experiences are less and less distinct.²⁵

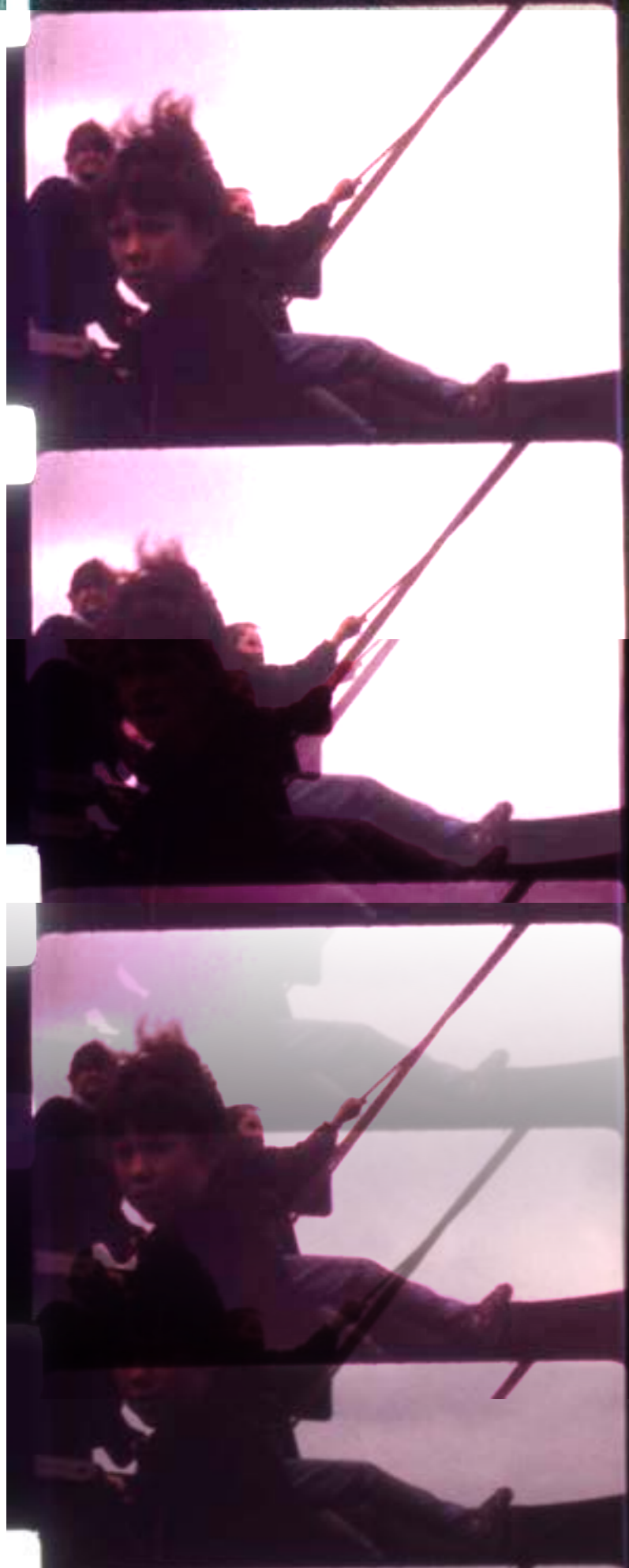
Three separate tendencies in Rimmer’s films impinge on ethnography: found film footage of people in historically distant cultures, travel footage, and TV imagery (including film transferred to video). In each case, the cultural “other” is silenced, observed, and often radically objectified through the manipulation of time. Reserving analysis of the role of gender in this process for the last section of this essay, the structures of voyeurism can here be analyzed as they pertain to historical and ethnographic imagery. I do not want to imply that Rimmer’s films are voyeuristic, but rather that they deconstruct the epistemological politics of voyeurism implicit in structural film’s foregrounding of the apparatus.²⁶ Andy Warhol’s structural films of the 1960s are the most important precursors of such a practice, but whereas Warhol counters voyeurism with the exhibitionism of the film and fashion industries, Rimmer allegorizes voyeurism as historiography and tourism.

The Dance (1970), *Seashore* (1971) and *Watching for the Queen* (1973) are all short films, each of which is built upon a single piece of found footage of people performing some kind of activity. The brief gesture or movement is repeated in loops that function somewhat differently in each of the three films. Although the source of the image is unknown in *Seashore*, the bourgeois settings and costume, the composition in depth, and the quotidian action are highly evocative of the Lumières’ style and era.²⁷ To describe it as ethnographic is to draw a tacit parallel between the myths of primitivism which inform both avant-garde film

and traditional ethnography. Structural filmmakers’ preoccupation with early cinema was part and parcel of the introspective “purification” of the medium. The stripping away of institutional and narrative codes led numerous filmmakers back to cinema’s origins where pictorial composition, montage (or the lack thereof), and address might be found in their raw state, uncontaminated by “bourgeois” narrative codes. Bart Testa describes avant-garde appropriations of early cinema as “pedagogical interventions, as works that allow us to see cinema again, in places and at levels where we had ceased to see it.”²⁸

The fragment of film upon which Rimmer works in *Seashore* has been related by Testa to “the many picturesque views of the sea, boats and the shore in the first years of film production... (whose) composition in large measure defined the visual code of the extreme long shot.”²⁹ The fragment in *Seashore* consists of four groups of figures: three women in the centre tentatively wade into the sea, a couple of bathers screen-right play in the waves, a group of men and women stand fully dressed on the shore screen-left, and a group of bathers waist-deep in the middle distance stand off a rocky outcrop completing the curve of the beach. It is a complex image with a number of rhythms, including the movement of the water. When the loop is shortened, the smaller movements and gestures appear automatic and mechanical; when the fragment is flipped and superimposed on the original screen direction, the image becomes symmetrically framed. A total fragmentation of the image occurs with the imitation of projection flaws: white leader, frame lines, and flicker.

All of these formal devices, added to the pattern of surface flaws on the film emphasized by freeze-frames, distract the viewer from the original image. Testa concludes his analysis by pointing out that “Rimmer has brought a distinction between recorded



event, however literally or lyrically rendered and the limited compositional stability of the perspectival system in cinema."³⁰ With the destabilization of the composition, the recorded event becomes more indistinct and more distant, a distance which is historical before it is ethnographic. Rimmer's rephotography of found footage is allegorical in the sense that its signified content lies elsewhere: in another movie, in another time.³¹ That "other time" may be a mythic time in film history, but simultaneously, the historical referent has the specificity of the singular moment captured by a seaside photographer.

The affinities between history and ethnography are crucial to the mythology of primitivism. Clifford explains, "The salvage paradigm, reflecting a desire to rescue 'authenticity' out of destructive historical change, is alive and well. It is found not only in ethnographic writing but also in the connoisseurships and collections of the art world and in a range of familiar nostalgias."³² The designation of early cinema as primitive cinema by Noel Burch is a good example of this practice, which more recent historians have been quick to point out.³³ Pre-Griffith cinema is "primitive" because, like "primitive" cultures, it preserves something "essential" in its naiveté. Burch's formalist historiography imposes a modernist antibourgeois aesthetic onto a body of work that was produced in very different historical circumstances. The historiography of early cinema has tended, by and large, to repress, or at least subordinate, questions of imagery and codes of signification to questions of form.

At first glance, structural film practice might appear to do the same. Yet it is more difficult to ignore the people who populated early cinema when they cross your field of vision, and cross it again and again and again. The almost accidental emergence of a trace of history — real people doing real things — is the

obverse of the salvage paradigm which tends to endow the historically and culturally specific with meanings well beyond the documented experience (meanings of primitivism, of anthropological humanism, of pastoral romanticism, etc.) Instead of "bringing culture into writing," which for Clifford is the enactment of the structure of "salvage,"³⁴ *Seashore* discovers culture already written and investigates the structure of this representation. It reproduces the allegorical structure of ethnography in such a way that writing — the language of representation — is shown to destroy and violate the referent.

The brevity and anonymity of the fragment of history that is glimpsed in *Seashore* might seem to compromise its epistemological value. And yet its connotative meaning is rich precisely because it is "foreign" and difficult to decode. What are the relationships between the different groups of people? Is the group on the beach crowded into the frame because they are posing? Are the bathers in the water male or female, young or old? Is this a typical leisure activity of this period, whatever period it is? In this country, whatever country it is? Precisely because these questions have no answers, a level of inquisition is denied and subordinated to a more respectful attitude of passive observation. The privilege of looking into history is itself finally taken away in the reduction of the image to light, line and form.

Watching for the Queen may have an opposite trajectory to that of *Seashore*, restoring a "whole" film fragment from its composite frames, but it is no less a reversal of the salvage paradigm. In this case the image is of a crowd looking into the camera, as if the filmmaker and we who necessarily adopt the camera's gaze, were the titular queen. The two-second shot of the crowd is looped at progressively faster speeds, from one minute for the first frame, slowly working

up to the “normal” speed of 24 frames per second, so that the narrative of *Watching* is the reconstruction of the original shot. The film creates a sort of mirror effect as we watch for the crowd to do their watching, and it provokes a certain pleasure when this is accomplished, when the crowd finally moves “like a crowd,” united, like us, in their mutual fascination. Because of the slight tilt of the camera, one has to scan the image to relocate figures from one frame to the next. A man near the centre of the image, wearing a military-style cap, raises his head in one of the largest gestures of the group to meet our gaze, but as he does, his movement is lost in the general jostling of the crowd. If the freezing of individual frames allows us to discern individuals within the mass of faces that fills the screen, the restoration of movement denies the autonomy of their gestures and redefines the group as one that moves together in a single swaying gesture.

As ethnography, this film is as ambiguous as *Seashore*, and one tends to place a great deal of semantic weight on the title. Whether these people are really watching for the queen or not, the title refers us to the practice of spectatorship and the panopticonic form of an apparatus which retains control even when authority is the ostensible object of scrutiny.³⁵ Placing the crowd under microscopic analysis in *Watching* represents a relation of empowerment and subordination that the title obliquely associates with a colonial relationship. The monarchy may be the ostensible spectacle, but its image is withheld, and the representation of power is extended into a technology of power. The crowd’s subservience to the monarchic gaze is analyzed as a mechanism of representation in which cinema becomes allegory for the irreversible structure of voyeurism. It isolates the subject-effect of ethnography as an abstraction of individuality and an imbalance of power which can, nevertheless, be apprehended as a technology. The triumphant moment of closure is one

in which the viewer realizes that his or her constitution as a subject of vision is dependent on the loss of subjectivities on the part of the people in the image; we necessarily adopt the point of view of “the queen,” protected by invisibility.

The Dance may be less ethnographic than the other two films because the original film fragment is of a performance rather than the quotidian activities of *Seashore* and *Watching*. The stage setting is itself exaggerated by opening and closing shots of a theatre audience applauding, shot from the perspective of a stage, across which a curtain opens and closes. But the dance itself, a couple jiving in front of a jazz band, is more likely set in a 1940s nightclub than in a “legitimate” theatre. The disjunction between audience and show is in keeping with the central trick of the film: the dancers repeat a six-second movement back and forth across the stage while the soundtrack is a continuous piece of music. The dissynchrony is humorous, and the irony is at the expense of the poor musicians and dancers who are caught in an endless series of identical gestures until they are finally released from the repetition with the closing chords of the piece. Like so much comedy, there is a certain cruelty involved, this time with respect to the integrity of the original performance and performers.

While *The Dance* exhibits a certain self-conscious flair for presentation, adopting the performative codes of the dance for its own “brilliant” execution of technique, the ironic tone provides another counter-gesture to the salvage paradigm. The specificity of the historical and cultural setting of the dance resists appropriation: it is ironically endowed with an anonymity that such footage typically lacks. As in *Seashore* and *Watching*, repetition functions as a vehicle of amplification for a fragment of film that is only “meaningful” insofar as it is different from our own cultural

and historical experience. Even the mirror-effect of *Watching* is destabilized by the black-and-white footage which, in invoking an archival past, differentiates the people as cultural others. In each case, the formal experiments are performed within an ethnographic structure of perception and power, a structure discovered to be a technology and an apparatus through its deconstruction.

In each of these films, and also in the many other examples of found footage throughout Rimmer’s work, the anonymity of the people filmed is made mysterious. The images tend to evoke a sense which Roland Barthes has described in *Camera Lucida*: “Since every photograph is contingent (and thereby outside of meaning), Photography cannot signify (aim at a generality) except by assuming a mask.”³⁶ Photographic contingency “immediately yields up those ‘details’ which constitute the very raw material of ethnological knowledge.”³⁷ And yet Rimmer never allows us the time for contemplation necessary to the pleasure of the photographic text. The movement, repetitions, and fragmentation of the image provoke a desire for the look which is always denied by the filmic appropriation of the photographed scene.

The film flirts with photography and its freeze-frame cinematic version (especially *Watching*), and in this flirtation alludes to the that-has-been of the photographic referent.³⁸ Because they allude to it, though, without touching it, without stopping to gaze wistfully into the past (with the possible exception of *Surfacing*), an allegorical structure is maintained. The “primitive” form of the *Seashore* fragment belongs to a history apprehended as distant, but also different. Photography may have “something to do with resurrection,”³⁹ but no such mythology informs Rimmer’s historical ethnography. Faces are summoned up from the archive for our viewing pleasure, but their masks

remain secure and they remain dead. If they weren't dead already, as in the case of the vibrant dancers in *The Dance*, they are killed by the violence of the cutting. Refusing the "sting" of the punctum, that detail which for Barthes reaches out of the photograph and grabs the viewer in his or her present tense, is also a denial of the mythology of salvage: that "we" are like "them."⁴⁰

A very different construction of otherness is inscribed in *Real Italian Pizza*, shot in New York from September 1970 to May 1971. This is not only Rimmer's most overtly ethnographic film, but because of the setting, it also serves as a foil or counterpoint to Snow's *Wave-length*. Outside the loft window he finds the life of the street which Snow so radically excludes. Turning the camera onto the patrons of an Italian pizza and sandwich shop, their rhythms of coming and going and just hanging out on the sidewalk, Rimmer assumes the position of the spy. From his elevated angle, across the street, the New Yorkers, many of them African-American, look like ants or bees revolving around a buzzing hive. Another kind of "queen," the pizza-makers/shop-owners remain invisible. They come out once to shovel snow off the sidewalk, but for the most part, their invisibility and centrality on the other side of the scenario mirrors and complements that of the camera.⁴¹

Each of the three overlapping camera positions in the film has the effect of framing the scene as a stage onto which people exit and enter. Collapsing nine months into thirteen minutes, Rimmer's editing exaggerates the rhythms and patterns of the routines of daily life, lingering on those who loiter outside the shop during the summer months, pixilating rapid activity, and when the police drag someone out of the shop, dramatically cutting into the scene to see the apprehended man stuffed into a patrol car. The brief shot is the proverbial exception which proves the rule

of the otherwise statically framed film. In comparison to many of Rimmer's other films, the "real" documentary image is more or less sustained in its integrity. Although it is step-printed and looped in order to exaggerate the sense of rapid activity and routine, it also comes close to the candid verité technique of observation. Moreover, when that observational technique is combined with the structural adherence to the fixed frame, the investigative thrust of cinema verité ethnography (as in the work of Jean Rouch or Pierre Perrault) is exposed in its derailment.

Despite the intervention into the image by way of montage and the addition of a jazz soundtrack, Rimmer's camera is extremely passive. Again, this should be contrasted with Snow's zoom inside the loft. The voyeurism of the film's premise is met by the exhibitionism of some of the shop's patrons who, on a couple of occasions, dance on the sidewalk. Although their steps are almost synched to the film's soundtrack, the silencing of their own transistor music retains the distancing of the spectacle. The scene of the sidewalk is a public space which is specific to New York, and is therefore an ethnographic "sight." Likewise, the people on the street may be "villagers" (inhabitants of a neighbourhood), but they are also there "to be seen." The scene may be outside the filmmaker's window, but it is also — like *Canadian Pacific* — an extension of that New York window.⁴²

Real Italian Pizza is an unusual example of ethnographic poetics in experimental film, idiosyncratically suspended as it is between two very different film practices — structural film and cinema verité. The soundtrack of jazz music and traffic sounds helps to accentuate a rhythm of life which is both daily and seasonal. As in any ethnographic text, the film imposes a form and a structure on cultural others in the very process of transposing them into representation. And yet the fixed camera of structural film has

the effect of "framing" that process, and quite literally inscribing its limits. Twenty years later, the afros, bell-bottoms, and dance steps are documents of a historically specific culture that occupied a certain public space. Racial difference is embraced within ethnographic difference, which is in turn represented as a spatial difference inscribed within a technology of perception. The form of the film makes the scene a spectacular other, just as the twenty intervening now years make us into historical voyeurs, looking but not touching, outside the scene looking in, inside the window looking out.

When Rimmer goes to China to shoot *Black Cat White Cat*, a similar fixed frame, verité shooting style, combined with atmospheric, ethnographic music, helps to negotiate the representation of a more radical cultural difference. The imagery at the beginning of the film might be described as conventionally ethnographic, especially the faces isolated in crowds and the trance-like tai chi witnessed very voyeuristically through trees. The stylized, underlit setting of the tai chi, accompanied by Chinese music, is an exotic — even Orientalist — treatment which by the end of the film is reversed. When the Chinese tourists in Tiananmen square crowd around the camera, presumably staring at Rimmer, he is representing himself and his perspective as touristic rather than ethnographic. In doing so, he shares something with his ostensible subjects, as he repeatedly finds the Chinese people to be tourists also: at the Great Wall, at the Forbidden City, at a park or cemetery. None of these places are named as historic sites, but they are represented as anonymous "sights" enjoyed by Chinese and foreigners alike.

No foreigners actually appear in the film, but the English language is omnipresent, especially in the language lessons heard on the soundtrack. Among the fragments of phrases and narratives articulated in perfect, if halting, English is a woman describing a

medical examination. An odd and disturbing parallel between technology, language, and a violation of the body is suggested. While she speaks, we see a billboard advertising “White Cat low-foaming detergent” in English with Chinese characters. Trinh T. Minh-ha is critical of the “incorporation (if not emphasis) of recognizable signs of Westernization” in ethnographic film, for exoticism can only be consumed when it is salvaged, that is reappropriated and translated into the Master’s language of authenticity. A difference that defies while not defying is not exotic, it is not even recognized as difference, it is simply no language to the dominant’s ear.⁴³

The prevalence of English in *Black Cat White Cat* is neither authentic nor authoritative, but serves as a sign of neocolonialism which is at the same time a sign of capitalism and technological modernism. It draws the tourist’s eye and ear to signs by which the filmmaker locates himself (and by fiat, his non-Chinese viewer) as a foreigner to the culture. It is the English which is being consumed as exotic within a quotidian Chinese context. Between the aesthetics of exoticism and the technology of salvage lies an ethnographic poetics of passivity in which a strong subjective presence is inscribed. The camera placed on a railway crossing is stationary in a steady stream of bicycle traffic, but the shifts in depth of field effected by the proximity of the passing vehicles and cyclists refer back to the perspectival system anchored to the observer.

The trajectory of *Black Cat White Cat*, from the opening image of an inked finger carefully writing the film’s title in Chinese characters, to a montage of television imagery, is, as I have already suggested, one of social transformation. The recurring punctuating shots of sunsets glimpsed from a moving train inscribe a sense of historicity and movement, but it is above all in the terms of language that the “other culture” is seen to

be in the throes of rapid change. Glimpses of Shanghai TV reveal a culture rich in performance codes and complex intertextuality, a culture of spoken, written, and body language. One is immersed in its signifiers, and it flows over one like a river over a floating stick. Referentiality is in constant flux as every shot refers back to the observer failing to understand the language heard or the activity observed. The social movement is not towards Westernization or capitalism, but into some new and different modern culture with different traditions.

It should be clear by now that Rimmer’s work is ethnographic in ways that stretch the term well beyond its usual meaning. While there is a huge difference between the use of found footage in *Seashore* and the cultural encounter of *Black Cat White Cat*, thinking of both tendencies as ethnographic specifies the documentary thrust of Rimmer’s films. The gaze at other people is often direct, and as we shall see in the next section, is often returned. Breaking down distinctions between voyeurism and exhibitionism is key to tempering ethnographic ethics and power relations. Photographing television imagery in *As Seen on TV* and *Local Knowledge* is yet another means of looking directly at randomly selected, decontextualized people performing unusual activities. Video in Rimmer’s films is the sign of institutionalized mediation, of an authorized glimpse into other worlds, cultures, and lives, of which he takes full advantage. In *Local Knowledge* and *Divine Mannequin* (1989), he even transfers his own footage of objects and landscape onto video and then back into film, producing a sign of mediation within the image itself.

One of the final images of *Local Knowledge* is an outtake of *Black Cat White Cat* — a woman performing tai chi, or possibly dancing; but she is not a dancer and is not on a stage. She does not exhibit herself the way



the women do on TV. Decelerated to quarter-speed and videographed, the shot lingers on screen longer than any other in the film. Ethnographic filmmakers have long been attracted to the trance, or possession dance as particularly cinematic, perhaps because of the way it blurs the distinction between exhibitionist performance and investigative observation, an objectification of a remote subjectivity. It bears these connotations here, as an oasis of calm meditation within a montage of violent and dramatic imagery. Although *Local Knowledge* is not a travel film, it travels widely through a kaleidoscope of imagery in order to return again and again to a familiar landscape. The tension between coming and going, encapsulated in the temporally reversed shot of landscape from the back of a boat, may not be so different from the tension of staring at someone so “at home” with themselves that they can display their body so gracefully in a public park. In one case you are not really going anywhere, and in the other, you are not really seeing anything. Perhaps this is the melancholia of the film.

The title, *Local Knowledge*, is also Clifford Geertz's, but it means something quite different for the anthropologist and the filmmaker. For Geertz, local knowledge is a technique of explaining social phenomena by “placing them in local frames of awareness”⁴⁴ as opposed to imposing epistemological or interpretive schemas upon them. For Rimmer, these frames of awareness are never available. Everything is out of place except one's own house, which is itself only a frame of awareness. The flaw in Geertz's theory is of course his failure to account for his knowledge of other local knowledges and the mediation implicit in his acquisition of that “knowledge.”⁴⁵ Rimmer's ethnography never ventures into epistemological terrain, but by remaining outside looking in, many of his films work closely with ethnographic strategies in a poetics of “self-fashioning,” in which one comes to know oneself through the encounter with others.

“Ethnographic subjectivity,” argues James Clifford, “is composed of participant observation in a world of ‘cultural artifacts’ linked... to a new conception of language — or better, languages — seen as discrete systems of signs.”⁴⁶ Rimmer's encounters with others always refer back to himself through the cinematic apparatus and its inscription of subjectivity. At the same time, this apparatus registers the world as forms of language, in which all identities are fictions and every image alludes to unknown identities. The filmmaker's encounter with others, at once insistent and passive, is also a construction of self within a heterogeneous cultural landscape.

GENDER: THE DISCONNECTED IMAGE

*THE BIRTH OF A DAUGHTER IS LIKE RECEIVING
A BLOSSOM.*

– Beijing wall poster,
quoted in *Black Cat White Cat*

In *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* (1970) a woman in a factory lifts a huge sheet of transparent material which flutters across her body, catching the light. The brief shot, the only image in the film, is cut and repeated just at the moment she lifts her eyes from the table. In the subsequent repetitions, the image is solarized and abstracted in a virtuoso display of technical effects that eventually break it down into an abstract display of line, colour, and light. As “art” displaces labour, the woman disappears behind her image. Even the title, by punning on the materialist parallel between cellophane and celluloid, makes the woman disappear.

Rimmer's films are filled with images of women. They seem, at first glance, to be almost synonymous with “the image” which is subjected to formal experiments, the classic example being *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*. And yet, one can also find a discourse on and about images of women, as well as an implicit cri-

tique of gender codes, in their deployment. The more recent films may even be regarded as engaging with violence against women as a technology of language and representation. However like the slogan quoted above, the film treads a crooked path through feminist concerns, precisely because they are so often double-edged.⁴⁷ The work is remarkable in its preoccupation with women and the proliferation of images of women, apprehended with an unsettling directness.

Bricolage is in a sense the recovery of the woman who is so cruelly violated and annihilated in *Variations*. An equally abstract image is gradually integrated, clarified, and resolved into a black-and-white image of a woman who appears to be advertising a cleaning product by sliding a piece of glass — one half clear, one half dirty — in front of her face. Her steady gaze through the glass at the camera is in direct contrast to the abrupt curtailment of the woman's look in *Variations*. A woman's voice repeats, “Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.”

Without going so far as to say that *Bricolage* is the “corrected” version of *Variations*, other crucial elements of *Bricolage* suggests a real change in Rimmer's representation of women. The use of advertising imagery and the return of the gaze are key features, which recur in *As Seen on TV*, *Local Knowledge*, and *Black Cat White Cat*. Through the use of shots clearly marked as commercial, the image is already exploited before Rimmer gets to it. His treatment is then a treatment of the image in its context. A good example of this is the women in colour-tests who appear in *Local Knowledge* and *Black Cat White Cat*. In the latter film, they serve as powerful signs of the gender codes of Chinese TV. Likewise, the “Toni Twins” in *As Seen on TV*, two women advertising a hair product who seem to float across the screen in Rimmer's video-manipulation of the original image, represent a 1960s representation of women.

All of these women look back at the viewer, and even if their address was originally that of the sales pitch, in their new contexts their gaze is a challenge. It upsets the inertness of the material image, subject again and again to formal manipulation, and becomes the sign of human presence. The Toni Twins also wipe off a piece of glass standing between them and the camera, and although the solarization of the image almost obscures their faces at times, their look still cuts through the many layers of aesthetic and historical mediation. Women remain identified in Rimmer's films, as their faces and bodies become abstract patterns and formal movements through repetition, but in the formalization process, they also become the sign of "content" resisting that aestheticization — signs of dis-content.

Men also appear in the films, but their bodies are rarely the subject of intensive repetition and analysis, with the important exception of the naked man having an epileptic fit in *As Seen on TV*. However, privileged by the double framing and ominous electronic music (in contrast to the pop muzak of the rest of the film), this image evokes anxiety rather than objectification. The crisis of the film consists of the Toni Twins' endless gestures of walking, turning, entering, wiping, smiling, etc. as if they could never stop, as if they were trapped in those inane gestures for eternity. The doubling of the women makes the play of looks very vivid, as at first one looks screen-right while the other looks at the camera. When they look at each other, the erotics of the image are strangely intensified, and when they both turn to the camera, the viewer is seduced in a way directly contrary to the daunting image of the naked man. Looking at him is a confrontation with alienation, fear, and mortal flesh. He represents the anxiety that the women seem to have caused through the soothing seduction of commercial media.

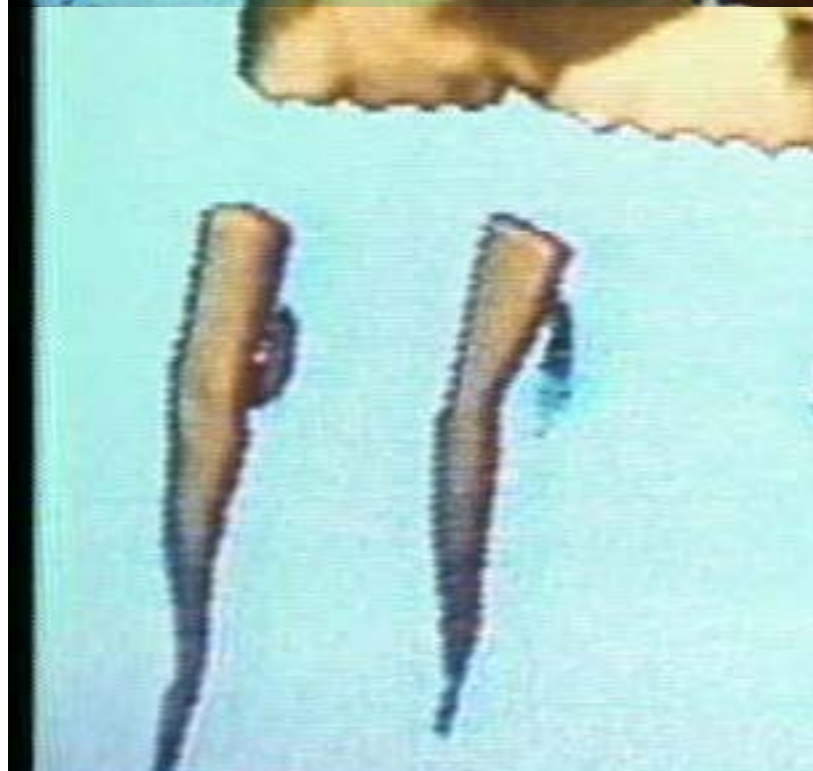
An earlier film, *Fracture* (1973), investigates the gendering of narrative codes. It is one of the only instances in which Rimmer uses his own footage — Super 8 blown up to 16mm — rather than found footage of women. Two series of shots are intercut. In one, a woman with a baby in a forest appears to fear something or someone approaching; in the other, a man in a cabin appears to open the door to leave. The latter series is somewhat obscure as the man's body is shot "too close," and yet that obscurity intensifies the sense of his bulk as well as the suspense. The woman exhibits the protective instincts of an animal mother, and her worried posture and expression enable us to read the other image as male and threatening. Her look screen-right and his movement screen-left are spatial codes that narrativize two sequences which might in fact have nothing to do with each other.

The incorporation of the nuclear family within Rimmer's fracturing of narrative form is another example of the way in which a formal experiment acquires deep resonance through strategically chosen imagery. By alluding to a narrative of threatened innocence, he returns, through his own 1970s footage, to D.W. Griffith's early imbrication of narrative and social codes. The impression of continuity between the parallel series of images is only achieved through a scenario in which an active male discourse threatens that of a passive female, and the security of the family provides the stakes of the game. By the end of the ten-minute film the woman has returned to her sitting position, but there is no closure. Nothing has happened, but the sense of anticipation and suspense does not fade, suggesting again that the scenario is more permanent than its brief appearance in this film.

While narrativity tends to be generally downplayed in Rimmer's fragmented style of montage, in the later films an Eisensteinian aesthetic of juxtaposition and

collision persists within the formal technique. Dialectical meanings emerge from the evocative imagery, meanings that continually circulate around women and violence. In *Local Knowledge*, a collection of images linking an animated bull (like a cave painting) writhing with spears in its back, a mustached man (possibly a toreador), and a hunter provide a counterpoint to the Chinese woman's graceful, peaceful dance. Images of execution, surveillance, and explosions punctuate the film, and a rare example of a recognizable figure — the evangelist/cult leader Claire Prophet — intones the impending apocalypse in synch sound. Her reference to the darkness moving against the light is taken up in Rimmer's landscape photography, but another image later in the film gives it an ambiguous political implication: a documentary (not found) image of a graffiti slogan, "Reflet de nuit." Among the people who pass by the wall bearing this message are women who stop to look at the camera, women who begin and end the sequence. The extremely melancholy soundtrack links this section to the previous one of surveillance and crowds.

At another point in *Local Knowledge*, a woman's legs are intercut with the image of fish mentioned above as an image suggestive of "the unconscious." After three quick shots of the legs, a man shooting a rifle appears briefly. Then Rimmer cuts back to the legs and the camera pans up the woman's body. The woman, perhaps from the 1940s, reclining slightly to show off her legs, turns and returns the gaze before we cut back to the fish. In one sense, the sequence is a dangerous flirtation with clichés of female sexuality, but with that look back at the camera, the woman reclaims her legs and extracts herself from the montage to reveal the fish and the gun as mere symbols. The sequence itself becomes a fragment of language rendered harmless in its deconstruction, but suggestive of impending violence.



While *Local Knowledge* is riddled with images of violence, *Bricolage* may be the film that engages most systematically with violence against women. It opens with a primitive audio-visual machine like a kinoscope in which a woman's head appears in a small opening while a hand turns the crank, and a female voice intermittently squeaks "Hello." A graphic target is superimposed on the aperture. The suggestion of containment recurs in the final sequence in which a graphic white rectangle is superimposed on the image that eventually "becomes" the woman holding the piece of glass described above. Until we see this glass, it is graphically represented as a frame sliding back and forth in front of the woman's face. The white rectangle is also linked to a very specific site of violence when it is superimposed on a window smashed by a hammer. The smashing action is part of a highly melodramatic and narratively coded scenario of male aggression, repeated twelve times, complete with escalating soundtrack.

Connecting these and the other images of *Bricolage* is a black-and-white suggestion of a brick wall crumbling to reveal the woman advertising the cleaning product. She seems to be behind this wall, contained in the film like the woman in the box. Fragments of the phrase "Plus ça change..." repeated monotonously by a woman's voice, accompany the wall image as well as the woman herself, whose lips move slightly out of synch with the phrase. It would do a disservice to the film to say that the phrase refers to women's role in the media, because referentiality is, as always, outside the scope of the film. And yet, the "bricolage" of the film is clearly more than a merely formal exercise, incorporating as it does a series of defamiliarized gender stereotypes from a range of historical sources. "Nothing changes" in this history upon which *Bricolage* comments without entering, retaining that distance of aloof observation that also characterizes the representation of landscape and culture in Rimmer's films.

It is precisely in the way that images are offered up without commentary and without resolution that Rimmer disturbs and provokes. In *As Seen on TV* a colour image of a belly dancer mechanically performing in a boxlike set is distorted in such a way that only her face and her bare stomach can be clearly discerned. This is one of the women who never return the gaze; like the Chinese woman, she appears to be in a trancelike state. A man beside her seems to be touching her nipples with a pointer, as if she were the topic of a lecture. The violence of the scene, consisting of its repetition the man's insistence and the woman's passivity looped in an endless activity of exhibitionism and aggression, incorporates the spectator as the man's interlocutor. Whatever the original footage may have looked like, Rimmer reduces it to a form of gender coding in a technology of address.

The point of this reading of gender in Rimmer's films is neither to accuse Rimmer of "incorrectness" nor to claim the films for a feminist agenda. It is rather to draw attention to the central place of gender in his analysis of representation, for it is spoken, written, and visual language with which the films are ultimately preoccupied. To this extent the work remains within a modernist paradigm of reflexivity and self-referentiality. Increasingly, though, this paradigm is not simply one of film language and representation, but in encompassing video, becomes a technology of representation. Language lessons, cave paintings, military weather forecasts, and all the other fragments of representation and pieces of language that come together in *Local Knowledge* become parts of a technology which is not inert, and is certainly not a harness.

Teresa de Lauretis argues that "violence is not simply 'in' language or 'in' representation, but is also thereby en-gendered."⁴⁸ Her claim that "for the female subject, finally, gender marks the limit of deconstruction, the rocky bed (so to speak) of the 'abyss of meaning'"⁴⁹ is remarkably borne out in Rimmer's films. The

exercises in form continually circulate around the female image which brings, in de Lauretis' words, "the sense of a certain weight of the object in semi-osis, an overdetermination wrought into the work of the sign by the real."⁵⁰ Rimmer's representation of women may be anchored in a "pop" aesthetic of political ambiguity, but by linking that imagery with a violence of and in representation, he transcends the image itself and situates it within a technology of representation in which women are systematically violated.

CONCLUSION: THE WORK OF FILM

*[F]or contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art.*⁵¹

At one point in *Local Knowledge*, in shades of bright yellow and deep brown shadow, the cameraman (Rimmer) runs tight circles around a rock that remains centre frame in close-up, medium close-up, and extreme close-up. The low angle is shaky, catching glimpses of the surrounding landscape, and the imagery has been made distinctly "painterly" through video effects. A rock on a mudflat is basically transformed into a van Gogh wheat field in a two-minute long shot. Inserted into a rapidly paced section of the film loaded with images of violence, literal and metaphoric, this scene is relieving, despite the sound of footsteps and heavy breathing. It seems to anchor the body to its environment in a centered composition in which the very idea of a centre is banalized as a conveniently placed rock. The futility and physicality of the exercise, and the glimpses of Rimmer's shadow in the remote setting, make the sequence a grimly ironic comment on the labour of artmaking.

Two more recent films, *Beaubourg Boogie Woogie* (1991) and *Divine Mannequin*, also incorporate a strong sense of energy and labour linked to the act of filmmaking. Edited to the rhythm of a boogie woogie piano score, *Beaubourg Boogie Woogie* takes the viewer on a whirlwind tour of a gallery in the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Works by Picasso, Leger, Matisse, Magritte, Duchamp and others are "collaged" in the rapid rhythms and camera movements which allow only fragmentary glimpses of the pieces. The film is transgressive in its disrespect for the conventions of contemplation demanded by wall art. The jazz soundtrack, however, evokes the dynamics of folk art that inspired much of the art in question, and its repetitions, along with the fast-paced editing, also reanimate the machine aesthetic of the period. The film may appear to subordinate high modernism to the popular cultural musical form that governs the film, yet it shares a great deal with the work that it photographs in the tendency toward abstraction and its reflexivity. It ends with a long contemplative shot fixed on the sky framed by Beaubourg-district buildings, a very filmic image, offering a sigh of relief outside the gallery.

Beaubourg Boogie Woogie challenges the rarefied atmosphere of "art," not by bringing the paintings to life, but by parodying the gallery setting of the art. The energetic pace of the film represents a technologized, highly distracted gallery patron: a tourist perhaps, but also a physical presence. The tensions between formalist aesthetics and lived, experiential reality inform Rimmer's use of found footage, his use of structural techniques, and also the role of his own body in his films. *Divine Mannequin*, for example, is "grounded" in the image of Rimmer's own running feet, seen from above. A technologized self is indeed constant throughout this body of work in which the filmmaker himself never appears. It is his gaze which

is represented in the persistently fixed camera position, a look that is not "all-perceiving" but materially and spatially linked to the filmmaker's body.

Blaine Allan has suggested that the video effects of *Divine Mannequin* approximate the "hand-made" qualities of film animation and a "corresponding restoration of traditional values to the high-tech artist working in film and video."⁵² The document that accompanies the installation (a found text) endows it with a peculiarly mystical character, possibly of Buddhist origin, and at the same time identifies it obliquely with the male body.⁵³

The auratic unities of traditional artmaking and art-viewing can still be found in Rimmer's work, but always at a distance, held at arms length from the highly coded and technologized interaction with the world. If, for Walter Benjamin, "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art,"⁵⁴ Rimmer relocates that aura as the trace of something sacred and vaguely erotic lingering just beyond the reach of mechanically reproduced imagery. The films are neither "modern" nor "postmodern," but tread a careful path between such categories. The work remains a far cry from George Kuchar's scatological and omnipresent self-representation, eschewing Kuchar's kitsch for a more reflective, and by contrast, modernist, aesthetic.

From the expressionistic mysticism of *Migration* (1969), in which Rimmer links Brakhagian camera-work to symbols of pop mysticism, to the sophisticated collage of landscape photography, found footage, and electronic sound that is *Local Knowledge*, Rimmer's films embrace technology as a mode of awareness. The subject of perception is immersed in a world that is increasingly recognized as gendered, as ethnically diverse, as historical, and as dangerous. As artistic subjectivity is pushed further and further

into the shadowed recesses of the apparatuses of representation, so also it seems is the “aura” of the work of art. Its passing is not mourned but configured as the trace of history, like the people of the past looking through the photographic residue of time.

Most of Rimmer’s non-experimental films are concerned with artistic practice as cultural activity that extends well beyond the art gallery. His most recent video, *Perestroyka* (1992), conforms closely enough to documentary convention that it may even find TV airtime. The interviews that make up *Perestroyka* are primarily with artists, filmmakers, musicians, and critics who address the difficulties of artistic activity in the Soviet past and the Russian present. *Al Neil: A Portrait* (1979), another fairly straightforward documentary, is a portrait of an experimental British Columbia artist/musician/poet/“character.” Even in the experimental films, there is an ongoing interrogation of the relation of film to “art” in its gallery sense, an ambivalence concerning mechanical reproduction as artistic practice and experience.

The internal frames of so much of the imagery in *As Seen on TV* and *Local Knowledge* turn the film screen into a metaphorical TV screen. The digitization of the imagery, however, tends to foreground the signifier, pushing signification into the background, a process more akin to the visual arts than to television. Such ambivalence points to the common tendencies of both television and wall art to enclose and confine “reality.” Along with the windows and sheets of glass noted in *Bricolage*, Blaine Allan has noted that in the video

installation of *Divine Mannequin*, the stacked monitors look like windows through which we perceive the highly abstracted imagery, windows like those in *Real Italian Pizza* and the *Canadian Pacific* films.⁵⁵ In *Local Knowledge* and *Bricolage*, white graphics superimposed on the image further equate the tendency towards enclosure with targets, “writing” the square or circular frame as a zone of desire and aggression.

All of these practices make literal the transformation of the real which takes place in framing. But reality does not become “auratic” through this framing; as it becomes desirable and commodified, it becomes language. Language and people, especially women, are potentially caught up in a technology of desire from which the eye of the camera escapes outside the frame. But as the eye of the camera and the “I” of the filmmaker become increasingly linked in a physical sense, the metaphysical/transcendental inscription of subjectivity is relegated to convention. Technology may insist on its perpetuation, but the living, breathing body of the filmmaker intrudes on its sovereignty. Those who are seen, on the other hand, on the other side of the apparatus, are freed from the technology of desire, and are allowed to return the gaze.

In this process, the imagery with which Rimmer works takes on an increasingly indexical relationship with its various sources, becoming “content,” and recovering its signifieds. Insofar as the recurrence of West Coast horizons within his work constitutes a discourse of familiarity and emplacement, Rimmer is a “Canadian” filmmaker, not by virtue of a national aesthetic, but

through a politics of location. Environmental issues may not be addressed any more literally than are feminist issues, and yet in *Local Knowledge*, at least, one feels obliquely the encroachment of destructive technology on a familiar landscape.

Black Cat White Cat closes with a stunning sequence in which the structural gaze, as the representation of determining consciousness, is quite literally relinquished. It begins with the camera positioned at the opposite end of Tiananmen Square from the entrance to the Forbidden City, a scene familiar to Western viewers from Bertolucci’s *The Last Emperor* (1987). In the foreground of the shot, Chinese tourists, many of them sporting cameras, look at some “sight” hidden below the elevated camera angle, glancing up occasionally in the direction of the camera. The shot is held for some time, the dark interior of the distant palace mirroring the invisible camera in a structure similar to *Real Italian Pizza*, although the discomfort of some of the tourists, aware of being watched, makes it an even more panoptic gaze. And then the camera pans slowly to the right, revealing a huge crowd gathered around, staring at the camera and its operator. As the multitude of curious tourists’ faces unfolds with the camera movement, the centre of that movement, the filmmaker, becomes overwhelmed as the object of their gaze. We never see what they see because technology remains the province of individualized perception and the representation of subjectivity, and yet the cloak of invisibility has been penetrated. The game is up and the subject dethroned, simply by meeting the gaze of other people. ■

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 40.
2. See Paul Arthur, "No More Causes? The International Film Congress," *The Independent* 12, no. 8 (October 1989): 22-26. That issue of *The Independent* also includes an open letter to the Experimental Film Congress from a group of filmmakers challenging its premises, and a response by Bart Testa as a member of the congress executive. See my essay "Will the Reel Avant-Garde Please Stand Up?" *Fuse* 13, no. 1-2 (Fall 1989): 37-43. See also Manhola Dargis, "The Brood," *The Village Voice*, 20 June 1989, 92.
3. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 370.
4. The metaphysical connotations were developed mainly by Annette Michelson, "Toward Snow," 1971; rpt. in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 172-83; and Hollis Frampton, *Circles of Confusion: Film/Photography/Video/Texts 1968-1980* (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1983).
5. Stephen Heath, "Repetition Time: Notes around 'Structural/Materialist Film,'" in *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 165-75; Peter Gidal, *Materialist Film* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Malcolm LeGrice, *Abstract Film and Beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1977).
6. Paul Arthur, "The Last of the Machine? Avant-Garde Films since 1966," *Millennium Film Journal* 16-18 (Fall 1986-Winter 1987): 81
7. Aside from Sitney, whose *Visionary Film* is subtitled "The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978," David James also deals extensively with structural film in a chapter called "Pure Film" in his *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the 60s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). Neither mentions David Rimmer.
8. This is especially true of Al Razutis' essay for the Vancouver Art Gallery retrospective, "David Rimmer: A Critical Analysis," 1980; rpt. in *Take Two: A Tribute to Film in Canada*, ed. Seth Feldman (Toronto: Irwin, 1984), 275-86. For an appreciation of the "synaesthetic" properties of the films to 1971 which prioritize "feelings" over content, see "David Rimmer: A Critical Collage," compiled by Joyce Nelson, in *Canadian Film Reader*, ed. Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1977), 338-44.
9. A fourth paradigm, that of historiography, has already been developed in my article "Reproduction and Repetition of History: David Rimmer's Found Footage," *CineAction!* 16 (Spring 1989): 52-58
10. "The End of Avant-Garde Film" is the title of an article by Fred Camper in *Millennium Film Journal* 16-18 (Fall 1986-Winter 1987): 99-124, which ostensibly inspired the organization of the 1989 International Experimental Film Congress. The open letter to the congress signed by seventy-six filmmakers concludes, "The Avant-Garde is dead. Long live the avant-garde" (*The Independent* 12, no. 8 [October 1989]: 24).
11. Mann claims that the avant-garde "was condemned to death by its own idea of progress" (Mann, 40). His obituary/historicization is as much of and for the discursive space surrounding adversarial art in postmodern culture as for the work itself, and is in this sense extremely pertinent to the situation of avant-garde film and theory and criticism.
12. Frampton, 123.
13. Kirk Tougas, "Vancouver Letter," *Take One* 2, no. 11 (May-June 1970): 29
14. Gaile McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Landscape* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 99. The name "Wacousta" derives from the title of an 1832 novel by John Richardson in which "a profound fear of nature often seems to override any other response" (McGregor, 7).
15. Bart Testa, *Spirit in the Landscape* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989), 11.
16. Stephen Heath writes: "The disunity, the disjunction of 'structural/materialist film' is, exactly, the spectator" (Heath, 167).
17. Reproduced in *Vancouver: Art and Artists 1931-1983*, exhibition catalogue (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983), 228.
18. Reproduced in *Vancouver: Art and Artists*, 230.

19. Scott Watson, "Terminal City: Place, Culture and the Regional Inflection," in *Vancouver: Art and Artists*, 226-55. Many visual artists also turned to the styles and iconography of the Northwest Coast native cultures, which are by and large absent from Rimmer's filmmaking, perhaps because they do not lend themselves to cinematic appropriation. It may not be stretching the landscape theme too far to see it reappear in *Media Wall*, an installation by Rimmer, Tom Fix, and Tom Shandel, which is also somewhat totemistic in concept. The ruins of television sets are banked in "mountains" and "pillars" against a gallery wall, as part of the 1969 *Electrical Connections* exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery (photo of installation in *Vancouver: Art and Artists*, 186).
20. Scott Watson, "Art in the Fifties: Design, Leisure and Painting in the Age of Anxiety," in *Vancouver: Art and Artists*, 97-98.
21. Blaine Allan, "David Rimmer's *Surfacing on the Thames*," *Cine-Tracts* 3, no. 9 (Winter 1980): 58
22. Michelson, 175. She goes on to cite Husserl as the philosophical source for her notion of horizons of perception.
23. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 71
24. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 9.
25. *Ibid.*, 9.
26. Heath claims that structural-materialist film is "anti-voyeuristic" (Heath, 19) but he fails to demonstrate either the means or the effects of such anti-voyeurism.
27. Dai Vaughan describes the distinctive sense of formal spontaneity characteristic of the Lumière's cinema in "Let There be Lumière," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 63-67.
28. Bart Testa, *Back and Forth: Early Cinema and the Avant-Garde* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1992), 19. Testa lists other key examples of structural films using early found footage: Ken Jacobs, *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969); Hollis Frampton, *Public Domain* (1972), *Gloria!* (1979), and *Cadenza #1* (1977-80); Ernie Gehr, *Eureka* (1974) and *History* (1974); Al Razutis, *Visual Essays: Origins of Film* (1973-84); and Malcolm LeGrice, *After Lumière* (1974) (*Ibid.*, 36).
29. *Ibid.*, 92.
30. *Ibid.*, 94.
31. See my "Reproduction and Repetition of History," 56.
32. James Clifford, "Of Other Peoples: Beyond the 'Salvage Paradigm,'" in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, no. 1, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987), 121.
33. Noel Burch, "A Primitive Mode of Representation?" in Elsaesser, ed., *Early Cinema*, 220-27. See also Noel Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, trans. and ed. Ben Brewster (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). See the debates anthologized in Elsaesser, ed., *Early Cinema*.
34. "Every description or interpretation that conceives itself as 'bringing culture into writing' moving from oral-discursive experience (the 'native's,' the fieldworker's) to a written version of that experience (the ethnographic text) is enacting the structure of 'salvage'..." James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 113.
35. In the panoptic institutionalized gaze of prison architecture, authority rests in centrality and invisibility; visibility becomes a form of submission as the gaze becomes a form of entrapment. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 195-230.
36. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 34.
37. *Ibid.*, 28.
38. Barthes defines the *noème* "that-has-been": [I]n Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past" (*ibid.*, 76).
39. *Ibid.*, 82.
40. "[E]thnography's narrative of specific differences presupposes, and always refers to, an abstract plane of similarity" (Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," 101).
41. Here I am obliquely alluding to Foucault's analysis of "Las Meninas" in order to indicate the tightly structured scenario of the empowered gaze which is reproduced in *Real Italian Pizza*. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: The Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 3-16.
42. Rimmer has identified the location as the Upper West Side, around 85th Street and Columbus. Rick Hancox claims to have spotted Rimmer himself eating pizza on the other side of the camera, suggesting a further breakdown on the voyeuristic set-up (Rick Hancox, "Short Films," *Cinema Canada*, 2d ser., no. 14 (June-July 1974), 58-60.
43. Trinh, 96.
44. Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology* (N.p.: Basic Books, 1983), 6.
45. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 40.
46. *Ibid.*, 94-95.
47. For a history of the "exclusively male subject-position" in the avant-garde, see Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 21.
48. Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 42.
49. *Ibid.*, 48.
50. *Ibid.*, 41.
51. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 234.
52. Blaine Allan, "Handmade, or David Rimmer's *Divine Mannequin*," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 2, no. 1 (1992): 66
53. Blaine Allan has suggested that the text is "consistent with some accounts of the sacraments of Tantrism and Buddhist practice" although the source is unknown. It describes a female totem through which a religious man can "make love to a semidivine" (*ibid.*, 72). *Divine Mannequin* was installed at Emily Carr College's Charles E. Scott Gallery in September 1988 in the form of three stacked monitors and a text tacked on the wall. According to Allan, "the column of images effectively becomes a body" (*ibid.*, 69).
54. Benjamin, 221.
55. Allan, 70-71.

41.

DAVID RIMMER'S VANCOUVER

DAVID RIMMER'S VANCOUVER

by Mike Hoolboom

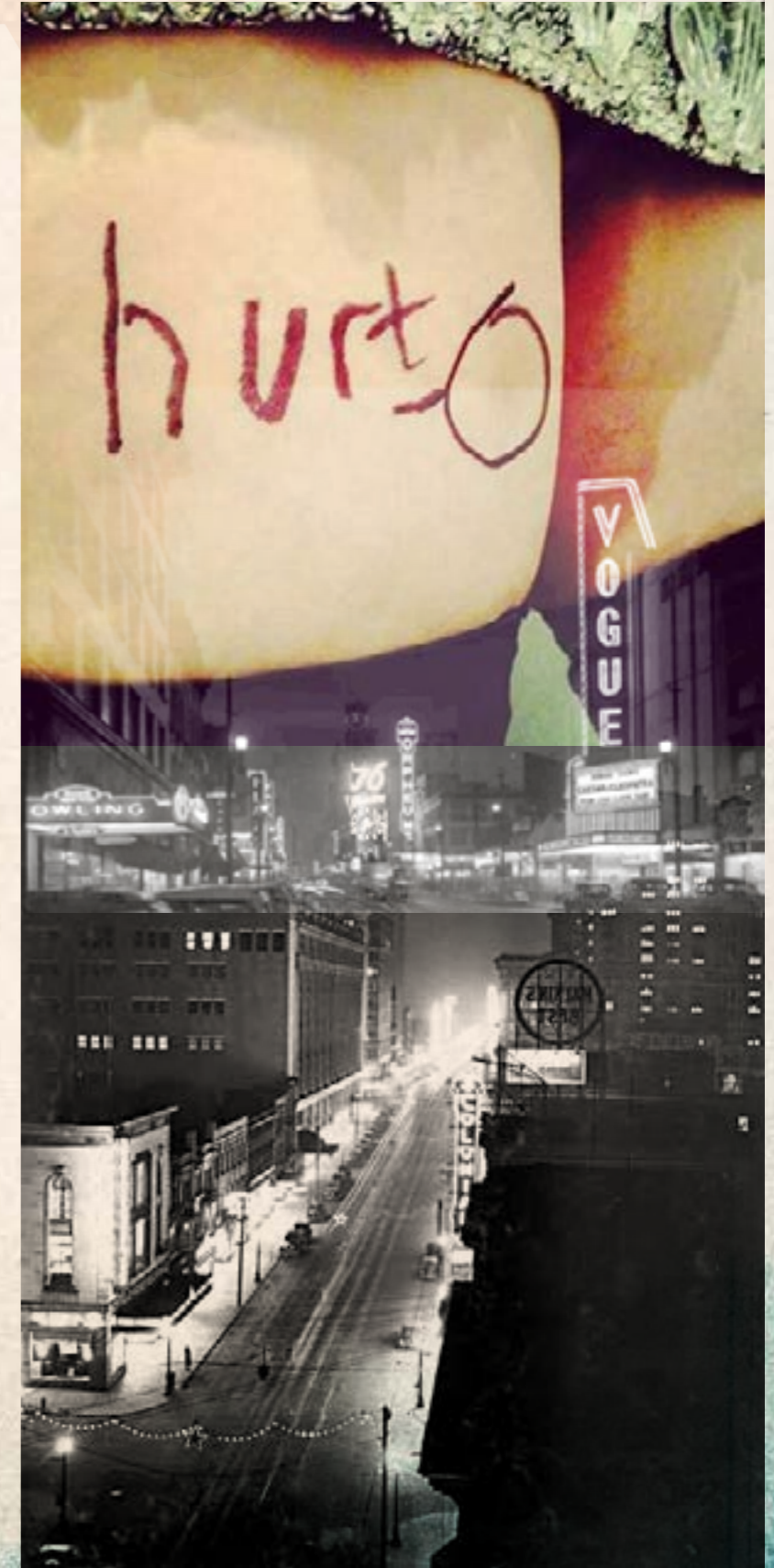
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Paul Delaney, 1994

She stands motionless, covered in a fine haze of sweat and blonde ambition. Around her six men, naked except for g-strings, preen about her garters, long arms reaching from her stiletto boots to the crucifix lost in the foliage of her bustier. Her hand caresses the length of her décolleté, her head hurled back in a paroxysm of excess. In an instant, she seizes her sex and thrusts it boldly towards 80,000 Japanese teenagers. They don't speak English and the performers speak nothing else, but tonight the differences of language are set aside. They reach for her with the understanding that genius is not a gift but the way out one invents in desperate cases. The year is 1989. The city is Osaka. The woman is Madonna.

Over the course of the past decade Madonna has turned from pop star to corporation, assuming the roles of author, performance artist, gay rights activist,

movie star and business mogul. Her tireless incarnations have proved an irresistible lure for the mass media's cult of personality. But apart from her gender and her boundless relish for the invention of life before the camera there seems little in this story to separate her from dozens of other media icons — be they presidents, royals, fast horses or entertainers. But in her pursuit of iconicity, Madonna has consciously drawn ideas and images from generations of vanguard artists — restaging formal tropes, themes and motifs held dear by a marginal imaging practice. These would be most succinctly applied in a genre she would deploy with an imprimatur all her own: the music video. Designed as advertisements for records, these short, narcissistic class fantasies found a champion in America's MTV and quickly blossomed into a global phenomena. To the astonishment of all those who had been involved in the sixties reinvention of cinema — in the liberation of an apparatus that had for decades remained the near exclusive preserve of a monied class — they found that the grammar of personal invention, a grammar of discarded film stocks, marginalized sexualities and meditations on





the apparatus — all this had been pressed into the service of a budding genre whose express aim was marketing. These personal gestures had been drawn by film artists working in a singularly eccentric fashion with little attention or reward, outcasts even from an art milieu that remained the preserve of objects that could be bought and sold. Seemingly overnight this long ignored rhetoric would appear again, now reduced to the dimensions of a television set, beamed to audiences undreamt of even in the most utopian imaginations of the avant-garde, now made to watch as decades of discovery seemed effortlessly converted into the hype surrounding new record releases. For evidence one need look no further than Madonna's most recent recording effort, *Erotica*. The video produced for its title track is a virtual catalogue of avant-garde gestures in film — the handheld camera, layers of superimposition, grainy, step-printed images of the forbidden, recycled found footage, flare outs, stroboscopic lighting and form cutting all conspire to ease *Erotica* onto a shelf alongside a pantheon of other vanguard works in film. Indeed, having delivered it to the offices of MTV it was promptly banned, adding to its transgressive aura of forbidden sexuality and dangerous practices, another arena avants once claimed as their own.

The postmodern temper of the eighties has collapsed traditional distinctions between mainstream and marginal cultures — for so long the war cry of an undernourished vanguard of artists inveighing against the reifications of privilege that fueled the dream factory. But now the Other has turned to embrace its bastard kin, proving once more the resilience of capital in its ability to absorb difference and turn it towards a common ideal: the commodification of experience. Now that the fringe has been co-opted into the electronic vomitorium of multichannel television which way does opposition lie? How is it possible to construct an image practice that might resist the feeding

frenzy of commerce, as it roots out undreamt territories, worlds not yet imagined in its colonization of a double architecture — one below ground, one above? And if such an image could exist, what would it look like here, in the aqueous portal of Vancouver — for two decades home to one of Canada's most prodigious efforts in the arena of fringe cinema? In answer it will be necessary to turn back, not in hopes of celebrating the good old things but in unraveling the bad new ones...

*Everything in history appears twice —
the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.*

— Karl Marx

He was born David McLellan Rimmer in Lion's Gate Hospital, the bleached Catholic erection that continues to overlook the suburban sprawl ranging over the bulk of the city. His parents arrived in 1923 in a period between the wars that provided the impetus for the city's establishment as a major trading port that would fuel a century long expansion. The Rimmers arrived in Vancouver when it was still an aspiring port of call — "Terminal City" as it was named by the men who had driven the rail line cross-country. While a few hundred workers had gathered near the Burrard Inlet to work at the Hastings sawmill in the early 1870s, just a couple of decades later their number had pushed beyond one thousand, anticipating the arrival of the rail. These citizens would incorporate their number into the City of Vancouver, a city which would number 27,000 residents by the turn of the century, and 120,000 by 1911. A decade later it would grow to 163,000 and by 1931, having swallowed the neighbouring municipalities of Point Grey and South Vancouver it hosted a quarter of a million inhabitants.

Before the rail track merged its western setting with Canadian markets to the east, Vancouver's port was joined in trade with the United States, home to 60% of its exports, and to England, which took nearly a

third. B.C.'s salmon canning industry set up offices in Vancouver, and the massing prairie population proved a lucrative market for the province's fruit and timber trade. Banking interests, insurance firms and industrial concerns from the east arrived in Vancouver to set up shop early in the twentieth century. Government capital invested in upgrading and establishing port facilities would make Vancouver the busiest port in the country by 1930, two-thirds of its traffic directly tied to wheat. The opening of the Panama Canal gave west coast wood access to markets in the east and beyond the Atlantic. Lumber and wheat figured chiefly, along with canned salmon, metals, fertilizers and fish meal.

The 1930s and 40s witnessed a decline in the use of the port as global depression, prairie drought and the Allied preference for North Atlantic shipping routes each took their toll. But in the fifties the port grew alongside the global economy to which it remained so dependent, and by the early sixties Vancouver was once again the pre-eminent trading port in the country. Though there was little indigenous manufacturing, the twenty-five years after the second World War were dominated by exports of minerals and forest products, the latter accounting for half of every dollar earned in the city.

By the time Rimmer had graduated from the University of British Columbia with majors in economics and math, Vancouver had become Canada's third largest city (after Toronto and Montreal), an exploding metropolis whose colonized economic base would nonetheless seek indigenous expression in an art practice reared beneath the benevolent slopes of the Coast Mountains. For if the identity of its vast neighbour to the south had been founded on the Hobbesian premise of a contract amongst equals securing them from anarchy, a contract that would inspire a revolutionary war, a pioneering spirit and *laissez faire*

capitalism — then the citizens of Vancouver would need to look elsewhere for their sense of themselves, for an identity that seemed as much a function of geography as a question of history. As Northrop Frye would have it, the problematic of a Canadian identity is less "Who am I?" than "Where is here?" — that is, an attempt to account for the vast and overwhelming topography of a largely unsettled surround. To this question, "Where is here?" there have been few replies as elegant in their summary understandings as the film work of David Rimmer.

At the age of twenty six, having dropped out of Simon Fraser University's Master's program in English to become an artist, Rimmer found work at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation — the state sponsored television network designed to convert the 5,000 mile sprawl of Canadiana into the alternating currents of prime time. This electronic mirror would continue to founder beneath the phenomenal success of an American tutelage whose wares were in easy reach of the 85% of the population that lived within a hundred miles of the Canada-U.S. border. Network programs beamed at large American markets in Seattle, Detroit, Chicago and a host of other cities stationed near the 49th parallel spilled easily into a voracious Canadian clime already accustomed to American movies, themes and stars. Even today in the video stores that score intersections across Vancouver, Canadian films may still be found in the "foreign" section, while American work assumes the bulk of the retail area.

Forced to compete with its American neighbour, the CBC decided to mimic the proven formulas of the networks, offering its population a retinue of generic sitcoms, talk fests and cop shows. Apart from its journalism and sports broadcasts it has never taken hold, and continues to rely on state purchased programming from the States to bulk up its ratings.

It was here, amidst the miles of generic emulsion that were daily beamed across the nation that Rimmer was introduced to film, first as a neg cutter, and then as a film editor. It was here that he met Stan Fox, a programmer and avant-garde aficionado. Fox had inherited a regional mandate from CBC headquarters — the country parceled into topographical segments that were imagined to possess a singular character, even as they were framed by a distinctive geography. Because the imaging practices of the private sector had been driven into ruin by American monopolies, and because the state, heeding these same monopolies, developed a national imaging trust that would leave American interests free to do business as usual, an indigenous imaging culture was slow to mature. As a result the relation between marginal and mainstream Canadian practice was significantly enhanced — both toiled beneath the omniscient shadow of the American giants, both rendered fringe concerns in their country of origin.

If theirs was a common lot, then Stan Fox at the CBC was one of the few with the power and largesse to cement the relationship. He initiated film workshops in both Vancouver universities and provided substantial support for a budding community of makers. Together with Gene Lawrence he founded *Enterprise*, a television series showcasing the talents of local film and video artists. *Enterprise* commissioned works by artists such as Gary Lee-Nova, Tom Shandel, Sylvia Spring... and David Rimmer. They met in the editing bays of the old CBC building, the first an affable, paternalistic pipe smoker, the second a fledgling with a head full of art and eyes that would soon craft the most exquisite miniatures of the Canadian fringe. While working at the CBC Rimmer composed a film out of newsreel outtakes and landscape forays, a kinetic mantra of universality that fairly bristles with the optimistic occultism of the day. He called it *Square Inch Field* (1968), named for the Ajna Chakra in Kundalini

Yoga, the small drawn space between the eyes which explodes in Rimmer's film to assume a catalogue of archetypal faces drawn from around the globe, faces whose accumulating surface appear with increasing rapidity until each endures for just a single frame — 24 per second — their likeminded composition serving to underscore a global physiognomy.

Stan Fox provided funding for *Know Place* (1968), a free school documentary by Rimmer, and purchased it, along with *Square Inch Field*, for the *Enterprise* program on CBC. But it was another Vancouver institution that would provide the formative gestalt that would hone Rimmer's interest in the moving image. They called it Intermedia, a four-storey warehouse on Beatty Street that remains in many ways the primal scene of Vancouver's alternative arts scene. Its origins are described by co-founder Jack Shadbolt:

In '65 I had left the Art School to assess myself as an artist. I had become interested in McLuhan, in meeting him, talking to him. I was fired up by some of these new ideas as were several key people around, among them Victor [Doray] and Joe Kyle, one of the real instigators of all this. I called together everybody I thought would be a germinal thinker about a few things that were happening. We met at my house every week for a whole winter. Joe came along, Victor, Arthur Erickson, Archie McKinnon, dean of communications at SFU, Iain Baxter, people who were coming into town, anybody we felt was significant and we simply set up a continuing, open-ended discussion. Victor Doray had contact with all the key people around in the new video field. And he said, I think that all these new people who are doing film and video need an equipment centre of some sort and that's the most practical thing one needs for a starting point. We got together, presented our brief to the Canada Council people, Peter

Dwyer and David Silcox came out here; we met with them and made our pitch and they gave us \$35,000... We found a building, fixed it up, equipped it, hired Werner Aellen as co-ordinator and never looked back. We called our operation Intermedia (the interaction between media) and the name spread.

– Jack Shadbolt,
Vancouver: Art and Artists 1931-1983, 181.

At Intermedia, Rimmer was one of a core group of roughly twenty members whose interests ranged from poetry, performance, film, sound, painting and sculpture. When American Al Razutis arrived in 1968, having burned his draft card and been recently jailed for anti-war demonstrations, he began weekly screenings of avant-garde film, the first regular screenings of artists' film work in the city. While largely drawn from the American fringe with which Razutis was familiar, programs soon included the work of locals like Gary Lee-Nova, Al Sens and David Rimmer. Present day screenings of fringe work are invariably state sponsored and subsidized while their declining attendance reveals a marked public disinterest, an inability to build and sustain audiences and the collapse of vanguard production into a film genre like any other — the western, the science fiction film, the film noir. But in 1968 these screenings were having a profound effect on their audiences, who came to recognize themselves not in the Hollywood melodramas of stars and plots, but in the scratchy, flickering relations of personal filmmaking. The screening's founder Al Razutis put it this way:

I hooked up with an organization called Intermedia which was a four storey warehouse on Beatty Street comprised of artists of all disciplines... anybody who was doing crazy, innovative work was doing it there. I convinced them that I wanted to run underground films on the

weekend and they said nobody here comes to anything. I asked for the second floor Saturdays and Sundays promising to pay for everything and I would keep the proceeds. We made hundreds of dollars every weekend — the place was packed...

Take a film like *Lapis* [1966] by James Whitney for example. It's a computer graphic mosaic set to sitar music, an abstract film which serves as a meditation on a state of mind. It externalized what some people experienced on LSD. Formally eloquent in its own right, it had a place in a counter-culture drug culture because people were experiencing these things on a daily basis. What they were celebrating was completely connected to their political beliefs which were similarly anti-establishment. It was not a problem in that culture to accommodate a whole mosaic of anti-establishment moves. Everyone was trying to break down conventions and look for alternatives to message systems which they'd grown up with, family systems they'd inhabited, professional systems they were obliged to. That's why none of this work was touted as art, because the institutions of art were already suspect. How could you reject middle class America and not reject its art history and universities? The same universities that were teaching a European history of art were teaching the military sciences that fed the war machine. In the time of Intermedia there was no connection with grant agencies, art galleries, any institutions of any kind. Later on Michelson, Sitney and Youngblood began making schools and movements which was the beginning of the end: its professionalization, anthologization, academicization. Underground film became art and that was the demise of the form. They made it pedagogical, voyeuristic and auteur based. That's when the rush for the museums began.

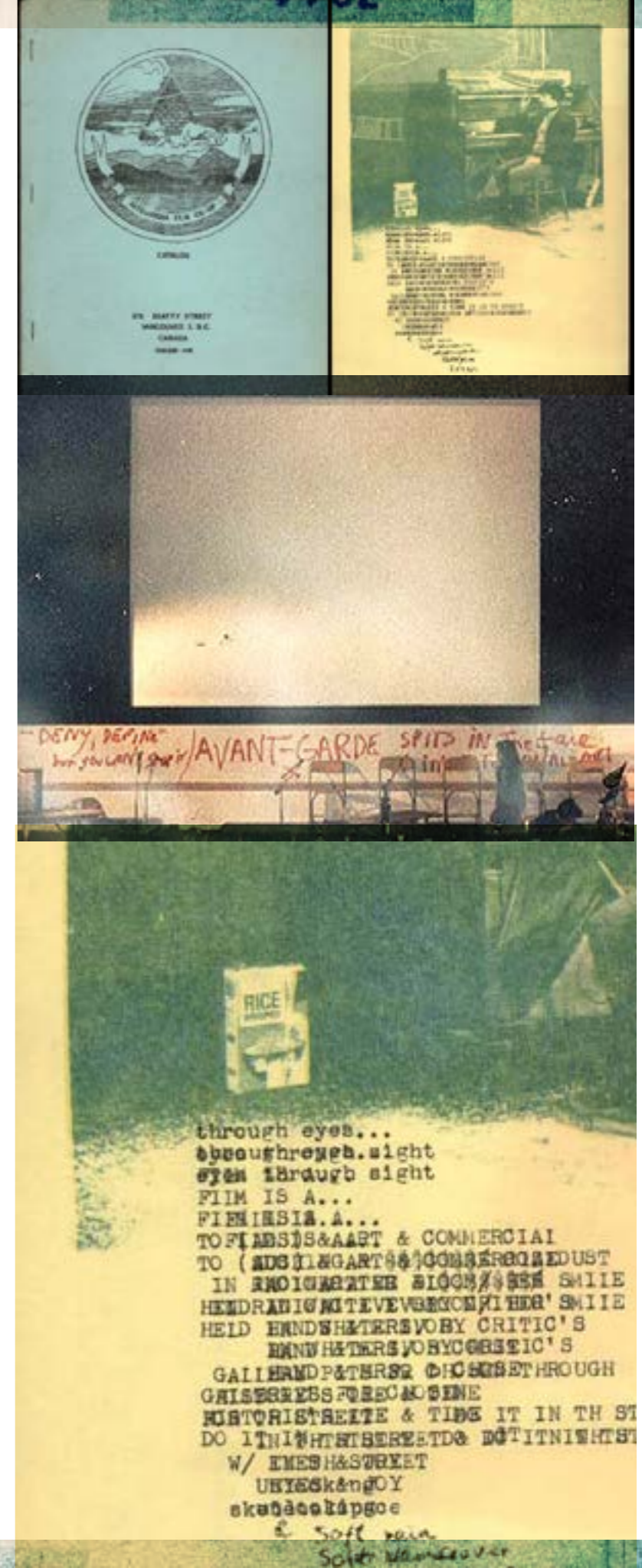
– Al Razutis, interview

In 1969 Razutis organized the Intermedia Film Co-operative, a distribution collective whose democratic mandate ensured that anyone with a film could join. It was Vancouver's first distribution collective and included the work of local filmmakers like Razutis and Rimmer as well as international filmmakers. While the collective was short lived — lasting just two years — it managed to print a catalogue and provide a focus for local activity.

While at Intermedia, which he had chanced upon “just wandering in one day” — Rimmer found a home on the “film floor” of its four storey house — stocked with the bare rudiments of film production: projector, rewinds and splicer. Here was the home of the Intermedia Film Co-op and a cadre of like-minded artists, hipsters, drop-outs and hangers on. Each year a major show was mounted in the Vancouver Art Gallery where members collaborated on multimedia environments. In 1970 The Dome Show saw each member of the collective build domes. Rimmer's geodesic design was animated by an abstract short of water waves he called *Blue Movie* (1970). The year before he had participated in The Electrical Connection Show at the VAG, filling a room with dozens of monitors, some smashed, some bearing mirrors or housing telephones, some tuned to the CBC, some running live before its audience and others filled with the first artisanally produced 1/2" black-and-white video pictures of the port. It was the first video installation in Vancouver, a rambling wreck of television and its constituents, mounted for a two week run in the heart of the metropolis, its multiphonic address an early harbinger of the cable/satellite broadcasts that would stack their multiplicity across a boundless spectrum of discrete channels. This interactive heave was in many ways emblematic of Rimmer's involvement with Intermedia — a spontaneous flux of collaboration whose easy flow from centre to margins was

fuelled by poets making films and painters making sculpture, an interactive mix founded on exploration, dialogue and alliance. Intermedia was the culmination and watershed of a period in Vancouver art making, where a minimum of bureaucratic impediments and a co-operative spirit trailing from artist studios to corporate headquarters provided a common front for the production and exhibition of a living art. Inevitably, it was not to last.

In the years between 1969 and 1975 Rimmer would construct a series of shorts that exhibited a typology of Vancouver — a symbolic history that while never consciously constructed, nevertheless managed to convey the history of the city in its successive incarnations — from unspoiled wilderness to colonial outpost, from entertainment centre to industrial combine. The blankly titled *Landscape* (1969) is the first, a plain air portrait of the mountains which surround the city of Vancouver, a grandly picturesque setting which prompted pitchmen from the tourist bureau to dub the province “super-natural.” *Landscape* is shot from a fixed vantage, framing a mountain overlooking an expanse of lake, the camera exposing a frame every four seconds over a stretch of fifteen hours, compressing the actions of an entire day into eight minutes of film. As cloud formations pass overhead and the water unfurls with the impression of a north wind, the camera stands in the same posture as its subject. In drafting this simple, time-lapsed portrait of natural cycles, Rimmer mimes the effect of his subject, positioning the camera as landscape, enlisting its service in a sympathetic correspondence. The device used to ensure a steady image is usually a three-legged construction of wood or metal whose pyramidal vantage resolves into a narrow base at the head where the camera is attached. These tripods resemble mountains. This act of correspondence, which manufactures



the shape of contemplation in a pyramidal mount that mirrors its subject, inaugurates Rimmer's dialogue with his city and its often uneasy rift between cultural and natural artifacts.

Vancouver's ocean-side perch, surrounded by mountains and nearby islands, combined with the most temperate climate in the country, ensured that landscape would exert an abiding fascination for the image makers of the region. Natural themes would continue to preoccupy Rimmer in his next work as he furthered his typology of the region. Lacking a manufacturing nexus, Vancouver would continue to rely on the conversion of the natural world into commodities to fuel its furious growth. Founded on its luxurious forests, they would account for fully half of its economic production in the years following the Second World War.

Rimmer restages this intersection of wild kingdoms and human settlement in *Migration* (1969). Its main subject is a slow flying seagull, consistently shown through rephotography, its movements slowed, its status as an image magnified as enlarged particles of grain and a flickering cadence replay its flight. All too soon the picture seizes and burns, the image of the gull giving way to a molten transport that reaffirms the technology of vision. If *Migration's* rapidly distended pans mime the efforts of a bird in flight, its molten dissolution recalls the gull's status as a function of the image, its very legibility reliant on the camera's technology of vision.

As moments from the natural world pass in a blur of lines and sun flares, the montage introduces a second central figure — a dead beast lying on shore, its festering carcass home to an omnivorous insect world. Amidst the electronic chatter of the soundtrack it is tempting to read this creature as a victim of technocracy, cast aside in the march of progress. But it is also a reminder of the central place accorded death in

the natural cycle, and that our reliance on reproductive technologies are a way to mediate our own end. Rimmer insists that our machines act as a kind of veil over our own death, and so insistently deploys it to conjure images of what it seeks to repress, the dialogue with mortality coded in the terminals of replication.

In 1908 the city of Vancouver began publishing the Elite Directory — a listing of the city's important personages — nearly 80% of whom resided in the West End. "At home" days provided structure for their gatherings, the Elite Directory noting days when visits could be made without invitation. A raft of societal organs followed: the Vancouver Club, the Terminal City Club, Vancouver Lawn Tennis Club, Royal Vancouver Yacht Club and the Vancouver Riding Club all provided venues of interaction for the monied elite of Vancouver's burgeoning capitalist interests.

Rimmer restages this era of English gentility in a ballroom short simply entitled *The Dance* (1970). Entirely comprised of "found footage," the film opens with an image recurrent in the Rimmer canon — the veil or drape. Here it is a plush curtain drawn to reveal an audience awaiting spectacle. Rimmer's inaugural use of the veil is here deployed in its frankest form, though it is a gesture he will return to in many films to come. The veil lifts only to reveal its onlookers, it keeps from them the secret of identification: the collapse of an eye and its object ensures that viewers become what they behold. The veil is the mask which keeps the audience from itself, even as it is the seductive lure that draws them to it, but its fascination depends in part on keeping its operations secret, transparent, invisible. This is where Rimmer and so many other artists of his ilk have intervened, insistently presenting both an image and its construction in order that the drape might be drawn aside, that an audience may see themselves seeing, weaned

from the identificatory abandon of spectacle which is invariably touched with nostalgia because something is always lost. The spectator. The spectator is always lost in the story, the music and emotions. Rimmer's program of identification asks that we admit all of the works' protagonists, and these invariably include the means of representation. By dividing one's focus between the means and object represented, one might attain insight (not to mention pleasure) into one's own capacities for reconstruction. The danger in this kind of reflexivity is that life behind the veil becomes as fascinated as life before it, that the technologies of reproduction are themselves fetishized and reified.

After the drape opens and the audience sits *The Dance* begins. A horn band blows as a couple begins a turning jag across the stage. But midway through their routine their turns are looped in a gestural closed circuit that underlines the redundancy of spectacle. It is as if we were made to watch all of the practice turns that had allowed them to perform this one so gracefully, or that the groove of their time together had worn so deeply that they were caught in lockstep, in that endlessly opening moment related by schizophrenics, fascinated, obsessive, infinite.

It started with the fruit trees. One saw might last forever. I was completely absorbed in the dust floating to the ground, the incredible patterns in the bark, the muscles in my arm pulling back and then pushing forward. Everything stretched infinitely in all directions.

– Mark Vonnegut,
The Eden Express, 76.

The schizophrenia of *The Dance* shows itself in the seamless apertures of the ballroom turn — the ease and transparency of their gestures casting another kind of veil over the work of the body. By arresting and repeating a small fragment, the filmmaker opens

up a rift in the seamless flow, a fissure into which the action falls. As the couple continues to spin ceaselessly round the same tile, their actions resemble a machine at work — the machine of spectacle, its performers become automatons, its spectators continuing to respond in the manner to which they've grown accustomed. This divide between seat and stage, self and persona, between the apparent effortless production and the work that underlies it, between an audience joined in the representative figure of its star turn and the anonymous collection of individuals whose community is founded on the price of a ticket — all this marks the world of spectacle as a schizophrenic device. It is a schizophrenia founded on ruptures it struggles to conceal by naturalizing its conventions, by turning its convictions into genres, and its morality into commodities.

Entertainment isn't a suspension of disbelief, but a suspension of values. It may even be said that this is the meaning of 'entertainment' as it is practiced amongst us: the relief of suspending values with which we are tired of living and frightened of living without... To go from a job you don't like to watching a screen on which others live more intensely than you... this is American life.

– Michael Ventura,
Shadow Dancing in the USA

In *The Dance*, the couple suddenly breaks from their machine-inspired turning and finishes their dance to thunderous applause. The curtain draws closed but its degraded and flickering visage signals its status as rephotographed, its original footage crudely refilmed. Closer inspection reveals that this shot is the same as the film's opening only played in reverse, its softly strobing demeanor used to mark its status as also-ran. The drape's patent restaging reaffirms spectacle's closed-circuit, palindromic seal.

If *The Dance* restaged the schizophrenia of spectacle, then *Watching for the Queen* (1973) would remark on its effects. Taking the audience as its subject, Rimmer focuses exclusively on a crowd of faces. In the grammar of film, this watching is a kind of elongated reaction shot. In a gesture that recalls Vancouver's colonial unconscious, these folks are gathered for a glimpse of another country's sovereign, crowned head of a bloodline that could only derive from English shores. Rimmer's footage likewise hails from elsewhere — as in *The Dance*, he has appropriated a single, incidental shot from another film. So the film's subject and formal treatment are joined in their role as "absent parents," both derive from lost centres, absent Others pressed into the service of a Canadian mythos.

Where *The Dance* detailed the spectacle of entertainment, *Watching* deliberates on the spectacle of state, its armatures of power reduced to its primary function of directing attention, of arresting the gaze. As Rimmer's crowd jostles for a view of the monarch she never once appears — what we are watching then is not the pageantry of state but its effect — which Rimmer suggests is the visibility of its populace. Even as they have taken to the streets to bask in the numinous aura of a bygone era, their congregation has grown public, their watch a public circumstance, their gaze a matter of records like this one.

As Foucault relates in *Discipline and Punish*, the auratic power of the monarch is supplanted in the modern state by the internalization of conscience, a heightened visibility and a dispersion of power from a centre (the ruler) to its surrounding field (the ruled). Here, in *Watching for the Queen*, we stand witness to an audience not unlike ourselves, an audience regarding an audience, a closed loop of regard, or a metaphor for the internalization of the watch — each of us become our own jailor, our own watchful conscience.

Rimmer's formal treatment of the fragment elaborates the watch — freezing the first frame of this two second (48 frame) shot for 1200 frames, the second for 600 frames, the third for 300 frames, and so on. As the crowd slowly turns into motion, its quiet acceleration drawing its constituents into the time of the present, our eyes are dispersed across the frame, imagining the lives behind this anonymous assembly. Because the centre is missing, because *Watching's* central character never appears, and because the motivating gesture of this congregation is left off screen, we are left with a narrative of attention. This structuralist reprise makes metaphor of the Canadian public, slowly poring over the runes of distant cultures, waiting for a glimpse of bloodlines that might secure its own identity. This watch, this surveillance is one finally turned upon itself, in a reflexive gesture that demonstrates the new distribution of power, a new order of control.

What in fact was the Rousseauist dream that motivated many of the Revolutionaries? It was the dream of a transparent society, visible and legible in each of its parts, the dream of there no longer existing any zones of darkness, zones established by the privileges of royal power or the prerogatives of some corporation, zones of disorder. It was the dream that each individual, whatever position he occupied, might be able to see the whole of society and that men's hearts should communicate, their vision be unobstructed by obstacles, and that opinion of all reign over each.

– Michel Foucault,
Power/Knowledge, 152

If *Watching for the Queen* allegorizes the return of the colonialist gaze then *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970) might be read as the passing of the royal imperative. When England declared war in 1939 against Germany, Canada was quick to follow suit, and a Canadian



draft would soon swell the ranks of an Allied war effort. While conscription was greeted with outrage in Quebec, there was little resistance in the rest of the country where patriotism remained founded on ideals of English empire. But the savagery of the war effort combined with a proliferating industrial base and a revamped immigration policy would unwrap many of these commonwealth ties, even as Canada looked to its southern neighbour for capital, security, and the myths of nationality it had so long lived without. *Surfacing on the Thames* — like *Watching for the Queen* and *The Dance* — is comprised of a brief length of found footage, this one just ten seconds in length, showing two ships passing on the Thames. Culled from a Second World War-era newsreel, its 240-frame length progresses a frame at a time, each dissolving into the next in a golden-hued transport of granularity and aging. *Surfacing* demonstrates its materials, the mottled surfaces, scars and scratches of its original now held in a suspended gaze. The flow of filmstrip and river are married here beneath the sign of an elegiac passing, its movement of retreat echoed in the shattered nitrate stock of the war. An image of the setting sun of empire, these dark hulks passing “like ships in the night” signal an end of one empire, and the beginnings of another, in America.

Between 1945 and the early 1970s, both the Canadian and global economy were dominated by the United States and the multinational corporations it spawned. Large firms producing standard, mass produced goods were at the very core of this production system, which came to be known as “Fordism”... The success of Fordism after 1945 rested upon twin foundations. The first was a distinctive set of production and organizational characteristics. Foremost among these was the mass manufacture of standardized products, such as automobiles, domestic appliances, and heavy machinery,

that yielded considerable economies of scale. This, in turn, required a distinct industrial structure, dominated by large, oligopolistic capital-intensive corporations that often combined all stages of production at a single place. Associated with this vertical integration were labour practices based upon principles of “scientific management,” which entailed production-line work and the repetition of limited tasks.

– Graeme Wynn and Timothy Oke (eds.),
Vancouver and Its Region, 173

Vancouver’s postwar industrialism and its ties with Fordism is shown in Rimmer’s *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* (1970). It is a celebration of anonymity, a portrait of the machine rescued from the waste piles of industrial excess, society’s “cutting room floor.” Befitting its (economically) colonial vantage — it is an image drawn not from its maker, but from an already existing film — it is part of the “received” gallery of pictures that spray Vancouver from south of the border. Its primal scene is a single shot, obsessively repeated over the course of the film’s eight minutes. Its central figure is a woman, unnamed and unidentified, who performs a single action, raising a large cellophane wrap and allowing it to settle on a large table standing before her. We see this woman through a veil of cellophane, its transparency admitting her visibility even as its surface shapes the contour of her repeated gesture. Her visibility amidst this world of machines is central — amidst the clatter of engines and turbines her actions are readily accessible to the eye of the supervisor, the judge, her gesture weighed according to the standards of the factory. The fact of her labour and her visibility are drawn inextricably together here, in a panoptic universe where the life of its workers is submitted to an unrelenting scrutiny, an optical measuring and adding up, the body in motion becomes a quantifiable arrangement of vectors, a geometry of commerce, a congress of efficiency.

Over the whole surface of contact between the body and the object it handles, power is introduced, fastening them to one another. The regulation imposed by power is at the same time the law of construction of the operation.

– Michel Foucault,
Discipline and Punish, 153

As the film develops we see her in variations of negative and positive, in black-and-white and colour, its rhythms of change orchestrated according to a musical temper of theme and variation. The soundtrack is filled with the voice of the machine, of turning engines and accelerating pistons, all managing to condense in its eight-minute span, a cacophony of reception. Its closing moments finds her still lifting the veil, but now rendered as a broken line drawing, her contours mapped with a rough and approximate draftsmanship, the whole conspiring to convey an image of dissolution, the body's perimeter drawn to a vanishing point in a scopic future of mass production.

Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper is both a celebration of a machine art and a haunting exposition of the new body born in the womb of manufacture. Marshall McLuhan writes, "Retrospectively, it may well prove necessary to concede to the age of mass marketing a new order in aesthetics as well as in commodities." What McLuhan insists upon here is that the machine universe is less an extension of the merely human, a prosthesis founded on elaborating the motor-muscular system, but a way of life. As Rimmer's closed set of degenerative loops make clear, repetition is a form of change, and this change is predicated on a new kind of visibility, a new technology of power whose impression on its constituents would prove to be ubiquitous, pervasive, omnipresent. By assigning each of the workers a task which owes its shape to the machine, by marrying the body to the clock, by regulating the cycles of repetition, the temporary employment of factory hands founds a new order of consciousness.

After a two-year stint in New York City, Rimmer returned to Vancouver to complete his typology of the city. Seeking out successive apartments in Gastown whose north windows provided a view of the rail tracks, the Burrard Inlet and the Coastal Rockies beyond, Rimmer stationed his camera at the window over three winter months. He exposed intermittently, using a series of lingering dissolves to join this meditation of ninety days. He made two films in this manner, separated by a year: *Canadian Pacific I* (1974) and its companion piece *Canadian Pacific II* (1975). Both are meditations on a view, both summary documents enlisting the passing light of the everyday in a moving epiphany of coastal vantages.

Through the unchanging window we see winter settle over the mountains in a snowbound mist that obscures all but the rail yards in the immediate foreground. Another dissolve restores the mountains, now snow capped and overlooking the arrival of massive international freighters. Freight trains shuttle across the screen, their dissolving lengths bearing food and machines across a country whose dream of national unity was once emblemized by these stakes of iron and wood. The cycles of weather and trade are joined in this city portrait, its movements of change a combination of *Landscape's* stoic lyricism and *Variations'* industrial cacophony. Here the city inhabits its geography in a graceful passing, its economy of means delivered to its natural inclinations. But if the subject of *Canadian Pacific I* and *II* is as expansive as the city itself, its view is necessarily restricted, drawn through a single glassy peer in Gastown's warehouse district. Rimmer's persistent framing underlines the constraint of an individual perspective, forced to view the shifting machinations of its surround from the narrow aperture of a single consciousness. This meditation on relativity also signals the isolation of the Vancouver artist, its original impetus of community shattered in the de-centered sensibilities of frontier.

When I think of Vancouver I think of a city where the inside is out and the outside is in. The natural environment is where the real theatre happens, not inside. The middle class and the politically middle-of-the-road are driven to the fringes, and by an accident of geography, the Vancouver mainstream is on the margin of Canadian cultural experience. The paradox of Vancouver — so many inward-looking social groups in a beautiful outdoor setting — is the root of the city's strength and weaknesses...

Settled by resource developers and labourers, British Columbia remains a province of social inequalities and political divisions between labour (it is the most unionized province in the country) and the powerful resource industry. Between the two, there is little room left for the intellectual middle class, the core of arts support in any community. One of the most resonant descriptions of Vancouver comes from photo-artist Jeff Wall: he calls it a "culturally oppressed" community. In a psychological, and definitely in an economic sense, Vancouver artists are on the outside. The Social Credit government, which models its political philosophy on small business, treats the arts with barely concealed contempt. Provincial arts funding, on a per capita basis, is the worst of any province outside the Atlantic provinces; there is no ministry of culture; culture is tacked on to the municipalities and recreation portfolio. Film, a successful local industry, is treated as economic development... There is no real centre to Vancouver: there are pockets, strips, urban moments... a good city for solitary artists — writers, painters, poets — Vancouver is singularly difficult for collective activities, especially theatre and dance companies... Culture has different functions in different places, and in Vancouver its task, overwhelmingly, is one of rapprochement between race, class and political allegiances, between those who are on the inside, and those who are on the outside. There is a need here for new forms

of the kind of experimentation that characterized the West Coast through the sixties and seventies. Vancouver is separated by a wall of mountains from the rest of the country; as a city, it needs all the openness it can get.

– Liam Lacey “The Paradox in Paradise,”
The Globe and Mail, June 29, 1991

1970 would prove to be the most productive year of Rimmer’s career. Over the course of his twenty-five year making he has averaged nearly a film a year, which quickly established him as one of Canada’s premier fringe concerns. 1970 was also the year that witnessed the demise of Intermedia, wound in conflicting directions because of the generous range of its concerns, and increasingly populated with an ambitious artistic constituency, its members decided to pack it in. Rimmer recalled its closing this way:

With Intermedia we worked together for about four years in quite an intense involvement of a group of about twenty core people, plus a lot of other people, and took a lot of risks. If we failed it didn’t matter. It was a matter of trying something new. And after that, we got tired of it, we got a bit burned out and Intermedia was becoming an institution, a myth in a way. Becoming something more than what it was. So we decided eventually just to let it disband, not to try to force it on, to continue it on and make it an institution.

– David Rimmer, *Vancouver: Art and Artists*

The period of the late sixties in Vancouver was a moment of remarkable and unprecedented exchange between official culture and its peripheries, between centre and margin. Intermedia was regularly granted an open door at the Vancouver Art Gallery, and having secured space in the city’s most prestigious art establishment, was permitted an extraordinary largesse in hosting evenings of performance, poetry, installations and the like. The CBC was commissioning

work by the fringe. The National Film Board helped assist marginal productions. But this early spirit of co-operation would turn in the decade to come to a retrenched institutionalization in both quarters, as the idealists of the sixties were weaned from positions of power in the central agencies of state, and the fringe began a rapid process of incorporation, congealing areas of interest around like-minded collectives who quickly assumed their own architectures, mandates and audiences. This movement was felt across the country, as a raft of artist run centres set up shop, choosing to secure the means of art within their own purview, staking out turf, attaching an administrative face to the counter-cultures of a decade before. This movement was emblemized by the diaspora begun with the collapse of Intermedia. In its wake there arose no fewer than six new centres — including the Intermedia Press, Video Inn, Western Front, Metro Media, New Era Social Club, and the Granville Grange. Each assumed an aspect of Intermedia’s function, each sequestered in a specialty of expression that would eventually found, by the end of the eighties, a nation-wide litter of small administrations, a bureaucratization and professionalization of art practice, an adherence to the federal cultural purse, and a structural reinforcement of the divide between centre and margin that would ensure a rapid proliferation of artists honing a specialized rhetoric that would grow ever more removed from its public.

After Intermedia’s screenings of avant-garde film gave out, Kirk Tougas began film shows at the University of British Columbia in 1972. Begun as a cine-club, these monthly events would eventually become the Pacific Cinematheque — an annual series of exhibitions that has endured to the present day. In August 1972 it began screenings at the old National Film Board theatre on West Georgia Street. Admission was a dollar. Its first full year presented a typically eclectic mix of work including Vancouver filmmakers, a Chaplin retro-

spective, George Méliès, and a look at Quebec and Japanese cinemas. Over the next two decades the Cinematheque would host screenings at a variety of other venues including the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, the Vancouver Museum, the Planetarium and the Robson Square Cinema — always looking for a more permanent location, always returning to its base on Georgia Street. Its long search ended in March of 1986 with the opening of the Pacific Cine Centre, a government subsidized brownstone at Howe and Davie which offers daily double bills that mix features from around the world, Vancouver productions, mini-festivals and retrospectives. Admission is five dollars.

With the close of Intermedia’s distribution co-op there remained just one organization in the country whose non-profit, artist-oriented mandate would accept works as frankly indifferent to the wiles of commercial filmmaking as those that filled the shelves of Intermedia. That was the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, the country’s oldest artist-run centre, begun in 1967 by a disenfranchised lot of independents (including a young David Cronenberg) lacking someone to peddle their wares. Its initial collection of fourteen films would eventually number over a thousand, and increased distribution activity led to the establishment of two sister organizations: Atlantic Independent Media stationed in Halifax and Canadian Filmmakers Distribution West stationed in Vancouver. CFDW was begun in 1979 and achieved autonomy three years later (it is now named Moving Pictures). In concert with the rise of film studies programs in Canadian universities, it ensured that the largest public window for the avant-garde is the post-secondary classroom — rows of students made to watch the canonical moments of the vanguard pass in a studied restaging of the spirit of invention. Rimmer has been central to this process of historical selection; each week his work is shipped to universities across the

country as one of the reigning avatars of "structural film." As many fellow Canadian vanguardists have become teachers, the classroom has provided a home of sorts for a vocation reliant on state funding and subsidized equipment and whose produce offers little return. If one were to trace a line from Intermedia to CFDW, the Pacific Cinematheque and the reign of universities in the place of the avant-garde, one stands witness to a steadily encroaching institutionalization.

These gestures of incorporation came to a head for the Vancouver fringe on March 28, 1986, with the opening of the Pacific Cine Centre. There, beneath a single roof were sequestered the three arms of the independent film scene — the production co-op named Cineworks, Canadian Filmmakers Distribution West (the distributor), and a two hundred seat theatre staffed and organized by the Pacific Cinematheque. As part of the opening festivities and held in conjunction with National Film Week, a panel on "Avant-Garde Film Practice" was convened by moderator Maria Insell, a panel which included avant-garde icon Michael Snow, new narrative spokesperson Patricia Gruben, the founder of Toronto's fringe film co-op (The Funnel) Ross McLaren, first lady of the Canadian avant-garde Joyce Wieland, iconoclast Al Razutis, and David Rimmer. Snow traced the etymological roots of "avant-garde" to a military tradition which dubbed its advance scouts the "avant-garde," and took pains to distance himself from this notion of leaders and followers. McLaren and Wieland drank tea and gossiped. In the day's clearest address, Patricia Gruben denounced the narrow and canonical definitions which had attached themselves to the Canadian avant-garde, rendering it a formalist's playground of privileged signifiers and academic myopia. Razutis staged an action which decried the prevailing theoretical applications of psychoanalysis to film studies, all staged in an interrogation of a ventriloquist's dummy (an audience surrogate in the Lacanian arcana) and

closed his address by spray painting a slogan on the brand new screen of the Cinematheque: The avant-garde spits in the face of institutional art. (This event was documented in a film entitled, *On the Problems of the Autonomy of Art in Bourgeois Society or... Splice* [1987] by Doug Chomyn, Scott Haynes and Al Razutis.)

Rimmer took a different approach — opening his address with his only written discursus on film to date — which insisted that spectators fearing "the erotic power of the image" resorted to words in hopes of covering over or defusing the lure of pictures. He then announced that the remainder of his time would be occupied with a film instead of talking, a recently completed work entitled *As Seen on TV* (1986). *As Seen* may be remarked as the avant-garde's response to television, the electronic hearth made to turn in the immutable stare of a practice Rimmer would conjure after two decades of work. It is a frank exploration of the effects of televised spectacle, using a variety of found footage fragments to conjure a universe of delirium and death. The film opens with TV's "Toni twins," blonde smilers advertising hair permanents who emerge slowly from a door, figured here as the portal of media spectacle. They appear before us electronically transformed, shimmering in a high contrast palette of hallucinatory design, their movements arrested and slowed in the act of reproduction. This couple open and close the film, moving back through a door at the film's end, providing a frame of greeting and departure. A series of tableaux ensue, each similarly electronically transformed. They are excisions from a universe of spectacle — a man jumping through a flaming hoop, a woman offered for sale at auction, a fantastically wrought chorus line of dancers who swing vast multi-hued bananas in unison across the dance floor. Between these moments of excess and separated from them by a foreboding audio signature lies a naked man caught in the grip of epileptic seizure, his pained gestures of recoil simulating



masturbation in the lock of his solitary. He appears four times, each adding to the impression that he is the protagonist of this fantasy. Here is the subject of television, its masculine gaze turned towards a solitary evocation of escape, sickness and paranoia.

As Seen on TV formally elaborates Rimmer's reworking of found footage a decade earlier, but now instead of devising a sculptural strategy to reshape these fragments into a unitary design they are presented as episodes of viewing, electronic spasms tuned to the neural overload of its victim and progenitor: the male gaze. If the subject of Rimmer's televisual flow is masculine then its objects remain women, hypostatized and eroticized in the new plumage of an electronic age. Whether as banana bearers, objects of sale or damsels falling in succession at a kiss, they are staged for their passive attendants, caught and inflamed in the scan of the raster, their hyper-visibility a prerequisite for the controlling interests of man-ufacture.

Forced to occupy the embittered and paranoiac space of male imagination these women have been strained through fantasy, and so appear as male surrogates, subjects of a masculine will to power. That the relations of power informing these images derives not from a male-female dialectic but an exclusively male preserve is shown explicitly two-thirds of the way through the film. Here Rimmer borrows a fragment from Thomas Edison's early short *The Dance* (1903). While a fiddler saws quietly at the resin, two men move in a circling lockstep, their arms joined in a signature of fraternal bonding and nostalgia. While one man "calls the tune" the others move to it, and this fraternal order makes explicit what merely underlies the remainder — that women are merely the vehicle to restore this image of masculine plenitude, sealed from its Other in a mirrored embrace of penal codes. In a photo-text collage New Yorker Barbara Kruger puts it this way: Showing a grouping of male exec-

utives stumbling towards unseen destinations she inscribes the words: "You construct intricate rituals to touch the skin of other men". As the Toni twins drift towards the door that will seal this reverie, their blankly smiling look-outs an invitation to the projections of male desire, the screen pulses to white, to an electronic ejaculate that anoints their passing. The film is over.

Despite Rimmer's incisive allegorical recitation of the effects of spectacle, *As Seen on TV* remains tied to the economy of the avant-garde, that is, relegated to a life of film festivals hosted in the year of the film's making and thereafter shipped to university classrooms and one person shows in government subsidized theatres. One might reasonably expect its audience to alternate between connoisseurs of the form (the converted) and those weaned on the starlight of Hollywood, for whom the absence of a discernible plot, characters and narrative trajectory quickly renders *As Seen's* precisely executed turns of rephotography frankly unintelligible. Here then lies the dilemma of the post-modern artist. To adopt a public form of discourse which almost assuredly subsumes any oppositional intent. Or to work in a marginal practice which will attain visibility only insofar as it allows itself to be converted into the rhetoric of mainstream advertising. While the effect of a marginal practice may not be accounted simply in terms of audience numbers — the question of its efficacy must be raised here, especially in light of its recent co-optation by commercial television, its rhetoric pillaged by the commodifying bent of postmodern capital. In this regard, Rimmer's oeuvre is no exception, serving only to accentuate the ironies of any artist working in the cinema. For while the technologies of production have been assured by a federally sponsored rack of film co-operatives across the country — its cameras, splicers, recorders and editing machines lying in wait in a number of post-

secondary institutions and co-operative tableaux, the technologies of distribution and exhibition remain today in the hands of the same American studios which have commandeered Canadian theatres since the early part of the century. With a massing discourse of marginal manufacture structurally denied the means of expression it has pursued a double-headed future — the first as a junkyard of styles which may be willfully pillaged by any with the inclination to do so. And the second as a genre hermetically sealed in esoteric elaborations of its own history. There seems little alternative unless a way can be found to bring together production and exhibition, to begin to extend to the process of projection the same willful imagination that has for so long characterized its productions. Here, in the waning moments of the cinematic project — its antiquated mechanical transports quickly giving way to its electronic cousin — it may be already too late. But in the proliferation of cheap, user-friendly camcorders and personal computers, one might glimpse the shape of a grass roots mobilization whose raster-led restaging of the family may cohere once more into a shape future generations could name again as a worthy nay saying. ■

42 LIZARD FILM SCALES THE ART OF JAZZ

LIZARD FILM SCALES THE ART OF JAZZ

by Peter Birnie

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN
Vancouver Sun, 1995

When Vancouver independent filmmaker David Rimmer makes a documentary, it's far from a dry recitation of facts. Thursday at Pacific Cinematheque, Rimmer's latest work will confirm his status as a leader in bold experimentation. Winner of this year's prize as best arts and culture documentary at Hot Docs, the Canadian independent documentary festival, *Under the Lizards* is a visually arresting study of music in tough times.

Under the Lizards in Polish is Pod Jaszczurami, the name of a bar in Krakow where Rimmer first conceived of the idea for his new work. He'd been in Poland a couple of times to show his films, and became enamored of the nation's commitment to the arts and its importance in Polish life. Two years ago, a crew of five traveled to Krakow to capture the anarchic nature of jazz music under the thumb of Communism.

"We went over there with the idea of filming mostly jazz, but came away with contemporary classical, folk and rock as well," Rimmer says.

Music, the first form of protest for many people in the Soviet oppression of the '50s, has shifted from mimicry of the jazz riffs heard on illicit recordings to a broad range of performance-art stylings.

"Younger people know they have to change and adapt," Rimmer says, "but some of the older people are falling by the wayside."

With the help of sound designer and longtime collaborator Dennis Burke, Rimmer captures both the flavour of freedom in old jazz and the offbeat nature of some new voices — one of them a wild falsetto. *Under the Lizards* is stamped with Rimmer's visual style, in sequences where images speed by to match the music or slow to a painful frame-by-frame detailing of brutality in a Polish street.

The 53-year old media instructor at Emily Carr has crafted something that's both logical narrative and art. And once again he proves the worth of charting an individual course in life. ■



43.

DECONSTRUCTING NARRATIVE

DECONSTRUCTING NARRATIVE: STORY-TELLING, DOCUMENTARY, AND EXPERIMENTAL FILM

by Peter Harcourt

— for Christine Ramsay

Pedagogically, experimental cinema has been limited by the ghetto in which it operates. Partly inflicted, partly chosen, this ghetto brackets it off from the *Via Appia* of conventional film studies. If it exists at all, experimental cinema becomes a “special topic” within film programs — like women’s films or Canadian films. In its isolation, experimental cinema has developed its own canonical filmmakers and its own jargon. It has generated a discourse which is, arguably, the most demanding of any discourse about cinema — certainly, the most philosophical; but it’s a discourse that, especially since the takeover of video art, has been shunted aside.

If we could do it all over again, if we could design an introductory course that focused more on the variegated achievement of cinematic art and less on the established priorities of mainstream film studies. I can imagine a situation in which the earliest films of

the brothers Lumière would be interwoven with the landscape films of David Rimmer — *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970), *Canadian Pacific* (1974/75); in which the optical achievements of Georges Méliès would be put along side the similar achievements of Al Razutis — *A Message from Our Sponsor*, *The Wild West Show* (1972-83). Such a pedagogic strategy would contest the historical determinism that, in this post-Althusserian age, is now an unshakable priority within film studies as it would destroy the colonizing sense of national and temporal boundaries — with them, then, being major; and us, now, being minor.

Similarly, the whole concept of narrative could both be “problematized” and “de-hierarchized” by interweaving examples from experimental, documentary and fictional films. I notice with delight that, in *Spirit in the Landscape*, Bart Testa refers to that classic Canadian documentary, *City of Gold* (1958) as if it were an experimental film;¹ and Richard Kerr has often claimed that he doesn’t make experimental films: he simply makes *imaginative* documentaries. And so he does; as he has also recently made an imaginative feature film which may, in part, be fictional.²





In the classroom, any notion of cinematic suture, whether between shots within a sequence or between spectators and films could be beautifully foregrounded by the presentation of *Fracture* (1973) by David Rimmer. *Fracture* is about suture. Invoking the codes of silent melodrama, including the gestural codes associated with the representation of women and of classical photography with its diagonal division of space and even the fragility of hand-tinted colourization, *Fracture* provides all the elements that might constitute a narrative but leaves the details of the story — the “narrativity” as Robert Scholes might say — up to us.³ Is the woman standing up or sitting down? Is she worried about her baby or about herself? Is the man entering or leaving the cabin? Is he a source of threat or does he himself feel threatened — possibly by a paternity suit that he doesn’t want to deal with! All the narrational elements for a most heart-rending story are present in this film; but any sense of closure is systematically refused. In terms of the Elderian narrative categories tucked away in a footnote in *Image and Identity*, *Fracture* possesses separation and opposition but withholds synthesis.⁴

Finally, the utilization of the musical device of a stretto emphasizes the formal priorities of this extraordinary film. “A few clues for late-comers,” as Godard might say,⁵ the film repeats itself in its entirety but at double the speed — as if to give us a second chance at putting it all together.

Were we blessed with an abundance of time, I’d examine how the contrapuntal structure of [Bruce] Elder’s *1857 (Fool’s Gold)* (1981) interweaves the different narrative texts through conflict towards resolution; through the narration involving the author himself; through the narrated text from Dafoe evoking an historical period; through the lexical dimension, adducing the work of Ezra Pound; through the liturgy of the music and the aggression of the flicker sequence,

providing the climax of the film’s pain both in itself and in its effect on spectators; and through, finally, the work’s concluding plea for forgiveness — an additional reference to Pound but ironically appropriate for the filmmaker himself.

I’d also like to present Blaine Allan’s *Yukon Postcards* (1983) and Philip Hoffman’s *?O, Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)* (1986) not as experimental films but as documentaries about the telling of lies. For this presentation, however, I’ve decided to look at a film that equally contests generic boundaries — Richard Kerr’s “last bachelor film,” as he has called it⁶ — *On Land Over Water* (1984).

* * *

On Land Over Water provides an inventory of narrational strategies possible in film. Just after its release, Bruce Elder analyzed the film in terms of its relational structure: “the relation between image and texts, between the past and the present, between fiction and fact, between showing and recounting, between material reality and consciousness...”⁷ And Bart Testa suggested that the development of the film was “not narrative but narrational.”⁸

Kerr has acknowledged his “narrative itch”; and certainly, *On Land Over Water* investigates the process of story-telling. For this film, which was initially intended as a fictional film, Kerr was fortunate in stumbling upon a number of found stories.⁹ The six episodes all narrate themselves differently and each contains within itself its own narrative tensions, a dialogue between its parts.

The first, “Indian Camp,” by utilizing a reading voice and a selection of printed words from the same Hemingway story, establishes a dialogue between the oral and the written. The selection of text is not random. Whether through anticipation or recapitulation, it

serves to emphasize key words or phrases — until the end, where a mid-shot of the printed page brings the audible and the lexical into a kind of harmony — a “happy ending,” in effect, with young Nick’s intimations of his own immortality.

The second, “Shotgun Story,” is a synch-sound sequence-shot, taking place in the back room of a taxidermist’s workshop. The dialogue here is between the gestural and the verbal. Furthermore, a couple of extra-diegetic gun-shot sounds punctuate the story’s ending, at which point we cut to a shot of the moon, as if it were the hole in the ceiling that the story-teller has just referred to.

The third story, “Drive to Work” — the most “fictional” story — is an extended travelling shot along a prohibited landscape and then along side the hull of a ship, while a series of titles slip up before us on the screen, suggesting interior monologue, even though in the third person. The titles all address the nature of belief and seem to take place over an extended period of time. “Believing made a believer of him, later in life.” Thus the dialogue here is between different units of time — the visual equating actual with cinematic time, the titles narrating the different stages of a given person’s life — probably the driver’s.

The fourth episode, “Spirit Astray,” is the simplest and most fortuitous of all the found stories. Kerr has recounted how he and Philip Hoffman were driving around Toronto one day, while they still had the CP-16 and the Nagra necessary for shooting synch sound and they stumbled upon these four kids, playing by a wall — the graffiti serendipitously already there, suggesting a theme. They bought the kids some popsicles, as Kerr remembers the situation, and then asked them to perform.¹⁰ In the sequence we see the kids noticing the camera and leaving the frame. A jump-cut

brings them back, all with popsicles. Hoffman gets his shot and Kerr his story, complete with evidence of its own manipulation!

In this episode, there’s again the dialogue between the gestural and the verbal but also between the supposedly natural and the obviously contrived. Furthermore, the black girl’s story about her difficulties with the adult world — the swimming pool, her school, the traffic lights — is echoed by the authoritative way the older children deal with the younger ones in their care. [...]

The fifth episode, “His Romantic Movement,” unfolds without speech, often in black-and-white, and often more with shadows than with direct representations. It’s a tender, nightmarish presentation of the violence that existed within the male bonding of the 1970s drug culture — “the dream of freedom turning sour,” as Bruce Elder has suggested.¹¹ It’s an episode without sequence, a world without hope — a universe in which a dialogue is established between the promise and the actuality, between violence and caring, the desperate and the celebratory, between shadows and reality.

The sixth (and final) episode, “At Her Cottage,” is the most tender and the most pastoral. It serves, in fact, to bring together all the other parts of this film. Again there are contrasts between the past and the present, the narrated winter and depicted summer, the narrative escapades of men and the observable nurturing of women — of a mother with her daughter. There’s also a dialogue between the unfolding of time and the arresting of time, as Polaroids fix the image of scenes that have just taken place.

If on the surface, *On Land Over Water* is about disjunction; at a more subliminal level, it’s about how all the parts of all these sequences are actually interdepend-

ent. If it’s a quest film, the movement is, obviously, from land towards water, from male towards female, from isolation towards bonding, from an apparent incoherence into a coherent whole.

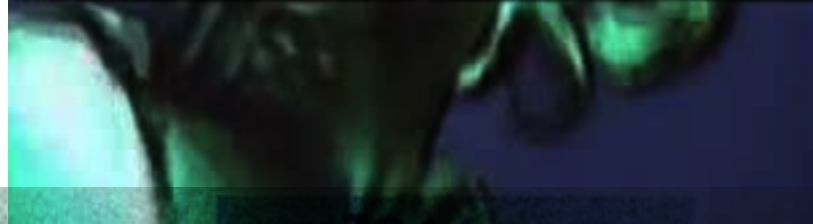
Barking dogs are heard in a number of episodes and the gun shots in “The Gunshot Story” recur at the opening of “His Romantic Movement,” suggesting a murder. If there’s a terrified death in the opening story, there is a drunken death at the close, told twice, once in voice-over, once with synch sound; yet each time in the spirit of a lark — really nobody’s fault — the kind of thing that happens when boys go out to play. Also, a dog is drowned, bringing to a close all that barking that we’ve heard elsewhere in the film.

If water is referred to in the opening story, it’s beautifully present in the last, very much in the mode of the summer-cottage idyll. This final section recapitulates the film’s recurring pre-occupations, as Bruce Elder has suggested, “with notions of sin, guilt, aggression and death”;¹² or, as Bart Testa concluded while considering his Canadian landscapes: “*On Land Over Water* has returned to a Canadian silence, or failure to join the landscape with narration’s language of men.”¹³

* * *

The literary theorist Peter Brooks has proposed that narratives, “lay bare the nature of narration as a form of human desire: the need to tell as a primary human drive that seeks to seduce and to subjugate the listener...”¹⁴ And earlier he’d suggested that

Narrative is one of the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in negotiations with reality, specifically, in the case of narrative, with the problem of temporality: man’s time-boundedness, his consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality.¹⁵



Experimental narratives do not escape these classic formulations. No matter how “undercoded” they may be in terms of emplotment and psychological investigations, no matter how rigorously they refuse synthesis or any simple notion of closure, no matter how much they baffle Roland Barthes’ hermeneutic code and prolong the “dilatatory space” of films,¹⁶ unless even experimental narratives allow spectators to participate in the processes of their own narrativity, they frustrate a primordial human need: the need for continuity over time, for perceptual significance throughout our long journey, on land over water, towards the inevitable contemplation of our own death. This need, I take it, is still as it has always been, the originary purpose of art. ■

NOTES

1. Bart Testa, *Spirit in the Landscape*, exhibition catalogue (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989), 37.
2. Richard Kerr, *The Willing Voyeur* (1996).
3. Robert Scholes, “Narration and Narrativity in Film” (1975), in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 390-403
4. Elder: “... narrative can be considered to be a quasi-abstract form structured by certain formal narrative relations such as separation, opposition and synthesis.” R. Bruce Elder, *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989), 423, ch7, n25.
5. As he does in his voice-over for *Bande à part* (1964), about half-way through the film.
6. Quoted in Mike Hoolboom, “Richard Kerr: The Last Days of Living,” *Inside the Pleasure Dome: Fringe Film in Canada* (Toronto: Gutter Press, 1997), 162.
7. R. Bruce Elder, “Living Fictions: *On Land Over Water*,” *C Magazine* (August 1985): 82.
8. Testa, *Spirit in the Landscape*, 38
9. Hoolboom, “Richard Kerr: The Last Days of Living,” 163.
10. *Ibid.*, 162.
11. Elder, “Living Fictions: *On Land Over Water*,” 83.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Testa, *Spirit in the Landscape*, 43.
14. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 61.
15. *Ibid.*, xi.
16. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (1970), trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), 18-20.

44 FRINGE ROYALTY

FRINGE ROYALTY: AN INTERVIEW

by Mike Hoolboom

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Inside the Pleasure Dome: Fringe Film in Canada by
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2nd edition, 2001

For more than thirty years, David Rimmer has been making some of the most exquisite work in the fringe microverse. He has the uncanny ability to take small moments — the view from a window, the tiniest scrap of discarded footage — and rework them into panoramas of attention. From the very small he is able to extract the very large. He is led in his choices not by calculation but by intuition; given his luminous body of work, he may be regarded either as the luckiest filmer alive or else as someone who has become a student of chance, cultivating it the way others reshape their bodies through exercise or tending small gardens.

Not incidentally, his work offers a typology of the city he has lived in almost all his life: Vancouver. Its multi-storied histories — its growing industrialization, the divide between nature and culture, the Elite Directory,

its love affair with the British monarchy, its Asian ties, and the increasing influx of American television production — have all been restaged in Rimmer's work. The secret history of the city is written in his practice, though no one would be more loath to discuss it than Rimmer himself, who has guarded with silence his lifelong romance with intuition. In this beginning there is not a word but an image.

* * *

DAVID: I graduated from the University of British Columbia, majoring in economics and math. After graduation, I decided to take a couple of years off to see the world, hitchhiking, working on freighters across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and travelling overland through Asia, Europe, and Africa. When I got back to Vancouver I realized that I didn't want to be an economist after all. So I went back to university to study English, though that wasn't entirely satisfactory. The problem was that I wasn't a writer myself, and I couldn't see spending my whole life writing about other people's work. I needed a more direct involvement with what I did.



MIKE: How did you get word about fringe film?

DAVID: The Cinema 16 film society at the university presented programs each week, showing Dada and Surrealist work and European cinema. I had no idea what they were about, but they were more interesting than what I was seeing downtown, so initially I tried to make that kind of film. I had brought an 8mm camera along on my travels and began to make films with a group of friends in a very naive way. Brakhage came to the university to show *Dog Star Man* and although I couldn't make any sense of it at the time, I thought, "Here's someone who's really doing something different." While I was pondering his work, a poet friend of mine, Gerry Gilbert, gave me a book by Brakhage called *Metaphors on Vision*. That book changed my ideas about film. I realized that anything was possible, that there were no rules. I started in a new direction, using the camera in a more expressive way. But I was still working in somewhat of a vacuum.

In 1969 Al Razutis came up from California. He'd left the States because of the Vietnam War. Al began bringing programs of experimental or "underground" film into town, and I quickly saw that there were others working in this field, in a tradition of artists' films that ran back to the Dadaists and Futurists. Al's shows ran out of Intermedia, an experimental arts workshop set up by the Canada Council to encourage artists to work in interdisciplinary ways. I had no formal training in art, so Intermedia became my art school. We did a number of very large performances at the Vancouver Art Gallery where we combined film, videos, performance, sculpture, music, poetry, and dance. It was a very exciting time. Sony gave us a half-inch black-and-white portapak to experiment with. The camera came with a razor blade and tape so you could edit, but it left horrible glitches, so we mostly made tapes lasting the length of a roll — about

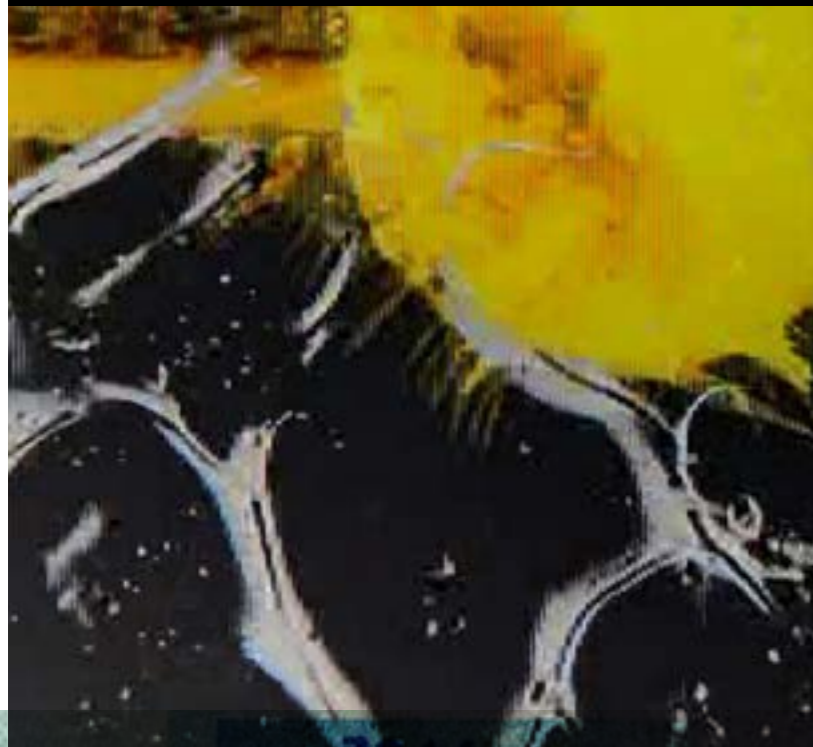
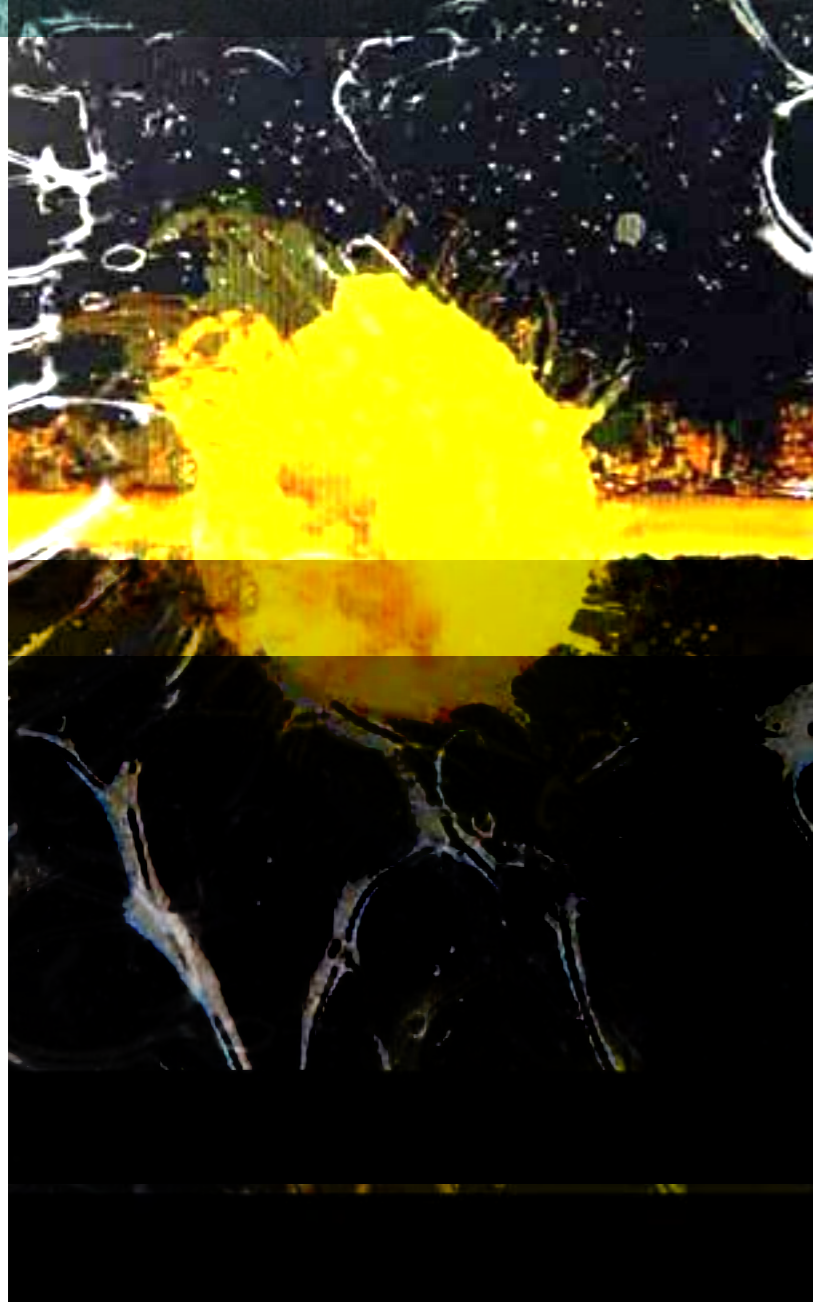
twenty minutes. It was liberating because it didn't cost anything. I did a lot of installation work at that time; the most elaborate one featured sixty television sets displaying a mix of pre-recorded material, local TV, and closed-circuit work showing other events in the gallery. Some of the monitors had been smashed by hammers, others had small scenes constructed inside the monitors. No one knew anything about video, or ever heard about coaxial cables, so in order to make the connections we just scraped the wires and joined them end to end. This allowed the image to escape from the cables, fly through the air, and wind up on a different monitor entirely. I also made videos that accompanied dance performances.

So far as film equipment went, Intermedia had only rewinds, a tape recorder, and a camera, but no one complained — that's all anyone ever needed. I didn't know what the rules were, which was a blessing. We had a lot of old footage from worn-out National Film Board prints and educational films. In some of our performances we'd have a bank of four or five projectors running loops while musicians hit the notes and poets read. I started playing with this loop of a woman shaking out a sheet of cellophane, running it backwards and forwards, putting coloured filters in front of the projector, and that was the beginning of *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* (8 min 1970).

The entire film is made from an eight-second loop, and I worked in a deliberate way to arrive at a fixed form for the loop's transformation. The first half is contact printed, showing successive generations. You see the original, then a print of the original, then a print of a print, as the loop slowly gains contrast. In the second half of the film, I rephotographed the image using two projectors running simultaneously, one with a negative loop, one with a positive loop. I mixed the two, playing variations like a jazz musician

might, introducing colour filters which gave a colour-separation effect. By the end of the film the image dissolves into a flickering abstraction, reduced to lines and shapes. Everyone cut their original reversal film then because the price of a workprint would buy you another roll of film. When I finished putting *Variations* together I started looking for money to make a release print. I had heard that the National Film Board was giving out small amounts of cash to filmmakers at the end of their budget year (if they didn't spend it, it would be returned to the head office in Montreal). I called them up and made an appointment to show them my work. I was met at the door by Peter Jones, then head of the Board in Vancouver, and he put the film on the projector. The film had hardly started when Peter began chuckling. I didn't know what to think. When the film was finished he asked where I had got the piece of stock footage. I knew that it was from an old NFB documentary, but pretended I didn't know. He told me that when he was a cameraman for the NFB he had shot that footage himself. And then he gave me the \$300.

The Dance (5 min b/w 1970) is another film that began as a loop in an Intermedia performance. Curtains open on a stage where a jazz band plays and two dancers come out. I looped their dancing so they perform the same moves over and over. Then the band stops, someone brings them flowers, and the curtain closes. *Surfacing on the Thames* (9 min 1970) began with an eight second piece of footage showing a boat moving on the river Thames. It was slowed down by printing each frame two hundred times and then using ninety-six frame dissolves to join them. The boat moves almost imperceptibly, but the dirt and scratches and texture of the film move a great deal. This old bit of film had run through hundreds of machines, acquiring a history of projection which my film reviews — I was interested in what was happening on the surface of the film itself.



I made *Treefall* (5 min b/w silent 1970) as an accompaniment to a dance performance. As the title suggests, it shows a loop of a tree falling. It was projected on a giant screen made of strips of white surveyor's tape, so the image was visible on both sides. The dancers could move back and forth, right through the screen. That same year I also made *Blue Movie* (6 min silent 1970). I shot water and clouds in black and white, then made high contrast positive and negative prints. Colour filters were introduced in the printing. It was projected from the ceiling of the Vancouver Art Gallery onto the surface of a geodesic dome twelve feet in diameter. The dome was covered with a porous cloth, and the image was visible both on the surface of the dome and the floor of the dome, which was covered with white foam. The audience could lie on the floor of the dome and look up at the image and also be part of the picture. Gerry Gilbert said it was like being inside your eyeball.

MIKE: You made five films in a year. Better drugs then?

DAVID: It was a very high-energy time. The Vancouver Art Gallery was run by Tony Emery, who was very open to any kind of experimenting. Each year he gave Intermedia two weeks to do whatever we wanted.

MIKE: How did you wind up in New York?

DAVID: I'd been driving taxi to support myself, then applied for a Canada Council grant. Back then you could only apply for an arts bursary, no matter what discipline you were in. I looked down the list — music, theatre, painting — but no film. So I wrote "film" on the form, drew a little box beside it and checked it off. To my great surprise I received a grant for \$3,700. That was enough to live in New York for a year. My wife was a dancer who wanted to go to New York and study with Merce Cunningham. We moved there in 1970. At last I got to see everything that was going on

in experimental film because everyone came through New York. The main place to show work was the Millennium Film Theater, run by Howard Guttenplan, and a show there led to an invite by Larry Kardish for a screening at the Museum of Modern Art. I supported myself in New York by working at the MoMA library and as a carpenter for a theatre company and as a freelance cameraman. We lived in Mike Snow's working loft on Canal Street for a year. It was pretty bare, with cold water taps, a hot plate, and no bath. Mike had shot *Wavelength* there. At the far end, by the windows, he still had a picture of the sea pinned up. It was like living in a movie. One morning I set off for a bookstore and found my loft on the cover of *Artforum*. I remember seeing *Wavelength* back in Vancouver. "Underground" film was in the air, which meant sex and drugs, so the place was packed. But there's not much sex in *Wavelength*; it's a very slow zoom down a loft, and after a few minutes the audience started throwing things at the screen, until finally the projectionist turned the film off.

I made my first documentary, *Real Italian Pizza* (13 min 1971), in New York. Most of my work since then is documentary in some sense. I wanted to make a film about New York, but I wasn't sure how. I sat at my window on 85th and Columbus Avenue, looking out at a pizza parlour across the road, and I realized there were all sorts of things going on there — people getting busted, fire engines, passersby, snow falling. I was afraid to go out with my camera in New York, but now I realized I didn't have to go anywhere. The window gave me focus. I framed up the pizza parlour and locked the camera down for eight months. Initially, I shot ten feet every day at ten o'clock, until I saw that nothing was going on. So I started checking the window periodically, exposing whenever a moment insisted. I shot about five or six to one. The record

store next door kept the music coming, so kids were always hanging a groove. I tried to find some music to go with the film but ended up having a rock band in Vancouver make a soundtrack especially for it. Later, the film showed in Toronto at the Funnel. While it was running they hooked up a telephone to the sound system (the phone number was on the storefront) and they called, asking for me. You could hear the pizza guys asking at the counter, “David Rimmer? Is there a David Rimmer here?”

I found an old 16mm camera in a flea market, bought a keystone projector for three dollars, and made my own contact printer. I passed the original footage, along with the unexposed stock, through the camera. I took the lens off the projector, and replaced it with a cardboard tube which ran through a can with a light bulb in it. That was the printing light. I was working with another eight-second film clip showing people at the beach in the early part of the century. That became *Seashore* (11 min b/w silent 1971). I broke the loop down into smaller sub-loops before running it through the printer. Sometimes it would jam, and sometimes I would deliberately jam it by grabbing the film and ripping the sprockets off. I recut the material to make a dance out of it, because dance has always influenced my work. The loop is covered with stains and watermarks; like in *Surfacing*, I was interested in the physicality of the shot, making the material visible.

I got involved with video again in New York, working with Rudy Stern and John Riley, who were running Global Village, an alternative news-gathering outfit. We shot with black and white portapacks, and at the end of each week these images were presented on a bank of sixteen colourized monitors in a loft on Broome Street in Soho. One week, for example, we shot the Italian-American Civil Liberties Union, who were protesting the use of the word “mafia” in *The Godfather*. They felt Italian-Americans were being

unfairly stigmatized. Everyone knew that Joe Columbo, one of the most notorious dons in New York, was behind the protest. We packed off to the news conference and found the major networks already set up, but they threatened to walk if we were in the room. Columbo said he’d give us a private interview later, so we came back and turned him onto portable video — he’d never seen a rig like ours before. It was funny and scary at the same time. These guys looked like central casting’s idea of the mafia, with their slicked-down hair and suits and a lawyer hanging over everything. That afternoon we interviewed another protest group called STAR, the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. They were pushing an almost identical list of demands, so at the end of the week we ran the two stories together in a collage. Along with some footage of Abby Hoffman, that was the news for that week. Most film artists considered video beneath them. I remember Stan Brakhage saying that video is one of those mediums that might never be an art form. I stopped making tapes after that, feeling I’d exhausted its very limited possibilities. We didn’t care what happened to the tapes after they were shown, because video wasn’t about later — it lived in the time of its recording.

When you’re working with found footage, you always know where to look. I’d chance by the trash bins at the lab at the right time, and there were flea markets on Canal Street right outside my front door. *Watching for the Queen* (11 min b/w silent 1973) uses just one second of stock footage from a documentary about the Queen’s visit to Canada. It’s my most formal work. The first frame was printed for one minute, the second frame for half a minute, the third frame for a quarter of a minute, and eventually the film returns to normal speed. The shot shows a crowd of people looking at something, which in the original footage is the Queen passing by. The arrested speed allows

you to look closely at each individual in the crowd, to scan the frame. When I work with stock footage I look at it over and over again until it starts to speak back to me, rather than applying an idea of what it’s about at the beginning. I work intuitively, wondering how I can make order out of it. Do I impose some formal arrangement, or let it flow and see where it goes? I try to give the image room and wait for something to insist itself.

After three years in New York, I got homesick, missing the mountains and wildness of Vancouver. I moved back to a loft in Gastown, the oldest part of the city. That’s where I made *Canadian Pacific* (9 min silent 1974). Like *Real Italian Pizza*, it’s a window film. My windows looked out onto the rail tracks, the ocean, and the mountains. I locked my camera down for about three months and shot whenever something occurred. Boats passed, snow fell, trains arrived. There’s one person in the film. Then I was kicked out and moved next door, and set my camera up again at a window that was two flights higher than the first one. That became *Canadian Pacific II* (9 min silent 1975). I sometimes show them as a double screen, they contain the same elements but with a slightly different view, both shot in the winter. Now I’m living about a block away and I’m thinking about doing a third film in this series.

MIKE: You’ve worked as a teacher most of your life.

DAVID: When I came back to Vancouver, I got a job at University of British Columbia teaching film production with a projector, a camera, and one splicer. That was all you needed then. I stayed about three years as a sessional lecturer, earning just enough to keep food on the table, then got into a political argument and left. I ended up at Simon Fraser University where Razutis and Patricia Gruben were teaching. I stayed there for about four years, got into trouble there, too, and quit. Then I went down to the Emily Carr School of



Art and Design, which was looking for someone to teach video. I gave myself a crash course and signed up, and that's what I've been doing these last twelve years.

MIKE: Your next film was a bit of a departure, a very intimate portrait of a friend.

DAVID: Al Neil seemed to have been making art for so long that he'd started before anyone knew the meaning of the word. He was a jazz pianist and a collage/ assemblage sculptor. He'd begun years and years earlier and I'd known him for a number of years. He was an important person in the scene, really sticking with it through all sorts of adversity, always continuing to surprise and amaze us. I proposed doing a film about him and he said, "Sure, man, do it." *Al Neil/A Portrait* (40 min 1979) was my first sync sound film — a mix of interviews with Al, his piano playing, and images of his sculptures and home.

Al played bebop for years at a bar called the Cellar near Main and Broadway. Later he rejected all that, determined to find some other way of playing music beyond bebop, which he felt had become too predictable. He went off on his own tangent, combining the spoken word, projections, performance, and music. The film stays pretty tight on Al — one close-up follows another until the end of the film, when the camera pulls out and you see him in a social space, at a concert. The beginning also shows Al at a concert but you can't tell, you don't see anything but Al and his piano because that's all that was real for him when he played. Behind him there's nothing, just a void, a blank. And all those notes filling in the spaces. One morning during the filming, I asked him some silly question and he said, "Man, I want to tell you about my mother dying," starting off on a long ramble about the funeral and sharing the limo with other members of his family who he thought were also a little bit

dead, and then I ran out of film. I changed magazines while the sound kept rolling because Al wasn't in a state where I could say, "Al, wait." I just had to let him go. So I wound up with picture some of the time, and then no picture, and then picture again, which created a dilemma when editing. I tried every kind of cutaway, slugging in some black leader just to keep sync, until I finally realized that the black leader was fine. This happens again near the beginning of the film when Al runs down a story about early jazz, finally pausing to ask, "Hey man, did you run out of film?" After I finished the film Al thought a lot about dying. The doc had told him, "Al, your liver's really shot, you gotta stop drinking. If you stop I'll give you three years. If you don't, I'll give you a year." Al said, "I'll take the year." During his performances he'd project slides of his liver and talk about how much time he had left. But he's still alive today, playing concerts and putting on shows. Being Al.

The other portrait I made was about the painter Jack Wise. It was called *Jack Wise/Language of the Bush* (45 min 1998). Jack was trying to get to the same place as Al; both were on a spiritual quest. Al's way involved excess. He took drugs and alcohol, whatever could get him closer. Jack used discipline and meditation, finally becoming a Buddhist and learning the Sutras. When I met him in the late 1960s he was studying calligraphy at a very deep level; eventually he went to Tibet and took up with a Chinese master. His free-form calligraphy was about letting the brush speak. He also painted very formal mandalas. I saw him intermittently and we'd talk about making a film. A couple of years ago, Jack called and asked if I was still interested. When I told him I was he said, "Well, you'd better hurry, I don't have much time left. I don't know if I can make it through the winter." There was no way to get funding for the film, so I rented a DV camera and set sail to Denman Island. But a quarter of the way there I realized that I couldn't steer the boat —

the rudder had broken in the middle of the ocean. I turned around and sailed back to Vancouver using an elaborate series of curves, barely making it back to the dock. When I phoned Jack he quoted me something of the I Ching: "Difficulty at the beginning means success at the end." I repaired the rudder and returned, spending a week with him. Jack had a rare blood disease which made him very anemic and weak. He could only paint for a couple of hours each day before he had to lie down again. I taped him working and talking. He's a very articulate talker, like Al Neil. He'd seen my earliest work, and I'd seen his, so there wasn't a lot of discussion about what we were going to do. Or how we were going to do it. We trusted each other. Then I returned to Vancouver, roughed up an edit, and was rejected by the Canada Council. Without anywhere else to go, I went to the National Film Board, which gave me enough money to go to Victoria and shoot Jack's delicate paintings on film and to put the whole thing together. By that time Jack was dead.

MIKE: Did watching your friend die make you reflect on your own end?

DAVID: Jack looked forward to the adventure of dying, feeling it was the end of a cycle. While he had deteriorated physically, he was sharp in his mind. He knew he was dying and was very accepting of what was happening. I hope that when I go, I'll be in the same frame of mind.

MIKE: How did *Narrows Inlet* (10 min silent 1980) begin?

DAVID: Every summer I sail up the coast to Storm Bay, an isolated community on Sechart Inlet. Nearby is Narrows Inlet, site of an old logging camp where many pilings have been driven into the ground and remain sticking out of the water. I sailed in at night, anchored my boat off the pilings, and fell asleep. When I woke at dawn, the whole place was surrounded by fog, so

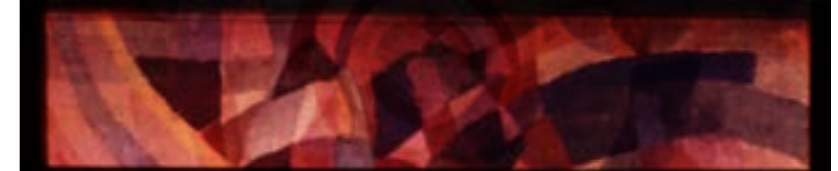
I couldn't see a thing. I started shooting a frame at a time, and gradually the fog lifts so you can see the pilings and shoreline. The boat drifts back and forth at anchor, which is reflected in the shooting. I exposed two or three rolls, and, while editing, saw that it was moving too quickly, so I printed each frame five or six times to slow it down. That became *Narrows Inlet*.

MIKE: It looks like line drawing at first — charcoal marks against a white page.

DAVID: The fog softens everything. The fog and the sea. It's boatcam. I have a forty-two-foot-long two-masted sailboat now, and I lived on it for a year here in Vancouver, docked out in Coal Harbour. But when my partner got pregnant, she said she didn't want to have a kid on the boat, so we moved back to Gastown.

MIKE: *Bricolage* (11 min 1984) finds you returning to found-footage loops, only now several fragments of footage are cast into relation with one another.

DAVID: *Bricolage* has three main images and three minor ones. The first shows an old television set with a woman saying, "Hello. Hello." The loop was in very bad condition because of the splices and scratches. I ran it alongside a slide projector that beamed an outline of a circle onto the image, like the site of a gun or camera. I shot these two off the wall. That's followed by a couple of shorter images — one shows a woman taking off her false leg. The second main image comes from a documentary on juvenile delinquency. A man walks to a window and smashes it, then another man comes out of a door and punches him. There are two main sounds, the punch and the window smash, and they trade places over time. The sound begins in sync and then drifts with each repetition, until the sound of the window smashing coincides with the moment of the man's punch. The final image was taken from a black-and-white television commercial. A woman holds a piece of glass up to her face, moving it from



side to side. One side of the glass is clean, the other dirty. I did some very complex optical printing involving mattes and bi-packing to join this image with a shot of a brick wall breaking apart. Her negative image appears in the white parts of the brick, her positive in light sections, and there's a great deal of colour separation. It's a deliberate parody of an earlier work, *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*.

MIKE: Your source materials share no obvious centre, yet they all work as an ensemble. Can you talk about how you bring them together?

DAVID: I'm always collecting stock images, pictures that resonate with things I'm thinking about. Theoretical ideas perhaps. Although I don't want to be illustrating theoretical ideas — that's a deadly form of art making. The images come together in an intuitive way and reveal their meaning sometimes despite my intentions. Until I see an image, I can't tell whether it's going to work. I can't call someone and ask for a picture of an exploding car. After finding something, I typically relearn it a frame at a time through optical printing or video processing, working the image up into something that speaks back to me.

MIKE: Tell me about *As Seen on TV* (15 min 1986).

DAVID: Video had made great technical advances, so I returned to it in the eighties. *As Seen on TV*, *Divine Mannequin*, and *Local Knowledge* were all video-based works transferred to film. All of *As Seen on TV* was transformed through video processes like chroma key and luma key, shifting the texture and timing of the image. The central image shows a naked man lying on the ground who looks like he might be masturbating. In fact, he's having an epileptic fit. I found him by chance in the middle of a medical documentary on television.

The film opens with the Toni twins, who were quite famous when I grew up. Whether in magazines or television, one used the right shampoo, the other the wrong brand, and together they demonstrated the difference. As the film starts they move through a door and enter a steamy humidity chamber. The camera looks into the room through a window that steams up, which the twins occasionally wipe off. After spending some time shaking out their hair, they emerge, looking to me exactly the way they entered. Other images include a man jumping through a fire hoop, a Busby Berkeley clip showing a chorus line of women with great phallic bananas, and a test for the first sound movie from Edison, in which two men dance while a third plays the violin.

MIKE: The recurrent figure of the male epileptic, prone and twitching, seems analogous to the television viewer. He's alienated and alone, surrounded by spectacle.

DAVID: I wouldn't call him the viewer. I showed it to Kaja Silverman, a feminist academic, who loved it and said it's all about male guilt. I said fine. It's about gender representation, how the sexes are portrayed in media.

MIKE: *Along the Road to Altamira* (20 min 1986) looks like it was shot entirely in Europe.

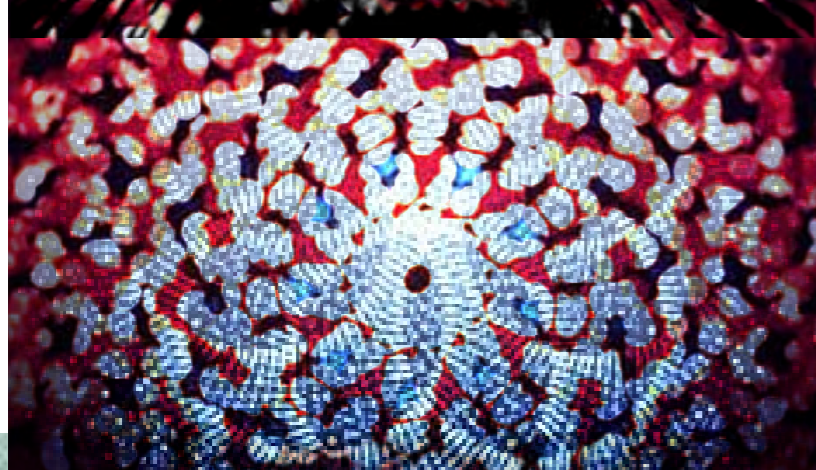
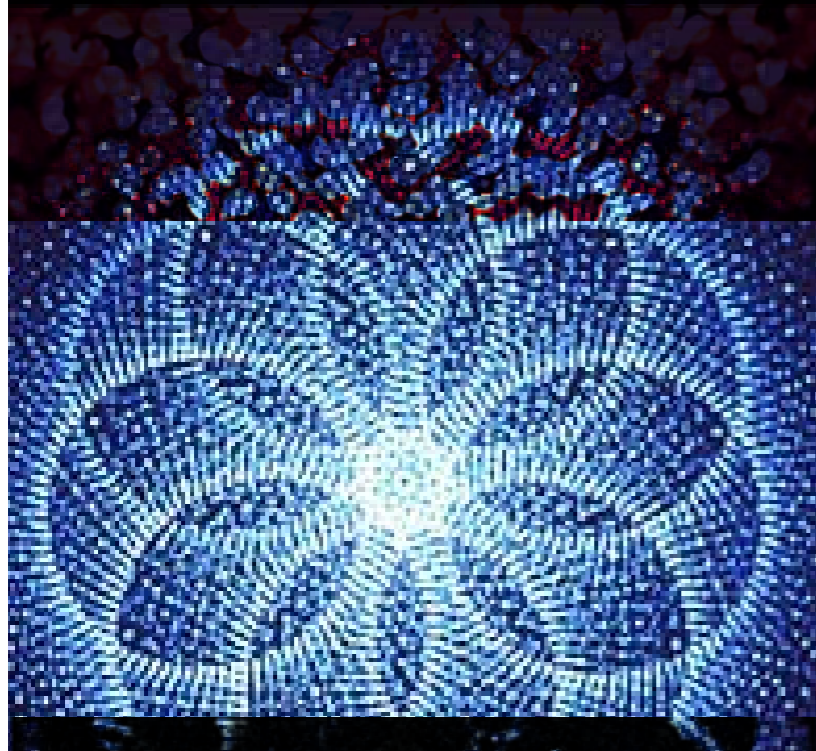
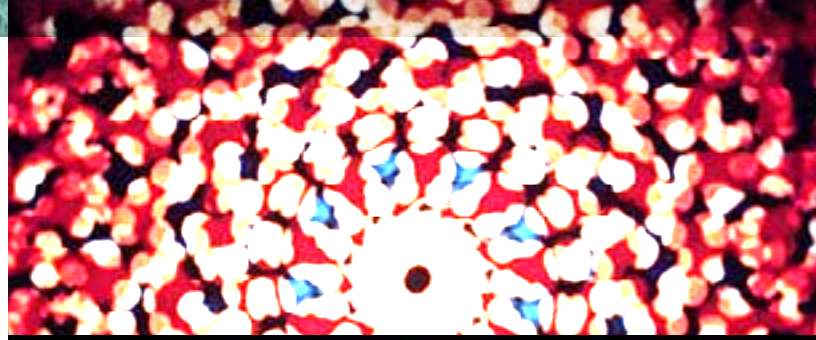
DAVID: Yes, my wife at that time was in Amsterdam for a dance performance and we decided to drive down to Spain to see the cave paintings in Altamira. I wrote the authorities asking permission to film the caves and they refused, which was good because going into the caves was so magical I'm glad I didn't have my camera mediating what I saw and felt. I bought a Super 8 film about the caves in a nearby gift shop which I used — though the only reel they had left was in German. On the way to Spain, I wanted to visit the cathedral at Rouen where Monet had done

one of his series of paintings. He'd make ten paintings over the course of a day, a kind of time lapse in paint. I went to the cathedral looking for the spot he might have painted from. I found a likely building which turned out to be a museum. I asked the curator if I could shoot out the window and he said by all means. But there was a large French flag in the way, blowing back and forth, obscuring and revealing the image, and I slowed it down using step printing. The film arrives at the caves, and the German voice-over describes the cave's discovery by a young girl whose curiosity led her to the ancient paintings inside.

MIKE: Tell me about *Divine Mannequin* (7 min 1989).

DAVID: It uses just three images, which are video processed then transferred back to film. The first shows feet running; after keying out all the white in the image, I keyed in pure white. By some magic, which I couldn't duplicate, it looks like a pencil drawing. It was actually shown in an animation festival, though it's not hand-drawn at all. The second is two large golden balls which rise in front of some Italian architecture and are caught by two hands. The third is a nearly white outline of a man's head wearing a pair of glasses. The film is about different kinds of energy: physical, sexual, and spiritual. This energy moves up through the body from the feet to the head.

I conceived of this film while I was running my first marathon. It's forty-two kilometres so you have a lot of time to think. On another day, I was running through the rain along Spanish Banks up onto the long hill that rises up to the university. When I reached the top, soaking wet from the rain, I leaned on a bicycle rack to stretch my legs and saw a piece of paper lying on the ground. The text described a religious practice in India. Inside the temple stood a wooden statue of a goddess; a male worshipper could actually insert his penis in order to commune with the spirit. Inside the



hollow statue, a young girl with sandalwood oil would facilitate the devotional act. This found text called the wooden statue a “divine mannequin.” I felt that my film was a divine mannequin, because it brought together different parts of the body, letting the energy rise through them. I put the paper in my pocket, ran home, and titled the film. I made another version as a video installation with three monitors stacked one on top of another. The bottom monitor shows the feet, the middle monitor has the gold balls rising, and the top monitor shows the man’s head. I blew up the text and laid it up beside the monitors. Each of the three images was on a loop, and every minute or so the loops would dissolve into the golden balls and the sound of footsteps.

MIKE: *Black Cat White Cat It's a Good Cat If It Catches the Mouse* (35 min 1989) was also made in the same year.

DAVID: I took my Emily Carr students on a field trip to China with scheduled visits to the Beijing Film Academy, the Sian Film Studios, and the Shanghai Animation Festival. This was six months before the Tiananmen Square massacre. We showed our work to students who laboured under a rigid and hierarchical system, apprenticing for years before they could use a camera, whereas our students were given cameras on the first day of class. The work we showed was typical art-school fare: very experimental, political, sexual, off-the-wall — completely unlike what students were allowed to do in China. They were amazed. I decided to make a film while I was there. I brought my Bolex and a bag of film and documented what I saw, getting up early and going out in the streets. I didn't have a plan, this wasn't political analysis; I was looking with fresh Canadian eyes at something I'd never seen before.

MIKE: What did you see?

DAVID: I saw a lot of people looking at me, because I was white and had a camera. They were the focus of my attention and I was the focus of theirs. I searched for fixed frames where I could set the camera down and let people walk in and out of it. Like the Scientology storefront in Beijing. I also recorded sound there. The radio ran English language lessons, and in order to teach the words, they made up stories which were unintentionally hilarious. A woman meets a foreign student on a bus, they discuss schooling and she shows him where to get off. As he's leaving she asks his name and he says, “John Denver.” And the woman calls out to the driver, “Stop! I have to get off now!” I used some of these stories in the film, along with sounds collected independently by my colleague Dennis Burke. He's a musician, composer, and sound designer and we've worked together on a number of films since.

MIKE: I saw echoes of a lot of your earlier work in the film, which suggested that while you'd arrived in a new place you had brought familiar methods of seeing the world. I thought *Black Cat* was not so much about China, but about how looking or subjectivity is carried across borders.

DAVID: Filmmakers develop their own vocabulary over time, like a painter or a musician, which becomes the way you look at the world. The work comes out of this view, this kind of attention that is entirely personal.

After I premiered *Black Cat* at the Experimental Film Congress in Toronto, I went back to my hotel to find the TV filled with scenes of the Tiananmen Square massacre. I realized my film had a different context now, and wondered how I could acknowledge what these students were doing. We had met many of

them on our trip. Were they in jail now, or dead? The next morning I woke to the sounds of protest, and outside my window was a march of Chinese-Canadians heading to the Chinese embassy. I joined in and a Chinese student handed me a piece of paper, with transcripts of the last broadcast from the Beijing English language radio service. They said, "Our colleagues have been murdered in the Square," and appealed to the world to stop the massacre. They signed off by saying that due to political relations in Beijing this was all they could report. I included this text at the end of the film.

MIKE: *Tiger* (5 min 35mm 1993) is your only film in a 35mm format.

DAVID: One of my students found a 1927 camera at a junk store, and I lent him the \$300 to buy it on the condition that I could use it for a year. I shot widescreen landscapes, water and waves, and also included a scene from a Mexican documentary showing a caged tiger. This film was in 16mm so I cut out all of the frames and taped them onto clear 35mm film with the sprocket holes visible. The caged tiger is like the taming of the landscape.

MIKE: *Local Knowledge* (33 min 1992) feels like a summary work, combining time-lapse photography, found footage loops, and careful framings in an episodic venture into knowing.

DAVID: The title came from my life as a sailor. When you sail on the coast here you have to be very careful about rocks and currents, always consulting the charts. "Keep the little rock to the left as you veer towards the shore..." But sometimes when you arrive at a small harbour the passage is too complex to describe in a book, so they say instead, "In order to enter this harbour local knowledge is required." This knowing comes from the people who live there. The film is about the knowledge one has about the

place one inhabits. It begins in Storm Bay, where I spend my summers, then moves out into the world, and eventually returns. The ocean is a strong image in the film; I shot from the boat, allowing the winds and tides to transport the view. Women emerge from the water in found-footage moments, women as muses and sirens. The centre of the film is a jog around a large ten-foot rock on a mud flat. As I circled the rock the camera was always pointing towards the rock's centre, recalling the Muslim pilgrimage to the great rock of Mecca. This circling achieves a kind of peace.

MIKE: What do you think about the state of the art?

DAVID: I think there's less interest in experimental film now, but people are more tolerant because they're exposed to different kinds of work. But experimental film — a term I never liked — is not as different now. The mainstream has co-opted a lot of technical things that were being done, so it's harder to surprise people. Experimental film used to exist in opposition to the mainstream, but that's no longer happening at a formal level, only in terms of content. Different kinds of stories are being told, and different kinds of people are telling them. But experimental film doesn't really exist any more. [...]

MIKE: You don't like talking about your films.

DAVID: Once you try to explain an image, it takes something away. If I were a poet I would do it; word-smiths would feel comfortable. But asking filmmakers is not always a good idea. Do we ask musicians to explain what all those notes mean? Ultimately, it's the image itself that has the power. ■



45 SEEING THROUGH THE PAST, AGAIN

SEEING THROUGH THE PAST, AGAIN: DAVID RIMMER'S FOUND FOOTAGE FILMS

by Samuel LaFrance

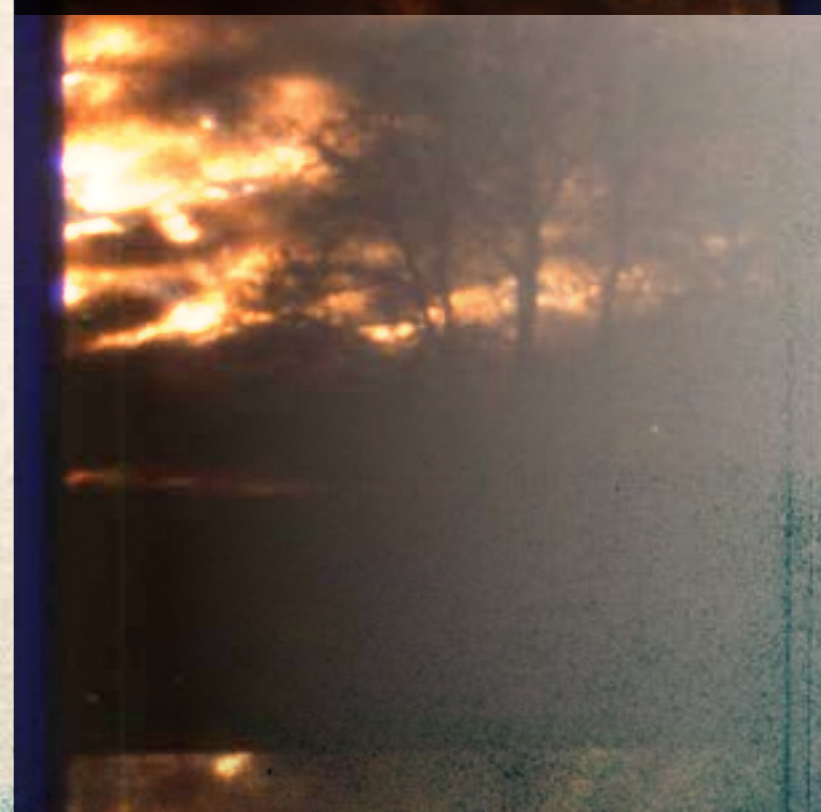
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Screened in a newly restored print as part of the Wavelengths program at this year's Toronto International Film Festival, David Rimmer's *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* (1970) consists of a repeated eight-second image of a factory worker waving a piece of cellophane in front of the camera, looped through an invisible cut that imbues the gesture with a graceful continuity. As the woman's arms work inexhaustibly and the plastic wrap settles down over and again, a slew of variations are imposed through heavy photographic processes: the image's negative form begins to insinuate itself atop its reversal double; grey density slips away as the contrast is increased; and finally, a spectrum is introduced through intricate colour separation. While the complexity of these effects is impressive enough to begin with, the

brilliance of their execution can only be fully appreciated when one learns that the film was not made with an optical printer, but was mostly rephotographed on a small screen with two projectors running variations of the loop, each manipulation executed spontaneously by a filmmaker who described himself "playing variations like a jazz musician might."

Rimmer has long been considered alongside Chambers, Wieland, Elder, and Snow as a charter member of Canada's avant-garde elite, which makes the large-scale restoration effort on his oeuvre recently undertaken by Mark Toscano at the Academy Film Archive particularly welcome. First discovering Rimmer's films while working at San Francisco's Canyon Cinema, Toscano — a preservationist who has initiated projects to restore the works of numerous experimental filmmakers, including Robert Nelson, Gary Beydler, Stan Brakhage and Chick Strand — sought to collaborate with a Canadian institution in order to get the restoration project underway, which proved to be an uphill battle. "Although there's no shortage of passion and enthusiasm for David's work [in Canada],





there is a definite crisis of resources among Canadian archives, and attention to independent artists' work has naturally suffered," Toscano explained, adding that this is a problem far from unique to Canadian archives. Eventually, a coordinated effort by Moving Images Distribution, Simon Fraser University, and Rimmer's family and friends resulted in elements for all of Rimmer's films being delivered to Los Angeles, adhering to Toscano and the Academy's shared philosophy that a filmmaker's body of work be preserved in its entirety. "This is a rejection of the notion of preserving only a 'greatest hits' of the avant-garde," said Toscano. "Often a filmmaker's lesser-known work will greatly inform a reading of their more popular films, as well as their entire output. In many cases, a work previously thought of as 'minor' will capture a later generation's interest more than a presumed 'masterpiece'" — a mandate that echoes Henri Langlois' reminder to archivists (as well as critics and the public at large) to "never assume you know what is of value."

That admonition is especially pertinent given the sheer taxonomic breadth of Rimmer's work (ranging from lyrical to documentary, dance, and diary, to name a few), which has engendered an equally broad field of theoretical inquiry into his oeuvre, from gender representation to structuralism, minimalism, ethnography, or even, as Al Razutis has suggested, industrial-constructivism. This heady discursive stew can seem rather at odds with Rimmer's artisanal strategies, not to mention his declaration that the cinematic illustration of theoretical ideas is "a deadly way of filmmaking." In Rimmer's found-footage work in particular, we see an artist whose intuitive, intensely materialist acumen — somewhere between (or beyond) what writers describe as "flow" and jazz musicians as "blow" — aims, perhaps impossibly, at the redemption of the source material it has irrevocably transformed.

A distinctly Western Canadian filmmaker, Rimmer initially learned his craft in the late '60s via what seems to have been a mostly unstructured apprenticeship as an editor with the CBC in Vancouver, while at the same time experimenting with film and video resources made available by media-based institutions in the city's contemporary art community, such as the Intermedia lab. Rimmer's earliest public screenings were projector and video-circuit works, frequently incorporating found-footage loops, that accompanied dance, music, and poetry performances as part of multidisciplinary happenings at the Vancouver Art Gallery and other venues. These performances not only anticipated Gene Youngblood's coining of the term "expanded cinema" (in his canonical 1970 text of the same name) by a few years, but also that "ecological" tendency that Youngblood identified within a certain subset of new media artists, for whom "the act of creation ... is not so much the invention of new objects as the revelation of previously unrecognized relationships between existing phenomena, both physical and metaphysical." Despite his curious omission from Youngblood's text, the "ecological" tag fits Rimmer perfectly, and echoes Mike Hoolboom's later assessment of the filmmaker as "a recycler, working with elements until the audience could feel it right along with him, holding that bit of plastic in his hands."

Rimmer's proclivity for appropriation developed rapidly in this period. Of the nine films he made between 1970 and 1973 — a body of work that the University of Toronto's Bart Testa once called "the most magical and precise in all Canadian cinema" — more than half are found-footage works, derived from material Rimmer gleaned from poring over discarded reels from the National Film Board and the CBC in search of a segment, fragment, or single frame that resonated with him, each bearing a distinct material

complexion acquired over time through use, abuse, or abandon. While much of Rimmer's most captivating work is predicated on a deep respect for the appropriated material's now degraded provenance — lovingly lingering over scratches, faded colors, and acetate decay — the ultimate goal is to transform that material: to employ formal and technical applications in order to wrench the footage out of its original mimetic context and, in doing so, reassert its status as a material entity. "David's found-footage works, especially the ones in which he's performing further manipulations on the found material, are very aware of photographic content, but also of the image as a construct, as silver and dyes embedded in an emulsion on a piece of plastic," says Toscano. "That awareness, that tension and connection between the two aspects of his cinema, are part of what make his work so expressive and powerful."

Rimmer established that tension early on with his short 1970 classic *Surfacing on the Thames* (described by Youngblood in *Artscanada* as "the ultimate metaphysical movie"), the title's pun offering a less-than-subtle clue that the film's surface is the real meat of the material. The film's loop is cut from an aged filmstrip, its faint emulsion bearing the images of two boats crossing a sepia-bathed River Thames. Arresting the image's progression through the use of a slide projector, Rimmer allows each frame to occupy the screen for a few seconds before a cross-dissolve brings about its successor, slowing the vessels' progress to a nearly imperceptible crawl and allowing the viewer to take full advantage of the time afforded to examine the worn texture of the filmic surface. Overwhelming the ostensible content through its brute materiality, *Surfacing* practically allows one to smell the vinegar and feel the brittleness of the film, until its golden grain literally consumes the frame in a climactic optical zoom.

In *Seashore* (1971), Rimmer turns a day at the beach into a watermarked ballet, displaying a greater freedom in determining the sequencing and rhythms of his moving images as compared to the more rigidly structured loop seen in *Variations*. Working from a brief scene of seaside bathers and assorted onlookers, Rimmer first allows us to familiarize ourselves with the entirety of this snippet before clipping the loop at head and tail to draw our gaze toward specific bursts of action within the frame — a dress being pulled to the knee, a head turning toward the camera, a body launching into a wave — while the scratches, splices, and water stains that come forth and recede as the image's density rises and falls create an intricate choreography with the figures in motion. The film is subjected to varying levels of light saturation, the images fading in and out in an ongoing pas de deux of obliteration and restoration.

Rimmer's aestheticization of surface blemishes in *Seashore* and *Surfacing* foregrounds a preoccupation with the tension between material and temporality that he explored differently in *Treefall* (1970), where his photographic processes imbue the film's emulsion with destructive potential. The film comprises alternating positive and negative images of two trees being felled; as the positive image of each tree is downed, its negative is erected in its place and repeats the topple. The four images are printed in stark black and white, superimposed and looped in increasing synchronicity as Rimmer gradually collapses the temporal divide between the positive and negative images. Soon, the opposing forms of each image are so closely synchronized that only skeletal outlines of the timber are left, awakening the realization that a precise overlaying of these images would lead to a complete obliteration of their content, or more specifically a succession of black frames — and awakening also a sense of the fragility of the image as a construct of the artist's machinations.

This innate, if unarticulated, awareness of the political implications of appropriation would be developed in the more structuralist work that followed. For *Real Italian Pizza* (1971), Rimmer initially planned to shoot the view from his New York loft — the same in which Michael Snow had shot *Wavelength* (1967) — for a few seconds every day for several months; eventually succumbing to the banality of the scene before him, Rimmer instead opted to trigger his Bolex whenever something of interest was going down outside of the pizza joint across the street. That abandonment of strict structuralism was more than compensated for in *Watching for the Queen* (1973), which mirrors the durational experiments of *Surfacing* while pushing the outer limits of spectatorial attention. Taking a one-second shot of a crowd gathered to catch a glimpse of (an off-screen) Queen Elizabeth passing by in a motorcar, Rimmer stretches these 24 frames across 13 minutes by repeating the first frame for a full minute and then halving the duration of each of the subsequent frames, until the normal projection speed of 24 frames per second is finally reached.

Both these works share a (perhaps unintentional) concern with the camera as voyeuristic tool. Catherine Russell, whose readings of found-footage works highlight the inherent ethnographic tendencies of the practice, interprets *Watching*'s trifecta of exchanged gazes — between onscreen subject (the crowd), off-screen object (Her Majesty, ostensibly), and apparatus (the camera) — as symptomatic of a complex hegemonic exchange, where the camera serves as a surrogate for an absent but nevertheless omnipresent power that robs the onlookers of subjectivity. Yet while it could be argued that Rimmer's safely concealed camera in *Real Italian Pizza* imposes a far more complicated anonymity upon his unwitting subjects than that of any of the nameless figures in his found-footage films, the onlookers in *Watching* are at

the very least aware of this exchange of gazes: indeed, many of them seem more interested in the recording camera than in their titular head of state. Further, while Russell suggests that *Watching's* gradual restoration of movement “denies the autonomy of [the individual’s] gestures,” one could just as easily contend that the crowd’s gradual release from the restrictions of the film’s decreased speed signals instead a reclamation of (collective) agency. Rimmer’s imposition of a mechanized stasis from which he gradually releases the film’s subjects could well serve as a commentary on the appropriative function of his work, and on the liberatory potential he saw within it: deprived of the projector’s light, gate, and claw, these images remain frozen in time until they are revived (and redeemed) through the filmmaker’s interventions.

It’s in this that Rimmer’s early found-footage work tellingly overlaps with the efforts of the conservationist. If Rimmer’s early work in performance elicited a desire to transform one’s experience of an inhabited environment, his found-footage pieces seek to impossibly reconstruct the uninhabitable spaces of the past, an impossibility attested to by the degraded state of the celluloid upon which they’ve been captured. Of course, Rimmer’s films inevitably trudge through the muck of problems that accompany this type of making; they might misrepresent, render anonymous, or otherwise do damage to the initial intentions, contexts, forms, and structures of the appropriated material. But to conserve is, necessarily, to transform, especially in a medium founded on flux: between capturing (or appropriating) an image from a physical reality, producing an iteration of that replica through at least one photochemical process, and relying on constantly changing film stocks to reproduce said iterations in order to disseminate the artist’s work,

filmmaking is, of course, predicated on an attrition of “authenticity” in the very act of pursuing it. Addressing this transformation head on, both found-footage filmmaking and restoration practices are bound, as Toscano says, within “an organic, elastic medium, one whose inevitable changes can be righteously reconciled with the film’s aesthetic history to create something new which preserves a work in a faithful form.”

There’s no doubt a certain irony in restoring the work of an artist whose process necessarily occluded the contexts and content of his source material. But while Rimmer himself seemed to grow increasingly aware of the implications of this practice in his later, more overtly political work, he never took on the air of an apologist. In *Bricolage* (1984), he loops a sequence from a film on juvenile delinquency with two distinct sound effects — a teenager breaking a window, and another youth retaliating by punching him in the stomach — but offsets the sound cues with each pass of the loop, until the corresponding sounds of each act are switched. In the loop’s final iteration, we hear the thud of the sucker punch when the windowpane shatters, and the crash of glass during the gut shot, suggesting that provocation and retaliation are aspects of the same thing. One could read this sequence as an act of self-criticism, or, conversely, as pre-emptive self-defence, Rimmer’s acknowledgment of the violence wrought upon the “original” material by the filmmaker’s interventions. But such politically correct second-guessing seems unlikely, and unnecessary, for an artist who so thoroughly embraced variation as a means of redemptive expression. As the conclusion of *Bricolage* attests, in a repeated voiceover of a woman uttering French critic Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr’s famous epigram, “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.” ■

Special thanks to the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre for their assistance in researching this article.



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NOMINATION STATEMENT

by Michael Snow

ORIGINALLY WRITTEN AS

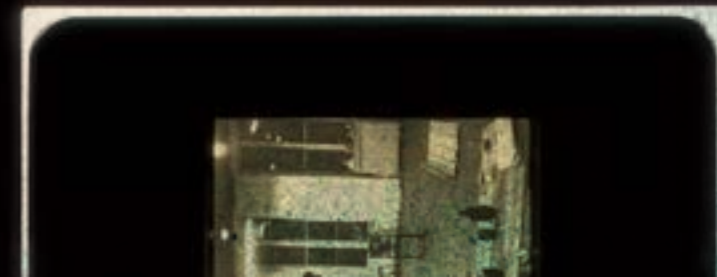
**a nomination statement for Canada's
Governor General's Award, 2010**

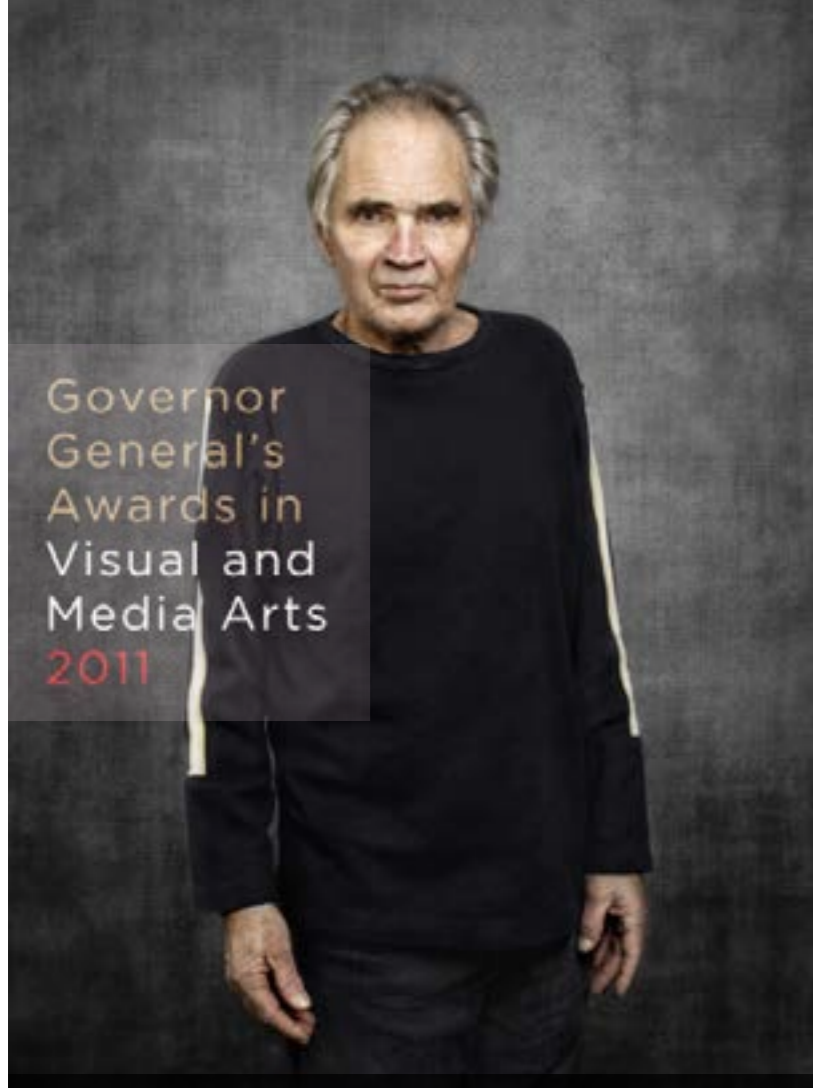
In 1962, my wife Joyce Wieland (visual artist and filmmaker) and I moved to New York City. In Toronto we had both made independent films-as-art since 1956. When those films were made we didn't know that there were other artists (relating to the painting and sculpture world) who made films.

In New York we soon encountered the world of "Experimental Cinema," also known at the time as "Underground Cinema," and we both made films that were screened at many theatres (including the Museum of Modern Art), got written about and won prizes. Joyce and I were considered to be part of an avant-garde movement called (by critic P. Adams Sitney) "Structural Film."

In 1970, screenings in New York of films by another Canadian, David Rimmer, took place. I believe *Square Inch Field* (1968) was the first of his films that I saw, but specifically *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970) is forever fixed in my memory. It achieves its magic by utilizing technical possibilities (re-photographing rear-screen projections) specific to the medium of cinema. This film has been likened to *Wavelength* (1967), a film of mine which is considered a classic by some historians/critics.

As we saw more of his films, including the superb *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* (1970), I realized that he was a very original creative artist and that he and I had a kinship in looking to the qualities and processes that were specific to film for some of the impetus for creating film art.

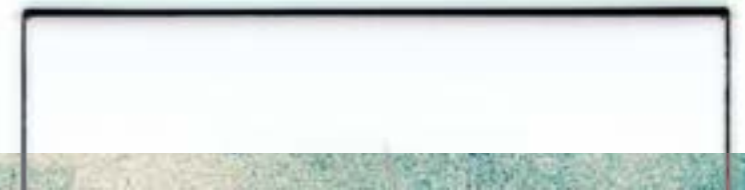




Rimmer has continued to make extraordinary films — *Canadian Pacific I* (1974), *Canadian Pacific II* (1975) and *Al Neil: A Portrait* (1979) stand out. He continues to explore creative juxtapositions (editing), e.g. *Local Knowledge* (1992). Some of his films and videos can be identified as “documentaries,” but are no less creative than the more seemingly “experimental” ones.

Perestroika (1992) is an interesting, ambitious (60 minutes) example. It’s a film that is mostly built on filmed conversations with Russian artists in Russia. The film’s individual character as a personal documentary comes from Rimmer’s quiet and respectful role as another artist making his art with artists.

He has been active in the Vancouver art scene for 40 years and with his work with Intermedia [the Canada Council-funded arts lab and workshop] from 1966 to 1975 and in particular with his 1969 video installation *Electrical Connection*, he should be recognized as a pioneer in video art. Vancouver has a history of artists (especially recently), being involved with photography, film and video. Rimmer has taught at Emily Carr University, at Simon Fraser, at UBC and several other institutions since 1971 and I have no doubt that he has deeply influenced his students, who thus carry his example into different levels of moving-image art production in the Vancouver area and elsewhere in Canada. David Rimmer has made, and continues to make, a great contribution to art and is very much worthy of national recognition. ■



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WHEN THE MIND REACHES OUT TO TOUCH

WHEN THE MIND REACHES OUT TO TOUCH THE THING IT SEES: A SELF-PORTRAIT

by David Rimmer

ORIGINALLY WRITTEN AS
a Canada Council Research/Creation
grant proposal, February 2012

INTRODUCTION

In 2011 I was awarded the Governor General's Prize for Media Arts, and, as part of my acceptance speech, I told a story about the beginnings of my work as a media artist; it went something like this.

More than forty years ago, having abandoned a university degree in mathematics and instead hitched around the world for a couple of years, I came back to Vancouver with the idea of taking a master's degree in English Literature. As I was writing a lengthy essay on Ezra Pound (as one did in those days) it suddenly occurred to me that the last thing I wanted to be doing was interpreting someone else's poetic vision, I wanted to make my own instead.

A friend suggested I apply for a grant to make a film so I filled in the Canada Council form to make what later became *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*, but as I came to tick the box that best described the kind of practice I was interested in, I couldn't find anything that fitted. So I drew my own box and labelled it "experimental" and ticked that. To my great surprise, I got the grant.

Experimental is now an accepted term, it is what I do. This project proposal is another kind of experiment — the box I'll be ticking, the subject I now want to tackle, at seventy, is myself.

When the Mind Reaches Out to Touch the Thing it Sees (a useful working title for me) is a self-portrait of a kind but with as many poetic ambiguities and experiments as I can work back into the material: myself in the first place and my work, re-visited.

I imagine making a film which interweaves traces or evidences of myself taken from "out there," but where the observing self of David Rimmer, as in much of my work, inter and under cuts the material in dissolving



textures of presence and ambiguity, resonance and erasure, disappearance and irony. A kind of visual hide-and-seek with myself and my lifetime's work, almost a rhetorical loop filled with my own nagging epistemological signatures — a portrait as tentative, hesitant and riddling as I can make it.

I am after all, a tree, a weather-pattern, a woman, a movement — certain codas and signatures that re-occur in most of my work. I am also “real” things: events that occurred, people I met, places I went, mistakes I made, these are part of my “real” history — they changed the course of events. But these “real” things are tangential — it's not that I want to make a film “about” myself, but more a film “of” myself and that of-ness is all in the process: including things, not including other things, insisting on certain patterns and rhythms, cuts and loops in logic and anticipation... tangled up to make some kind of music of myself.

And, as this title suggests, *When the Mind Reaches Out to Touch the Thing it Sees*, what is it that my films have made present? What was it that ever touched this mind? How can one tackle the perception of self as subject? In what objects could the subject reside? At which end of this looking is the self to be found?

Self-analysis of any kind is absolutely the last thing I'm aware of when I create my work yet my films are all deeply personal and very close to my intuitive grasp of things that matter in the bigger picture — when one gives oneself to this absolute interpenetration of all things, it can manifest as a self-exposure so wide and pure that it becomes practically identical with the light with which they are seen.

Dear Dave

all sorts of hassles. My films were seized by customs coming back from London, & they won't let them in without a screening, broken, etc, which will take about a week. So I figured the best thing to do was to send them back to you in Canada, & try again another way. Enclosed is the export form that you will need to get them from customs. I won't need them for a couple of weeks, so maybe you could make enquiries about how to get them down to me. Maybe the filmboard can help. Let me know before you send them tho. Another possible is my picking them up when I go to Ottawa, but I may have the same hassle.

Dave

WHAT'S IN A SELF-PORTRAIT?

An interview with David Rimmer by Sarah Butterfield

SARAH: David, you hate talking about yourself, so why do you want to make a self-portrait!

DAVID: Ha! Yes I don't like talking much, but my films aren't about talking. Sometimes I think about this project, and I think, what am I doing? I've nothing to say about myself! And then, when I think about it a bit longer, it gets interesting, something persists: all my films are myself in a way. So I think, why not look at them all again and bring them back in and do something new with them. This could be intriguing, that kind of self-reflexiveness, coming round full-circle, re-visiting, years later and as a much older man.

There are lots of characters in my films, and they're all part of who I am. There's a paradox in there somewhere I haven't finished with yet. Perhaps there's also something quite exhilarating about feeling self-conscious. I don't know, the best experimental films make you feel that way!

SARAH: Can you say something about what your films have been looking at and what you're now going to look at? I mean, you know, whose eyes will be looking and at what now?

DAVID: I suppose I've been grappling, in any way I've been able to imagine to find a way to tackle the ambiguities of film itself and the qualities of perception, of looking, trying to slow time to look at it unfolding, to slow down the perception of images and events to create a kind of insistent interrogation. What's it all mean? I watch things and people slowly and for long stretches of time, I sift through materials and re-photograph them, loop them around or turn them inside out. It's a process of looking, watching and building and packing images that make the kind of

poetic meanings I'm interested in... impressions and questions about people, places, the image itself... myself in the end, inevitably!

That kind of interrogative loop, looking back through eyes that have been looking for so long through the image itself... in the end it's all about the nature of looking, who's looking and at what? But it's also about experimenting, not knowing where you're going, getting lost... but it's also quite formal what I do.

I get disillusioned sometimes though, perhaps that form is dead now... Is it dead? I don't know, it's what I do! I struggle with computers, I can't get anywhere near what I see, hear, think, feel in the way I could when I was working on a Steenbeck. It's why I'd like to go back to it to make this. Why? So that I can touch the image itself. I don't know, it's different, essential. There's something I remember Atom Egoyan saying when he was talking about experimental cinema being dead, or marginalized — meaning unimportant, I guess — he said that that was to marginalize some integral part of ourselves. That's what I work at.

SARAH: There are recurring themes and images in almost all the films you make, can you say something about them as characters? Will they be re-appearing in this film?

DAVID: "Local Knowledge," which is the title of one of my films, is a term mariners use to describe private, local, secret knowledge that they use for navigating, they're all the things that aren't drawn on maps. In a way I've spent years looking at things that aren't drawn on maps. Trees, changing waterlines, clouds, horizons, patterns, things that come and go and change, time itself... and they get really interesting when you look at them long enough. I suppose all of my work insists on this kind of local knowledge and that way of looking. So when I think now about a self portrait, it's that looking at all those eternal, indeterminate, not particularly noticed things that change

a lot, but really slowly — this interests me. I can pull lots of things through those kinds of holes — history, myself, paradoxes — through these tiny moments and spaces, that links me back to them. It's my ground and all the paradoxes of blood and joy that are "out there," in them, in me.

So yes, that flux of things, self, others, objects that are both dangerous and wondrous to me. It is what I try to capture, so yes, they are all characters, parts of myself.

Local Knowledge was all about how ways of looking are attached to local circumstances to generate fresh ways of seeing. The thing is, it's all in flux, that's what I really want to play with now: all that disappearing, re-emerging, looping, insisting, it's a puzzle and a riddle, that kind of thing. It's what I'd like this film to be. You can find it in particular found footage fragments too, I need to find new ones. I've always worked with them, they're part of my tool kit. Looking at small fragments for a long time, working with remnants.

SARAH: David, you run every day, you've run marathons. How many? Five? And you've made films about walking. Can you say something about this?

DAVID: Yes, I run and walk a lot! I have for years, through the forest, along the coast, and I see things that are always there, but they're always changing. They're sort of beautiful and menacing at the same time. There are certain trees for example that crop up in a lot of my films, that have aged and changed shape over the years I've been looking at them. They've become characters in my life, personalities, and I'd like to show this in this new film — re-film some of the trees that are in work I made thirty years ago or more. The same is true of certain horizons and shore-line shapes, I've been looking at them for years and they change, but you wouldn't know unless you really look at them and for a long time.

I'm interested in this, how complexity can be seen in very simple things. It's metaphysical. I think we're living in a time now where we're beginning to understand that we have to take more care and slow down... that'll be a line through this new project. When you take that time you understand that they, we, everything, holds this kind of complexity and fragility and, I suppose also, in the end, a kind of aimlessness and it requires a much greater and gentler attentiveness than we give it. The original people of this landscape have always known this. It's also a way of suspending judgment and I think that's important.

I like running, it is aimless, but it is also when I feel and understand the heartbeat. I think about the conceit and madness of our attempts to harness nature, and all the arbitrariness of what we think is the right way to behave — it's just fashion and it goes in and out of fashion. These are all things I play with in the films I make. The arbitrariness of life itself really, the rules we impose, codes of conduct. So yes, running, travels through the mind, my mind — they're all characters and harmonic opposites, myself included. Also, I run now at a different pace, the rhythms are changing, so are the meditations — perhaps there's something in the collision of these older and younger versions of myself, I mean, I'd never be able to make *Divine Mannequin* now!

SARAH: There's a film you've been making since the sixties that no one has seen, the Storm Bay Film. You've been talking about integrating it into this one. Can you say something about that?

DAVID: About fifty years ago a bunch of us bought some land up the coast in a place called Storm Bay. We were hippies, breaking rules, building anything, back to the land kind of thing. That community is more or less still the same, we're just older and our children are now part of that place and its dreams. Storm Bay is in the official guide books, but it says



something like: once a popular escape for hippies... you may see some run-down shanties that have been left in their wake! But it is/was so much more than that! It shaped my thinking and we are still there.

I've built a couple of houses there — the last one's a glass tree house. There's very little that separates the inside from the outside and I use it to film things. I've made lots of my films there, the power of that landscape is extraordinary but so also was the power of our thinking, what we tried to set up.

I've always had a boat and lots of my work has been shot on the water, adrift on the sea, tides and storms moving the camera... I began making a "home movie" about our community, what we were up to, right at the beginning and have been adding to it over the years. Every couple of years or so we watch it on the communal dock in the summer. I'm in it, everyone's in it. It's just a really great and valuable document about a group of creative people who've hung out together for a long time, whose intentions were to do something different. I want to use it in this film, rework it back into the future in some way.

SARAH: Your work dances all the time and there's incredible intimacy in it, but it's often quite menacing. Someone wrote that it's like a gentle invocation of disillusion — are you disillusioned?

DAVID: I can't answer that question, I don't know, we'll see!

SARAH: Mike Hoolboom writes a lot about your work, he's a great fan. He wrote somewhere that you have the uncanny ability to take the very small and extract the very large, that you can find the whole universe in the corner of a room. You have the rare intuition for taking some part of recorded action, distilling it into an abstract pattern and then slowly allowing the content to seep back in, like an epiphany. It's a great description of your work! When I look at your portrait of Al Neil it is exactly this — it's a fantastically blown

open portrait of someone using very small details with great energy and affection. Can you do the same with yourself as a subject?

DAVID: I have no idea! I don't think about it this way, it's what other people write about my work, later! It's just what I do, so I don't know. But that film on Al, it's a good film and I'd like to send part of it in as support material. Al taught me to listen, and I suppose I taught him a little about watching and so we had a conversation going the two of us, inside Al's jazz beats and we got very close. I wanted to make a really intimate portrait of Al that was also completely open because he can't be contained. So there are lots of different kinds of people in that film, but they are all Al Neil (inasmuch as they are all also probably myself — it's why I was drawn to Al in the first place). Same with this project. What does a portrait mean, it's just a generalization or an approximation of someone. It's an invocation, that's all, never complete, never said, just an approximation. That's what absorbs me. Flux, ambiguity, approximation, traces.

SARAH: Do you imagine including newly filmed, "home movie" footage with you in it, your sons, friends, your partner?

DAVID: Hmm, that gets really self-conscious then. I don't know, I think we should film something like that and see what happens to it.

SARAH: But, David, this is a self-portrait, that means it's about you — you are the subject. It's not just a film by David Rimmer, it's something else. How will we know this? I mean, will we see you and hear you? Will you film yourself — in a mirror, for example? Will you be talking about, I don't know, growing older? About what you've learnt, your process? About people and communities in your life that have shaped your thinking? Those kinds of things?

DAVID: Yes, of course. You will know this is a self-portrait, but I can't tell you how yet, it's not the way I

work. It's the hardest part, the trickiest part — to get the shape right. I mean, you know, to be conscious of one's self but not self-conscious — to think you have anything to say in the first place, directly that is. How do you position yourself? It is an interesting question and it's a scary undertaking for me, I never talk about myself! But this is the project!

As I said, all my films are about myself: that's what experimental cinema is really — like a painting. Whether I have anything interesting to say more directly about myself and how I can make that into the kind of material I generally work with, well, that's an interesting challenge and we will have to see! Many artists have eventually turned to themselves and made self-portraits, but not at the beginning, only when they feel mature enough. I am interested in that turning point, that moment of self reflection and what you chose to reveal and leave out.

SARAH: We talked about an idea you had for this project. You said you'd like to upload some of the image sequences from your films as Creative Commons material and invite friends and artists to rework it and send it back to you. Your intention presumably to work back into this new film other people's reiterations of your originals, a sort of digital mirror.

DAVID: I suppose I think of it a bit like writing a letter back, well not really a letter, a sort of call and response... but it also tips the images and sequences I've put together back into a very much bigger picture. It's where they belong, but because they are sequences, they're also part of my vocabulary, since I made them. I want to play with this, the echoes and versions of things. I'd love to see what Mike [Hoolboom] or Gerda [Cammaer] or you, would do with something like *Bricolage* or *As Seen on TV*.

Last year when I was working with Sammy [Chien] we started generating some really great material together: he brought his younger eyes and this

technological wizardry and we re-mixed and mashed up old films of mine with new images and beats in live performances together. I was amazed by what we managed to make together. It really surprised me. I'd like to work that way again! I love the idea of relinquishing ownership this way and re-generating new from old.

SARAH: You want to work with both digital and analog platforms to make this new film.

DAVID: Yes, it's essential to work between the two, they do different things. Working in film and by hand, I just feel I can work more intuitively and closer to the speed at which I think, it's something to do with being able to touch the image I am cutting. I find mistakes come more frequently and that's where the good things are, in the surprises. And then there's all the scratches and dirt patterns I work with, I can't see these on a computer and lose part of my language. I want to be able to work frames within frames again, loop, repeat, re-photograph, perhaps stop-frame printing again, these are all part of my kit and I can't get at them in Final Cut. I can't paint if I can't do these things easily and quickly. So I want to work again with all these exacting, formal concerns that belong properly to film.

I mean, look at my hands, they are builder's hands, I have always made things and always been interested in getting inside the machinery of filmmaking, building optical printers, my own projectors. I've torn film, scratched it, done all sorts of material things to it, I have to be able to touch it in some way. That's why I went back to hand-painting on film recently. I don't talk film, I build film, I have to touch it: words are not where the feeling is.

But I'm excited about the Creative Commons material, it's a digital mirror as you say, the way it can be gifted and returned quickly and re-integrated. There's a

swiftness there that I know is important and appreciate it and it's digital. So the two against, with each other.

And the hand-painting stuff. There's still a lot to play with in this technique. It was Norman McLaren's, but I am trying to take it in other directions. If you paint onto film using chemicals that can't tolerate each other, like people you get microscopic explosions of intolerance and in physics' terms they obviously have a lot of metaphoric leverage. Who are we? By what forces are we formed? These properties obviously belong in this kind of film, but I'd like to experiment some more to figure out how to integrate them properly back into this mix.

SARAH: Lastly, what are you going to be doing for sound?

DAVID: In the past, I've always pirated bits and pieces of sound because I cut with it, against it. Generally, I give an early version of sound and image to my musical collaborator Dennis Burke who's worked on many of my films. He generates something and sends it back, I cut to this and it goes back and forth that way a few times. I imagine doing the same again.

SARAH: Oh, and one other thing. What did getting the Governor General's Award mean to you? Does it make a difference?

DAVID: I don't know really. I liked the moment of it, you and Milo being there, it all felt complete and good and it was fun! It was great to see work of mine at the Art Bank I'd completely forgotten about. But there was also something melancholy in it, an ending maybe, because unless I can make work now, make new work, keep turning up new tricks for looking and living, what's left? Getting the Governor General's hasn't helped in that way. I sometimes think most young people now have no idea who I am. It's tough now to find funding for real experiments. And meeting

endless new artists who seem to think they've suddenly invented "experimental," re-inventing wheels, when they have no idea, at all, about what we were all up to in the seventies, how very radical that time was, it makes me sad. As if it's just old stuff, but those were great times, creative times and it's important to know what went on before — your history — most young people have no idea. Things are getting thin, if this gets thin, then everything does.

SARAH: So, can you sum up, just a string of things that come to mind when you think about this film. I really like the title, by the way!

DAVID: Ha ha! It's yours! So, OK, let me think, off the top of my head. Trees, horizons, time, water, wind, patterns, mirrors and windows, the persistence of vision, revisiting forms and myself, older and younger versions of the same. Growing old: re-iteration and approximation, recurring nagging epistemological tropes in my work now that I can see them with greater distance. Paradoxes and riddles, slowing time, the sifting process that's like running. Meditations on trees and shore-lines and breathing. The process itself and formal questions of "proper" filmmaking, properties too of the Creative Commons and gifting, aimlessness and gentle attentiveness, change and menace, local knowledge and navigation. Trees, windows, horizons, shore-lines, have I said that? Am I repeating? Storm Bay, back to the future, the direction of time, repetitions, re-iterative loops, found footage and the same. Patterns, mine and other people's. Puzzles, riddles, re-emergence, aging, gentleness, awareness, repetition. Shortness of breath and of time now. Digital mirroring, real-time world and politics, now, arbitrariness of beliefs and fashion. How these pale and fade when trees stand, change shape, endure and inhabit my horizons and long after my horizons. Approximation, tolerance, corruption, re-generation, a sense of humour. You! Is that OK?



STRUCTURE

Film length — approximately 50 minutes.

What follows is pretty speculative: thinking about a film in any really concrete way before I have made it is completely alien to me, it is not how I work. What I tend to do is collect as many threads and image associations as I can find and just jump in, working from the middle (perhaps) and out towards the edges... filming new images, searching, uncovering, exploring chance and variation. Moving fragments together that don't belong, that kind of thing. So, what follows is a description of some of the material and drifts I would like to be working with, they read as sections, but, of course, nothing I make is linear in this way, all of these influences and purposes intertwine. "Thickening the mix" is what I am good at and it's the detours, not the straight lines that interest me. In some ways this project will also be about leaving out all the important stuff you're supposed to put in a documentary, that's part of my character too.

Nevertheless, here are a few sections or threads. I imagine building towards a fifty minute finished piece. They are loosely chronological in terms of how my thinking and my craft has matured and taken shape and the things that have touched me in the process. Apart from a number of things I have already mentioned to do with shifting landscapes, particular trees and horizons that appear and re-appear as codas in almost all my films, these are some of the more personal/concrete pathways I'd like to be integrating, however indirectly.

Inspiration

Starting out, beginnings, knowing nothing, all the in-utero stuff that belongs to exploration and experiment and breaking the rules... escaping, breaking open. We were doing things in those days that were

entirely new, they were fresh because they were born of naiveté and intuition. There's a lot of history to cover here, lots of documentation. My films and tapes: *Treefall*, *Migration*, *Blue Movie*, *Variations*, *Surfacing on the Thames*, *The Dance*, *Seashore*, *Fracture*, *Watching for the Queen*, *Canadian Pacific* all came out of this time. It was a fantastically vibrant time and I couldn't stop, the possibilities were infectious. We pillaged and we stole, we made mistakes, we made new ways of looking.

Communities

I work alone, I am a loner, but we did form communities, early versions of artist-run communities. These had a significant effect on the Vancouver art scene and then elsewhere as we travelled. We built shacks on the mud-flats in Vancouver, communes in Kits, studios in the downtown East Side. We bought Storm Bay — it was all new. We put art where it had not been seen before. Intermedia in Vancouver came out of that time — it was powerful, significant and cut new ground — there was our take-over of the Vancouver Art Gallery too. We infiltrated experimental film festivals in London in the 70's (I even found myself on the front cover of *Time Out*) and then I went to New York, everyone did eventually, where I lived for a number of years. We were on the front cover of *Artforum*, the loft I lived in became Mike Snow's and the place where he shot *Wavelength*. Lots of history here, lots of changes in my work, new preoccupations as well as children.

Fathers and Sons

The first significant break I made from found-footage films was a documentary I made with Al Neil, an amazing rule-breaker, shaman, Dadaist of his own making. My relationship to Al (and the film I made with him) was significant and powerful. He was a friend and artist with whom I got very close. I'd like to re-visit this material, that portrait of an older man, as I am aging too. He was a father-figure to me in ways I haven't yet

really thought through. And sons, I have three, they are me, I have loved being a father.

Loves and Women

My films are full of women! They all relate in some way to the erotic power of the image itself. I can't imagine making any film without women in them, but what of the two women who have been my companions? They have both been hugely inspiring to me and my work and I couldn't have done what I do without them but they are never spoken about in the literature about me — this is a hole in the telling I'd like to address.

Aging and Death

I look at my face now and I see endings, age, wisdom of a kind, time. What does that mean to me? What do I know now? To go back to all my earlier work and re-cut or reassemble it back to the future in some way, what would I do? How has the tone shifted? What would I extract in this portrait of me at seventy? That kind of looping back and through interests me. A sort of new revealing, perhaps more honest or something. And what persists?

Storm Bay

As I said, I've been making a "home movie" about that community for years, it was just made off the cuff for those people and has never been seen by anyone else. But it's interesting footage now partly because it has seized such an immensely long stretch of time. We are beginning to lose now some of the people you see, our children watch this film with a sense of awe and wonder (and embarrassment probably!). What were we up to? Storm Bay has played a huge part in my life and my work — this film holds images and memories that are critical to who I became, and I'd like to work with this footage as a central spine in this portrait. All the friends, lovers, mad projects, laughter, children, storms and hand-made houses that it contains. It is a character itself.





Later Work/Older Work

There's something in re-visiting all those older films of mine, as if finding them again for the first time, so that now, through these eyes, much, much older eyes, those films have become new found-footage fragments. I want to take them back and treat them in fresh ways, with fresh eyes, as if looking at them for the first time, or in a very long time, at least. *Bricolage* and *As Seen on TV* were films within films within lives, lots and lots of layers ricocheting. I'd like to put myself in there somehow too and add a new layer. To rub them up too against the same returned footage that comes out of the Creative Commons project element I described earlier in which other filmmakers have re-cut, online, some of my work and gifted it back. These are rhetorical loops I find fascinating and they are rich, essential ground for addressing history, time, death, passing, change, the interpenetration of things. Perhaps I will be adding layers over and inside using hand-painting techniques I've been working with recently.

Local Knowledge

This is, I think a mature work, or, at least it is different in significant ways from others, before and after it — it is a culmination and turning point — everything that went before and came after passes through this film. It is local knowledge.

Walter Benjamin said that there are two kinds of storytellers. There is the one that is always on the move, bringing the story of one place to another. And then there is the storyteller who lives their whole life in the same village, who knows the rites and rituals, the secrets, the doubts and shame, of that village, and is able to spin their stories, the masks of their stories, from that place. *Local Knowledge* emerges from staying put, at home. It's a film that holds a record of moods and inclinations, it looks at both the climate of the inside and the climate of the outside. It is me. It is outside and inside my head, but it is all me.

Hands/Magic: Bricoleur/Bricolage

I started a film not long ago out of material I had gathered from a trip to India where I'd been working as an artist in residence (near Calcutta). It got really interested in the idea of *jadu* which is the Hindi for magic. Magic, some sort of direct line to other kinds of consciousness or parallel worlds, infects, without a doubt or a missing beat, the work of most contemporary artists I was hanging out with when I was there. There's a lot of new material and interviews I shot there about magic, what it is, where it comes from, how it influences that needs to intertwine with revisiting my older work, the Storm Bay footage and my own thoughts, if that's the right word, about growing older. Times, traces, what you leave, where the ideas and inspirations, loves and chaos came from in the first place. These are the kinds of nagging epistemological questions that underlie almost everything I have ever made. This new documentary material from India holds a great deal of fascination for me.

I work with my hands, it is where my intelligence is. Sleight of hand/magic will be a recurring coda in this self portrait, which will be a bricolage, some of it made by hand. *When the Mind Reaches Out to Touch the Thing it Sees* will be some kind of self exposure so wide and open that it/I become practically identical with the light in which my images/all images are seen. Who am I? Where am I? What is it we are looking at? Make it strange: it'll be a strange music. ■

FILM AND VIDEO WORK

Knowplace, 1967

(co-director with Sylvia Spring, Bob Herbison)

Square Inch Field, 1968

Migration, 1969

Landscape, 1970

Blue Movie, 1970

Headend, 1970

Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper, 1970

The Dance, 1970

Forest Industry, 1970

Seashore, 1971

Real Italian Pizza, 1971

Treefall, 1971

Watching for the Queen, 1973

Fracture, 1973

Al Neil/A Portrait, 1980

Narrows Inlet, 1980

Shades of Red, 1982

(co-director/producer with Paula Ross)

Bricolage, 1984

Sisyphus, 1985

Along the Road to Altamira, 1986

As Seen on TV, 1986

Roadshow, 1987

Divine Mannequin, 1989

*Black Cat White Cat It's a Good Cat
if it Catches the Mouse*, 1989

Beaubourg Boogie Woogie, 1991

Local Knowledge, 1992

Perestroika, 1992

Amigo's Blue Guitar, 1992

Tiger, 1994

Pod Jaszczurami, 1994

Codes of Conduct, 1997

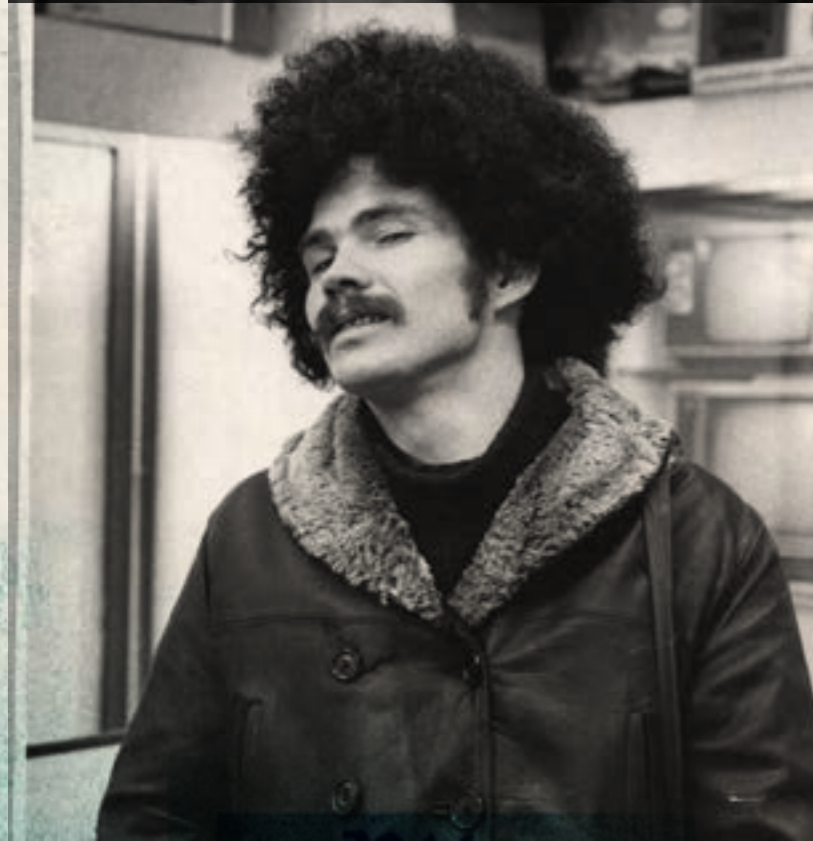
Jack Wise: Language of the Body, 1998

(director; co-cinematographer with
Lynka Belanger, Taki Bluesinger; editor)

Language of the Brush, 1998

An Eye for an Eye, 2003

Gathering Storm, 2003



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