

September 2, 2008

Toronto 08. Wavelengths preview.

From one of my own favorite writers on film, Michael Sicinski.

Straub In the midst of a super-sized warehouse festival like Toronto, the Wavelengths program can get a bit lost in the shuffle of industry hype. This annual showcase of experimental film and video consistently features some of the most formally adventurous programming of the entire festival - work that, in another time and place, we might have called "advanced" - but too often much of this work slips in and out of the festival, largely unnoticed. It would be easy to blame this solely on the Entertainment Weeklies of the world, but that would be both unfair and inaccurate. For one thing, back in 2005 one Owen Gleiberman made a point to praise a Wavelengths film, Kenneth Anger's *Mouse Heaven*, in his EW wrap-up, which is more than a lot of supposedly "edgier" critics have done since then. But there are also institutional factors at work. For instance, the logistics of conducting a press screening for a 16mm film projected at 17 frames per second is mind-boggling for even the most technically advanced festival personnel. And from a media standpoint, acquisition deals and star vehicles will of necessity drive the coverage. A film festival like Toronto has many masters to serve, and it's admirable and extremely gratifying that, between the Appaloosas and the Brothers Blooms, there's still a niche for the kind of work programmer Andr̄a Picard highlights each year.

Some of the most noteworthy films in this year's Wavelengths slate were not available for preview. But, as it happens, they're films that should probably already be on many cinephiles' radar. Two new films by Nathaniel Dorsky, *Winter* and *Sarabande*, will be shown in the first program alongside the first solo effort by Jean-Marie Straub, *Le Genou d'Art̄mide*. Dorsky's last film, *Song and Solitude*, world premiered at TIFF in 2006 and was, in my opinion, both the finest film in the festival and the best film of that year. The Straub film, which debuted earlier this year at Cannes, has amassed the customary legion of passionate admirers and gainsayers, some of whom are still not reconciled to the radical project Straub began with his life partner, the late Dani le Huillet, 45 years ago. *Le Genou*, said to be both a sequel of sorts to the couple's final feature, *Quei loro incontri*, and a farewell poem to Huillet, is the sort of film that could, in a more adventurous programming climate, have appeared in the festival's Masters or Visions sections.

RR The same could be said for the cinema of James Benning, a man who has gradually become one of America's greatest feature filmmakers in any category. If ever there were a film artist whose aesthetic output virtually nullified any rigorous boundaries between experimental, documentary and narrative feature filmmaking, Benning is the man, and the fact is, major North American festivals have been much slower on the uptake than their European counterparts. Thankfully Picard is taking up the slack. Benning's latest, *RR* (pronounced "railroad"), also unavailable for preview, is another examination of place and its connection to politics, ownership, temporality and perception. Each shot shows a train moving through a specific landscape, and the shot's duration is determined by the length of time it takes that train to enter, occupy, and exit the film frame. I do have to quibble about TIFF's unwillingness to schedule in a press screening for a feature length film, even in the Wavelengths section, by a director of Benning's stature, but it's a relief to have his work in the festival at all. If aesthetic logic reigned over commercial considerations, Benning and Straub would be categorized and screened alongside Lisandro Alonso and Nikolaus Geyrhalter, and Picard wouldn't need to use her slots to grandfather them into TIFF. But there you go.

I had the opportunity to preview most of the remainder of this year's Wavelengths slate, and while any collection of short works will, of necessity, entail variance in quality as well as viewer-response based on taste and inclination - there's just too much information coming at you in a short amount of time, too much abrupt switching of gears - overall Picard has assembled another strong set of programs which should be a must for any committed cinephile dipping seriously into the deep well of TIFF. Besides, even an uneven batch of non-narrative shorts can serve as a piquant palate-cleanser between, say, an existential, dead-stare Asian master shot exercise and an earnest biopic about an ailing reality-TV cast member. Here are some highlights.

How to Conduct a Love Affair How to Conduct a Love Affair - The overall project of filmmaker David Gatten could be justifiably considered an acquired taste, since many of his best-known works are about film's inability to capture some ineffable aspect of human experience, such as the instantaneous moment of cognition when a jumble of letters is recognized as a word. As such, watching his films can be a bit like seeing mercury slip through your hands. (His What the Water Said films are an exception, palpable hits to the consciousness that only underscore the almost calligraphic subtlety of the rest of his oeuvre.) This film, however, is one of his most openhearted and concrete. It's about delicate emotions, and it possesses a visual fragility, but maintains a deeply satisfying tactility, like a handmade gift. (Wavelengths 2: Lost and Found)

Horizontal Boundaries - The latest 35mm abstract concerto from Pat O'Neill is actually the latest revision of a film that has been under re-construction for several years. (By my count this is the third variation, but I may have missed one.) The film instantly thrusts us into a chugging image-processing machine that arranges fragments of Southern California into a kind of superimposed light-table display in action. Rapid-fire segments of highly processed beaches, bungalows, car life, palm trees stutter across each other vertically as a horizontal line bisects the frame. Basically, the title refers to a kind of intentionally faulty registration, wherein images slip into and onto one another on the horizontal axis, as though film and projector aren't working in the same gauge. Carl Stone's thrumming washer-dryer soundtrack, punctuated with snippets of film noir dialogue, provide the counterpoint. Even though to my eyes Boundaries is more of a "container" film than a fully integrated work, it features passages of thrilling formal brilliance that only a master like O'Neill can provide. (Wavelengths 3: Horizontal Boundaries)

Public Domain Public Domain - I cannot feign neutrality when it comes to the films of Jim Jennings. I think they represent one of the most criminally underrated bodies of work in the American avant-garde of the last 25 years. Although Jennings is the quintessential "filmmakers' filmmaker," held in the highest esteem by his peers, this is the kind of characterization that typically implies an inaccessible, specialized art practice, something that Jennings's films are not. They are for everybody with working eyes. Public Domain, made in response to an ill-conceived and since-rescinded edict involving heavy taxes for filming in New York City, is both a classic on-the-fly, man-in-the-crowd city film, and an implicit hurrah in favor of the unauthorized camera-stylo liberty that has defined the avant-garde. Jennings's edits turn people, buildings, windows and shadows into tectonic ballerinas in a volumetric dance, and the results are electrifying and joyous. This is one film you'll regret being able to see only once. (Wavelengths 3: Horizontal Boundaries)

Garden/ing - Eriko Sonoda's video is deceptive in the most delightful way. If you have even a passing familiarity with experimental film and video, the opening moments of Garden/ing prepare you for a rather uninspired iteration of a well-worn genre within the field. Sonoda, it appears, is going to use the same camera set-up and staggered pan to shoot her backyard at various points in the year so as to compress the passing of the seasons. Hm, ah, yes. How lovely. But actually Sonoda is setting you up for a skull-rattling perceptual process about which the less you know going in, the better. What I will say is that, in the telling, and in the immediate post-perception, what she's doing is simple to understand. But at the moment of actually watching it unfold, most of Garden/ing is a mad mental scramble to catch up with what you're seeing, a kind of phenomenological slapstick. A very close cousin to both the film work and the conceptual photography of Michael Snow, Garden/ing is a natural fit for a program named in his honor. (Wavelengths 3: Horizontal Boundaries)

Rodakis Rodakis - A highly accomplished first film by German artist Olaf Nicolai, this is a work that appears at first blush to be a somewhat off-kilter essay film or experimental documentary short, one a little bit out of place in the program. Nicolai has more up his sleeve than that, but to reduce Rodakis to its late-in-the-game reveal would mean missing its numerous sensual pleasures. Formally akin to Straub/Huillet and especially Heinz Emigholz, the film explores the life of proto-modernist Greek builder Alexis Rodakis, based on a cinematic study of the house he build for himself. Part architecture, part photography, part cinema and part conceptual process art, Rodakis establishes the tropes of art as autobiography only to undermine them in a uniquely graceful manner. (Wavelengths 5: Trips)

Mosaik MŽchanique - Oh, those madcap Austrians! It seems like Vienna has an endless supply of demented formalists whose mission is to detourn, deface and otherwise turn the remnants of official film history on its ear. Our latest mad scientist from the Ringstrasse is one Norbert Pfaffenbichler, who has taken a Chaplin/Arbuckle one-reeler, separated each shot, looped it, and arranged the results in a simultaneous widescreen grid. The whole of the film, right before your eyes! The running time, over and over, yet completely static! The paradoxes abound. Mosaik is said to be a dual homage to Peter Kubelka and Fernand LŽger, but more than anything Pfaffenbichler's result looks like the hanging-filmstrip gallery displays of Paul Sharits, which "showed" a film quite literally, but lacked the temporal dimension harnessed here. Is this how aliens will watch movies in the future? Is this how David Bordwell secretly watches them now? (Wavelengths 5: Trips)

Trypps 5 Black and White Trypps Number Three and Trypps #5 (Dubai) - Chicago's Ben Russell has proven to be one of the most interesting young filmmakers to emerge in recent years, his work displaying both a wry sense of humor and an easygoing formalism characteristic of a generation equally at ease with No Wave and structuralism, who no longer have to choose between Brakhage and Warhol. Although I must lodge a small protest here that Russell's newer, reportedly thrilling Richard Pryor demolition film, Trypps Number Four, is not included in the program, he is certainly well represented by two excellent works from that major series. Number Three, shot during a hardcore show by the band Lightning Bolt, displays an audience in secular rapture, catching the lights and achieving the avant-garde's preferred state of shifted consciousness, from the other side of the camera. Trypps #5 is a brief tone poem compared to Three's expansive drama. From a fixed frame position, we see a large fragment of an outdoor neon sign, the middle of which is anchored by the word 'HAPPY.' (Above the Western alphabet letters, there is smaller but complete Arabic script. So a more knowledgeable audience can "read the signs," but many of us aren't in on the code.) The neon is in startling pastels - hot pinks, baby blues, sea greens - which contrast with the fire-engine red of the block letters. Within this photographic scheme, Russell gives us just enough time (not quite two minutes) to watch as the sign lights up in myriad ways. The neon tubes illuminate from left to right; they alternate; they play pianistic chords; they divide the sign in half and blink; and on and on. Is there a pattern? In a very short time, Russell shows just how many surprises there can be within things we mistakenly treat as mundane phenomena. (Wavelengths 5: Trips)

Flash in the Metropolitan - This exceedingly brief but jarring little film, a collaboration between British artists Rosalind Nashashibi and Lucy Skaer, is a perfect example of cinema's ability to redefine the conceptually familiar through perceptual means. Nashashibi has been making quite a splash in the British art scene over the last few years (don't know her stats, or if she's technically a "YBA"), and I can see why. Flash is a rare "theatrical" mood piece that straddles the grammar and attitude of experimental and narrative film but sells neither short. Nashashibi and Skaer basically move through the antiquities sections of the Met, providing a collision-montage of pre-Columbian, African, Greek, and Roman artifacts in display cases. The formal rhythm results from the fact that the directors film in complete darkness, then pulse a powerful spotlight on the objects before the lens, making the room, and the film, "breathe" with an arresting sense of drama and suspense. Movements across the space are generally smooth tracking shots, although the darkness also conceals edits which "cheat" the integrity of the space, but make for jarring head/mask interfaces. Although I suppose one could take the filmmakers' formal procedure and interpret it as an ironic neo-colonial gesture, or a critical statement on museum space, the overall impact is to reinvest some of the most taken-for-granted material in the Met with a sense of danger. (Wavelengths 5: Trips)

Suspension Suspension - Anyone will tell you that the greatest pleasure you can experience in the context of a film festival is a new discovery, the joy of a major talent jumping out of the crowd and forcing you to take notice. I'm happy to report that Vanessa O'Neill appears to be such a talent, based on the evidence of Suspension, a dual-projection seascape abstraction that takes essentially familiar elements and weaves them into an entirely unique visual field. In describing what she's done, it will sound fairly simple. The two single film images represent significantly different spatial effects, and the spatial differential results in a hovering, luminous painterly image that mutates across the running time. Much of the film operates as a sort of optical contest between a sharp, Yves Kleinian cobalt blue and the pure white of the projector lamp. Against this action there is the tension between shifting water images. Sometimes we're deep in the drink,

with waves filling the frame; sometimes they're offset with a white sky managing the top half of the image. But time and again, the secondary filmstrip contains active film grain in motion, so that seemingly static images seem to zoom forward like oncoming traffic, or form and disintegrate like atoms. What's more, at key transitional moments, O'Neill washes the film frames out to the bare minimum of information - a blue horizon line or a hovering edge. In one significant moment mid-film, a gaping blue cut opens and retracts from left to right, turning the screen into a Lucio Fontana canvas, opening itself in time. Suspension is an achievement of a high order indeed, and when all is said and done will most likely be one of the best films shown in this year's festival. (Wavelengths 6: When It Was Blue)

When It Was Blue - I've saved the best for last. Jennifer Reeves will be presenting When It Was Blue as a live, two-projector performance piece, but I was able to preview a version of the work in single-disc form. Even in that less-than-ideal format, Reeves's performance was one of the most emotionally overpowering filmworks I've experienced in a very long time. Blue is a stark, masterful cold-water baptism in the image-life of a complicated and fearful mind, a sort of layered visual headspace in which the natural world is experienced, as a set of rhythmic patterns rather than as a narrative, as both desired object and potential assailant. Tapping into what Freud called the "oceanic feeling," Reeves creates a jangled skein of natural fragments whose beauty and terror continually threaten to overwhelm both implied subject and viewer. Considering what an all-enveloping sensation Blue was on my DVD player, the live gig will no doubt be utterly piercing. This is the one program not to be missed. (Wavelengths 6: When It Was Blue)

- Michael Sicinski