

BREAK OUT! STUDENT FILMS ON THE EDGE OF REASON

Curated by Coral Aiken

Curatorial essay accompanying the Break Out: Student Films on the Edge of Reason program screened at the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque on January 29, 2009

“Break Out: Student Films on the Edge of Reason” highlights an exciting new generation of filmmakers currently attending film programs in Eastern Canada and the US. Following a tradition of narrative filmmaking, the filmmakers use narrative boundaries as an opportunity for innovation.

Students reinvent old forms of narrative and create new ones, drawing inspiration from other disciplines. For example, the musical form is traditionally used to expand reality or take us outside of reality but many of the films in this program use the genre to bring us deeper into reality. The films draw from their diverse backgrounds in other art forms. While some of the filmmakers look to literature for insights into time and place, others are inspired by dance and theatre performance.

Performance plays a major role in “Fictional Dance Party” by Geoffrey Pugen. For this film, Pugen rented a space, set up music and a bar and brought in actors to create a dance party. The actors are members of the modern dance group DanceMakers whose activities that night were actually highly choreographed. The film experiments with spontaneity and performance to reveal the constructed nature of human interaction.

Whereas “Fictional Dance Party” creates a world of artifice, “The Gaspar Show” demystifies the magician’s world. Breaking with the convention of magic shows as puerile entertainment, Lessard uses the spectacle to grapple with issues of despair and ennui. The magician, in an intimately small theatre, performs a magic trick where the assistant’s grim fate is determined by an act of violence devoid of magic and trickery.

David Frankovich takes the idea of demystification further in “The Exquisite Corpses”, using the musical genre to break through the fourth wall of cinema. In one scene the director himself appears in the film and sings a ballad with his crew about how a director’s presence on set is superfluous or, according to the film, “super superfluous”. Breaking from a series of narratives within the film, Frankovich’s self-reflexive move comments on auteurism, personal narratives and authenticity in filmmaking practice.

“No One Thinks About The Garden” and “La Mienne” each represent a different type of narrative character study. Tara Khalili’s “No One Thinks About The Garden”, the most experimental film of this program, uses optical printing, hand processing and other experimental techniques to conjure the reality of an elderly woman, the filmmaker’s

grandmother. With Khalili's approach to the subject, form and content intersect in a kaleidoscope of images and represent the woman's fragmented memories more faithfully than would a conventional narrative structure.

In contrast with Khalili's film, Danielle Morgan's "La Mienne" follows a standard narrative form, using the language of continuity editing to create an unquestioned illusion of filmic reality. The normative structure of the film acts as a cover for the strangeness of the story, an obsessive love ritual with a mechanized toy bird.

Another film reaches out to the animal world for a protagonist. An urban drama, Han Lee's "Walking While Sleeping", features a wayward cat as one of its major characters. "Walking While Sleeping" uses a conventional dramatic structure to present a poetic meditation on the nature of relationships while problematizing our understanding of reality and time.

The idea of place is important to many of the films. For example, in "The Adventures of Ledo and Ix", the characters are presented with a seemingly endless void, which challenges their courage. The non-place provides a fertile ground for the imagination. Both "The Adventures of Ledo and Ix" and "Patience" evoke Samuel Beckett in their examinations of a non place.

Beckett describes the kind of space present in these films in his novel "The Unnamable".

...this place, if I could describe this place, portray it, I've tried, I feel no place, no place around me, there's no end to me, I don't know what it is, it isn't flesh, it doesn't end, it's like air...

Samuel Beckett

The Unnamable

Beckett's sentiments resonate through many films in the program. Both "Patience" and "Gaspar Show" seem to perform to the camera without having any sense of time or place, and "Fictional Dance Party" plays with the notion of constructed space. The absence of place gives freedom to the artists to abandon cultural signifiers that would be inferred by a specific location.

Eve Majzels calls "Patience" a "minimalist musical about repression, accompanied by a chorus of accordions". Majzels uses her theatre background to inform "Patience's" awkward dance routine. Tensions between our expectations and the actual performance are heightened by the erratic hopelessness of the dancers going through the motions of basic choreographed actions. Majzel's comment about repression makes us look at the dance as a

futile rebellion by performers forced to enact scripted gestures, giving the impression that they are only biding their time for something better.

“A History of Narrative Film”, a textbook by David A. Cook is a staple in film education. Students inevitably refer to it as the “Cookbook”. Eleven hundred pages of text outline a detailed history of film, and serve as most student’s introduction to the form. In his note on method the author, David Cook, explains his reason for grounding the text in narrative filmmaking.

I believe that the history of film as we have experienced it to date is the history of a narrative form. Many of the greatest films ever made were created by artists seeking to break the constraints of this form as it defined itself at different points in time, and there is much evidence to suggest that since the fifties the cinema has been moving in an increasingly non-narrative direction. But the fact remains that the language common to the international cinema from the last decade of the nineteenth century through the present has been narrative in both aspiration and structural form.

David A. Cook

A History of Narrative Film

From German Expressionism to the French New Wave to the New American Cinema to the new works of today, innovation in filmmaking comes from the experiences of the culture creating it. The student films presented in this program “break the constraints of the form” and are part of a movement that continuously strives to redefine our understanding of narrative, and expand the scope of cinema.