

The Western Influence: Films by Ellie Epp, Chris Gallagher, Al Razutis, and David Rimmer

By Alex MacKenzie

Curatorial essay by Alex MacKenzie to accompany the Cinema Lounge screening of short films that is part of the series The Western Influence: Films by Ellie Epp, Chris Gallagher, Al Razutis and David Rimmer on March 7, 2010.

I was in a university classroom about 20 years ago when I saw a handful of short films by four Vancouver-based experimental filmmakers. It was my first real brush with this kind of filmmaking, and it made an immediate and profound impact on me. So much so, that I decided to travel west a few years later and see what I might find that inspired these sometimes beautiful, occasionally disturbing, and always rigorous moving image works. What I found were the filmmakers themselves.

I first moved to Vancouver in 1990, fresh from a UI (now known as EI) top-up job in Montreal where I was working with the local co-op Main Film to organize a provincial tour of experimental film works. It was to be a fast education on how this kind of film was made, distributed, exhibited and received. But when I arrived in Vancouver, my sole local connection was an ex-girlfriend who knew only a little about the city and the local mediascape. In a few weeks, I got involved with the Cineworks Film Co-op, as well as Idera, a film organization specializing in the distribution of Latin American films and political documentaries.

Within the next year, I managed to land a job with the Pacific Cinematheque as a glorified secretary. I think the title was *Administrator*, which eventually transformed into *Communications Manager*, and as such I began to pick up some design and publicity skills. I remember working in to the evenings when the program deadline was looming, knowing I had stayed too long at the office as the smell of popcorn began to waft up from the cinema downstairs. My film education was expanding, and it was a period for me of uncovering a tremendous amount of feature-length art-house cinema, and the start of making short film works of my own.

A few years later I began to think about the possibility of opening up an alternative screening space as some kind of antidote to an observed lack of attention to and exhibition of avant-garde/experimental work in the local scene. The Cinematheque was a poor fit at the time, and alt art space or gallery screenings were few and far between. Inspired by a ramshackle little cinema in Seattle at which I had attended a series of old Church of Latter Day Saints propaganda films (the long defunct Pike Street Cinema), and taking an ever-increasing interest in so-called “ephemeral” films (educational/industrial/how-to, etc), I rented out a storefront at the north end of Commercial Drive on

the East Side of Vancouver. After spending a few months renovating the decrepit space with the help of my friends, I immediately started screening films and presenting moving image-based artwork on most weekends. The space was christened *The Edison Electric Gallery of Moving Images* in honour, not of the crooked inventor, but of the first permanent cinema to ever exist in Canada, in Vancouver in 1902. And so, here I was, 93 years later, pursuing a sort of revival and celebration of an alternative way of seeing.

Or so I thought. I didn't really know what I was doing to be honest, but my naïveté certainly helped things along. Had I known what I was really getting into with the rent looming over my head everyday and incredibly high film transport and rental costs, I might not have made the leap so quickly. The programming I was doing was largely thematic and combined artist works with ephemeral films as a way to create a fresh context and perspective. It seemed to be working, and an audience began to grow.

One of the first screenings featured Chris Gallagher's *Plastic Surgery* as part of a show I called *Fluid Bodies and Bodily Fluid*. If that title wouldn't get them through the door, nothing would. Along with David Rimmer, Al Razutis, and Ellie Epp; the works of that West Coast group that had drawn me to the so-called *Terminal City* in the first place, filled the white wall in front of the Edison's tiny 50 seat cluster of relic theatre seats more than a few times. These films also visited me in my sleep in the makeshift loft I had built above the projection booth, where I lived for that entire two year period. With three little space heaters to keep me warm and a crummy old futon, my slumber was fitful, my dreams erratic. But ideas were percolating. All was well.

I was now making films of my own, a project I had begun back at Main Film. I remember showing *A Current Fear of Light* as a part of the Vancouver International Film Festival, the first performance-based film I had made. It couldn't have been created without the central use of both the space and the projectors I was running at the Edison. The film was a combination of scars, scratches, punctures and scrapes across black emulsion, inspired by Aldous Huxley's conspiratorial eyesight improvement handbook *The Art of Seeing*. After the screening at the festival, Ellie Epp told me that she quite liked the imagery and rhythms, but that she didn't take to the sound. It was nice to hear from one of my heroes. Two years later and reaching the end of my lease, I published the final program at the Edison, featuring among many other things, a show of 3-D work by Al Razutis along with a display of antique optical toys and devices. But the screening never came. A central sponsorship fell through and the eye gear, as it turned out, was prohibitively expensive to rent. But I would see Al again, soon enough.

A year and a half later, I opened my second cinema, a full-time engagement as well as a much larger project all around. I hunkered down to 5 years of screening 6 nights a week, again featuring among much

else the works of these early influences. While I continued to open up *The Blinding Light!! Cinema* programming with the screening of political documentaries, live events, 'cash cows' for the stoner crowd like *Dark Side of the Rainbow* (the Pink Floyd/Oz mashup) and the occasional bit of controversial retro-porn; at the core were the rigor and undeniable power of the experimentalists. Among these, Al Razutis' 3-screen epic 16mm film *Amerika*, along with a comparably epic introduction by Al, and a retrospective of David Rimmer's work were undeniable high points.

I have since had the good luck to cross paths with these filmmakers from time to time. All were (and are) still very much involved in many and varied creative pursuits. Rimmer, Gallagher, Epp and Razutis continue to produce new media-based works, and their tenacity, enthusiasm and ongoing investigation of ideas never cease to inspire me. David can often be found out at local film shows and art openings, while Chris has recently completed what looks to be an epic and visually entrancing feature entitled *Time Being*. Ellie Epp has created an online version of her personal diaries dating back over 40 years called *Lifetime Journal Project* - an incredible collection of writing that she proposes may be the "the real work of my life". It is a fascinating and completely engaging document. And, I just met up with Al the other day. To my delight his trademark vitriol and venom for the establishment was on full display.

I might have stumbled across a different group of filmmakers to aspire to and to find influence in, but I am thankful for that early class with Peter Harcourt. A humanity, charm, and insight inhabit each of these makers, and I continue to feel it in them and in their work to this day.

Resources on the filmmakers:

Ellie Epp: www.sfu.ca/~elfreda

Chris Gallagher: www.foxglovefilms.com

Al Razutis: www.alchemists.com

David Rimmer: www.davidrimmerfilm.com

About Alex Mackenzie:

Alex MacKenzie has been working as a media artist for over 15 years with a focus on various models of expanded cinema and light projection involving the handmade image. He was the founder and curator of the Edison Electric Gallery of Moving Images, the Blinding Light!! Cinema and the Vancouver Underground Film Festival. His live media works are presented at festivals and underground screening spaces throughout Europe and North America, most recently on a tour of the British Isles which included The Leeds International Film Festival, Cork Film Festival, no.w.here in London, and the 7 Inch Cinema in Birmingham. Alex received a Bachelor of Arts Degree with Honours in the School for Studies in Art and

Culture (Film Studies), Carleton University, and has worked with a variety of independent film organizations over the past 15 years including Main Film, Pacific Cinematheque, Cineworks, and Doxa. He has been invited to residencies at Atelier MTK in Grenoble, France and Struts Gallery/Faucet Media in New Brunswick. Alex is the co-editor of Damp: Contemporary Vancouver Media Art (Anvil Press 2008), interviewed David Rimmer for Loop, Print, Fade + Flicker: David Rimmer's Moving Images (Anvil Press 2009) and is currently designing handmade film emulsions and manually-powered projection devices for gallery installations and live performances. His website is www.alexmackenzie.ca.