

Notes from Underground: Experimental Documentary's Unsung Heroes

Words: Adam Hart

It's not exactly a movement, but the underground/experimental/indie/whatever documentary is shaping into a central subgenre of non-mainstream film, and a valuable proving ground for talented filmmakers. It's a genre that Matt McCormick, one of its foremost innovators, defines as "artistic, nonfiction filmmaking... the result of a head-on collision between traditional, information-laden documentaries and abstract, craft-driven filmmaking." Its practitioners are a disparate group of filmmakers, scattered around the country and tied together by similar aesthetic concerns, along with a growing sense of community that overrides geographical separation and leads its members to take one another's films with them on tour. These experimentally minded artists are not only producing some of America's finest and most innovative films, but have made enormous gains in bringing a chronically stigmatized avant-garde tradition out into the open.

Although on the surface it might seem pointless to link the painfully gorgeous photo album-films of Robert Fenz with Bill Brown's wistful travelogues or Travis Wilkerson's remarkably calm, yet blistering polemics, they all share the characteristics that have come to define the work of truly independent filmmakers in recent years. Made largely from grants, or out of the creators' own pockets, these films are often the result of the filmmaker alone with a camera (occasionally with a friend to shoot additional footage or to hold the microphone), and correspondingly, are often about outsiders and isolation -- all staples of the avant-garde, to be sure. But what sets these filmmakers apart is that their formal playfulness and experimentation, though very significant elements in their films, seem almost incidental. Many are most concerned with subjects and surfaces -- their approach to their subjects is both graphic/aesthetic and fundamentally sympathetic.

Long, relatively static takes of an animated mechanic telling stories about drag racing in Deborah Stratman's *The BLVD* both alienate viewers and draw them in. A contemplative shot of a tugboat in Matt McCormick's remarkable *Towlines* can be perceived as either allowing the full scope of the image to sink in or removing it entirely from context, turning it into an abstraction on the screen. The singular trait about these filmmakers is that they often achieve both opposed effects at the same time. Their films express an exceptional faith in the power of the image, unmodified and unmanipulated, that leaves no doubt as to their sincerity, even when, as is often the case with McCormick and Brown, you might think they're being smartasses.

McCormick is certainly one of the central figures in contemporary non-narrative filmmaking, and deserves a good deal of credit for his part in cultivating the underground film scene in Portland, which has, perhaps improbably, become one of the deepest and most dynamic in the nation. A constantly surprising filmmaker whose disarming, low-key films are steeped in a wicked sense of humor not always apparent on first viewings, McCormick's importance as promoter, distributor and programmer of experimental film over the past decade cannot be overemphasized. As the founder of Peripheral Produce, a DVD/video distribution label, and the Portland Documentary and Experimental Film Festival, McCormick has helped tie together the disparate strands of American non-narrative film and draw them out of the New York circles, bringing attention to filmmakers who work outside such major art centers, including nomads like Bill Brown and Bill Daniel.

Brown, whom McCormick calls his "favorite filmmaker in the world," might be the most delightful filmmaker in America that nobody has heard of. His digressive, witty first-person ramblings focus less on himself than on the melancholy, nostalgic speculation inspired by the events he documents, and his eye for desolate, uncrowded images is first rate.

Along with such figures as Jem Cohen and Travis Wilkerson, McCormick also represents a more fluid interaction between filmmakers and the rest of the arts community, particularly musicians. Wilkerson has worked with Jim O'Rourke and Will Oldham, while McCormick has enlisted indie darlings The Postal Service and James Mercer of The Shins to do the soundtracks of two recent projects. Mercer, a longtime friend of McCormick's, says that the collaboration was "an opportunity to expand my understanding of music and of art in general... it's also something that you really feel good about contributing to"

-- an attitude shared by the many small-label superstars who have begun to search out more underground filmmakers for music videos and concert footage.

Wilkerson makes kinetic, graphically driven essay films that concentrate on the troubling sociopolitical legacy of his hometown, the formerly booming mining community of Butte, Montana. While two of his films, including his debut (fiction) feature, *Who Killed Cock Robin?*, have played at Sundance, his most powerful statement might be the caustic *From the National Archives Vol. 1*, a found footage compilation that turns actual film recorded from the electronic sights of helicopter-mounted machine guns in Vietnam into a mere pattern of dots and lights on top of a green jungle backdrop, allowing the full implications of the footage to slowly sink in as the targeting indicators swirl around the screen.

Robert Fenz and Deborah Stratman have strong ties to the larger experimental documentary tradition, Fenz having served as director of photography on Chantal Akerman's DV meditation *From the Other Side* and Stratman having collaborated with such highly regarded filmmakers as Thom Anderson and James Benning. Fenz' ability to capture devastatingly beautiful images is mind-blowing, while Stratman, whose work includes the much-heralded *Kings of the Sky*, about a troupe of Mongolian tightrope walkers, produces atmospheric, delicate films and has a knack for expressing sophisticated social analysis through minimalist means.

Cohen, who has been making films for two decades and is in many ways the forerunner of and model for this loosely defined genre as it currently exists, has achieved some mainstream success through collaborations with the bands Fugazi (*Instrument*) and Smoke (*Benjamin Smoke*). He continues to tell unconventional, impressionistic stories, both fiction and nonfiction, or mixtures of the two, but cautions against saddling films with a daunting term like "experimental documentary" when work "doesn't fit into a recognizable, mainstream slot.... Most of my films come out of observing the real world, at least as a starting point. I think they offer something for everyone."

Indeed, McCormick and several of the filmmakers in and around his circle are born showmen, and have managed to create a sense of palpable excitement about highly unconventional, occasionally difficult, filmmaking. Maybe in a few years, filmmakers will no longer have to worry about a term like "experimental documentary," in Cohen's words, "[scaring] people off."



Our fall 2006 issue celebrates the tenth anniversary of our acclaimed international touring film festival, RESFEST, with a number of special features tied to this year's programming, including profiles of filmmakers Run Wrake (who designed the issue's cover), Richard Fenwick, Bert and Bertie, and PES, plus a survey of the emerging horror trend, and a visual look back at the many incarnations of RESFEST. The festival is currently on tour around the globe. For full details, visit www.resfest.com.

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