



The 16th Media City: International Festival of Film and Video

Paul Breschuk October 2010 Festival Reports Issue 56 | October 2010



A big festival in a small town, Media City 2010 stretched across four nights with works from 17 different countries. And, as in recent years, the Windsor, Ontario festival boasted a large international attendance of filmmakers, critics and curators.

Since its 1994 debut, the festival has consistently screened roughly 50 new works per year by notable international artists such as Guy Maddin, Peter Hutton, Kurt Kren and Gustave Deutsch. These appearances have been made possible due to the efforts of the festival's extremely dedicated programmers, Jeremy Rigsby and Oona Mosna. With a combined 20 years of experience in presenting experimental and avant-garde film and video, the work of this programming duo is a vital addition to the Windsor arts community.

The 16th edition featured a partnership with Detroit's Burton Theater, screening Kevin Everson's feature film, *Erie*. Another notable aspect of this year's festival was the large amount of films by female artists. Exactly half of the films chosen for the International Competition were made by women, with a great number of them attending the festival from as far as Senegal, Germany, France, Ecuador and across Canada.

Media City has always included both film and video formats, keeping the two on equal footing. Increasingly, video artists are turning to digital and computer aids to experiment with new methods of presenting an image. At the forefront of this movement towards the digital is England's Simon Payne, who at last year's festival screened his aptly titled film, *Iris Out*.

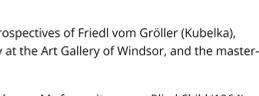
This year he presents his latest work, *Point Line Plane*, another mesmerisingly psychovisual journey through flashing geometrical patterns. Unlike his earlier work, such as *Colour Bars* (2004), *Point Line Plane* uses only the tones of white, grey and black. Together, these lines shift into an increasingly complex crosshatch. With only a mild blinking at the start, each movement causes a slight pulse of light that gradually increases until midpoint when the crescendo reaches an almost frighteningly violent flicker. During this strobe-light climax, in which the exhausted viewer is tempted to look away lest there be any surprise seizure, the images one sees are of an unknown origin. Are they happening on the screen, or in our minds? Is the slow refresh rate of our eyes only catching mere fragments of the flickering images, implanting a wholly different result in our brain? It is in this mysterious interplay where the art of Payne's work comes alive, with the films only truly existing somewhere in the space between the screen and our minds.

Other more regular contributors to Media City include Robert Todd, who screened the enigmatic, introspective and microscopically intimate works of *Lullaby* and *Groundplay*, as well as Bruce McClure and his body-jarringly percussive live performance with three 16mm projector machines, *Through Some Trick of Nature It Appears*.

This year's highlights, however, were undoubtedly the film retrospectives of Friedl vom Gröller (Kubelka), whose photography exhibition, *Year Portraits*, ran concurrently at the Art Gallery of Windsor, and the masterful Dutch documentary filmmaker, Johan van der Keuken.

Of van der Keuken's work, five 16mm short-length films were shown. My favourites were *Blind Child* (1964), *Four Walls* (1964) and *Herman Slobbe/Blind Child 2* (1966). The first two films, while depicting sad, heavy and emotionally disturbing themes, surprised me with their flashes of bittersweet lightness. With their halcyon soundtracks of 1960s radio muzak, the airy French New Wave feel gets into your blood like a pleasant injection of morphine.

The latter film, *Herman Slobbe/Blind Child 2*, told a much easier story. A continuation of his first *Blind Child* documentary, here van der Keuken returns to make a star out of the extraordinary blind child, Herman Slobbe. Now two years older, Slobbe is featured showing off both his infectious personality and unique vocal abilities. He spins records, beat-boxes, and plays a mean harmonica. He's got the face of Peter Lorre, the voice of Louis Armstrong, and the orally emulated sound effects wizardry of Michael Winslow. What caught my attention, overall, was the amount of confidence and ease with which van der Keuken captured life around him, as it happened, and without pretense. As if he'd been a natural-born documentarian, van der Keuken allows the people and their environments to fill the screen with their own energies and spontaneity.



While I regretably missed the Jury Grand Prize-winning film, *Trees of Syntax, Leaves of Axis* by Daichi Saito, I did catch Mati Diop's second place finisher, *Atlantiques*. And though I enjoyed the Diop film, I would have much rather seen Manon de Boer's third place finisher *Dissonant* take its spot as runner-up. De Boer's filming of dancer Cynthia Loemij as she listens to a violin sonata, improvises a dance routine and, finally, performs in silence, is a fascinating study of artistic expression, athleticism and memory. Like capturing lightening in a bottle, the viewer is privy to the improvisational magic, the moment when an idea materialises through the artist and into the physical world.

Media City's honourable mentions were awarded to Barbara Meter's *Loutran*, Robert Todd's *Groundplay* and Richard Wiebe's *Aliki*. Though, I'd like to make some honourable mentions of my own.

Frontier, by painter and video artist, Harriet McDougall, contains the dawn to dusk study of a forest scene. Compressing 15 hours of subtle light and colour changes into a 13-minute film, *Frontier* is more than a simple time-lapse video.

Two layers of imagery are interlaced across the screen, divided evenly by thin vertical strips. At first, this randomised pattern of interlacing seems to obscure the image and disorientate the viewer, removing a sense of order and unity. This causes the viewers to immediately question what they are looking at. The atmospheric soundtrack of forest wind and birdsongs, however, help to anchor the viewer while providing, at the very least, an aural certainty. This uninterrupted audio recording captures a whole image, albeit a mental one, which soothes the anxiety associated with the obscured visuals.

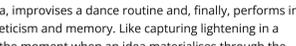
Despite shattering the unified integrity of the original image, the vertical lines are not a complete hindrance to our perception. In fact, the merging of two layers acts to broaden and enrich our consumption of the original scene. As if staring through the eyes of a fly, we are able to see an image in a combination of different angles.

Beginning with the morning's subdued blue light, the colours of the strips begin to slowly change, warming into green with the rising sun. These changes emerge slowly and organically in barely perceptible waves of colour. At midday, with the film reaching its climax, its vertical strips are in a full bloom of green as the foliage dances in the wind. Fully lit, the forest now fills the screen with individual rows of movement and vitality.

With the setting sun, the leaves become painted orange-gold before fading back to blue, grey, and finally, black.

Frontier's multi-perspective study achieves a unique language in the description of a typical nature scene. Despite its interlacing, the slow and inevitable changes of the images which brighten and fade throughout the course of a day offer an oddly comforting viewing experience. With *Frontier*, McDougall investigates both the benefits and pitfalls of experiencing multiple perspectives simultaneously. And while the original image risks being dissolved, the very process of interlacing inevitably guarantees us a unique replacement.

Dutch filmmaker Ariane Olthaar offers just the second film of her solo career, *Dining Cars*. It is a film of such technical and thematic tightness that it resembles the video documentation of a science experiment. Unlike the cold utilitarianism of science, however, it presents a certain degree of nostalgic romanticism. Still, despite this touch of warmth, the ride isn't always a smooth one.



Enamoured with the transience of 1960s and 1970s design aesthetics, Olthaar has tracked down a number of especially outdated dining cars still servicing the railways of Eastern Europe. Mounting cameras in each, she has filmed a vast array of these empty cars as they bounce and sway along unknown rails to unknown destinations. And that is all the viewer is left to observe: empty cars, one after another in a long miserable march as if in a funeral procession. And with their garish hues of faded paint, wallpaper and wood panelling, they increasingly look the part of coffins chained together behind the same locomotive.

Their loneliness becomes almost too much to bear, at times, with the futile emptiness of passenger-less cars weighing heavily on the viewer. And as the film rolls along to its 15-minute conclusion, these interiors begin to look all the more sad, unnatural and alien. These spaces, after all, were designed for human patronage. They were built to shelter passengers speeding through the dark countryside of a cold winter's night, to house the warm smiles, laughter and intimacy of a local pub on wheels. Instead, we're left with the faded memories of bygone eras, sun-bleached and deteriorating, shaken loose by the incessant rattle from the rails.

There is, however, some life still remaining in these cars: the gentle dancing of window curtains, swaying doors, the rocking of light fixtures. These subtle hints become increasingly important with every minute a human figure is not shown. Finally, the warmth returns. We are not alone. And if we've made it this far, we could just as well be sharing a booth in one of the cars with Olthaar, sipping gimlets past knowing smiles.

Admittedly, *Dining Cars* was not as pleasing, inviting or attractive as most of the other Media City offerings. In fact, I had difficulty, at times, in retaining completely inside the piece. Though, films such as *Dining Cars*, in their tests of concentration and patience, are often much more rewarding than any "easier" film. With its flow of patiently timed cuts and never-ending soundtrack of railcar rattle, *Dining Cars* is our ticket to a warm nostalgic trance.

Distance, by Julie Murray, is a short, enigmatic gem. In this film, what's missing in plot is made up tenfold by its thick, deftly constructed atmosphere. The mood of this piece is helped mainly by its soundtrack's dark ambience: sounds of thunder, the crackling of a dying radio, the rumbling a distant train, and the cutting of wind and waves into soft laughter. And to further this effect, the images of rusted metal and derelict beach houses provide a somber, most aching sensation as the darkened tide rises with the moon.

Beach walkers suddenly disappear. A storm gathers at sundown.

Now, set against a night sky are ominous-looking wind turbines, the anti-septic modernity of a passing jet airliner, and the cold isolation of sparsely lit apartment windows.

Distance is a film that offers a *feeling*, rather than a story. It hints at something that might have always existed with us, in us. And like a song you can listen to repeatedly, it leaves enough room for personalisation, for our own stories to fill in its cracks.

While the other films at Media City offered definite endings and answers, were easier to follow, or were funny, exotic, or experimentally innovative, *Distance* was the only film that left me in goose bumps after its final cut to black. And there, in the suddenly-dark theatre, I was happily reminded about the rewards of venturing into the wilderness of an experimental film festival.

Media City Film Festival
25-29 May 2010
Festival website: <http://www.houseoftoast.ca/mediacity/Home.html>

SHARE ON: [Save](#) [Post](#)

← Tweets in the Dark: The 13th Revelation Perth International Festival

→ *Conversations with Directors: An Anthology of Interviews from Literature/Film Quarterly* edited by Elsie M. Walker and David T. Johnson

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Breschuk

Paul Breschuk reviews art and writes plays from Windsor, Ontario, Canada.

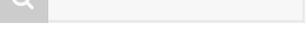
RELATED POSTS



THE 20th KILDA

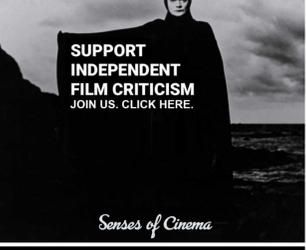
NO SERVICE, KEEP MOVING: THE 63RD INTERNATIONAL SHORT FILM FESTIVAL OBERHAUSEN

Tara Judah June 2017



READ THE SENSES OF CINEMA WORLD POLL 2025

- PART 1
- PART 2
- PART 3
- PART 4
- PART 5
- PART 6
- PART 7
- PART 8



PUSH THE BUTTON TO MAKE A DONATION
It's tax deductible for Australian residents



Senses of Cinema 25,023 followers

Follow Page

Established in Melbourne (Australia) in 1999, *Senses of Cinema* is one of the first online film journals of its kind and has set the standard for professional, high quality film-related content on the Internet.

Senses of Cinema was founded on stolen lands. We acknowledge the sovereignty of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin nation and support all Aboriginal people on their paths to self-determination.

© Senses of Cinema 2019

STAFF MEMBERS

Editors:
Leonardo Goi • Abel Muñoz-Hénonin • Fiona Villella
• Alex Williams • Nace Zavrl

CONTRIBUTING PARTNER

DONATE TO SENSES

Click here to make a donation. If you are an Australian resident, any donation over \$2 are tax deductible.

SEARCH

