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# FOUND IN TRANSLATION

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Writing on Prairie Tales 7



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There are too many good people out there doing good things in this world to afford ourselves the luxury of being pessimistic.

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The Alberta Media Arts Alliance Society engages in promotion, education and advocacy on behalf of Alberta's media artists.



## FOUND IN TRANSLATION

Writing about film and video is a form of translation. In an ordinary sense, reviews are descriptions, they render images into words. But in a less mundane sense, a critical review converts the writer's experience into text. Some reviews are read in advance of a film. You want to know if the thing is worth seeing. But critical reviews—that is, literature responding to films as art—are often read after you see a film. Critical writers don't just write about films and videos, they write about their experiences with them. And we read reviews for many reasons: Do my thoughts and feelings accord with someone else's? How do the ideas in the film relate to film as an art form with a history? Can the reviewer tell me something I don't know? Perhaps most importantly, we read good writing for pleasure.

The critical reviews in this volume were generated by a one-day workshop sponsored by the Alberta Media Arts Alliance Society. About a dozen writers from Calgary, Edmonton and Banff—some who also make film and video—joined me at Red Deer College for *A Thousand Words Exactly: Writing About Film and Media Arts for Publication*. Because all were motivated, deeply thoughtful and experienced we could speak as colleagues about the art and craft of writing critical reviews.

The reviews printed here are an extension of this conversation. Each piece went through many drafts and email conversations. Because we were not as rushed as most editor-writer relationships are, I was able not only to work through the drafts with more patience than normal but to explain my suggestions and argue about strategies, voice, form and philosophy with these terrific writers. It was an educational experience for all of us—and a great pleasure. I hope you enjoy these voices and find something refreshing in their translations.

David Garneau,  
May 2005

The videotape closes with a glimpse of renewable energy alternatives. In the background, upbeat piano jazz swings a new future. A vintage male voice-over concludes, "How wisely or wastefully we use the heritage of our land is not solely the responsibility of the planner, the developer, the builder, the community official. It is the responsibility of all of us."

How quaint, how correct and how disappointing to note that we have not been vigilant or engaged enough in curbing our sprawling consumption. We chuckle at this quote's earnest message, an echo from the past, but it introduces an ethical dimension. Carlson's deconstruction of these 'educational' messages scratches beyond the surface to show there are no alternatives or contingencies in the subtext: behind the illusions we find only projected light. But in her videotape, the narrative trajectory points into the future at us, and at the role we create for ourselves. What will we do individually and collectively to be creative in bringing about change? In updating our notions of endless profit and growth, or including human and environmental costs on the balance sheet, or being global and long-term in our thinking? This requires a broad mobilization but it begins in the imagination. For all of us, then, as citizens of the community and the world, the pondering—the hard thinking—is in the follow-up. The tape leaves me thinking about my own responsibility. The questions explored, and raised, continue to echo. There is no comfortable closure here.

Popular skepticism would suggest that we would do nothing. Nevertheless, the tape ends with cautious optimism. Art such as *An Urban Sprawl Thinking Piece* can be a catalyst that expands our thoughts and possibilities. Art is no real friend of stasis or the status quo and it is in this space of transition that art and activism can collaborate. Artists and their work inevitably quote or reference history and the past, while offering insight into the present reality. More importantly, art also looks forward, a hopeful and generous act. Perhaps we can take further encouragement from an observation made by elder musician storyteller, Utah Phillips:

information and materials is illustrative of the 'open source' and fair use philosophy among the contemporary musicians, artists and software programmers affiliated with Copy Left, Creative Commons and other on-line communities, networks and databases.

The videotape's textured collage and rhythm of audio-visual sequences offers the viewer an encounter that is a respite from the daily hubbub—both mediation and meditation. Each person brings their own understandings when they enter the constructed space of the video. When the aesthetic engagement succeeds, the viewer's thinking meets the artist's halfway to create a new experience, the one they take away with them. Thinking amidst art in the urban environment offers another vantage: it shifts the perspective.

The video begins and ends with male voice-overs taken from archival sources: (intro.): "a story of remarkable achievements in the realm of science;" (exit) "their effect upon the daily life of every one of us." They are didactic brackets that frame evidence and signal an ironic quoting of earlier informational films. They set the Western world as the location and the ecological footprint, while helping to fence-in the sprawl of twentieth century egotism. The initial enthusiasm of the opening announcement is later toned down and enclosed in a context now tempered by hindsight, to become more cautious and sobering advice. There is this small question about sustainability.

Although the video is only five minutes long, because of the compacted montage, you feel like you are passing through a whole era. Interestingly, the second-hand celluloid feels distanced, a step removed. The lines, messages and purposes were scripted long ago. This is not unlike our experience of life where it often feels as if the future is already set. We simply act out parts that we had no hand in writing. The manufacturing of desire and consent today is even more fine-tuned, entwined as it is in our technologically wired environment and lives. The content of the original film footage is additionally de-contextualized and depersonalized as the artist jumps from genre to genre. The fragmented visuals, disruptive editing and interrupted motion, make it difficult to enter into the narrative. This effect mirrors our contemporary sense of alienation—we're sitting out on the cusp of impending change.



## **pass me bye**

by Jonathan Busch

Film recreates, typifies, and ultimately flattens the experience of time. Aaron Munson's *pass me bye* combines rich Super 8 visuals with editing trickery characteristic of the low-budget silent short. It draws a parallel between time and the temporality of film and frames this meditation within the stylized subjective experience of the filmmaker.

This is the story of a boy with a post-modern dilemma; some dude (likely Munson, I'm not sure) appears equally haunted and transfixed by the concept of time as it is manifest in the material objects that surround him. In classic auteurist black and white, Munson alternates between images that oppose and inform each other. The piece opens with a clock whose Roman numerals are cleverly montaged with the digits of a movie countdown. Next, our hero, in jerky stop-motion, observes the city and country. These opposing spaces are echoed by an extreme close-up animation of the construction and destruction of a Lego structure on a greenish grey starter board. At various points, the camera revolves abruptly into beautiful 180 and 360-degree motions, disorienting the viewer from the vertical/horizontal mise-en-scene (and square shape of the screen).

Munson has an eye for sincerely expressing himself in Super 8. In delicately streamlined sequences, he frames weighty, allusive subjects in an unspoken but effective visual language. Despite qualities often condemned by digital video filmmakers—an uncooperative retrograde camera, costly developing, and grainy images—Munson manages to render his visual experiences through the medium of Super 8. In fact, it is precisely these organic restraints that give the film a nostalgic artfulness, something the film is conscious of in its Bunuelish imagery. In my favourite part, a silhouetted Barbie-doll-looking-thing dawdlingly busts a move against a cluster of trees. The representative nature of the other images is eloquently abstracted by the obscurity of this murky one. The film closes with a meditative poem rather than a philosophical comment. This effect may be achievable on DV, but nonetheless has an ascetic grace when done the old-fashioned way. I admire this technique perhaps more than Munson does. He tends to overstuff his film with restless editing tricks that make already loaded imagery jump all over the place. A few too many over-stylized moments needlessly complicate the narrative. This leads to over-interpretation on behalf of the filmmaker and, potentially, the audience. Eisenstein and Goddard successfully married mise-en-scene with befitting flair, but it may not be necessary here. Munson manages to visually capture and present his reality with the camera, but his narrative structure would benefit from a more straightforward, less frolicsome narrative strategy. He could allow the camera to roll, and simply show us what he gathers. Cinema's rhetoric of time and representation lies largely in this compulsive technique of "showing" and minimally on "telling". I can tell by Munson's sophistication in visually wielding a classic medium that he may agree.

**Jonathan Busch** is an emerging visual artist living in Edmonton. He is currently in Film Studies at the University of Alberta and employed at a drugstore photo lab. In his spare time, he worships Sandra Bernhard and sluggishly works on developing his art practice. He also sits on the Board of Directors at Metro Cinema, and has a grey cat named Mooshoo who has a really big head.

Our road-trip leads through some of the troubling connections and consequences of society's faith in a petroleum-fuelled economy. Growth is not always progress, and we are not necessarily growing wiser. These highly romanticized images and messages from another era—America's post-WW2/Cold War years—have a nostalgic and attractive veneer. However, deconstructed and in this context, these fragments look like ironic self-parodies. I hesitate to think of what future generations looking back at us in fifty years will make of our self-representations. Will our own ambitions, products and media images appear as shortsighted and naïve?

The dated images and attitudes are reinterpreted by the artist and turned around to become part of a new narrative and critique—one that implicates us. Carlson gives us a condensed history of where science and planned neighbourhoods have taken us. The report is not good. We are just now recognizing the degree to which we have bought into the same shiny dream. *An Urban Sprawl Thinking Piece*, like the artist's other experimental documentaries, was made to answer the artist's own questions and to share otherwise forgotten visual histories. She is unapologetic about her focus on power, media influence and economic control and their global effects on the environment, on humanity.

For Carlson, the thinking referred to in the title is inherent in the making of this videotape. Her research led her to a better understanding of her subject, process and self. At the same time, she was interested in the formal aspects of shaping ideas, images, sound, and developing narrative strategies. I found myself being stimulated by the tape's resonances and ambiguities, and by a consideration of the relationships between the artist to society and art to life. This tape strikes particularly close to home. Alberta is the heartland of riding the range. Oil is King—the Wizard powering Oz, and Calgary's ever expanding 'city limits' eats up the prairie. Carlson's re-use-recycle aesthetic embodies an alternative as she transforms obsolete images and materials into new products and messages. Much of the footage used in "*An Urban Sprawl...*" was mined from sources such as the Prelinger Archive in New York (a collection of over 48,000 ephemeral films established back in 1985). This approach to creating and sharing



## Thinking Amidst Urban Sprawl

by Grant Poier

Sheryle Carlson's *An Urban Sprawl Thinking Piece* got me thinking. Urban sprawl, thinking? Is the title an oxymoron? Urban sprawl suggests lack of planning, an absence of thinking. It surrounds us unexpectedly and discourages quiet contemplation. So when and where does this thinking occur?

The tape features a montage of ephemeral film which the artist-editor reconstructs as a vehicle to take us on a drive through suburbia (and how we got there). The narrative begins with the swelling hype and promise of modern science and technology—the miracle of petroleum, progress and the future and a sudden, BACKfire: “Duck—It’s a bomb!”

With its rapid edits and sampled clips, *An Urban Sprawl Thinking Piece* is an assemblage of genres, tones and textures. An excerpt from one industrial training film, newsreel or documentary scene parallels or segues into another. Carlson is accomplished at handling visual and audio rhythms and beats to set up an effective resonance between past-present mind sets. The soundtrack layers studio and location sounds: the drama of propaganda, the sweet talk and orchestrated strings of found consumer advertising, and transitions of original music. Except for the nimble editing, the artist does not add many special effects.

for the cat it is simple



## DigiKu

by Leslea Kroll

Beat Poet Jack Kerouac put his own spin on traditional Japanese Haiku. He revered the beauty and simplicity of the seventeen-syllable form, but was driven to redefine it for himself and his contemporaries. Kerouac proposed that “Western Haiku simply say a lot in three short lines ... Above all, a Haiku must be very simple and free of all poetic trickery and make a pretty little picture ... airy and graceful as a Vivaldi Pastorella.” He sought to relax yet revitalize the experience of traditional form. Tapping into Kerouac’s renovation, video artist Kari McQueen’s *The Calling* is best understood as a digital Western Haiku.

An auburn tabby cat materializes against a snow bright landscape before searing out of frame. The staccato motion of the cat is underscored by pulsing rhythm reminiscent of breath and beating. Although the cat is static, its burnished stripes blend fluidly, gingerly lapping into waves of colour. Outlined by an iridescent blue halo, the border between cat and setting glows, electric and permeable. The cat appears simultaneously juxtaposed against, and in charged harmonic balance with, its setting. Physicality and spirit are fused within a bright white realm.

The cat’s motion evokes sensations of calligraphic brushstrokes feathered by McQueen’s sans serif text:

for the cat it is simple  
i call her



and she comes  
this is her calling

The text appears gradually, line by line, shadowing the movement of the cat as it enters and exits the frame from various angles. McQueen's pulsing audio is an invocation, a slight chakral shake with each vibration; rhythm felt as much as heard. Shot on mini-digital video, over-exposed with a slow shutter speed and modifications of contrast to darken the resolution of the cat, *The Calling* was created without post-production effects. The result is wispy and graceful, stunning in its depth and simplicity, free of poetic trickery.

One line too many to strictly adhere to Kerouac's definition of Western Haiku, *The Calling* still paints a very pretty, resonant picture. Mediating on the familiar, McQueen invites us to reflect on the beauty and mystery of the mundane. The cat is presented as both known and unknowable: companion, yet an elusive, autonomous entity. However loyal, beloved and compliant ('she comes'), the cat remains the *other*.

Do cats come when called? Perhaps this question is not so irrelevant as immaterial. McQueen's *The Calling* presents physicality as vital, immediate and fleeting. The cat's jittering, dancing shifts emphasize the determined independence of feline will. Its presence and subsequent absence ask us to reflect on existence and mortality. McQueen's contemplation of 'her calling' speaks not only to the essence of the cat, but also to our essence as well. There are no succinct responses to the meditation, nor are any required. The very act of *Being*, regardless of motivation, is the essential unifying condition: both the question and answer to 'her calling'.

Ultimately, on screen as in life, the cat and her captions melt away. Subject and matter dissolve. Digitally reweaving centuries of traditional form, in just sixty seconds, McQueen's *The Calling* is complete.

**Leslea Kroll** is a freelance writer, arts administrator and Tour Coordinator of Prairie Tales. She is currently at work on post-production of *Hypertrophy*, a short video project she wrote and directed-funded, in part, by FAVA (The Film and Video Arts Society of Alberta). She is a member of The Edmonton Potter's Guild and lives within spitting distance of The North Saskatchewan River with her partner Mark Simpson and Frente the fabulous feline.

experimental film, appropriately, in the kitchen, where she 'belongs' and is 'happiest'—she clumsily sprays Phantastik onto filmstrips. The main storyline is linear and the character is as multi-faceted as a sheet of paper, but clips of experimental film disrupt this narrative. This film within the film, with its challenging images and eerie instrumental music, leads one to wonder why the filmmaker chose such contrasting styles.

The film plays on the cliché 'what you see is not always what you get'. Is mom really a blank sheet of paper? If the experimental clips are her works spliced into the stereotypical narrative of her life, then the viewer is coaxed to see that beneath this sweet and vacuous entity skulks a vibrant, wild and creative force. The clips depicting the housewife storyline are pale, evoking a dullness that is not only represented by her character, but also radiates to her surroundings. Conversely, the experimental clips shout. They are living, breathing, and dynamic. The richness of the reds, blues, purples, and even brown earth tones shed their traditional calming influence when they colour a penis, and later the sausage-like fingers of a disembodied hand. The penis shocks the viewer and exposes the author's sexual nature. The image of a face is striking, the wildness of the eyes are haunting. Is this a facet of her personality that was constrained, her society-defined mask of normalcy that she now sheds? This clip, in tandem with a disembodied hand, feels creepy. Even though the housewife facade appears innocuous, she has a darker side. These experimental clips expose her complexity and create tension with the two dimensional mom she portrays. This is ironic considering that one tends to identify linear story telling with real life and experimental with the surreal.

*How to Make a Phantastik Film* is a pithy and charming piece that challenges what is normal and real by unmasking the linear and filling it in with the chaos of the experimental.

**kelleY boleN**, an Edmontonian of 6 years, devotes most of her time to two passions: ASL-English interpreting and making art. She digs the stop motion animation and is working on her second piece. She has been involved in community radio for 4 years both with news programming and music DJing. She is also a part-time photographer and is taking a new leap into the foray of writing.



## A Phantastik Film!

by kelleY boleN

Housewives of the world unite!! Throw down your dish towels and accept your true calling; the calling of ... experimental filmmaking?!

Lindsey McIntyre's short, 16mm film, *How to Make a Phantastik Film* is a tongue in cheek how-to piece in which a housewife learns the delicate art of experimental filmmaking. The film is a stylistic tribute to the 1960s; from the housewife right out of *Leave it to Beaver*, to the narrator's mid-century car ad, affected voice ("You too could own a beautiful...."). The tinny audience laugh track completes the effect. What intrigues and disorients the viewer are the clips of experimental film interspersed throughout the nostalgic footage. In contrast to the washed out tones of the apple pie mom, the experimental clips scream with bold colours and diverse images ranging from a sweet, little bird to a grotesquely distorted hand. This jarring juxtaposition puts the viewer off balance. Some of the images are so conflicting that you wonder if you really saw a penis or just wanted to!

This dichotomy itches the brain and demands that we scour beyond the surface. For instance, observe the tension of the two styles of storytelling, linear versus experimental. The housewife is the embodiment of all that was proper and right with the 60s female archetype. She is Caucasian, blond, good looking, wholesome and attired in a stereotypically conservative dress and apron. Our heroine bumbles through her first



## When Evil Isn't Evil

by Brad MacPherson

The Catholic mysticism of *The Omen*, the jarring score of *Psycho*, the crimson history of *Dracula*; no film genre is more dependent on symbol, sound, and myth than horror. Viewers relate centuries of song, literature, and images to every screening and, though all films make use of these elements, effective horror depends upon it to manipulate mood, tension, and pace. *The Unholy*, a short film by Calgary's Lyle Pisio, utilizes this experience to generate unease and illuminate how the power of suggestion and emotion overrides reason to influence perception.

*The Unholy* is a series of vignettes uninhibited by character development or plot. Instead it combines classic components of horror with images of mundane scenes in an attempt to have us subconsciously see the evil in the everyday. Pisio wants to affect us on an emotional level and brandishes his strongest device, atmosphere, like Freddy Krueger at a narcoleptic convention.

Because the film is a study of well-worn styles and plots, Pisio's narrative path does not attempt to break ground. The story is secondary to the effect of the parts. A man stands in front of a chalkboard, feeds cats, cleans a kitchen, fills a birdfeeder. Not exactly *The Exorcist*, but Pisio layers ghosted jump-frame cinematography and the cries of a crow funeral, the beat of a



military drum, the physical characteristics of a goat, and the word 'Lucifer' to darken the tone. From these, our memories make associative leaps to years of influence from artists like Poe, Goya, and Argento. Our unease is heightened by our expectations.

*The Unholy* illuminates the power of the subconscious mind to amplify the effects of film. Alone, the stuttered motion of an actor and the sounds of crows do not induce tension. However, paired with our memories, the character's jagged movements provoke eerie flashes of Sadako from *Ringu*, and the clamour of the crows conjure stormy nights watching *The Birds*. The mind does not process observable facts alone. *The Unholy* belongs in the horror genre because it feeds on the emotional weights attached to our memories. But unlike conventional horror, *The Unholy's* differences from that genre cause the viewer to wonder how irrational we can be. The film's affect does last because there are no novel scenes or effects. After experiencing the film, we are left to ponder why we react as we do. Pisio is not as interested in scaring us as he is in having us scrutinize the manipulative nature of the genre.

Nevertheless, in order for *The Unholy* to work, viewers have to be engaged in the film's horror mood. To do this Pisio, for example, superimposes horns and a beard on the lead actor to associate him with Satan. This connection is grounded in an emotional response; whether the evidence behind that association is valid or not is irrelevant to Pisio. All that matters is that the connection occurs and leads to a reaction. Horror films can succeed even when viewers know that these associations are fiction. In this regard, a quick look at the history of the connection between goat-like attributes to the Devil may be of interest. To gain precedence in the ancient world, Christians co-opted the Greek god Pan for its image of Satan, thereby visually suggesting that the ancient ideals of revelry represented evil incarnate. To this day, the half-man, half-goat image remains a figure of malevolence. *The Unholy's* viewer may know the subterfuge behind this concocted association but is willing to suspend their disbelief. If we are able to 'play-along' with the conceits of the film, even a second screening can still produce tingles. Because years of emotional stimuli triumph over reason, *The Unholy* succeeds as horror.

*The Unholy* oozes with images of evil that are derived from debatable origins. Would the film no longer effect us if the veracity of its source images were called into question? Probably not. However, if sufficiently refuted over an extended period of time, the fundamentals of the horror genre would be forced to change. Horror needs humanity's imagination to go beyond intellectual storytelling to the gut reaction of fear. Pisio's work exemplifies this through the simplicity of its presentation, the effectiveness of the viewer's initial reaction, and the discovery of why this transpired. *The Unholy* illuminates the manipulation by horror's storytellers to influence the audience beyond reason. Though the core beliefs may be falsely originated, in the end, success relies less on the truth of the principles and more on the acceptance of the myth.

Born and raised in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, **Brad MacPherson** graduated from St. Francis Xavier University with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Bachelor of Science in Biology. Now living in Calgary, Alberta, he is a member of The Calgary Society of Independent Filmmakers and recently completed his first novel, third feature screenplay, and seventh short film. He is currently writing a feature screenplay for Imaginous Entertainment, which will be shot in 2006.