

## STUDY GUIDE

## WRIK MEAD SPOTLIGHT SERIES

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## WRIK MEAD: QUEER FANTASIES AND PERVERT PIXILATIONS

Wrik Mead, Toronto's prolific poet-priest of pervert pixilation, has accumulated a unique body of more than twenty animated miniature narratives: queer fantasies, parables, dreams, and even documentaries. His films are acclaimed by queer and straight audiences alike, both specialized cinephiles and laypeople. His films not only have a recognizable Canadian resonance—all those snowy landscapes and glimpses from the Canadian history of governmental queer-bashing—but Mead's growing constituency is also truly international.

Stretching over a period of fifteen years between 1987 and 2002, the eleven short works included in this collection are all variations on the low-budget experimental narrative that Mead has made his own distinctive model of cinema. Mead is known above all for his reliance—sometimes exclusive, sometimes as one element among others—on pixilation. This technique of single-frame cinematography, edited in-camera, subverts our realist standard of 24-frame-per-second illusion, producing movement that is jerky, and human figures that can feel like slapstick puppets, otherworldly automatons or, in Mead's case, impulsive agents of desire at odds with themselves and their world. Critics have celebrated pixilation's capacity for revealing the structural essence of the art of the moving image, and Mead plays this up through the textures of celluloid, clinging scratches and dirt, and the "artificiality" of light and colour inherent in his do-it-yourself, hands-on art practice. But for Mead pixilation is above all a narrative tool, a means for developing his characteristic stories—variably comic, romantic, tragic—of isolated characters struggling against themselves and their claustrophobic environments to emerge into self-fulfillment.

The films are allegories of human fulfillment yes, but are hardly as abstract as that might sound, anchored in the world of gendered social organization and regulated sexuality. For Mead's lonely protagonists, there is always another figure who mediates the process of emergence, whether "real-life" or fantasy. Even in *Closet Case* (1995), the only film where no second figure is seen on-screen, it is the implied presence of the cinematographer towards whom the self-liberated prisoner staggers at the end. What is more, it is same-sex desire—same-sex love and relationships—that shapes Mead's vision of self-fulfillment. His work is thus inextricably caught up in the enfranchisement of sexual minorities, the assertion of sexual diversity and queer identities that constitute some of the fiercest political struggles and cultural turbulence of our era. Remember that Mead's first prolific creative spurt during his studies at Ontario College of Art and Design, which included *What Isabelle Wants* (1987), unfolded in the shadow of the bitter push to include sexual orientation in the Ontario Human Rights Code in 1986, and that the final

film in this package, *Manipulator* (2002), was produced the very year that the province's Superior Court finally judged that the right to same-sex marriage was intrinsic to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

But it's not only a question of legalized exclusion and jurisprudence. As I've said, Mead's characters are wrestling with themselves as well as with their worlds. As critics have noted, his films fall within the experimental traditions of the psychodrama, and of other modes of personal filmmaking that orchestrate emotion. "Will I ever be freed of this stigma?" cries the prisoner in *camp* (2000), Mead's ambitiously hybrid "documentary" on the Nazis' queer holocaust, but it could have been his characters in any of his films. Indeed, the dynamic of shame—the psychic by-product of stigma—is what runs through all his films, constituting the root of their powerful affect and political import. How else to look at Mead's titles but as a kind of stenography of outsiderdom, pain and disgust: *Deviate* (1992), *(ab)normal* (1995), *Closet Case, frostbite* (1996), *Hand Job* (2001), *grotesque* (2002), *Filth* (2004)? Think of the sad clown in *stage fright* (1999) and the intense physicality of its on-stage abjection: only when s/he can recognize and confront the shame of his/her vomit and tears can s/he transcend and even find pleasure in his/her existence.

Smotheringly made up and costumed, the clown is the exception in Mead's work—elsewhere, his characters' nudity figures into the intense corporeality of both their shame and their fulfillment. *camp* includes one of the most painful moments of his oeuvre, with a list of Nazi torture techniques being scalped literally onto the naked torso of a gay victim. In *Manipulator*, the carving is on the flesh of the celluloid's emulsion itself, rather than on the body of the "master" who is "manipulating" his lover: at each point when the master advances toward his "victim," his body and his identity disappear in flurries of scratching. It is only with the master's erasure from the scene that the "slave" can process his shame and assert his authenticity and empowerment as the new "master." The ambiguity and contingency of this process prevents us from reading Mead's work as it has evolved and matured as the reductive and sentimental agitprop "coming out" discourse that queer festival audiences are sometimes accused of wanting. In real life and in art, it's more complicated than that.

On-film scratching reminds me of Norman McLaren, as does pixilation itself, and I wonder how consciously it is that Mead carries on the techniques of the great queer Canadian animation pioneer from the NFB, author of the proto-queer *Neighbours* (1952) and *A Chairy Tale* (1957), who died the year of Mead's first work. Not to imply a theory of queer reincarnation, only that McLaren was the first Canadian queer animator to scratch and click on celluloid the processes of shame and fulfillment and their implication in relationships and identity. Mead's bountiful work honours that legacy.

For the purposes of this DVD collection, Mead and CFMDC have selected only eleven of his more than twenty listed works. It is always impossible to second-guess an artist's selection or omission of this or that work for a particular use or

distribution. While it may be understandable to set aside for the moment some of the earlier and perhaps less substantial works, why would this happen to some of the more ambitious ones such as *(ab)normal*, the essay on relationships Mead co-directed with Isabelle Auger in 1995 (his longest film at 20 minutes), or the uncharacteristic *fruit machine* (1998), his complex narrative riff on the unsavory episode of pervert persecution by Mounties and crank psychologists during the Cold War? Also missing are the portraits, both a memorial tribute to a friend who died of AIDS, *Deviate* (1992), and the 1999 commissioned portrait of fellow Torontonian experimentalist Mike Hoolboom (their work has much in common and Hoolboom happens to be the most dedicated critic of Mead's work). But so be it. The missing films will be in the next package, along with the works that are no doubt in the pipeline—and meanwhile, these eleven gems are an excellent start-up kit for the study of one of Canada's most original and queerest filmmakers.

### Tom Waugh

#### QUESTIONS

1. Wrik Mead's films tend to feature images of singular bodies in confinement, isolation and/or struggle. Given his focus on queer life, why do you think Mead centralizes these themes? Consider, in particular, the political and social context in which his films were produced (late-1980s to early-2000s in Canada).
2. The tactility of the films in this collection is notable. Dirty, grainy images characterize much of Mead's catalogue. Why might Mead draw attention to the nature of celluloid in this manner? Locate and explain three examples of the artist's manipulation of texture and its significance.
3. *Haven* juxtaposes images of queer eroticism with notions of policing and surveillance. Such themes are implicit in several other titles of Mead's. Locate and explain the significance of the surveillance of queer subjects in three other titles by Mead. How is this surveillance different in Mead's later titles than those earlier in his career? Why do you think this is the case?
4. As Tom Waugh mentions, Mead relies heavily on pixilation as a "narrative tool" in his films. What do you think he means by this? Discuss the significance of pixilation to the development of Mead's narrative(s).
5. In Mead's films, we see bodies weighed down, tied up, carved into, in flux. What role does the body play in Mead's films? What argument is Mead making about the nature of the corporeal in queer life? How does he understand the relationship between the body and the social/political?

**FILMOGRAPHY**

*Filth*, 2004, 16mm, 4 min.  
*grotesque*, 2002, 16mm, 7 min.  
*Manipulator*, 2002, 16mm, 4 min.  
*Hand Job*, 2001, 16mm, 4 min.  
*camp*, 2000, video, 14 min.  
*Hoolboom*, 1999, video, 4 min.  
*stage fright*, 1999, 16mm, 5 min.  
*cupid*, 1998, 16mm, 3 min.  
*fruit machine*, 1998, 16mm, 8 min.  
*guise*, 1997, 16mm, 10 min.  
*frostbite*, 1996, 16mm, 12 min.  
*(ab) NORMAL*, 1995, 16mm, 20 min.  
*Closet Case*, 1995, 16mm, 3 min.  
*Homebelly*, 1994, 16mm, 8 min.  
*Deviate*, 1992, Super 8, 3 min.  
*Haven*, 1992, Super 8, 3 min.  
*Warm*, 1992, 16mm, 5 min.  
*Jesus Saves*, 1988, 16mm, 3 min.  
*Gravity*, 1987, 16mm, 3 min.  
*It Helped My Mind Relax*, 1987, Super 8, 3 min.  
*What Isabelle Wants*, 1987, Super 8, 3 min.

**ABOUT THE FILMMAKER**

Wrik Mead has emerged over the years as one of Canada's most distinctive experimental filmmakers. His films are psycho-dramatic by inclination, first-person narratives of desire and accommodation. They are a mix of painstaking pixilation, fairy-tale allegory and queer identity, and are preoccupied with the materiality and tactility of film itself. Mead's fantasy narratives offer provocative, ugly/beautiful, often unsettling explorations of desire and longing, isolation and confinement, ritual and transformation.

"In contrast to the opaque headiness of much experimental film, Wrik's ability to distill an idea has been the basis for some of his most stirring work. Wrik loves to tell a story, also unusual in a genre that has eschewed the seductions of narrative. If Wrik's place within the ranks of experimental filmmakers is somewhat suspect, his place within the ranks of gay and lesbian filmmakers is also uneasy. The creepiness of some of his films, *Closet Case* and *frostbite* in particular, has made audiences expecting affirmation uncomfortable. Wrik's films are based in fantasy, attuned to political realities, but not necessarily grounded in them. Perhaps it is their allegorical quality that has made them internationally popular. They are open to all kinds of viewers even if they have special meaning for particular audiences. Wrik Mead's work is finding larger audiences all the time, and for good reason."

— Julia Creet

In 1997, a retrospective of his work was presented at the Images Festival of Independent Film & Video in Toronto then traveled across Canada. Mead's films have screened around the globe.

For more information on Mead, visit [www.wrikmead.com](http://www.wrikmead.com).

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Waugh has published widely in Canada and the United States on political discourses and sexual representation in film and video, on queer film and video, and on Canadian cinema, and has undertaken inter-disciplinary research and teaching on AIDS and queer studies.

Waugh's books include *Show Us Life: Towards a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* (1984), *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from their Beginnings to Stonewall* (1996), *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema* (2000), *Outlines: Underground Gay Graphics From Before Stonewall* (2002) and *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Sexualities, Nations, Moving Images* (2006). He is Professor of Film Studies at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema at Concordia University.

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