

STUDY GUIDE

MADE BY HAND

CONTENTS

Footnotes	3
Glossary	3
Questions	4
Additional Resources	4
Further Viewing	5

CREDITS

After all, we already have entertainment on television. And if entertainment should be the sole aim of art, the comfortable zone of mind-numbing content and recycled formulas, then we all might as well glue ourselves to television rather than try to figure out what are we all about, what our culture is all about, and what is the bigger picture.¹

Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, director of *Light Magic*

The outline of a housefly rendered in burning white. Overlapping collages of buildings and faces. Naked human forms appearing and disappearing to an otherworldly beat. What relationship do these images and sounds, crafted using non-digital filmmaking techniques, have to the rapidly technologically advancing world we live in?

The collective experimental films works of *Made By Hand* offer the dedicated viewer a new cinematic experience. They accomplish this through experimenting with structure, challenging the viewer to explore their assumptions about the meaning of film and to experiment with new ways of reading. This structure is connected to the forms the films take, each intimately made through the direct manipulation of the film material itself.

The works presented on *Made By Hand* offer more than a bypass of **mainstream media** forms and content. Taken together they can immediately be read as a clear reaction against, and argument for, creative possibilities running counter to current video techniques and digital technologies. There has been animosity between independent film and video communities.² However some filmmakers see digital technologies as practical tools distinct from their art practice.³ Experimental films have also been criticized for not using a conventional narrative structure as a way to hide an inability to deal with the rapidly changing world.⁴ And yet some of the techniques developed in experimental film have shown up in music videos and commercials.⁵ But these debates are only parts of a larger picture of what these films might present to the interested viewer.

Each of the twelve films in this collection challenge conventional structures of filmmaking. For example, in Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof's *Light Magic* there is no obvious story being told, no progression through events towards a conclusion. Instead what we see and hear is not immediately clear. Slowly, through repetition and movement, the shape of flies becomes increasingly apparent and is confirmed through sound. But these flies have unfamiliar colours and do not fly in conventional ways. Soon the sounds seem to become the sounds of planes. What might this mean? The difficulty in reading this film does not come from lack of meaning

but from the unfamiliar ways this film can be read. Unlike the ability to read and understand a **narrative film**, taking meaning from *Light Magic* requires the viewer to forge new ground and experiment with new ways of making sense of film. The structure of *Light Magic* pushes the viewer towards unconventional ways of reading. Instead of progression there is repetition. Instead of a story there is rhythm. Instead of a story there are dreams and thoughts. The viewers' assumptions about the purpose and meaning of film as a mechanism for delivering a tale with a beginning, middle and end must be questioned if *Light Magic* is to be deciphered.

As the name of the compilation *Made By Hand* infers, each of the twelve works presented are crafted through experimentation with the film medium itself. The **materialism** of these films is directly connected to their structure, and one cannot begin to interpret these films without understanding both. For example, in *Light Magic*, the images of flies are captured using one of the oldest film technologies, the **photogram**. "The photogram technique combines science and art in order to record the process of transformation."⁶ While this technique involves physical contact with the film itself, it is through this contact that the non-narrative structural meaning of the film takes shape. One dominant convention in mainstream cinema is to hide from the viewer the process and technique of capturing images to film. Hiding the techniques, which would distract the viewer, are kept invisible in order to not distract the viewer from the story and to sustain the narrative form. In *Light Magic*, this convention is inverted and the techniques of capturing images to film are made visible, and in fact become central to the meaning of the film.

What is conventionally made invisible in mainstream cinema in order to preserve the narrative is made visible in *Made By Hand* and in fact the visibility of the process becomes central to this film. Instead of through a lens, the image of the fly is affixed directly to the film itself. Technique and meaning are consciously combined to create a film that unmask the illusions of the mainstream filmmaking process. The transformation being recorded through the combination of science and art here is the revelation of the process of making "light magic" with film.

"(E)xperimental cinema engenders experience that evolves over time."⁷ Through layers of the rhythms expressed within *Light Magic* with the invitation to return again and again to explore its non-narrative structure and exposed materiality, the film is experienced and not just watched. However, the full experience of these films relies on the dynamic efforts of the viewer to engage with and consciously question the magic within the light. The *Made By Hand* collection demonstrates that, while the medium of film is distinct from digital mediums, new possibilities for film continue to emerge. Through the crafting of their diverse works of visual poetry these filmmakers give us glimpses of the future of film.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Eliana Frederick, "Infinite Connections: An Interview with Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof ." *LIFT* (2005) [Online]. Available: http://www.lift.on.ca/mt/archives/newsletter_infinite_connections_an_interview_with_izabella_pruskaoldenhof.html
- 2 Fred Camper, "The Trouble with Video." *Spiral 5* (1985). [Online]. Available: <http://www.fredcamper.com/Film/Video.html>
- 3 Barbara Goslawski, "Experimental: Richard Reeves." *Take One* (summer 1999). [Online]. Available: http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0JSF/is_24/ai_30234642
- 4 "Frederick Jameson: Metacommentary and Realism/Modernism Debate." *Literary Criticism Databank* [Online]. Available: http://www.eng.fju.edu.tw/Literary_Criticism/marxism/Jameson_meta.html
- 5 William LaRochelle, "The Public and the Private: An Interview with John Price." *LIFT* [Online]. Available: http://www.lift.on.ca/mt/archives/newsletter_the_public_and_the_private_an_interview_with_john_price.html
- 6 "Filmlinc.com: the New York Film Festival." (2002) [Online]. Available: <http://www.filmlinc.com/archive/nyff/avantgarde2002.htm>
- 7 Frederick, op.cit., [Online]. Available: http://www.lift.on.ca/mt/archives/newsletter_infinite_connections_an_interview_with_izabella_pruskaoldenhof.html

GLOSSARY

mainstream cinema/mainstream media

Cinema or media form that is the most widely available, most commonly commodified and most familiar form available.

materialist film

Foregrounding of the process of filmmaking in order to demystify the process of making a film.

narrative film

A story told on film that progresses through a beginning middle and end towards a finite conclusion.

photogram

Images created through this technique are traces of light that pass through each object leaving its mark on the film surface. Photograms bring both the maker and the viewer closer to the object, thus revealing the essence that neither the naked eye could see, nor the camera lens could capture.

Structuralism/Structuralist Film Theory

Argues that the meaning of film is composed of parts in much the same way that language is and that meaning is conveyed only when all the parts work together.

QUESTIONS

1. Some films here “bypass meaning and go straight to the nature of perception.”⁷ Which films in this collection do this? Describe the techniques that were used to accomplish this.
2. In an interview John Price stated that: “Most of the techniques that were developed through experimental cinema processes have shown up somewhere along the line in commercials and music videos.”⁷ Referencing Gerda Johanna Cammaer’s “Canadian Experimental Cinema since the 1990s Retro-Vision and Trans-Vision,” discuss and explore the relationship between television and experimental film.
3. If “1895-2005 are films primitive beginnings”⁷ (Edward S. Small. “Technostructural Expectations.”) then what will experimental film look like in the future? Using one or more films from *Made By Hand* and your own imagination, describe how new media alters or doesn’t alter the productive possibilities of visual moving images.
4. I think of Canada as female. All the art I’ve been doing or will be doing is about Canada. I may tend to overly identify with Canada.
– Joyce Wieland.⁷

Discuss how Joyce Wieland’s film *Handtinting* is both Canadian and “feminine.” What other films in this collection deal with female Canadian identity? Be sure to refer to specific material treatments and selection of film stock. Connect these decisions by the artists to the themes of identity.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Beebe, Roger. “Sarah Abbott’s *The Light in Our Lizard Bellies* and the Meaning of Meaning” *Journal of Film and Video*. Vol. 54, No. 1 (spring 2002): 26-34.

Cammaer, Gerda Johanna. “Canadian Experimental Cinema Since the 1990s Retro-Vision and Trans-Vision” *Synoptique* 8. (March 2005). [Online] Available: http://www.synoptique.ca/core/en/articles/cammaer_canadian

Fan, Larissa. “Beyond the Fringe – Handmade Filmmaking, Still Finds its Place in Experimental Film World.” *Take One*. Vol. 12, No. 44 (December 2003/March 2004).

Goslowski, Barbara. “Experimental: Richard Reeves.” *Take One*. Vol. 8, No. 24 (summer 1999): 47.

Small, Edward S. “Technostructural Expectations.” *Journal of Film and Video*. Vol. 57, No.1/2 (spring 2005): 33-40.

FURTHER VIEWING

Awake. Barbara Sternberg, 2000. 3:00. Canada. Distributed by CFMDC.

cockroach. Kelly Egan, 2002. 4:00. Canada. Distributed by CFMDC.

Kokoro is for Heart. Phil Hoffman, 1999. 7:00. Canada. Distributed by CFMDC.

July's Wet Dreams. Kara Blake, 2003. 3:30. Canada. Distributed by CFMDC.

STUDY GUIDE CREDITS

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www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/tps/Boler/index.html

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