

Wrik Mead

Innovation is the driving force behind experimental filmmaking. Coupled with the need to say something is the need to express it differently. I'll never forget the first time I saw Wrik Mead's film *Warm* in 1992. I was sitting at a press screening at the Toronto festival, probably the third film that day, feeling particularly cynical about Canadian cinema (and probably hungry too), watching pretty movies that had nothing to say. Then *Warm* came on. A naked man was thrashing about unnaturally in a painfully confined space—the image was dirty, fuzzy and scratched. There was nothing pretty about it. A hand broke through the rigid constraints of the frame and pulled the man out of that space and into another's arms. The camera then roamed across their embracing bodies.

What struck me was not the action presented, which was obviously simple, but the way it was presented. This was imagery which was so rough and gritty that it could not possibly be called beautiful. And yet it was. I was watching a portrait of an individ-

ual, struggling with what I don't know, yet I had a clear sense of the intensity of that struggle. That sense came from the texture of the image which was layered with cinematic taboos—it was badly lit, scratched and grainy. Then there were the disquieting movements of this body within the frame. It was jerky and unnatural, pixilated and optically printed to the point of producing movements not quite human, yet somehow true to the situation.

Since then, Wrik's work has revealed to me, as he describes it: "the beauty in the garbage." Having studied at the Ontario College of Art, where he learned the rules of filmmaking, this film artist then tossed them aside. Wrik has told me of his need to experiment constantly, and, true to form, each film since *Warm* has had a distinctive look.

After the gritty intensity of *Warm* came the dreamy and playful *Homebelly* in 1994. A sleeping woman battles an insistent rock which stubbornly interrupts her rest as it repeatedly inches towards her. Two women

embrace, their figures dancing against a peaceful snowy landscape. The imagery remains grainy and scratched, but this time it has a very soft and delicate quality—the figures barely perceptible against the steady snowfall in the peaceful glade. Not content simply to present a situation, Wrik manipulated the texture of the image at every step of its production.

At first glance, I thought Wrik's next film was a return to *Warm*. In *Closet Case* (1995), a man struggles in a closet to break free of a bondage outfit. Sounds quite similar, but it isn't. *Closet Case* was filmed in high contrast Super8, optically printed up to 16mm. And that's it. He didn't shoot through dirty glass or smear anything on the lens and he didn't take the film for a walk, dragging it along in the dirt behind him. Not only are the details of the image lost to the high contrast film stock, but Wrik has lit the subject in such an unbalanced way as to obscure the action at times; bad splices abound. He has stripped away all the layers he built up in his previous films to get down to the core.

And the core he has reached, so far, is *(ab)NORMAL*, his latest film made in collaboration with Isabelle Auger. Four vignettes present various aspects of relationships: an androgynous being struggles with him/herself; a couple finally breaks the tedium of their existence together with a heartfelt embrace; two people tear each other's clothes off as their passion literally boxes them in together; a lover reaches out for another, only to be ignored. The movement in each vignette is pixilated in typical Wrik Mead fashion, a technique that serves to heighten the tension presented in each struggle. Between these episodes, we see images of wild animals courtesy of *Wild Kingdom* (shot off the TV screen), with their movements manipulated and superimposed on images of greenery. A familiar technique, but there is no grain or scratches and the lighting is fairly standard.

The guiding principle throughout these films has been Wrik's desire to tell a story. He keeps it simple, concerned not so much with the details of the story but with the details of *telling* the story. Increasingly, his focus has shifted inward, from the surface of the image to the elements within, to those basic components which create the image itself ●

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(ab)NORMAL

