



POINT OF VIEW

# The Festival That Ate My Brain

by Mike Hoolboom

I think it's true what they say: that in every city God has paused to show Her face. In some cities that face looks like Expo, or the Calgary Stampede, or the World's Fair, but in Toronto it looks like the International Film Festival. There are days in the springtime when the festival is still months away, when you can't open the window without seeing it, or stumbling over it on your way out the door. It just seems to be everywhere you look.

When I was little, I thought of heaven as a series of line-ups, like check-out time at the local supermarket. There would be line-ups for people who could do the most push-ups, or people who could stand in the shower for hours without turning into a prune, and you would just rush around trying to get into as many lines as possible. But it wasn't until the festival began, with line-ups that lasted far longer than the movies you waited to see, that something like happiness, something like the memory of heaven, descended upon our city.

As a film student, the festival was a bit like getting invited to a smorgasbord dessert table with 1,000 chefs circling the pile, shrieking at you to gorge, to indulge in every excess, to catch the early show at nine a.m. and make it all the way (your butt widened and numbed from an alternating current of caffeine injections and left-over popcorn) to the midnight show, appropriately dubbed Madness. Even better, now that you're an aspiring filmmaker, these long days of sitting pass as work, as one of the necessary sacrifices by the aspirant, and serve to quell, if only for 10 days, the relentless voice of the ascetic which continues to sound from within, decrying a slovenly work practice, insistently requiring a daily libation which threatened always to take the place of the day itself. This monologue of conscience which has never managed to leave you, seems soothed somehow, placated by the sop of the festival. Unwittingly, you had stumbled across the first law of the festival, that pleasure could be had without cost or consequence, that there was not a fixed amount of pleasure in the universe after all, so that the intense happiness of one was not necessarily balanced by the misery of another. Standing

before this bounty, this infinitude, you are filled with an emotion which had been a stranger to you until now—grace.

The year is 1986, and for the past six years I've been trying to catch up with the elusive thrall of experimental film. If there were no rules for this practise, if it had not quite succumbed to Lenin's dictum that ethics are the aesthetics of the future, then there was little audience either, and among our narrowing cult of emulsion benders there were few mentions of awards or show times. We seemed content to share our small yields with one another. The festival, the Festival of Festivals as it was monickered then (now The Toronto International Film Festival), was not even a distant dream for the most ambitious among us. It was, simply put, part of a cinematic world which had nothing to do with us.

I'd been struggling for three years to stitch together a diary film which seemed to vanish to the touch. While each approach rendered one small moment clear, it immediately cast the rest into a hopeless and painful obscurity. The NFB had made available a single editing machine which was used around the clock in shifts by every independent filmmaker in the city, so each day at two or three or four in the morning, I stepped over the heaping ashtrays and tried to find the thread, yearning all the while for something simpler. I think that's when *White Museum* took shape. It would be a film without images, just light on the screen with a voice apologizing (this period was marked by a Canadian cinema of apology) for not having enough money to produce images. Like all detours, this one took considerably longer than planned, and when I was through, I screened it for the faithful and got righteously drunk and fell in love with everyone who had a kind word to say about the film and swore revenge against all those who muttered noncommittally and then I went to bed knowing it was all over. That's when the call arrived. From someone I'd never met before, a stranger, and he'd seen my film, and I wondered how he'd managed because I knew everyone who saw my movies—mostly they were friends I'd lured with promises of free love and pharmaceuticals—but there



was this stranger on the phone who says he's seen my movie, well, not seen it exactly, it was blank after all, and that he'd like to show it at the Festival of Festivals!

In later years, you'd reach for the mainline to get this kind of rush. But could it really be true? Were they going to run your movie in a regular movie theatre? Not a converted church basement or the balcony of a friend with a screen flapping in the breeze, but a real movie theatre where people like you work for minimum wage oozing kilos of melted fat over condiments, where the names on lobby posters are enough to quicken the pulse of those given to starlight, and you pinch yourself in disbelief that Marlene Dietrich and Gloria Swanson and you could have been born in the same world. You think, when the day arrives and your movie hits the screen with the irresistible force that only solitude and misanthropy can muster, that there will be people sitting in the audience that you've never met. Because during the festival people will go to see any old piece of shit, even yours, because it has been granted a heaven, and your friends can't accuse you of selling out because you aren't selling anything and after that terrible scene at graduation when you pissed on the camera, you can invite your parents again, knowing that no matter how pathetically threadbare your movie is, they would be arriving not at a film but an occasion, and the vast media maw of the festival ensured that all of its gatherings would partake of the same blissful ascent.

Today, the details of the screening are blurry. Almost certainly drunk, I'd never seen so many people watch an experimental film. I panicked and asked the usher not once, but three times what film was playing tonight and when she pronounced my name, it sound like a country I'd never been to. As the audience continued to file in, I wondered if this was the beginning of something, or its end. Each of the films, as they screened, seemed utterly perfect gems, masterpieces. I can't remember seeing movies this good. And then my movie turns on, and it was long. It was an epic of insomnia, unbearable. Somehow I managed to take every mistake, every wrong turn and every bad decision ever made in cinema and stuff it into a single film. The music playing in the washroom was the same cut I used in my film and I tried to figure out some way of blocking the door so no one else would notice. Then the audience was laughing, laughing out loud in something like pleasure, an emotion generally frowned upon in the hallowed clubhouses where we usually gathered to learn our craft. Then it was over, already beginning to slip from recall, as if it had never happened at all.

Because its annual incarnation occurs in September, the festival manages to coincide with the beginning of the school year, and for many of us, its glowing screens have taken the place of blackboards, its lessons become a code we practised among ourselves, rehearsed in the long months before autumn. Is it because we are Canadians that we privilege the bureaucracy of movies, the elegant frame the festival provides, beyond the movies themselves? Or does it owe more to the dizzying

escalation of announcements that precede the festival, beginning earlier each year, with ever more extravagant promises, accompanied by extraterrestrial stars and parties where vast urns of happiness are poured directly into the veins of the participants, the whole city shaking with a delirium that can find release only in this cinematic bacchanal, this orgy of emulsion.

Perhaps, after all, the festival owes its endurance to its simpler beginnings, to its founding principles laid out a couple of decades before: that cinema is the art of the destruction of images. That each film is endowed with an inevitable decay, its emulsion swollen from humidity, its colours fading, its surface mauled by projectors, until at last there was nothing left. Each movie narrates the tale of its own end and no one understands this better than the festival, which creates an event that presides over this demise, in a great celebration of disappearance. If the festival has become, in the years of its maturity, the mirror in which we can find ourselves, it is our own end we glimpsed there, and the magic of the festival, indeed its founding genius, would lie in its ability to convert the horror of our own death into something approaching happiness. Our communal mourning has become, beneath its careful tendering, a festivity, a wonder to behold, and what might be more wondrous than this: thousands of people gathered to glimpse the possibility of their own decay, to celebrate our own end.

It's 1993 in Vancouver on one of those cloudless spring days when you imagine if you were tall enough you would see right around the world until you could just make out, faintly, at the close of the vanishing point, the back of your own head. I have an appointment with Dr. Richards and stumble upstairs, bracing myself for the waiting room. With an all-HIV/AIDS practice, his waiting room is a cruel mirror, as I watch young men, many barely 20, moving blind and slow and gutted into one of the many upholstered chairs. We stifle raspy coughs and joke with Dianne the receptionist until the doctor appears at the door and waves me in. I'm here to get the results of my latest blood test. "Well, it's pretty much what we expected," he begins and I nod, knowing this is just a routine check. "Are you having trouble breathing, say when you walk up stairs?" And because he's on the eighth floor and the elevator's broken again, I wonder if he's doing a brain check, trying to figure whether all those years of worry have finally washed away my grey matter. So I nod, he nods, and then he nods again and says, "Well, your counts are very, very, very low, and I really think you should go on AZT." I'm confused because my counts have been high and stable for a couple of years now and I don't feel any different than usual. So I ask if it's okay to do the tests again in a couple of months, and he nods again, only he looks worried now or maybe it's the sun in his eyes and I leave, feeling shaky and confused. I'm dying and it doesn't feel any different.

When I get home, there's good news. The B.C. government has granted me money to make a new movie, which is going to be a personal film about HIV/AIDS, only now the thought of making a diary movie seems trivial because this surely would be my last film. So I set about writing a new, longer movie—a feature which we could shoot in the house I was looking after for a friend who was on vacation. It was to be called *Valentine's Day*, and tells the tale of a couple of women, lovers, and what happens when one of them tests positive.

# Pages

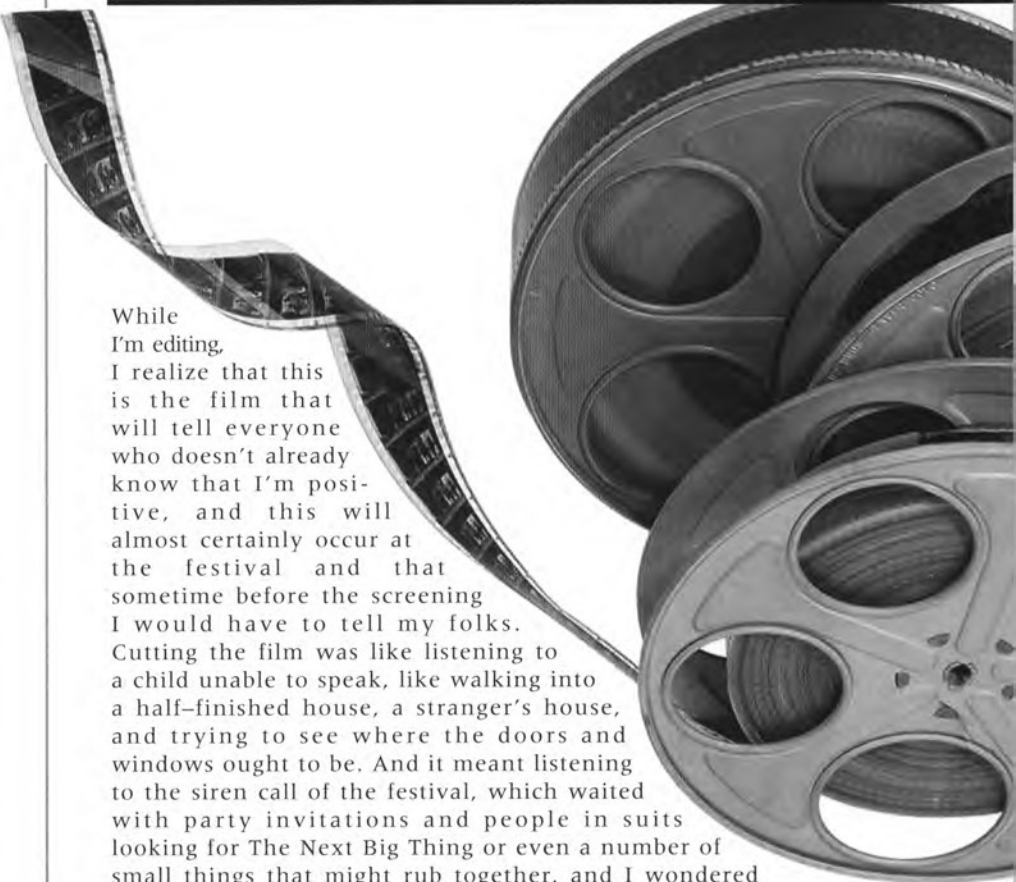
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## POINT OF VIEW CONTINUED



While I'm editing, I realize that this is the film that will tell everyone who doesn't already know that I'm positive, and this will almost certainly occur at the festival and that sometime before the screening I would have to tell my folks. Cutting the film was like listening to a child unable to speak, like walking into a half-finished house, a stranger's house, and trying to see where the doors and windows ought to be. And it meant listening to the siren call of the festival, which waited with party invitations and people in suits looking for The Next Big Thing or even a number of small things that might rub together, and I wondered why the line between public and private, between being a filmmaker and a fan, should be so clearly drawn. In Toronto, at least, it is simple. Either you were in the festival or you watched.

When the film was finished, I still hadn't told my folks, finding myself in a depth of procrastination I hadn't realized existed before. Then I got accepted into the festival, and, of course, my folks asked, like everyone else, did you get a film into the festival? I told them I had, but I still couldn't tell them what it was about. I had another film accepted, a short called *Frank's Cock*, but that wasn't exactly the kind of thing you want to bring home to your folks either—"Look mom, it's *Frank's Cock*." When I told my mother the title, she asked if it was a movie about farmers. A week before the screening, I mailed them tickets with a brief note telling them I was positive and that they should call. A couple of days before the letter had arrived, my mom had been sleepless and anxiety ridden, and when we spoke, she said the letter came as a relief because she finally knew what it was. We gathered at last beneath the marquees of the festival and cried and held each other, just like a family, and sniffled through a movie that seemed haunted by my declaration, and Babz came and made everybody laugh during question period, even those who were thoroughly confused by it, and then we all had a long drink together. I wondered how many other secrets were being laid bare because the festival demanded it, how many other families had grown beneath its call for congregation, or after meeting its weathering stare for some 20 years now, what new organizations of the social lay nestled in the womb of its projections, slouching towards Toronto, to be born. ■