

Experimental work is often rooted in a desire to document the world around us, with experimental techniques employed to try to get at a way of seeing the world—a response, a feeling—that cannot be achieved through a straightforward recording or retelling of an event. For this reason there is often a close connection between documentary and experimental works, with many hybrid films that blur the boundaries between the two. Three Canadian films at the Toronto International Film Festival this fall highlight this connection.

Elida Schogt's *ZERO the inside story* (35 mm, 52 minutes), screening as part of the Visions program, is a fascinating film about the number zero, touching on both its cultural significance and its place in mathematics. It's built around the narrative of a woman who goes in search of the origins of zero as a means to try to understand the feeling of emptiness inside her. She talks to mathematicians and philosophers and journeys to Mexico and India, the birthplace of the Western concept of zero. Along the way we learn about numerical notation, the role of zero in our counting system and the development of the circle as our representation of zero.

Both a documentary about the number and the story of a woman's quest to regain her sense of self, *ZERO the inside story* approaches an intensely personal and emotional subject through the lens of mathematics and philosophy. In confronting the number, the narrator struggles to confront the void within. The symbol of the circle and what it represents becomes increasingly important. Does it represent nothing, the end, hopelessness; or infinity, the beginning, hope?

Another feature, Caroline Martel's *Le Fantôme de l'opératrice* (64 minutes), is being publicized as both an experimental work (as part of the Wavelengths program) and a documentary. It reconstructs the history of telephone operators through archival footage from North American telephone companies of the last century. The narrator is posited as "the ghost of invisible women workers, without whom the 20th-century would never have been the same." The result is a fascinating voyage that, by tracing the history of telephone operators, touches on larger topics such as the place of women in the workforce, the development of mechanization and computerization, the idea of progress, and ultimately the role of technology in the modern world.

Both Schogt's and Martel's films could be classified as experimental documentaries, not because the visual treatment would be considered experimental—both are fairly conventional in this regard—but in the way that they use fictional narratives in a documentary context. In the case of *Le*

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Fantôme, the narrator is a fictional character who stands in for all operators, while in the case of *ZERO*, what is presented as a fictional story turns out to rest on an important truth. In both films, the line between truth and fiction is sometimes difficult to distinguish.

On the other end of the spectrum is a short film by Kelly Egan. Egan has made a number of short works that experiment with cameraless filmmaking. In *mary/me* (16 mm, 4 minutes) the soundtrack is formed by the text of an article in *Cosmopolitan* entitled "Why Men Marry Some Women and Not Others." It's the actual shape of the words printed on the sound portion of the film that creates the soundtrack when run through a projector, while the visuals are a collage of pages from the same magazine combined with hand painting on film. The result is a lovely abstract film of pulsating sound and colour, which can clearly be defined as experimental in its process and treatment but at the same time seen as documentary in that it is a visual representation or "document" of the magazine text.

Egan's intent is certainly pure documentary. She says, "*mary/me* questions the objectification of women through the assumptions of specific gender roles and socio-political functions." I'm not sure it would be such a stretch to call it an experimental documentary, or perhaps a documentary experimental. At what point exactly does documentary become experimental and experimental become documentary? How useful is the distinction, anyway?

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