

9 t h o u g h t s o s. h o r t f i l m s

All of my dreams are short films. Last night I had this dream that I'm living in a world where there's just two kinds of people, bodies and minds. Somewhere a bell rings and the whole world stops for recess so we all run out of school heading for the wall on the other side of the yard. I can feel my legs growing as I run and with one giant step I'm there, I'm at the wall watching everyone race towards me. That's when I realize, omigod, I'm a body.

from an address to the First Annual Toronto Worldwide Short Film Festival
by Mike Hoolboom

It was 1895 in a small coffee shop in the wrong end of Paris when they first started showing films in public. And the film they showed that night, the one that came before all the rest, seemed to contain all of the short films that would come after, because every medium, like the people who go to live there for a time, carries its inventory in a mark or sign, like a fingerprint that traces DNA lines about the contours of the thumb. And it was the same with this short film, the first film ever shown, it seemed to us when we finally saw it, like an act of writing, as if we were reading the writing on the wall of all that was to come. That every desire awakened in us by the cinema is already here in miniature, inscribed in the movements of a seeming chance encounter between the gestures of work and the gestures of love, between the trains of funerals, marriages, and

transport and a text which had come to be written in the body itself. Already in this first writing of light there is a concern with the autograph, the signature and the destiny of the name. Lumière in France means light, and it's as if they could only complete the sentence that began with their own naming by beginning a medium which does little more than vary the play of light against a wall, a wall which they call in French, *le mur*, the wall, *l'amour*, the wall of love. And all of the filmmakers that would succeed them, who would try to make a name themselves in this light reading would marry their Christian names with those of the Lumière brothers, the twins of light, whose pictures always double their subject and whose image or imagination would soon make doubles of us all.

When I hear the words short film, I wonder short of what? There's a kind of despondency to the term, a defeated air that hangs around it that smells distinctly, well it smells Canadian somehow. It's a kind of confirmation of inadequacy, not so much a statement as a shrug. Movies are short only in relation to other movies which aren't. The "short film" implies something else, something much longer, something that isn't just "short." And you want to know, we all want to know, where the rest of it is, because that is just a short form, an abbreviation, an acronym. We know that when we watch it, the short film, we are watching something missing, we are watching a part of something, and we can't help wondering where the rest is.

The first film ever made, ever shown, was a short one—short and simple. It showed a train arriving at a station, while folks who worked in the factory of the Lumières poured out of the factory gate, waiting for a ride home. When we look at this first film of the Lumières we feel that something is missing, something has been left out. Where are the gestures of work, of the factory? We look into the image of evidence of its passing, and realize that the brothers of light have left nothing out after all, that in order to show us the terrible effects of their machines we need only to witness the workers themselves. They bear the writing of the machine not simply in its hours of operation, but in their moments of leisure, in their unthinking stroll between factory and home. The Lumière's turn an unerring attention to the habits of the body, and find that everything is written there, every remark made in anger, every slight of childhood, every happiness and criminal intent. If only we knew how to read them. As the heads of the proletariat turn to the revolution of turbines and dynamos we understand that their walk is nothing less than a march of progress, inscribed for the benefit of future generations. They are the hieroglyph of industrial culture, written now not in the stones of pyramids but in flesh and bone. Here is the first great legacy of the brothers: to begin a public study of the human body, by projecting its parts as large as possible in dark houses of learning across the world, repeating the same gestures time and time again, until we could unravel the fathomless mystery of our own flesh.

