

Shape Shifting From Inspiration IN EXPRESSION

I'd like to officially welcome you to the Fifth Annual Perspective Canada Symposium, Shape Shifting: From Inspiration to Expression. My name is MICHAELLE MCLEAN. I am the Manager of Creative Affairs at Telefilm Canada and I will be introducing each one of the panelists just before they speak. Unfortunately, Holly Dale sends her regrets.

Shape Shifting refers to the process of taking that first nugget of an idea and bringing it to a concrete form, whether it's film, video or CD-ROM. More specifically, Shape Shifting is the process of understanding or overcoming obstacles—of figuring things out. And if Shape Shifting is about figuring things out, we thought that, besides talking about the influences from the past, the panelists might mention some of the things that they haven't figured out yet—the open questions, the questions not answered, the shift not shaped.

[The Perspective Canadian Symposium is a presentation of the Toronto International Film Festival and is sponsored by Mackerel Interactive Media, Credentials, and McGill University Centre for Research of Canadian Industries and Institutions. The presentations have been edited for length.]

Peter
METTLER

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: Peter's first feature was an experimental narrative called SCISSERE, which premiered at the Toronto festival in 1982. Since then Peter has authored some 10 films, including THE TOP OF HIS HEAD and TECTONIC PLATES, a feature-length adaptation of Robert Lepage's stage play, shot in collaboration with Lepage. More recently, Peter



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from left: John L'ECUYER,
Clement VIRGO, Adriene JENIK

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filmed *PICTURE OF LIGHT*, a documentary road picture about the northern lights. Peter divides his time between Canada and Switzerland.

PETER METTLER: I think that it would be fair to break this idea of Shape Shifting into two general categories: one that deals with the personal realm—your creative, distinctive personality in conjunction with the forces that shape your experience, your life; and the other—the industry, the public space which holds the demands of the marketplace and the audience. The personal realm is probably more fun. It's where you get your inspiration, where your experiences become articulated into some kind of story or form or expression. The industrial realm is dictated by trend, money and technology. Money and technology can ultimately rule the whole process of making films. I think that it would be accurate to say that most filmmakers will tell you that the vast majority of their time is spent finding a way to harness the forces of money and technology in an effort to combine them with their will or want to express their personal vision, or their particular story.

The specifics of these shape shifting forces are complex and constitute a very long list for which there is no room to elaborate on here today. The idea of being in between, I think, lies very much at "the centre" of my life and work. It's integral to the way I function and think. One of the big polarities that I play between is culture. Since being a teen-ager, I've been working and living and showing my films in Europe, in Switzerland specifically, and in Canada. There definitely is a different kind of reception to the same given film in different cultures. There definitely is a perspective which you gain as you move between the continents that leads to a kind of schizophrenia on the one hand, but informs in terms of what you're putting into your films, how you're anticipating your audience, critics, and marketplace. But it also offers, I think, a set of associations and perspectives which are actually manifested in the process and product of my films. My films tend to work very much by association and by juxtaposition, and I think that if I'm asked to account for this characteristic in my work, it comes partially from this double culture.

Two other things which I consider very major influences, even muses, are nature and music. I find I look to nature, to the natural world, for narrative, for structure, for associations and again, for links, for relativity of things. Nature is a very strong guiding force in my work. And music as well, which, I think, works in a very emotional realm. It is a "lan-

guage" I try to incorporate into cinema (not using music in cinema, but making cinema in a musical way), almost as if you would compose a film as a musician would compose a piece of music, trying to hit upon a communication that works subliminally, as opposed to narratively or descriptively. This is a dilemma in my process right now, because my films seem to demand a very delicate balancing act between working intuitively and working intellectually. When you go to funding agencies, anywhere in the world, of course, they want to have a very concrete blueprint of what they will see as the final product of a film. It's a risk, however, in some cases that by submitting a script that is rigid and predetermined, an over-confinement can take place and actually restrict the creative process, at least the kind of process that I'm interested in pursuing. Creative leads, insights and discoveries which might come up in the process of the filmmaking, aren't allowed to bloom because you've got a very strict production schedule, a very strict budget, a rigorous predetermined vision and process. So it takes us back full-circle to the dilemma of how do you balance the rigid structures of money and technology with your personal experience and your personal, often intuitive vision.

Adriene JENIK

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: *Adriene is our American colleague and new to the festival this year. She's a Vermont-based artist and her body of work is not categorized by genre or media. She says she usually has to plug something into the wall to make her art work, so she could be called an electronic artist. Adriene mostly works in video and with computers, but has also played in a band, made puppet shows, and has been a member of the Paper Tiger Television collective in New York City since 1989. She's currently working on a CD-ROM, an adaptation of the French-Canadian novel MAUVE DESERT, which was the work that she demonstrated yesterday. Adriene is on her way to the Banff Centre where she's been invited to complete the work on MAUVE DESERT.*

ADRIENE JENIK: I wanted to talk a little bit about artists using and abusing technology. This is not necessarily specific to com-

Peter METTLER



PETER
METTLER

puters, but can be applied to films as well. What I find interesting is that artists, particularly in cyberspace culture, are the people who envision what's actually going to happen with it. Then NASA scientists and engineers go out and make these things. I believe that artists, or at least people that define themselves as creative people, need to be involved in the process of programming and structuring these works. There's incredibly creative things that can be done on those levels, and what I fear is that artists are being sectioned off and marginalized in this area of design and content-providers. They are not structuring the programs, not actually working with the flow charts. And this is where a lot of creative work can be done, but a lot of rules have already been established. Everything is quite new, but there are all these rules that people have told me I've broken already. Artists need to be really involved in working with those levels and providing content. There's also a tendency, working with these tools, to get bound by the parameters of what's programmed. Certainly for anyone who's working with consumer-artist tools, there's this idea that I can do so much. In fact, many times you will spend a great deal of time just learning the breadth of the programs. But you're still working within the parameters of those programs and that's shaping you creatively. How conscious you are of that is really up to you.

Also, I just wanted to talk, briefly, about a few challenges that I've had in the process of making my work. One of them has been very surprising to me, which was that working in this particular medium I found it a real challenge to actually make meaning of it. I found that it actually resists making meaning. In my notebook, that I carry with me through a project, I actually have whole pages that read: "Remember to make meaning." It's very easy to slide when you're working with these tools, sometimes overwhelmed by them or even thrilled by what you're learning. Remember to keep going back to the centre of your decision making. I think that anything that people are trying to do with these tools would certainly benefit by continually asking that question, "what are you actually trying to mean?"

The other thing is that the work that I'm doing has fallen into the cracks of funding and support, certainly in the States where film-video areas are not opening up to include multi-media because people are really digging in and trying to protect the small amount of money that's left. The artists that are working in those media and visual arts have not really thrown their eyes open. And

the idea that there will be corporate sponsorship for artistic work has proven very difficult to locate. That's another issue which I'm trying to figure out, how to shape my work, not to have it be defined already, not shaped into a category that exists already, and still be able to attract some kind of support.

John L'ECUYER

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: John L'Ecuyer started making films a couple of years ago. He's made two short films, one of which, USE ONCE AND DESTROY, is in this year's festival and won TVO's Jay Scott Award. His first film was a short documentary on a treatment centre where he was a recovering heroin addict, and his first feature, CURTIS'S CHARM, was premiered last night here at the festival. He's currently working on a documentary for TVO's THE VIEW FROM HERE.

JOHN L'ECUYER: What inspires me or interests me and leads to writing a script or a short story is exposing myself to as many things as possible all the time. Some people call it manic behaviour or some other disorder, but I constantly need and thrive on information and emotional overload. I need constant stimulation all the time. I am fascinated by universally shared emotional experiences and I try to express those experiences and emotions visually. The hard part is going through the bureaucratic structure to fund one's films.

The thing that keeps me going, despite the funding process being as equally exhaustive as the creative, is the final experience of watching others see how you see. I love the interaction between the audience and the artist—I guess that's my not-very-high-tech kind of interaction that I get with people. When I see what Adriene's doing I think it's wonderful because it takes it to new level, where people are actually partaking in what you're doing. I think it's great because, it opens up the envelope of shared, creative experience and shared, emotional experience, which I think is pivotal to what we're all here for and what we all enjoy.

It's hard right now as I enter into this whole conundrum of funding. I've been able to work inexpensively, and there's a limit to that. There's only so many favours your friends will do; there's only so many times they'll get up at four in the morning to help you out. At some point, people have to pay the rent. It's a little daunting to think that if you want to create you constantly need more and more money. I'm the sort of person who prefers a crayon-on-the-wall or chalk-on-the-floor approach. Although I should mention that *Curtis's Charm* was my first experience at combining street-level shooting and high tech elements—both strategies were dictated by certain aesthetic considerations but primarily by the budget. The high tech component came in the form of picture and sound posting on the AVID and PC TOOLS. It saved us a lot of money which meant more for the screen. So, I'm beginning to see the benefits inherent in the whole field of new technology. Also, I think,

"I need constant stimulation all the time. I am fascinated by universally shared emotional experiences and I try to express those experiences and emotions visually"

on a creative level working on the AVID allowed me so much more room to play and flirt with different ideas, and I wasn't hindered by the fact that the flatbed had to go

back by noon. Because of the speed and non-linear aspects of that kind of editing, we could play with more ideas in a shorter period of time. Overall, it's kind of strange that we're using all this upper-end technology and saving a fortune while shooting down and dirty on the street.

I'm totally sold on this whole idea and I'm fascinated by Adriene's work, especially on the creative level but also just how freeing it is to have a self-contained unit in your basement. Now if only I can convince her to let me into her basement and borrow her equipment.

Clement VIRGO

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: *Clement Virgo studied at the Fashion Institute of Canada. He was dressing windows at Harry Rosen when he started working on the script for RUDE. Based on his work with this script,*

"it's crucial that you stand out, you be original, you be creative trying to get your film exposed and seen by audiences"

he was accepted as a resident at the Canadian Film Centre. While there, he made two short films, both of which have been shown at the Toronto festival: SMALL DICK, FLESHY ASS THANG and SAVE MY LOST NIGGA' SOUL. His feature debut, RUDE, was selected for Cannes, and

opened Perspective Canada this year. In addition to working on his own films, Clement has sat on the board of LIFT and the Black Film and Video Network.

CLEMENT VIRGO: The subject is Shape Shifting. I thought about this long and hard and came up with a structure about half an hour ago as to how I think I could help in participating in this forum. I would assume that a lot of the audience members are filmmakers, producers, writers and maybe a way in would be just to talk about what I've learned from making my first short to the making of RUDE and going on to my second feature. I went into the Film Centre as a writer, but I knew going in that I wanted to direct and I had the opportunity to make *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul*. With *Save*, I wanted to experiment with film form and structure. I wanted to experiment with the language of cinema. I wanted the film to be different, and how do you make the film different? Is it the style? Is it the form? When I was trying to figure that out, I looked at Peter Mettler's first film, because some of the film was about drugs. I looked how different filmmakers were experimenting with different ways of telling stories. Mainstream films have been the same since the 1920s and they

have a very straight linear narrative. And anyone who's seen *Save*, or *Rude*, will see that I'm trying to experiment with film language and film form. Once I had made *Save* and *Save* was fairly successful, it allowed me the leverage to make *Rude*.

The things I learned and how I shape shifted, going from *Save* to *Rude*, I realized that it's crucial that your film is known about; it's crucial that people come see the film; it's crucial that your film have a title that people recognize; it's crucial that you stand out, you be original, you be creative trying to get your film exposed and seen by audiences. Going into *Rude*, I thought I learned enough about the business to make the film. I assumed that everyone wanted to see a black film. I was trying to find a line between my own creative impulses and the commercial imperatives of the business. What kind of film did I want to make? Do I

make a 'hood film, or do I make my own film? Ultimately, I wanted to create my own voice, to find my voice as a filmmaker. Again I experimented with film language. I experimented with editing. I experimented with sets, lighting. Each story I treated differently. Once the film was finished I realized now that I would have to sell it, because we made the film without a distributor. We showed the film and everyone sort of said: "Yes, it's very nice, but we don't know." Cannes called us up and said that they wanted the film and everything changed. Once you have a certain level of success, I think the effect of a film and the way people see it is different. I realized, going to Cannes, that film truly is a business. That's where I got my greatest lesson, where I did my greatest amount of shape shifting. Because I realized that you didn't need a film per se to be in Cannes, just a great poster. I think the film that sold the most in Cannes was called *Barbed Wired*, with Pamela Anderson on the poster, with lots of cleavage and a smoking gun. The film sold world-wide without actually having been made. This is the kind of business it is. It's cold-blooded. The market for black films around the world, and especially in Europe, is not great. I knew we had no stars in the film, but I figured a way in would be through the music, so I came up with a list of songs and figured that perhaps that is something that distributors and financiers could latch onto to help promote and sell the film. So those are some of the things that I thought about.

John FRIZZELL

MICHAELLE MCLEAN: *John Frizzell is a writer and personality about town. He is a founding member of Rhombus, the well-known Toronto company which produces performing arts material. He left Rhombus to try his hand at writing drama and his first feature script was the Genie-nominated, I LOVE A MAN IN UNIFORM. His many TV credits include GETTING MARRIED IN BUFFALO JUMP and the searing LIFE WITH BILLIE. He was a member of the collective that made A WINTER TAN and, more recently, he was a co-writer on Bruce McDonald's DANCE ME OUTSIDE. He's currently a producer, writer and director on a television series based on DANCE ME*

OUTSIDE. John has also taught and mentored a number of writers through the Vancouver Praxis Workshop and at the Canadian Film Centre.

JOHN FRIZZELL: Obviously my esteemed colleagues saw this topic slightly differently than I. Now I knew that the phrase Shape Shifting held certain connotations for North America's first peoples, but to me, I just come up with wardrobe, weight loss and water retention. And yet I suppose this is to an extent pertinent. Pertinent even to notions of inspiration and expression. Perhaps because I tend to find myself in positions more commissioned than inspired. In fact, these words are virtually synonymous to me. Currently I'm being inspired by Kevin Sullivan to write a western, and inspired by Bruce McDonald and Norman Jewison to helm a TV series. The source of the "inspiration" obviously defines the expression. I find it easier this way. But this is not to say there aren't problems. Problems with shape shifting, i.e. when I'm working for television, especially on a series, I tend to gain. When I'm working on independent features, I tend to lose five to 15. When I'm thinner, the clothes tend to be darker, more severe. When I'm heavier, we're talking a touch of colour, a little flow. Clearly what we wear, how we look, the "shift of our shape," as it were, is an excellent indicator of our self-esteem, our self confidence.

I've been working in the Canadian film and television industry for approximately 15 years, ever since I was 12. I started as all good aspirants of my generation—as a documentary filmmaker. (Jeans, plaid shirts, preferably Viyella, a thick-soled boot, usually Greb or Fry), directing the usual spate of politically and socially respectable films about the disenfranchised. This was a period when it seems all films were in part financed by the National Film Board, and consequently skewed slightly by its taste.

This was followed by a period as a TV, movie and series writer (the tweed jacket enters the picture, Harris being *de rigueur* for the episodic writer, but a playful Armani being allowed for a series "creator"). Now funnily enough, this was just after the broadcast fund was introduced at Telefilm, when a requirement of any project was that it have a conventional TV broadcaster in place. Consequently, one made even one's feature films with the CBC in mind. To say that this financing scenario had an impact on the work and consequently life (intellectually and emotionally, and obviously visually) of the Canadian film artist is an understatement in the extreme. We were as a group TV artists, if that is not considered oxymoronic.

I ended this blissfully well-funded, if perhaps emotionally bankrupt period, with a 15-pound gain (thank you Atlantis Films and Nada Harcourt), when the Ontario Film Development Corporation was introduced, and I, with a group of nutty, boozy contemporaries, received funding for a low-budget feature film (*A Winter Tan*), and it was off to Mexico, for the tan, considerable weight loss, and it goes without saying, somewhat fulfilling hard work. The 1980s ended, and we now enter the most difficult period for me, for any artist who accepts that work is identity. Where every choice is terrifying. There was now a feature film fund at Telefilm, well-funded arts councils, an OFDC, and even a happy and supportive CBC. This created a terrible personal crisis for me, "What to do?" It was not the question of what story to work on and how exposing that choice is, but the ramifications of the choice. Mercy. Make money and grow jowls or starve and shrink. Hack or artist? Needless to say, I opted for the former. I, like many of my colleagues, had learned to like money.

Now, honestly, I loathe panels like these where I'm being asked to contemplate the future. I mean, look at this future, a period when there will be vastly less money from the arts councils, the funding agencies and the broadcasters. So all projects will automatically be projects of love. And in order to survive, we're being told we may have to learn something about technology. Technology, which means, to an extent, looking technological. The synthetics, the plastics. Well, not on me. Please, a look defined by technocracy—what will we wear to the party? If you're wondering where this thesis takes us, it is essentially this: it is a sort of general swat at the Zeitgeist. The government, the budget, and currently the deficit, seem to be wreaking havoc with the personal appearance of the Canadian artist, and we can assume from this, wreaking havoc with those artists' well-being. And personally, I am staggered that all I have learned about skin care from the Laszlo lady at Holt Renfrew, everything I've picked up about the whims and vagaries of fashion from Jeanne Becker, is information now in the hands of our premier, a golf pro from North Bay. A golf pro. I tell you, quite frankly, I'm living in fear. We all know what that means. White shoes, white belt, and everywhere pastels. I'm neither young enough, nor old enough for pastels, and I would say, neither are any of you. Fuck it. I'm going to Hollywood, so I can hopefully make enough money to spend my sad, sad unfulfilled weekends on the treadmills at Pratikin ●

JOHN
FRIZZELL