

FEATURE

Quick, Smart and Dubious

The Features of Kevin McMahon

by Marc Glassman

Photos courtesy of Primitive Features

Imagine it is the year 2001. The millennium has arrived and with it the fabled 500-channel universe. You're sitting at home one night, bored, considering some of the major problems in your speck of the universe: fried foods, too much cognac, too little sleep, rampaging landlordism, the sad-sack nature of the Toronto Maple Leafs, and whether Kierkegaard should have felt such sickness and trembling before God. You realize that most of these problems are unsolvable, particularly the Leafs, so you decide to flip channels. And you see...

A group is standing near a guardrail overlooking Niagara Falls. It is late springtime and ancient public binoculars are available to rent at a loonie a pop, like a parking spot downtown. A visiting Scotsman turns to a pal and asks whether the Falls is one of the eight natural wonders of the world. (It isn't, but the friend, a Canadian, doesn't know the answer.) From the perspective of a tourist in an elevator you look at the Falls, then the doors shut and everything is black until you reemerge near a picture shop that takes photos of people against deliberately artificial backdrop of a canoe in the water. You flip, and you see...

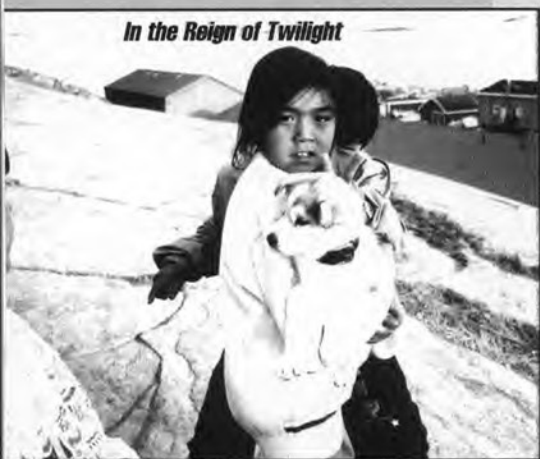
An Inuit is standing in the rugged landscape of the Far North. The image is in black and white. The Native is explaining how he fishes and the footage is clearly from a long-time past. The camera pulls back to reveal a video monitor. The footage, shot 80 years ago, was made by a Canadian arctic expedition. Retreating through the museum, the camera shows an empty cushion by the monitor and people walking by other exhibits. The camera veers to the right to a mannequin of a Native trapper, well detailed and placed prominently in a glass box. Moving along, the camera pulls out of the building to reveal the outside of The Museum of Civilization. That's nice, you think, but you'd like something more postmodern, so you flip again, and...

Swirling computerized graphics dominate a screen, beautiful and complex in their configuration. The camera moves out of the image to reveal a woman on the phone checking facts on the weather for the next day. There's a cut to the woman, an announcer, preparing to read her report. She is in front of a blue screen. The roving camera catches her preparations as a robotic camera trucks in to capture her image on a monitor. From the monitor we see her reading the news and blowing a word, "foreclast." In a little-girl voice, she implores the crew to let her do it again. The process begins to repeat itself in front of a now technologically loaded screen, filled with geographical information.

That bored Canuck occupying a couch three years from now will be an unwitting participant in a mini-film festival. All of those vignettes were created by one man with a singular vision—Kevin McMahon. A quintessential Canadian, his three features are on Niagara Falls, the Inuit, and communications theory, subjects that should quicken the pulse rate of most residents of this northern clime. Formerly an award-winning investigative print journalist and a contributor to CBC Radio's acclaimed *Ideas* show, McMahon is able to unleash his honed writing and researching skills on every project he approaches. What is more astonishing is the style he has created for his films, which marries the essayist with the poet in structure and content.

Take another glance at the scenes tomorrow's couch potato might see on the television. Layering an alarmingly diverse set of contexts onto striking images, McMahon takes delight in making the viewer see how many different ways one can look at an object. In *The Falls*, his first film, tourists travel for days in order to see its natural splendour for a nanosecond, then record false memories, in this case a staged photo, to commemorate their time at Niagara. The Falls itself, is only seen fleetingly throughout the scene.

In the Reign of Twilight



In *In the Reign of Twilight*, McMahon's second feature, the image of an Inuit from a bygone age represents a central theme of the film—that knowledge of how to live in the barrens of the Far North is of paramount importance for survival in those environs. By placing the footage and the figure of a trapper on display, the Inuit are reduced to an existence in a museum, reinterpreted as being hopelessly, romantically out of date, and worthy of



Intelligence: "McMahon's films are marked by their historical perspective; he can't approach a topic without revisiting its historic and

admiration from an audience far removed from the splendours and perils of the North. The thought that the Inuit way of life still exists will hardly intrude on the consciousness of most gallerygoers.

Similarly, in *Intelligence*, McMahon's long-anticipated new feature, the notion of the computer and its interface with humanity is presented through a situation involving the media. The weatherwoman utilizes the information created by the computer to give her daily forecasts. The images provided by the computer form the backdrop (what will be on the blue screen) for the viewers. Like the tourists in *The Falls* and the unseen museumgoers in *Twilight*, the announcer is concerned about other things than the image created for her. She wants her performance to be properly arranged by Hitachi cameras, so she will come off well on television.

In *The Falls*, McMahon investigates the natural phenomenon of Niagara through shifting notions of the sublime. Moving from the first Europeans, who thought of the Falls as a terrifying and ugly force, through the Victorians who romanticized it as a thing of purity, to the present day where it is a commodity of "natural beauty" for the tourist trade, McMahon comments on how societies reinterpret and recreate the same phenomena for their purposes. In *In*

the Reign of Twilight, Northern Affairs bureaucrats, veterans from the 1950s who still believe that they civilized the Inuit, are contrasted with that lost generation of Natives who can neither honour the traditions of their elders nor negotiate their way fully into a southern Canadian identity. For *Intelligence*, a film about the future, McMahon reminds us that computers and the Internet were created for the military. Now they are being proclaimed as the greatest tools for advancement in communication, education and the economy of the world. As a perennial doubting Thomas, as a typical Canadian, McMahon is not so easily assured that all is well in the Brave New Wired World.

His visual style owes more to narrative and experimental filmmaking than it does to documentarians. McMahon points to Peter Greenaway as an influence and it shows in his awareness of an overall master plan for his works. Everything in McMahon's films is storyboarded. Apart from Peter Mettler, there isn't another prominent documentary filmmaker in this country who would dream of approaching his/her films that way. This overwhelming poetic sensibility informs his choices as a director. There's always lots to see in a Kevin McMahon film. The viewer is placed in well-delineated environments and those sites change with artful



McMahon

information that you couldn't get anywhere else." It is through the narrative voice, generally female, that McMahon expresses the emotion dearest to his heart—fear.

In *The Falls*, the narration begins with the historical assertion: "Natives weren't afraid of falling, but we were." And what a fall it was. His film charts the course of a marvel of nature, watching as it becomes a shill for awful sideshows and carnivals while its own waters turn into a toxic-waste dump. For *Twilight*, the Inuit's primal fears, hunger and cold, are addressed by patrons from the south motivated by complex fears: Communism and American hegemony. The result was a disaster for the Inuit. And in *Intelligence*, the fear is that of a parent for a child: how can we educate children for the wired future? That future is yet to unfold but McMahon has reserved his right to question whether computers will provide the solutions for the next millennium's first generation.

McMahon shot *The Falls* in 1989. Born, as he says, "not a quarter of a mile from the Falls," this return to his birthplace had considerably more attitude to it than that of a normal homecoming hero. "My

fascination with culture and with nature comes from there," recalls McMahon. "You have this spectacular nature and you have this bizarre kind of carnival culture which is what drives the city. It's a bit like growing up in a circus." Although *The Falls* is clearly created by someone with an insider's perspective on Niagara, throughout the film the viewer is invited to travel like a tourist. The camera is always at a distance, discovering the immense show that is Niagara Falls. Like a private eye, or the investigative reporter he once was, McMahon can't help stirring up the pot.

The Love Canal is the dirty big secret of the Falls. The mother of all environmental disasters, this poisoned site caused horrible mutations in children and devastated the terrain. More than 20 years later, the film captures the grotesque trees that are half-green and half-white, gnarled and twisted at their roots. The effect on humanity is talked about rather than shown. In the most moving example, a mother tells about her daughter whom she found one morning with her legs twisted right under her back, like one of the area's trees.

In the freakish sideshow atmosphere that is the tourist strip for Niagara Falls,

rapidity. And the style is created not just through camera placement but through bravura uses of film technique. In *The Falls*, there is a lovely tracking shot that moves with Godardian sobriety past a representative selection of tourists looking at the Falls. Voices are heard—people talking to each other and occasionally commenting on the natural splendour of the place. The camera, moving like another tourist, looks at these strangers standing or walking next to the fence that divides them at the Falls until it stops at lovers who stare into the camera. In *Intelligence*, there is a brilliant scene in which a robot named Golem winds down one corridor and over to another, while a video monitor installed on its "head" has a commentary ruminating about the differences between human and mechanical thought: we have common sense, for example. Part of the point of view in the shot is that of the Golem's optics. In another, the camera pulls back down row upon row of chips designed for communication systems. Its nearly dizzying impact is capped by a visual teleconferencing call which is superimposed over part of the footage. Accompanying this sophisticated visual style created by McMahon, his brother and editor, Michael, and cinematographer Mark Willis, is, as the writer/director calls it, "an oblique narration that gives you





In the Reign of Twilight

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harshly illuminated ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds compete for attention with junk food, wax museums and the Criminal Hall of Fame. Upright Ontario's great shame is shown with an unsparing clarity by McMahon. Why, we can see the Falls, ride on a merry-go-round and look at full-figured replicas of Lincoln and his "servant" Martin Luther King! Could a city be better?

A voice informs us that located in the Niagara River gorge, there is a residential community, a university, youth parks and a hazardous waste site. Another says, "The surface is as simple as pie compared to the chaos beneath. We should have tried judging by appearances all along." McMahon's film allows us access to the welter of detail that makes up the Falls. As his narration states at the beginning and the end of the film, "it's all in the framing." Judgments can be made by all of us.

Images of airplanes clutter the sky in *In the Reign of Twilight*. It's the southern civilizing forces coming to the Far North to roost. Like the crows spotted throughout the film, they are harbingers of evil times. The planes that arrive, points out the film, land in a region between the Empire and the Barrens. When Victorians were stuck here they kept their polite manners—and ate each other. Another personal project, *In the Reign of Twilight*, completes a trilogy for McMahon; works that deal with the Inuit in the North. Having already written an *Ideas* program for CBC Radio and a book, *Arctic Twilight*, on the subject, he was more than prepared to shoot this film in 1994. Incisively organized, the film moves between archival footage (newsreels from the States, military information services and the NFB) concerning the creation of the DEW (Distant Early Warning) Line during the apex of the Cold War and its impact on the citizens of the Far North today. A conversation between three veteran Northern Affairs officials justifying the policies of the federal government of Canada is contrasted with statements by Inuit survivors. Contemporary scenes in Nunavut and brief sequences of Indian art sold down south complete the film's structure. For McMahon, this film "was more difficult to make than *The Falls*. I was an outsider and there were more stories involved." But, as with *The Falls*, he soon realized that "the issues are on the surface all the time. In the North, the first white guy you meet will tell you, 'these guys (the natives) are fucked, they don't know how to do anything anymore.' You go down a street and see a bunch of frozen

animals hanging outside of someone's house and a pickup truck and a snowmobile and a satellite dish on the roof."

McMahon gives the Inuit lots of opportunities to talk about their main tragedy: "We don't have children any more." The federal government's insistence on taking native kids away from their parents for 10 months of the year so they could get educated in western ways has proven to be disastrous. Our way of life was imposed on them. An older "witness," now in his 40s, observes that the nuns who taught him were "the wickedest people he ever met." A younger Inuit "witness" confesses: he can't skin foxes and can't build an igloo. So he worked on the DEW Line. Another "witness" worked in a mine for a while but missed his kids. Now he carves statues occasionally. Mostly he watches TV. He feels like he is "nothing." New kids on this block play in hard rock bands, drink lots of liquor and down whatever drugs are available. They don't know how to hunt, ice fish or build igloos because their parents never had the chance to teach them the ways of survival in a hard and unforgiving terrain. The only jobs these new democrats could perform were as menial labourers on the DEW Line military bases or as miners.

Intelligence uses two narrators, one a female guiding us through the process of discovering what intelligence may be and the other, a male, reciting a fairy tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes." The film's fractured sensibility is anecdotal yet analytical. McMahon's film travels from school rooms to video arcades, from hospitals to university labs and from the natural world to the artificial in a worthy attempt to capture the ineffable, why and how we think. McMahon's interrogative attitude, already important in his earlier films, is ever present in this film. While his earlier features traversed terrain that was clearly delineated, here he is not so sure. "When I hear the certainties promulgated by the corporate/government nexus, their ideas about education and technology," McMahon is clearly baffled. "They have an awful lot of certainties about how the world works, about what intelligence means, how you create a self-sustaining, self-reliant, healthy society, whatever that means. The film is a critique of those certainties because it is far from certain for me."

For education, the computer is seen as a panacea. Is it? Children use it much as they play video games. McMahon carefully places scenes of kids playing in

arcades and on playgrounds next to highly structured classroom situations. The real world is beginning to fade for kids schooled in the knowledge of artificial intelligence. Computers are, after all, "boxes of knowledge" created and designed in the initial stages for entry-level soldiers, corporate trainees and students.

Much of *Intelligence* is taken up with the physical nature of the brain. It seems reasonable to assume that a thorough examination of that organ ought to reveal how people think and what capacity we have for gifted thought. A specialist is brought in to discuss the change in skulls between Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon. In another scene, electrodes are placed on a patient to test wave patterns in thought. Blood samples are taken; fluids are injected into brains. The genetic code is invoked. In a disturbing sequence, an unflappable doctor dissects the human brain for the camera. Much data is collected but no conclusions are reached. How thought occurs and the nature of genius still resist scientific analysis.

We can use intelligence for controlling and marketing devices. Thanks to the



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older definition of intelligence (as a tool for espionage), it is no stretch to imagine that computers will be used to establish the identity of citizens in every "civilized" nation. Through cross-referencing, not only the names and addresses and fingerprints of all people will be known but so will their characteristic habits, attitudes and spending habits. McMahon takes us to a computer conference centre where a group called "Spies R Us" is already providing private security services. We're taken into a marketing session where the word "smart" is trotted out as the hip word of the day. A smart community, one that is wired to each other and the world, is already being created in a Toronto suburb.

In today's fast-paced society, many people want to be called smart and believe that they should be. Few deserve the accolade, because it really should be applied to free-thinkers, not to followers of the last supposedly hip trend. But then independent thinking is never easy and does not easily make people friendly. If Kevin McMahon is smart, it is because he is tough and analytical. For the marketing mavens of today, smart is a fashion statement, to be worn and discarded when a new nifty concept or phrase comes to the fore next season.

It is ironic to offer much praise for any one person as a creator these days. We are told to believe in the text, not the teller. But just as Donald Brittain embodied the possibility that one could be hip and care in his documentaries of the 1960s and 1970s, so McMahon does now. Both started as journalists, became filmmakers, and were no strangers to the dramatic forms of art. And yet, being Canadians, each embraced the documentary form. Brittain's contributions with such poetic effusions as *Memorandum*, about the Holocaust, *Fields of Sacrifice*, about the Wars, and the marvellous docudrama *Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks*, about the notorious racketeer, have long been recognized.

Kevin McMahon's films are coherent, poetic and ironic. They deal with important topics and never shirk the difficulties inherent in complex issues. Successfully marrying the oral and visual traditions of the non-fiction film form, McMahon has already produced thought-provoking, stylish pieces. What he will produce in the future is as unknowable at this time as is the true nature of intelligence. It is clear, though, that if given the right opportunities, McMahon can continue to build on a body of work that should stun lots of couch potatoes and hackers and just plain citizens by, say, the year 2010. ■



The Falls