

At the press conference for Perspective Canada, Liz Czach, one of the programmers, made a point of highlighting the experimental films included in this year's selection. Considering the size and scope of the Toronto International Film Festival, and judging by both the quantity and quality of their choices, I have to commend the programmers for their commitment to this too-often neglected genre. Space constraints permit me to mention only a few of the films, but every one of them is a bona fide gem.

Playfully surreal, *Soul Cages* (22 min.) by Phillip Barker is a highly self-conscious construct that revels in the sheer pleasure of the visual. In this delightfully engaging film Barker confronts



Elida Schogt's *Zyklon Portrait*

the properties of the photographic image, a subject he first tackled in the lyrically evocative, *A Temporary Arrangement* (1995). Barker borrows some of the visual devices introduced in that film, but in *Soul Cages* he places them in a narrative context that enriches both their effect and their meaning. The film tells the complex and cryptic tale of a photo developer's obsession with his client's work. Convinced that a photographer is capturing more than a mere representation of her subjects, he decides to turn the tables. In a fascinating look at the tension between the literal and the metaphorical properties of the photographic image, Barker intelligently alludes to everything from the theoretical notions of photography's relation to death to the superstition that the act itself steals the subject's soul. Adding to the mix, Barker takes the relationship between the photographer and the developer through a series of inversions that enlightens the whole notion of voyeurism, turning the simple question "who's watching whom?" into a provocative inquiry.

New discoveries this year include a group of filmmakers who grapple with the larger issues of family history and historical memory. Alexandra Grimanis' *Mothers Of Me* (15 min.) is a deeply personal response to the legacy of mental illness in

her family. While a woman is engaged in the simple act of preparing a meal, her thoughts are obviously elsewhere, evidenced by a swirl of voices on the soundtrack. Grimanis plants us squarely in the head of her protagonist, creating a world where even the most familiar of objects are unfamiliar. With its focus on the everyday, the skewed vision of the film perfectly mirrors the dissociated state of the overwhelmed protagonist. Grimanis achieves this state through a blend of processed imagery, often in extreme close up, with a chorus of voices that slowly, discordantly, reveal the details of this increasingly complex story. The effect is deeply unsettling, and transforms *Mothers Of Me* into a masterful recreation of that nightmarish state of paralysis that emerges when the past maintains an unrelenting hold on the present.

In both Meiko Ouchi's *by this parting* (13 min.) and Elida Schogt's *Zyklon Portrait* (13 min.), family history and historical memory converge, each film confronting the personal effects of an event from the Second World War. With *by this parting*, Mieko Ouchi delves into her family's experience in the Canadian internment camps to create a touching testament to the endurance of the human spirit. In her capable hands, the process of remembering becomes a ritualized act, performed by a group of Japanese drummers whose dynamism conjures up the spirits believed to reside in the natural landscape. Her skillful mingling of lyrical footage with documentary elements—old family photos, home movies, stark and sterile rooms in the camp—captured the complex implications of a difficult time. The poetic voiceover binds the film together nicely, creating more than just a record of an historical event. *by this parting* is a reverent homage to the survivors of the internment camps; in its celebration of the human spirit, it becomes a surprisingly uplifting piece.

Often, however, the greatest human tragedies remain incomprehensible and even indescribable. This is the provocative premise behind *Zyklon Portrait*, Elida Schogt's deeply moving portrait of her family's experience during the Holocaust. In the film, Schogt wisely privileges the subjective response over any attempts at historical objectivity. Beginning with a hypermeticulous analysis of Zyklon B, the gas used to kill millions in the concentration camps, the documentary approach quickly fractures into a necessarily personal one, underscoring the impossibility of making sense of the senseless. Skillfully weaving archival footage and the conventional documentary's dispassionate voice of authority with family photos and her mother's cautious words, Schogt creates a palpable tension between these irreconcilable elements. The commanding voice of the narrator continually dissolves into the reticent voice of her mother, whose insistence on the indescribable nature of these events resonates with an even greater legitimacy. Despite the marked absence of a single image from the Holocaust, *Zyklon Portrait* is one of the most powerful evocations of its horrors. The film is a fitting testament to the unspeakable nature of these horrors and to the courage of those who have struggled to summon up the words to even begin to describe them. What makes this film so affecting is this very refusal to be representational. Left to our own devices, it is perhaps most disturbing to imagine the tragic details ourselves. •