EXHIBITION REVIEW

Mark Lewis: Invention
THE POWER PLANT
TORONTO

Quickening the pulse of modernizing Europe in the nineteenth century were two new visual technologies: photography and cinema. Photography, despite its unique ability to record the real world, adopted the aesthetic conventions and fictive content of the medium that birthed it—painting. But when the photographic frame flickered into time, as cinema, connections to that earlier pictorial tradition were further strained. How can pictorial composition, reliant on stasis, exist in a medium that won’t be still?

This question moves slowly, almost imperceptibly, across the screens of Mark Lewis’s latest film projections, hesitating on a febrile threshold between stasis and movement, between fictive and real. This concern sits easily within Lewis’s ongoing considerations of the lineage, materiality, and cultural significance of moving image media.

Also expressed in Lewis’s films recently shown at the Power Plant was the artist’s understanding of the correspondence between cinema and city: the originary mise en scènes were kaleidoscopic, mobile images of real people playing out their everyday dramas, framed, reflected, and shadowed by modern shop windows and surfaces of glass, steel, and pavement.

In line with the increasing privatization of urban spaces across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, cinematic technology appropriated that public visual space, taking it into darkened enclosures for commercial consumption. Lewis returns to cinema’s primal scenes—Renaissance window frames and modernist reflections—freeing the medium from the industrialized narrative and sound accrued post-invention and, self-reflexively, flexing its cinematic muscle.

These machines for living and looking (cities, architecture, cinema) are conflated in Lewis’s films: in structuralist tribute cinema’s unique technical abilities—purified down to its essential operations of panning, zooming, tilting, and tracking—are performed. In cool caress, Lewis’s camera grazes and graces city surfaces, silently absorbing fragments of human drama.

Reflecting contemporary critiques of failed modernist projects, these updated “city symphony” films lack the joyful exuberance of such earlier examples as Dziga Vertov’s Man with a Movie Camera (1929) or Marie Menken’s frenetic Go! Go! Go! (1964), offering instead contemplative calm. Remaining, though, is the spatial instability achieved by Vertov’s automobile-transported camera; here, Lewis’s drone-mounted camera creates similar dizzying vertigos as it climbs and rotates among high towers.

Such maneuvers appear in the eighty-minute Invention (2014), Lewis’s first feature film. Premiering at the Toronto International Film Festival last fall, the film blends fourteen separate digital films shot in São Paulo, Toronto, and at the Louvre in Paris. Though the seductive surfaces of the Louvre, sadly, were not included in the Power Plant screenings, the five selected films offered sufficient visual interest skimmed from the North and South American locations.

A patch of São Paulo’s architectural eclecticism was the subject of the three-minute Galleria do Rock (2015). A jumble of tinted colonial-era churches, run-down glass tower façades, lush greenery, and the miniaturized buzz of urban traffic appeared...
through a frame created by the curved railing and walls of the legendary shopping center’s upper floor. This durational film hovers on the precipice between moving and still, between composition and decomposition, its unsettling and contradictory spatial relations achieved through dueling cinematic syntax. The field of view shifts subtly, undulating within the push and pull of the camera as it tracks in one direction and its lens aperture pulls focal length in the other, a technique Alfred Hitchcock introduced in Vertigo (1958).¹ Cinema is movement, regardless of where that movement occurs: in camera technology or its living subjects.

Galleria do Rock is as much a reflection on the history and techniques of picture making as it is about the real world it captures; its framed view resembles a traditional prosenium theater and suggests Alberti’s metaphor for perspective painting as a “window onto the world,”² and the scene’s illusionism is increased through its human-scale projection. The long unedited take registers only subtle movement and, emptied of sound and narrative, looks back to reveal its lineage of painting and photography.

A second film shot in Brazil, the two-minute, twenty-two-second Staircase at the Edificio Copan (2014), appeared on a large monitor. Here Lewis’s camera, trained closely on a central pillar, winds down a spiral staircase, and here, the subject seems to be the authority of focus itself. A seemingly autonomous camera eye drinks in the smooth surface of the soft-toned pillar and, as it circles slowly downward, gathers peripheral details of the apartment building’s surrounding windows and floors.

Lewis’s engagement with the “cinematic city” continued with three films shot in Toronto, once home to the Hamilton-born artist before his respective moves to London, UK; Vancouver; and back to London, where he now lives. During the 1960s, the city’s modernizing architectural campaign included Bauhaus designer Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s Toronto-Dominion Bank Towers. In the eleven-minute Pavilion (2015), Lewis’s roving camera first slyly acknowledges capitalist co-option of modernist avant-garde forms as it scans the financial district’s omnipresent corporate logos. The remaining film floats luxuriously, first across myriad abstract shapes seen from inside the building—the square ceiling grid, pillars, and curtain glass window frames—and then, as seen through those frames, pictures of urban life outside. These human scenes are made more abstract by their overlay of white snow, an effect critical for Lewis when selecting the winter season with its reduced tonalities and detail for his Toronto shoots.

The people in this and other of Lewis’s films are often real and captured candidly. But sometimes the camera, in its slow cityscape pan, absorbs actors planted by Lewis, who perform small anecdotals narratives. Here, a cyclist, seen through a framed window, is spotted grinding through heavy snow on the busy street outside. Later, the same figure sweeps a square of snow away from the pavement and, as on a painter’s canvas, performs bike tricks and wheelies.

Fictional characters also play bit roles in the eleven-minute Snow Storm at Robarts Library (2015). With stunning grandeur, the camera shows its technical stuff of pans, reversals, and rotations. After slowly scanning a section of Toronto’s architectural horizon, the drone-assisted camera approaches and, astonishingly, appears to glide right through an upper window of the University of Toronto’s John P. Robarts Library’s Brutalist façade, settling on a woman gazing through a window onto a very snowy outside. The lacy patterns on the dark-haired woman’s white shirt resemble snowflakes and Gothic architecture in seeming correspondence with the snow-covered architecture outside. Her gaze shifts between the (Albertian?) window view and the book on perspective she holds in her hands.

After establishing these motifs, the camera begins to play with alternative perspectives, thereby upsetting visual regimes. The modern glass façade reflecting the Robarts building directly across from it fills the frame like a huge mirror; after a slow rotation, the camera seems locked in fascination at the upside-down human locomotion. Wearing a bright red jacket, a man hands out fliers to passers-by. Lewis has commented that the bright colors animating painted snow scenes from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century create an effect that is pre-cinematic.³ As the heavily falling snow softens the scene, the camera redirects our attention, inviting us to contemplate relations between aesthetic principles such as geometric abstraction and our lived environment: lined up through a triangular-shaped window frame are the same linear shapes carved into walkways on the ground below.

It might be supposed that mass digital culture, with its proliferation of images, creates visually literate viewers. Yet most of these images, produced for immediate consumption and affect, flicker and fade before us in a steady stream, something like film itself, preserving and our environments and the visual technologies and aesthetic systems that represent them—might just help us see. For Lewis, the value of art, and particularly the long silent takes of his own filmic art, lies in its potential to slow down the process of looking, and ironically, to help us better see the world those images represent.⁴

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NOTES 1. Lewis describes his fascination for the fluctuation between static pictorial composition and its decomposition in movement: “...it is this ‘promise’ of a composition, a promise that is continually broken and then renewed, that keeps me watching.” Mark Lewis, Mark Lewis: Cold Morning (Toronto: Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and the Vancouver Art Gallery, 2009), 58. 2. In De pictura (1425–36), Alberti compared his painting surface to “an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen.” Leon Battista Alberti, On Painting and On Sculpture. The Latin texts of De Pictura and De Statua, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1982), 53. 3. “There is an unquestionable thrill to the look of winter. Beautiful barren landscapes covered with snow and ice, stark colours becoming signs of life that jump out of an empty white ground. A strange staccato floods an image of winter, raising everything to the surface of the image as if they were irregularities on the surface of the world. To me, a painted winter scene from the fifteenth to early sixteenth century can sometimes seem to contain early signs of the cinematic movement to come, so full of life can it be with the suggestion of unusual and unexpected movement and activities. Winter weather accomplishes magical transformations and suggests a vastly expanded realm of possibilities.” Mark Lewis, “People on a Sunday, Octopus on a Tuesday,” Afterall 11 (2005), 123. 4. Lewis says that we “depict things to understand what it is that we’re looking at when they’re not depicted.” Mark Lewis, interview by Chantal Pontiniard, “Rencontre avec Mark Lewis,” LE BAL, February 7, 2015, https://vimeo.com/120693336.