

## **Contingencies and Continuities:**

### ***The Wooden Lightbox and New Media History***

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*April 2010*

I invited Alex MacKenzie to perform *The Wooden Lightbox: A Secret Art of Seeing* at Concordia sight unseen. I had attended his performance of *Parallax* at Concordia in 2004 and I was eager to see his more recent work. He had been touring *The Wooden Lightbox* across Canada and Europe since 2007, and yet had never shown it in Montreal, despite his strong ties to the city through family and friends. It was time.

The unseen (as in both “unknown” and “invisible”) is significant here. *The Wooden Lightbox* contains secrets, and it guards them carefully. The strange-beautiful frame grabs from the press kit intrigued me, but as it turned out, the performance’s standout images would be those that remain undocumented, and so only reveal themselves in the darkened space of the event. These pictures imprint themselves only on the memory. The show is an engrossing but fleeting encounter with an unusual kind of cinema. For fifty or so minutes, you visit an elsewhere located between the dark, the image, the sound, and the crowd; and then it’s over. It’s over too soon and you want to remember it. The sensations linger, but the visual details quickly grow fuzzy.

This transient quality prompts an uneasy desire for a definitive, authoritative experience of the work. There is

the sense that you have only one chance to unlock *The Wooden Lightbox's* secrets, and it's tempting to seek something perfect and pure. Yet Alex's practice is all about contingencies, from his artisanal processing of the filmstrips to the improvisational elements of his performances. Rather than strive for the absolute experience – a futile exercise in control – *The Wooden Lightbox* relishes accidents. The unpredictability enhances the event's singularity, a feature that appears heightened in a climate of increasingly systematized replication, documentation, and accessibility.

*The Wooden Lightbox* probes the core of cinema's ontology, including the medium's attested reproducibility, mobility, and mechanical uniformity. The footage has all been hand processed, and additional prints could only approximate rather than duplicate the visual qualities of the original. The film consists of four reels (ten chapters) played back on a one-of-a-kind 16mm projector, which Alex assembled from parts of artifact projectors he had gathered over the years. The Lightbox projector has no motor; instead, Alex fitted it with a cranking apparatus, which he operates by hand during the performance. This device allows him to coordinate the speed and direction of the film, eschewing electric (or even digital) mechanization in favour of a manual and intimate engagement with the machinery, including all the variability this entails. The elements of stagecraft and skilled labour – with Alex in the middle of the audience, cranking the projector and using a bundle of lo-fi gadgets to modify the screen effects – invoke Canada's longstanding tradition of itinerant exhibition, which is most strongly associated with the first decade of

cinema but has been demonstrated to have a significant if overlooked history in the interwar period and beyond.<sup>1</sup> The figure of the travelling projectionist, case in hand, humble against the vast Canadian landscape is a romantic one, yet it somehow befits Alex MacKenzie.

Mobility and portability are fundamental to this work, but herein lies a paradox. The Lightbox projector itself is lightweight and travels easily in a back seat or overhead compartment. The show can go wherever Alex goes. Yet each instantiation is bound to a particular time and place. Appropriately, no videos of the performance exist. Insofar as *The Wooden Lightbox* is a film, you will not find it on DVD or online. There is only one print. So the work both flaunts and confounds portability: the traveling show comes to you, but you cannot seek copies of it through commercial or online distribution channels. Still, the Lightbox projector is a reminder that the mobile media "revolution" began long ago, and there was a time when the 16mm gauge was the portable cinema technology *par excellence*.<sup>2</sup> But 16mm projectors have come to signify something different: an amalgamation of nostalgia, technological fetishism, film school geek chic, and, well, outmoded-ness.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Lester, "Cultural Continuity and Technological Indeterminacy: Itinerant 16mm Exhibition in Canada, 1918-1949" (PhD diss., Concordia University, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Haidee Wasson, "The Reel of the Month Club: 16mm Projectors, Home Theaters and Film Libraries in the 1920s," in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Richard Maltby, Melwyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 217-233.

The contested “newness” of new media is an undercurrent of *The Wooden Lightbox*. I see in the equipment’s anachronistic innovations a near-polemic for taking a long view of the history of moving image technologies. In the contemporary digital phase, neophilia fuels developments in the institutions of art, entertainment, and education alike.<sup>3</sup> Technological advances motivate funding and vice versa in a way that frequently overlooks the fact that new things can also be done with “old” media. As Jonathan Sterne observes, “Obsolescence is a nice word for disposability and waste”.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the real problem of material accumulation, the largely unexamined and unchecked enthusiasm for novelty that propels technological change at an exponential rate continues to marginalize late adopters – on the local and international scale – who struggle to afford new hardware and software and scramble to develop the competencies to use them. This is not meant as an argument against “progress”, but rather as a warning against technological amnesia. In considering the economic imperatives that shaped cinema at the beginning of the previous century – one of the stated goals of the piece – we become more attuned to the part they play in the current transitions and transformations of cinema.

Alex talks about *The Wooden Lightbox* as an homage to the earliest days of cinema, when the medium in some ways owed more to scientific investigation, spiritualism, and

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<sup>3</sup> Zoë Sofia, “Contested Zones: Futurity and Technological Art,” in *Women, Art, and Technology*, ed. Judy Malloy (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2003), 502-522.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Sterne, “Out with the Trash: On the Future of New Media,” in *Residual Media*, ed. Charles R. Acland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 17.

illusionism than to any narrative tradition.<sup>5</sup> The site-specificity and performative aspects of the show participate in a fantasy about early film exhibition. *The Wooden Lightbox* wonders what cinema could have been if it had followed a different path. This retrofuturistic gesture recalls a time when the future of cinema was up for grabs and open to speculation.<sup>6</sup> This appeal for historical consciousness and questioning of the material history of cinema lingers after *The Wooden Lightbox* event, almost as a side effect of the rhythmic sound of the projector's gears and the dim flickering of the images in the dark.

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<sup>5</sup> Tom Gunning, "To Scan a Ghost: The Ontology of Mediated Vision," *Grey Room* 26 (2007): 94-127; and Tom Gunning, "Renewing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century," in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*, ed. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2003), 39-60.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Jenkins, "'The Tomorrow That Never Was': Retrofuturism in the Comics of Dean Motter (Part One)," June 18, 2007, [http://henryjenkins.org/2007/06/the\\_tomorrow\\_that\\_never\\_was\\_re.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2007/06/the_tomorrow_that_never_was_re.html)

Bio of curator: Zoë Constantinides is a PhD candidate in Communication Studies at Concordia University, Montreal. Her research interests include screen studies, cultural policy, digital piracy, contemporary art, and the Canadian cinema industry. She is active in Montreal's film community as a programmer and writer. As a teacher, she is interested in the ways community involvement and artistic practice intersect with pedagogy. She has worked with the Toronto International Film Festival, Montreal's Film Pop festival, and Lions Gate Entertainment.