

culture at ground level

guerilla

ARCHIVE

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**The art of
(dis)orientation:
watching and making
experimental films with
Alex MacKenzie**

Intro and interview by Kirk Finken

Photos courtesy the artist



Projected meaning

Alex MacKenzie is pure cinema. He works on the emulsion of the film itself. He is the projectionist and interlocutor at his screenings. He pares the medium back to its historical beginnings and releases its magic again. Light. Movement. Sound. Projection. Experience. He has curated, talked about, judged, projected and made experimental films for more than 20 years. His films have been presented at every damn experimental film festival around the world. Founder and curator of the Edison Electric Gallery of Moving Images, the Blinding Light!!Cinema, and the Vancouver Underground Film Festival, he is one of few Canadian filmmakers who has stuck to this most challenging and disorienting of media and made it his life. Recently, Mackenzie shared his thoughts with me on the pleasures of watching, making, and being confused by experimental films.

Finken: You have seen more experimental films than most Canadians. How many have you seen?

MacKenzie: During the years I was running my two microcinema projects and underground film festivals, that was a lot of experimental films. Add in all the other festivals and it really starts to add up. Over 5000 films? I honestly don't know. Probably too many.

If we accept that the art of experimental films is one of exploring new techniques and language, and—in the ethnographic/linguistic sense—new codes of expression, you have no doubt experienced moments of confusion in watching an experimental film where the code is unfamiliar. Can you talk about that moment and how you have experienced it?

I think one of the primary pleasures of watching this kind of work is precisely the discovery of new codes, and the experience of unlocking that comes with this. That moment of confusion you mention is something like being thrown off balance or suddenly finding yourself in a genuinely unfamiliar space. We tend to grapple for hints of the familiar, seek out even the slightest referents that we have in our personal catalogue. Sometimes it can make us angry. I have definitely seen some anger, even been angry myself. You might even call it a kind of fear. And so we immediately get to work trying to unlock this new shape, to figure out what it is up to and why. It is an attempt to stabilize. That work, I think, can be the challenge and the genuine engagement that comes with a good screening experience. The fact that this is diametrically opposed to the passive checks and balances approach to conventional narrative cinema is what is so refreshing.

But let's face it—it ain't for everybody.

The best experiences I have are when I give in to this confusion—when my preconceptions or expectations can fall away and the experience can take over.

Did you experience it differently when you were a younger filmmaker?

I think I was more confused but also less cynical. The newness of the experience really did open my eyes up to the tremendous potential and entirely different ways of seeing and experiencing this kind of moving image.

I went from mainstream cinema as a distraction to the films of David Rimmer, Al Razutis, Stan Brakhage, Ellie Epp, Maya Deren and many others pretty quickly.



I still have a clear memory of my first real experimental film experience. It was like a light went on in my head that said I get it—this is a whole other approach I had never even conceived of. And it is wide open. I welcomed the confusion. But once you are, let's say, seasoned, there is a point where you do start to see repeating patterns and familiar tropes. The experimental starts to take on a structure of its own, which of course means it is no longer experimental, but a genre in and of itself. These days when those tropes aren't present and I find myself in a screening experience that throws me off again, I guess I do feel a kind of youthful excitement again. The beauty of the form is that it really is limitless. Approaches, interests, materials and subject are unlimited. And so are people's imaginations, but only if they can find a way of releasing that potential. Confusion might be a part of that way.

Is it fair to say that the moment of confusion is also a moment of growth? Of meditation? Of spiritual awakening? Or is it something less momentous?

I wouldn't want to get too hippied out, but I would say growth is a good word for it. There are structuralist films out there (I am thinking of the work of Paul Sharits in particular) that can take on a genuinely meditative quality for me. The fact that many of these filmmakers are attempting to create a sort of look into the mind or soul, to create an emotional experience, can certainly lead to an experience that could lead one to a kind of spiritual shift. But I think the confusion happens first, and is likely then followed by some level of acceptance or embracing of the unknown or unknowable in order to get to that other state.

The reactions I have to experimental film work vary widely, and can be affected by everything from what is on my mind when I enter into the viewing experience, my openness at that time, preconceptions, expectations, how hungry or tired I am, etc. So yes, inevitably not every experience is life-shifting, but like most things, it all depends how much you are willing to give to the experience. And I think that is what any artist hopes for—that their audience is willing to take a leap of faith, move outside of their safety zone, and discover something entirely new by being open to the experience.



As a filmmaker, have you ever experienced confusion in the creation of a piece? Can you talk about those moments and how you have experienced those?

My process is a strange brew of practicality, intuition, serendipity, and instinct. I think there is a kinship to painting and sculpture here, more than conventional filmmaking. Of late I have been working with a lot of hand-processing as well as the manufacture of homemade film emulsions that I hand-paint onto the clear film stock and then expose. But yes, I most definitely get confused. And I think this is a different confusion than the one I might experience in the viewing experience. The confusion I have in the making is often a sense of helplessness. Feeling stuck and really at my wit's end as to what to do next. That is a good time for one of two things. One, leave it alone for a while, go for a walk. Or two, dive deeper. Both can be disastrous, but both can also be revelatory. Or neither —I think it is important to be clear that sometimes this confusion is telling me to get the hell out, abandon ship. Find another ship! Or maybe take a train. Sometimes confusion is a way of finding out that something is simply not working..

For your audiences, your films go beyond just the experience of sitting in a theatre or in front of a screen. It is a physical performance with you as the projectionist and third element in the room, speaking, interacting with the projected light. Do you ever see confusion in the eyes of your audience?



Thankfully, I don't often have the vantage point nor the time to study my audience's eyes. That would likely throw off my game. But I do sometimes sense a restlessness if it isn't coming together for someone. A shift in their seat maybe. A cough. And so I do have a relationship with a given audience that can impact on my approach to the presentation. Not in the sense of changing it in reaction, but rather in feeling like I am a part of a larger experience outside myself. And that can sometimes contain a brand of confusion that requires a collective leap.

Is it your role to demystify or resolve that confusion?

As much as I can be a part of an audience, I am also the magician in the room. Part of my job, really, is to create an illusion. A play of light. I guess the most I can do is introduce myself through my work. What the audience then does with it or takes away is really out of my hands. (That said, there is always the possibility of a Q and A!) The experience is always an immediate one, no matter what kind of describing happens after the fact. The level to which an audience believes in what they are seeing will determine the possible effects or impacts it might have. These experiences range from moving and revelatory to anger and, yes, confusion.

Alex MacKenzie will be presenting new works at the WNDX Festival of Film and Video Art in Winnipeg, Antimatter Festival in Victoria, and Pop Montreal, all upcoming in September and October. He currently has work in the "Cinema" exhibit at Voorkamer Gallery in Lier, Belgium until early July. www.alexmackenzie.ca.