

# Alex MacKenzie: Parallax

TAKE ONE, March-June, 2005 by Larissa Fan

Alex MacKenzie is a Vancouver-based artist who has long been a champion and practitioner of underground film and expanded cinema. He was the founder and programmer of the Edison Electric Gallery of Moving Images (1995-97) and the Blinding Light!! Cinema (1998-2003)--both micro-cinemas that screened experimental artists' and underground film--and director of the Vancouver Underground Film Festival (1998-2003). As an artist, he has been working for over two decades in various forms of expanded cinema, creating works that explore alternate ways of presenting film while appropriating old technology for new ends.

MacKenzie's most recent expanded cinema work, *Parallax*, is a dual-projector performance that employs two antique analytic projectors and draws from a large personal collection of old industrial and educational films. Through a long and mostly intuitive process, MacKenzie selected images from this archival footage and re-photographed, hand-processed and chemically manipulated them. This treatment allowed him to modify and shape the imagery, re-purposing it for his own means as a way to (temporarily) give dead and forgotten footage new life. At the same time, the unpredictability of the hand-processing and the degradation caused by re-photography introduced an element of serendipity, which also became part of the process. The final piece is composed of short sections or chapters of related imagery, which are linked together through a loose narrative arc that moves from the natural to the human made, from the child to maturity and civilization.

In performance, the use of two projectors expands the possibilities of film presentation in unexpected ways. At times, the film frame is extended by presenting two images side by side as other images are projected on top of each other to create on-the-fly superimpositions, and sometimes a single image speaks on its own. There is a fluid communication between the two projections, particularly when an object travels across both frames or when negative and positive versions of the same image are layered, almost but not quite cancelling each other out. Originally used by scientists, sports teams and the military to study motion and microscopic images, the analytic projectors also enable projection at varying speeds and single frame, furthering the artist's ability to effect and control the imagery.

To this arsenal of tools MacKenzie adds, at various times, coloured gels, masking and lens changes, all of which can be witnessed by the audience since the projectors and filmmaker are in full view. This performance element is crucial to the presentation. The sense of risk inherent in live performance heightens our attention; at any moment the film could break, one of the old, creaky projectors could malfunction, the artist's finger could slip, and the whole thing could fall apart. Watching Mackenzie change reels, control the projectors, and add and remove gels is fascinating--he is the wizard behind the curtain revealed, the magician whose tricks are laid bare. While you might expect this to take away from the film, instead it enriches it, allowing us to appreciate the dexterity and skill of the projectionist much as we might admire the virtuosity of a musician's technique at a concert.

No two performances are alike, so each is truly a one-of-a-kind event. The artist performs to a rough visual score, guided by a soundtrack composed from original recordings--audio from the archival footage and appropriated sound--but the exact unspooling of the imagery changes with each performance. Even at the same screening, each audience member's experience will be different depending on where they are seated in relation to the screen and the artist/ projectionist. And because MacKenzie is projecting his original footage, not prints, with each exhibition the film degrades and eventually the piece will have to be retired. In *Parallax*, MacKenzie orchestrates a sumptuous, stunning collage of moving images and sound that walks a tightrope between control and chance, order and chaos, permanency and change--reminding us of the fragile, ephemeral nature of film and ultimately, of course, of life itself.

*Parallax* has been presented at numerous venues in the past year, including the Anti-Matter Film Festival in Victoria, Pleasuredome in Toronto and Mediacity in Windsor. A West Coast tour is planned for this summer.

*Larissa Fan is the filmmaker liaison at the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre and a regular contributor to Take One.*

