



Essays / Zoë Druick

Vancouver Cinema in the Sixties

It is tempting to root the blossoming of cinema in Vancouver in the fecund conditions of the late 1960s. This was the time when the National Film Board began to regionalize (1966), when the Canadian Film Development Corporation (1967) was established in order to promote the production of Canadian feature films, and when the new Broadcasting Act (1968) diversified possibilities for distribution via television. But a look at the Vancouver film scene in the years leading up to these policies forces the observer to modify such a starting point. In the absence of targeted policies, filmmaking in Vancouver was steady throughout the 1960s, with production in every genre and gauge, from 8 mm experimental shorts to 35 mm feature films. In part this efflorescence was enabled by local institutions, such as CBC Vancouver (CBUT), which had a commitment to showcasing local talent, and the University of British Columbia, the province's major post-secondary institution, home to an influential film society. In part it was connected to a growing sense of West Coast cultural specificity, with influential artists and cultural industries traversing the Pacific coast. The new de-localization of Hollywood played a role, for example, as did the Vietnam War, which created its migrant resisters. In short, a confluence of factors, international, national, and local, conspired to create in the city of Vancouver in the 1960s a number of productive groups of filmmakers working in different traditions and often in ignorance of each other. This substantial yet eclectic body of work forms Vancouver's diverse 1960s cinema.

This essay will consider the films produced during the years between 1960, when the celebrated mini-series *Cariboo Country* was broadcast on CBUT, and 1972, the founding year of both Cineworks and Pacific Cinémathèque and the expansion of the Pacific office of the NFB. While the focus will be on the topography of film production in Vancouver, a number of individual film analyses will hopefully serve to illustrate some of the formal and thematic preoccupations of the period before the widespread use of video.

Vancouver independent narrative and experimental films of the 1960s are alike in one way: their preoccupation with the experience of being at the interface of culture and nature. Vancouver was a city in the midst of an accelerating modernization in the 1960s, a city in which art remained somewhat imbricated with the primary industries that dominated the economy and devastated the landscape. In Vancouver, a kind of West Coast utopianism merged modernist technological experimentation with mystic dabbling and cultural exoticism. In Gene Youngblood's influential concept of "expanded cinema," visual technologies became, along with psychotropic drugs and transcendental meditation, techniques of mind expansion. Film experiments of all kinds merged with other types of social and personal experimentation on the Canadian frontier.

The experimental spirit of 1960s West Coast cinema was expressed in films ranging from Al Sens' idiosyncratic, comic short animations made when he was a UBC student, such as *The See, Hear, Think, Act Film* (1965), to the psychedelic and visionary films of Al Razutis, Dave Rimmer, Gary Lee-Nova, and others. Sens' series of pastiche-style films are characterized by his use of the static frame, line-drawn caricatures, and vignette-like structures. The films combine a critique of US media culture, where avatars engage in absurd levels of hyperviolence, with bemused observations about the human condition, often expressed by domestic pets. A critique of media culture merges with mock-

philosophical musings in an adolescent stream-of-consciousness style, by turns anarchic and moralistic.[1] Sens' almost Monty Python-esque ethos led him to mix styles as diverse as stop motion, colour and line drawings, cut-outs, and even the heated liquid abstractions that can be found, albeit in very different context, in the work of psychedelic experimenters of the Vancouver scene, such as Sam Perry (a close collaborator of Al Neil who committed suicide in 1966 and whose films are no longer extant).[2]

As the 1960s wore on, film experimentation in Vancouver took on a different form and exhibited a kind of effusive eclecticism and youthful combination of contempt and hope. Filmmaker Al Razutis has attributed this diversity in part to the fact that “these practices and their attendant technologies, came into being suddenly and without the benefits of long-term cultural traditions”. [3] Although a certain Romantic lyricism featured prominently, some experimenters had structuralist tendencies. All addressed the mainstream media, either implicitly or explicitly, as a form of mind control and challenged viewers to perceive the world differently. Gary Lee-Nova's astounding *Steel Mushrooms* (1967), for example, is an unrelenting critique of mass industrial culture under the threat of the nuclear bomb. Combining rapidly edited close-ups of signs and industrial infrastructure in the city of Vancouver, such as pipes and wires, with found footage of nuclear clouds, the film adapts a kind of pop culture assault montage to jar the viewer into a new perspective on the violence of modern life. Although the film is redolent of earlier experiments with found footage by American filmmakers such as Bruce Conner (*A Movie*, 1958), the film combines the critique of media form and content with a distinctive West Coast urban iconography.

David Rimmer's early films, dating from the late 1960s, express a similar agitation. However, Rimmer, in what would become a characteristic trait, confronts the modern technology of film itself (highlighted in *Steel*

Mushrooms) with the natural rhythms of the West Coast landscape. Interrupting a placid contemplation of nature in *Migration* (1969), for example, Rimmer uses optical printing and an editing style based on repeated motifs to confront the viewer with images of death and rebirth in a natural world felt, rather than shown, to be at risk in its confrontation with modern technology.

The possibilities of abstract film were explored in a different vein by American filmmaker Keith Rodan in his *Cinetude* series, made in Vancouver in the late 1960s. Gorgeous colour hand paintings on 35 mm evoke constant movement and metamorphosis. With their improvised jazz soundtrack, these gem-like films emulate the spirit of Canadian animator Norman McLaren's earlier experiments with jazz abstraction, such as *Begone Dull Care* (1949), set to the music of Oscar Peterson. Along with many others, these experimental filmmakers worked with the arts collective Intermedia (1967–1972), sharing equipment and screening their work at local happenings held there and at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Intermedia's commitment to producing art environments and happenings links it to Gene Youngblood's influential work on expanded cinema. Youngblood defines "intermedia" as "the simultaneous use of various media to create a total environmental experience for the audience," an ethos that informs the work of many of the experimental practitioners of the period.[4] It is possible to see in the dissolution of Intermedia in the early 1970s a retrenchment of practices associated with distinctive media. However, this was not the end of experimentation. Filmmaking moved to the film collective Cineworks and to Cinémathèque, where Werner Aellen, one of the organizers of Intermedia, became the inaugural president. On the other hand, experimental, process-oriented production found a natural home in video and was taken up by artists affiliated with Video In and The Western Front.[5]

In the midst of this exciting period (1967–69), CBUT producer Stan Fox

compiled a series of short works by local experimental filmmakers as a gesture of support for a burgeoning yet still immature film scene. This work appeared in two series, *Enterprise* (1967–68) and *New World* (1969), and provides a particularly good example of the importance of CBC for the local film scene. Not only did this create an opportunity for young filmmakers to share their work with local audiences, it also ensured the production of documents of the concerns and sensibilities of the youthful local constituency. Documentaries such as *What Happened Last Summer* (1967) and *Generations* (1969), directed by Tom Shandel, explore the emergence of the hippie and yippie movements (the latter documents a Simon Fraser University lecture by Jerry Rubin) and are invaluable records of cultural foment.

The films in the series are uneven—many of them display the undisciplined exuberance and archness that typifies student films—but the works demonstrate the emerging self-consciousness of a dynamic film and art scene. Exhibiting the interdisciplinarity of the arts in Vancouver, these short films combine poetry and art (Jim Brown, Al Neil, Jack Wise, Paul Wong) with contemporary music performance (George Zuckerman Trio, Alan Hovanhess, Chris Jordan, United Empire Loyalists, Jim Johnson, Harry Aoki), confirming what Kirk Tougas has characterized as “the uniqueness of Vancouver’s films” and the “relative freedom of the independent filmmaker” when compared with contemporary counterparts in Toronto and Montreal.[6]

In a very different way, earlier episodic television was no less impressive or original. Written by Paul St. Pierre and directed by Philip Keatley, the series *Cariboo Country* (1960, 1963–66) featured a regular cast of characters from the white and aboriginal communities of the fictional town of Namko, located in the Chilcotin. *The Education of Phyllistine* (1964) and *How to Break a Quarter Horse* (1966), both of which have been discussed extensively by Mary Jane Miller in her investigations of CBC drama, are remarkably terse and

concentrated expressions of settler-colonial relations that also attempt to flesh out their characters beyond symbols.[7] Another early episode in the series, *Under the Blanket* (1960), stages a satirical poke at both CBC and Canadian nationalism. When a reporter from CBC Toronto shows up to do a Dominion Day broadcast from Namko, it becomes clear that the image of the West and its “aborigines” that Toronto wants will not be forthcoming. As Ol’ Antoine, a recurring central character played by Chief Dan George, plays a gambling game, the journalist has a break-down on live television and the national broadcast is a flop. The episode serves to reinforce the existence of a distinct experience in BC, one that exceeds restrictive media frames.

A decade later, another CBC dramatic series was just as ground-breaking. Filmed in colour and set on location in Vancouver and the lower mainland in the early 1970s, *The Manipulators* (1970–71) introduces characters involved in the life of a parole officer (Ben Maartman) and explores the production—as well as the racialization—of criminality on Canada’s West Coast. Margot Kidder’s memorable appearance on an episode of *The Manipulators* entitled “Games” (directed by Don Eccelson, 1971), an episode dedicated to the exploration of alternative therapeutic models of rehabilitation for prisoners, rivals any of the independent features being made regionally at the time for both social relevance and formal experimentation.

In the years before the establishment of the Canadian Film Development Corporation (1967), which brought marked expansion of feature film production across Canada, only a handful of features were produced each year across Canada. Of this almost infinitesimal group of films, the consistent production of Vancouver filmmaker Larry Kent deserves note. His films *The Bitter Ash* (1963), *Sweet Substitute* (1964), and *When Tomorrow Dies* (1965) remain some of the most notable of the era.[8] Made with shoe-string budgets, volunteer crews and UBC student actors, they are derivative yet compelling

portraits of the confusion, dissatisfaction, and violence of life in Vancouver. Filmed in rooming houses, bars, and on the gritty streets of Vancouver's east side and set to Beat-style jazzy soundtracks, the films express a youthful exuberance and a quick condemnation of a world deemed to be already unacceptably compromised. In *Sweet Substitute*, the most critically successful of the three, a high school senior is torn between pressure to attend college, and his own desires for immediate satisfaction, personified by a sweet but shallow siren who refuses to sleep with him before marriage. In frustration, he turns toward another girlfriend, and when she becomes pregnant he thoroughly betrays their friendship. Apparently unscathed by his actions, at film's end it appears as though he is on track to marry his first girlfriend, now his fiancé. These kinds of bleak scenarios and unredeemable choices are standard fare in Kent's world of moral lassitude and everyday thuggery.

Narrative films in the early 1970s by Sylvia Spring and Jack Darcus also expressed a bleak vision of life on the West Coast. Spring's *Madeleine Is...* (1970) presents Vancouver through the lens of rain forest magic realism. A young woman relocated to Vancouver from Quebec, Madeleine (Nicola Lipman), attempts to placate her brutal yet socially conscious boyfriend, Toro (John Juliani). Her struggles in love and on the mean streets of Vancouver itself are relieved by increasingly frequent fantasies about a male clown (Wayne Specht), who may or may not be David, a man she meets by accident. A nascent feminist parable, Madeleine ultimately attempts to gain the confidence she needs to be independent. The film is redolent of the self-conscious deployment of clowning documented in Tom Shandel's *Superfool* (CBC, 1967), in which Joachim Foikis meanders through the city in a jester's get-up while ruminating in voice-over about the role of a clown to invert social reality. Just as the clown in *Madeleine Is...* is anticipated by *Superfool*, Madeleine's search for identity and creativity is foreshadowed in Spring's previous film *Know Place* (CBC, 1967) made with Dave Rimmer, in which she looks at how young

people in an alternative school are using art to explore new ways of perceiving and being. Spring was one of only a few women producing films in Vancouver in the 1960s, making her completion of a feature film all the more impressive.

Proxymawks (1971), Jack Darcus' second feature mobilized an extremely distinctive West Coast gothic sensibility in its treatment of the emotional struggles of a young couple (Susan Spencer and Jack Darcus) living in a remote cottage surrounded by an assortment of birds of prey and other animals. She keeps rabbits while he tends to wounded eagles. Or are these just proxies for their incompatibilities? In either event, the lush West Coast landscape is rendered as a claustrophobic and inhospitable context for the brooding characters, living in a perilous balance with the creatures they are attempting to nurture.

The early 1960s saw the failed attempt to re-start the location industry in Vancouver, which had thrived in the early decades of the twentieth century, with the establishment by Panorama films of Hollyburn Studios in West Vancouver in 1962.[9] The most notable accomplishment of the studio was the inauguration of the long-running CTV series *The Littlest Hobo* (1963–65), produced by Canamac Pictures.[10] But in 1969, when counter-cultural American filmmaker Robert Altman filmed *That Cold Day in the Park* in Vancouver, he helped to spawn what would become Hollywood North: location shooting in Vancouver (and BC more generally) that masqueraded as America. This location industry should be considered to be an integral part of the Vancouver filmmaking landscape, not least because it reflects the integration of Vancouver into an increasingly globalized marketplace.[11]

Although filmmaking in Vancouver dates back to the beginnings of film itself and has never really been halted, the decades between quota quickies of the decade 1928–38—made for the British market—and the emergence of a full-



blown Hollywood service industry in the 1980s are often seen as something of a wasteland for film production. However, a snapshot of independent production in Vancouver during the decade of the 1960s shows a vibrancy both inside and outside of cultural institutions. The upsurge in production in a variety of film styles reflected both a desire to make a mark on film culture in Canada, and a cross-pollination with other art forms in the dynamic and burgeoning local scene. Using animation, documentary, experimental, and feature film conventions, artists working in Vancouver reflect an unease with both the past and an uncertain future, a modernist sensibility running headlong into a wilderness spirituality. After 1972, the impulses of the 1960s would find increasing institutional support and critical engagement, the vibrant filmmaking community would attain maturity, and a new chapter of film production in Vancouver was set to begin.

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Footnotes

01. Tony Reif, "West Coast Filmmaking: History," in Pierre Véronneau and Piers Handling, eds., *Self Portrait: Essays on the Canadian and Quebec Cinemas* (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1980), 122–38.
02. Ibid.
03. Al Razutis, "Recovering Lost History: Vancouver Avant-Garde Cinema 1960-69," in *Vancouver Art and Artists, 1931–1983*. Vancouver Art Gallery, October 15–December 31, 1983, 172.
04. Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E. P. Dutton., 1970), 348.
05. Jennifer Abbott, ed., *Making Video 'In': The Contested Ground of Alternative Video on the West Coast* (Vancouver: Video In Studios, 2000).
06. Kirk Tougas, "West Coast Filmmaking: Perspectives," in Pierre Véronneau and Piers Handling, eds., 140.
07. Mary Jane Miller, *Turn Up the Contrast: CBC Television Drama since 1952* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press/CBC Enterprises, 1987).
08. Piers Handling, *Canadian Feature Films: 1913–1969*, Part 3, 1964–1969 (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1976).
09. André Pâquet, *How to Make or Not to Make a Canadian Film* (Montreal: La cinémathèque canadienne, 1967), n. pag.
10. Dennis Duffy, *Camera West: British Columbia On Film, 1941–1965*, 22.
11. Sarah Matheson has shown that the quest to attract location shooting to Toronto coincided with a push by that city to modernize its architecture and insinuate itself into global capital. Something similar might be said of Vancouver of the late 1960s. See also Mike Gasher, *Hollywood North*. See Sarah Matheson, "Projecting Placelessness: Industrial Television and the 'Authentic' Canadian City," in Greg Elmer and Mike Gasher, eds., *Contracting Out Hollywood: Runaway Productions and Foreign Location Shooting* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).



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Critic, educator. Zoë Druick is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University. Her books include *Projecting Canada: Documentary Film and Government Policy at the National Film Board* (2007), *Programming Reality: Perspectives on English-Canadian Television* (with Aspa Kotsopoulos, 2008), and a study of Allan King's film *A Married Couple* (1969) for University of Toronto Press (forthcoming). In addition, she has published articles in journals such as *Screen, Television and New Media, Canadian Journal of Communication, Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, and *Studies in Documentary*, as well as various anthologies. She is currently vice-president of the Film Studies Association of Canada and sits on the organizing committee of Cinephemera, Symposium of Canadian Orphan Cinema.