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SEEING THROUGH THE FOG: EXAMINING NARROWS INLET

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(written for this publication) 2012

The first time I saw David Rimmer's *Narrows Inlet* (1980) was at the Winnipeg Cinematheque.¹ The film was shown on its original 16mm with the first half entirely out-of-focus. Normally, this would be quickly noticed by, and cause concern among, the audience members — even in a city like Winnipeg, where experimental screenings are informal affairs attended mainly by local filmmakers and diehards. However, due to the nature and structure of the film, it was impossible for this uninitiated audience (and projectionist) to be aware of the “error.”

Mike Hoolboom describes the film as follows:

In *Narrows Inlet* [Rimmer] takes his camera out on a boat and click clicks a frame at a time though he can't glimpse a thing. He's caught in the fog and there's nothing at all until a sliver of colour appears, and then slowly, oh so very slowly, the fog lifts and the tree line lives again, staring back at the camera with all of its colour and height resolved. Another small miracle of looking.²

According to Rimmer, the film was shot on British Columbia's West Coast, in Storm Bay, a location just north of Vancouver. He explains the film's development this way:

Starting with a boat swaying on its anchor at the head of an inlet, a landscape of pilings, shore, and forest is slowly revealed by time-lapse photography as the morning fog lifts. While the deep space of the landscape evolves out of the fog-enshrouded flatness of early morning, the camera skips from fixed point to fixed point — suggesting the motion of the human eye while reading.³





One can easily read the film as a poetic expression of subtle beauty: the white flat veil of morning fog lifts to reveal the colour, textures and splendor of the coastal forest. However, the Cinematheque projectionist's unintentional and virtually unnoticeable error points to an alternative interpretation.

The version of *Narrows Inlet* that was screened at the Winnipeg Cinematheque on March 6, 2010 began with a second or two of the film's title card, reading "Narrows Inlet." During this brief moment, the projectionist attempted (in vain) to focus the title, but it came and went too quickly, leaving the viewer in a murky world of white wonder. At this point, the filmmaker, audience and projectionist were all essentially in the same boat, surrounded by fog. As Catherine Russell observes in her essay, "The Inhabited View: Landscape in the Films of David Rimmer,"

Wooden pilings in the middle ground are evidence again of an inhabited natural environment, and the first half of the film is so drenched with mist and fog that the shore and rising mountains of the background are entirely hidden.⁴

As the fog begins to dissipate, the coast is revealed and the projectionist, noticing her mistake, started to correct the focus. The film became a living object, a play between the technician and the material. The projectionist thus became involved in the rhythm of nature as captured by Rimmer. Russell provides an eloquent description of how the coastal forest is revealed:

When the lushly coloured pine forests emerge from the blue-grey fog, a landscape appears to emerge from the grain of the image; an abstract expressionist surface composition of line and texture materializes to gradually clarify as a photographic image. The horizontal pans inscribe a centralized but unstable point of vision, constructing a shifting apparently "floating" subjectivity within this painterly landscape.

The legible "photographic image" of the coast line offered a window of opportunity to refocus the projector. In essence, the coast line provides an integral structural component to the film by becoming a stable focal point, both for the projectionist and the audience.⁵

In considering this projection error, it seems that *Narrows Inlet* utilizes a structural technique as a means to examine the patterns and rhythms found in nature, thereby bridging the gap between the phenomenological experience of the film and the mechanical aspects of the camera and the projector. It can only be assumed that the extremely short title sequence in *Narrows Inlet* has led to viewing experiences similar to the one I have just described. As Russell argues, "*Narrows Inlet* represents landscape as a phenomenological production of an invisible but determining seeing camera/subject/viewer."⁶ To this grouping I would add the unseen projectionist. The focusing of the projector becomes a natural part of the film, as organic as the waves swaying the boat; the projectionist, like the filmmaker and the audience, waits patiently for the morning fog to clear, allowing a hidden world to slowly and sharply emerge into focus.

NOTES

1. The film played as part of *Cinema Under the Western Influence* curated by Alex MacKenzie on March 6, 2010. See <http://cineflyer.wordpress.com/2010/02/27/cinema-under-the-western-influence-curated-by-alex-mackenzie/>
2. Mike Hoolboom, "David!" in *Loop, Print, Fade + Flicker: David Rimmer's Moving Images*, Pacific Cinematheque: Monograph Series No. 1 (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2009), 24.
3. *David Rimmer*, Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre Catalogue.
4. Catherine Russell, "The Inhabited View: Landscape in the Films of David Rimmer," in *Landscape and Film*, ed. Martin Lefebvre (New York: Routledge, 2006), 157.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.