



VENICE BIENNALE: CANADA

Mark Lewis's film work has returned to the problem of modernity, to the dilemma of its irretrievable pastness on the one hand and its continued centrality to thought about art and politics on the other.

Mark Lewis

*Exploring the mirage
behind the movie star.*
by Laura Mulvey



ABOVE: Still from *The Pick*, 1988. Screen projection 16x12. 7 min, 59 sec. Directed: Mark Lewis.

FACING PAGE: Two stills from *Rear Projection*, Mark Lewis, 2009. Screen projection 16x12. 20 min, 28 sec.

FOR SOME TIME NOW, MARK LEWIS has been interested in the old, celluloid-based special-effects technology known as rear projection. He has written about its aesthetic implications, and his new rear-projection film, *Nathan Phillips Square, A Winter's Night, Skating* (2009), will be shown in the Canadian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale this year. In addition, he has made a documentary (which will also be shown in Venice), *Backstory: Hansard Rear Projection* (2009), about the Hansard family, whose work with this technology in Hollywood spans three generations. Lewis first encountered the Hansards when he made his 2006 film *Rear Projection: Molly Parker*, and his interest in using an old technology then extended to the story of its rise and decline. In the documentary, the surviving father-and-son team, positioned in front of backdrops typical of the device, tell of the success of their family business over a number of decades, until it was overtaken and finally displaced by electronic effects (green and blue screens) and computer-generated imagery. Here, in a compressed and poignant form, is a firsthand account of the modern object's trajectory from being in demand to being "outmoded" that so fascinated Walter Benjamin. But when it's recycled obliquely back into history, through a work of art, say, such an object can acquire new unexpected interest and significance.

Rear-projection technology was a response to a threefold problem posed by the arrival of synchronized sound in the late '20s and early '30s: how to combine star presence and narrative action with audible dialogue. A would-be seamless combination of all three involved first separating them into two component parts. A narrative setting would be filmed on location for later projection in a studio onto a translucent screen. Arranged against the background footage, stars could then be easily shot, and their dialogue carefully recorded, all in the safety of the studio space. This technique allowed stars to remain in privileged close-up, their words clearly audible and their emotions clearly visible, while the dramatic setting, landscape scenery or urban streets, rolled behind them.

Over the years the illusion improved, but it was always vulnerable,



verging on visibility and a certain absurdity even in its heyday. Now that obsolescence has overtaken rear projection, its paradoxes can be simultaneously related back to its own historical period and reconfigured in the present. Mark Lewis's film work has returned to the problem of modernity, to the dilemma of its irretrievable pastness on the one hand and its continued centrality to thought about art and politics on the other. In his choice of rear projection as a means he resurrects an archaic technology that shares some attributes of the aesthetic of modernity; for instance, its celebration of disjuncture in time, space, and performance. Through its very nature, rear projection folds one level of time into another: the temporality of the "setting" is asynchronous with that of the figures in the studio foreground. The potential to make viewers aware of this temporal disjuncture, as well as the disjuncture of action and situation, is a consideration characteristic of the modern. The once-upon-a-time absurdity of rear-projection artificiality mutates into a site in which the mind's ability to shift between knowledge and belief can be both indulged and considered.

For instance, the device, in order to fake mobility, reverses the natural order of things: the figures supposedly speeding in a car or train remain static in the studio, animated by a "mobilized" landscape unwinding behind a window or simply framing the scene like a theatrical backdrop. This aspect of rear projection descends directly from the precinematic panoramas used as a special effect in the theater or as popular entertainment in themselves. When he made *Heller in Pink Tights* (1960), George Cukor paid tribute to the theatrical illusion. In the film, a little theater company traveling the West puts on a performance in which a live horse (with Sophia Loren strapped to its back) gallops on a treadmill placed on the stage while a panorama of the steppes unfolds in the background. The treadmill remained an essential part of rear-projection technology, allowing stars to seem to walk toward the camera while remaining within the confined space allotted by the background plane. But directors got the most traction from the device by using it to illustrate the railway journey, and perhaps no one more so than Alfred Hitchcock, whose persistent return to the railway carriage as a site of drama, from the 1930s (*The Lady Vanishes*) to the 1950s (*North by Northwest*), demanded use of the rear-projection illusion.

Indeed, Hitchcock's near obsession with this special effect went beyond convenience, and he continued to use it after it seemed antiquated to his technicians, not to mention critics and audiences. In his essay for the 2000 exhibition catalogue *Hitchcock and Art: Fatal Coincidences*, Dominique Pains argues that Hitchcock used rear projection for its dreamlike qualities, the uncertainty that double filming brought to the cinema, and ultimately for its modernity. He says the effect "creates a semblance of reality without erasing the illusory device that goes with it." In a comment on the dance sequence in *Saboteur* (1941), a set piece that has had particular influence on Lewis, Pains points out that the different aspects of Hitchcock's use of rear projection come together in the interests of an overarching emotional effect as he "isolates his dancing couple from the surrounding action and spirits them away from the other characters. This cinematic sleight-of-hand lends the situation an air of enchantment. The scene is a perfect example of the dramatic, poetic and visual power of Hitchcock's transparencies at this point in the 1940s."

The integration of prefilmed location sequences with those shot in a studio create a layering effect, in that two quite different spaces, and two quite different times, are superimposed on each other. Pains



FACING PAGE:
from *The Night*,
single-screen
1 min 07 sec.

LEFT: *100 Hours*
Philip Gourevoy
Night, *Shanty*, 4
single-screen
3 min.

NEXT PAGE: *100*
from 2016, *100*
video, 20 min.

describes the characteristic montage in terms of strata of scenery, in which nature may become “portable,” and the ultimate space results from an aggregate in which the film studio and the actual location sequence, filmed in the “real world,” remain uneasily separate. He says, “Nature is falling apart and confidence in its unity is being eroded. Occasionally the space thus created falls into parallel, disconnected layers.” In his early reflections on rear projection, Lewis related this aggregate space to an aesthetic device that comes from a very different point in the history of representation. In a certain kind of Renaissance painting, the figure or figures occupy the surface of the picture, celebrated, as it were, in “close-up,” and “superimposed” on a faraway landscape that stretches into the distance.

Lewis drew particular attention to this Renaissance topography in the catalogue for his 2006 exhibition at the FACT Centre, Liverpool. He included particular images, Jan van Eyck’s *The Virgin of Chancellor Rolin* (1435–36) and various portraits (Memling, Velázquez, and others), in which the central figure is shown against a spatially aggregated background. The paintings in which the figures are located in an interior “foreground” space use windows and arches as transitions, separating and integrating the stratified background and suggesting rear projection’s frames within frames, as in the motor-car or railway train effect.

But it was the opposition between the flattened space of the Renaissance portrait and its resonance with the space and time asynchronicity inherent in rear-projection technology that Lewis had in mind when he worked on *Rear Projection: Molly Parker* in 2006, the centerpiece of his exhibition at FACT. This film is a portrait of the Canadian actress Molly Parker, best known for her role as Alma Garret in the HBO series *Deadwood* (2004). The landscape background, shot on location in Ontario, begins in autumn with characteristically lush colors, and then, after a few minutes, suddenly mutates to the deep snow of a Canadian midwinter. The landscape background includes an abandoned roadside gas station and café, with its sign “Howlin’ Wolf” still prominently displayed, which is

not only in keeping with Lewis’s return in earlier (and later) films to abandoned buildings, but also carries the idea of the disused and the obsolete across from the technology to the image itself. Molly stands in the studio, and a complex camera movement that combines a track with a zoom further flattens and makes strange her figure’s relation to the background screen.

Molly avoids overt performance, and she looks out of the space toward the camera in a manner that would have been anathema to Hollywood conventions. However, the technology and its inherent aesthetic organization evoke the topographical relationship between the star and the screen that characterize the key function of rear projection. A film industry that was so axiomatically built around stars, with their archetypal attributes and legendary status in genres, placed these iconic figures in a privileged position for the spectator’s eroticized gaze, possible edification, and even adoration. To put them in a studio space, where iconicity overwhelms narrativity, was to highlight their beauty, and their most highly dramatic moments and characteristic poses were exaggerated by the stasis enforced by the technical device. Once again, there is a link back to the spatial and conceptual organization of Renaissance portraits that superimpose highly emblematic figures against symbolic and natural worlds. While the topography suggests the paradoxes of rear projection, the elevated importance of the figures and their iconographies suggest a parallel with Hollywood stars. Whereas the holy figures—Christ, saints, or donors—had to be raised out of ordinary surroundings, brought close to the spectator for reverence, contemplation, or supplication, they were also embellished with extraordinary beauty and dramatized by characteristic gestures or poses.

Compare these beatific postures with the artificiality of actors’ movements as they walk along a treadmill against a projected background. As Pains points out in his essay, a by-product of the rear-projection method is that the actor’s gestures become overly considered, almost labored, and exaggerate the essential dualism of star and character. Although these Hollywood scenes have little to

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do with the political nature of the “social gest”—the principle of foregrounding the social significance of an action, which Brecht explained in *A Short Organum for the Theatre*—its effect emerges particularly in these confined moments of maximum exposure in which, as Brecht writes, “the actor appears on the stage in a double role, as [Charles] Laughton and as Galileo, that the showman Laughton does not disappear in the Galileo he is showing.” Furthermore, due to the absolute necessity for the actors to stay exactly in the spaces allocated to them, their limited range of performance sometimes evokes the tableau effect that Brecht considered essential to the epic theater.

Lewis’s second rear-projection film, *The Fight* (2008), moves away from the portrait or the “star aesthetic” but brings together some of

these considerations and motifs. Lewis has described the film’s origins in a street confrontation he witnessed between two groups of people whose actions suggested antagonism without ever actually breaking into physical violence. He restaged the scene for an exhibition at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, filming in a studio against a rear-projected setting of a local street market. The spatial constraints on the performers produce a choreography of gesture and facial expression that combine into tableau-like moments as actions develop, fall away, transform, and reform. While the scene’s physical constraints relate back to those imposed by the conditions of rear projection (the need for the actors to stay within the confined space of the camera’s vision), there is also a Brechtian aspect to this reenactment of an everyday street scene, in which the social gest of racial violence erupts without resolution. The anger exhausts itself in the very performance of the anger. Lewis has described his staging of the scene in the following terms:

It is the very modernity of this montage effect (film putting itself inside of itself) that I believe allows for a reflection on the materiality of the process. Just as in other modernist art forms, the montage effect can give us somewhere to look or to think just as the content itself—here, the



endlessly composing and decomposing bodies—threatens to overwhelm any possibility for critical reflection. In other words I think that in the montage of front and back filmic images, we might get a sense of how confrontations like these—familiar, often dangerous and steeped in the politics of the everyday—draw their own strength from other images and in turn produce us as modern subjects or spectators.

Lewis's interest in the "montaged effect," the dislocation of time and space and their recomposition into a new material relationship, flows over into the wider aesthetic questions raised by his use of rear-projection technology. This recycling of an archaic form is not simply nostalgic but rather an experiment with historical narrative and its representational forms to consider how new meanings might emerge in displaced contexts. To return to the writing of Walter Benjamin, new life may be found in seemingly outdated objects, as he discusses in his essay on Surrealism: "Brecht was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appeared in the 'outmoded,' in the first iron constructions, the first factory building, the first photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them."

Lewis's work with rear projection should be understood in this

context. The intellectual and aesthetic questions posed by both the cinema itself as an outmoded medium and modernity as an outmoded culture insist on an understanding of time that is zigzag rather than simply linear, and has the ability to leapfrog rather than gracefully decline. By and large (although Hitchcock may be an exception here), the rear-projection device should not have been visible to its audience, though all too often it was. The mode of image production came to the fore, breaking the illusion, and glamour collapsed into an absurdity that, even if only coincidentally, shared modernism's predilection for tension between images and their materiality. Which is why it is again relevant today. For some years, the utopian aspirations of modernity have seemed relegated to an absolute past. It is ironic to think that, as the financial and political structures of "postmodern" neoliberalism come crashing down, the questions and principles posed by modernity return, ghostlike, into the present conjuncture. Lewis's work with this technologically archaic device allows it to be seen within its own setting of cinematic modernity and to be reconfigured within the confused temporal relations of the present moment. Hence the "old" becomes the "new new." +

