

FILM MEETS ART » MARK LEWIS



Mark Lewis was Canada's representative at this year's Venice Biennale. Now he's at TIFF, screening *Backstory*, which centres on the work of the Hansards (Bill Jr. and Bill Sr., above), who pioneered the transformative technique of rear projection.

Odes to a digital industry's handmade past

BY SARAH MILROY

For practitioners of the art of cinema, the technological advances in the medium are cause for jubilation. But for some, like the British-based Canadian film artist Mark Lewis, these changes are viewed with an air of subtle nostalgia. His two 40-minute documentaries, *Backstory* and *Cinema Museum* – which are screening back-to-back tonight at TIFF – share an air of lamentation for film's funkier yesterday, taking us down some of the industry's fascinating historical byways.

The documentaries constitute a break from Lewis's customary working approach. He's known for his short, two-to-seven-minute unscripted art films that engage in a kind of slow, scrupulous examination, usually of urban subjects. His new films, though, look at the history of the medium it-

self. *Cinema Museum* (2008) records his visit to a madly overstuffed private collection in London, his camera trailing a female curator through the stacks of memorabilia – from old scripts and usherette uniforms to antique theatre signage, and broken-down projectors. A musty air of obsolescence hangs over her explanations (uttered in her soft German accent), as she rapturously demonstrates the fluttering sound of a hand-cranked projector. Lewis looks back to a moment when there was pageantry in movie-going, with uniformed ushers, ice cream vendors, ladies' cloak rooms and sweeping staircases beckoning us to a heaven of make believe – a far cry from the multiplex utilitarianism of today.

If *Cinema Museum* exudes charming, Old World eccentricity, Lewis's companion piece – *Backstory* (2009) – res-

onates with Yankee ingenuity. The film centres on the work of Robert, Bill and Billy Hansard, three generations of men who pioneered the technique of rear-projection in Hollywood. Shooting the background footage in one place, usually outdoors, they then set up the moving images in the sound studio on a large screen and shot the actors performing in front of them. (The most obvious rear-projections are often those in driving scenes.) "This was the moment when cinema became modern," says Lewis, who has used rear-projection in a few of his own films, such as *Nathan Phillips Square*, *A Winter's Night*, *Skating*, a work made for this summer's Venice Biennale and currently showing at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto. "This was the moment when cinema started looking at itself, incorporating itself as

a subject, literally."

The Hansards gave Lewis their stories. They also provided the background "plates" for his film, which likely constitutes the last gasp for this dying art. With the digital capabilities of current cinema, rear projection has become obsolete, and with it has gone the creaky artifice that characterized film's early days, so charming to our contemporary eyes. Lewis bids this era farewell, addressing – with entropic melancholy – the transformational changes of the film business as well as the human fascination with storytelling, and our futile fight against the passage of time.

Here, history turns poetic, and an industry reveals itself to be a calling. Lewis proves you can deconstruct movie magic and still cast a spell. » *Backstory* and *Cinema Museum* will be screened tonight at 7:45 at Varsity Cinemas 2.

FESTWATCH

Neil Young bows out of TIFF appearance

Neil Young's public appearance at the Toronto International Film Festival has been cancelled.

A festival spokesperson told The Canadian Press that Young will not make the planned trip to Toronto to appear at a public screening on Monday of Jonathan Demme's concert film starring the Canadian rock legend, *Neil Young Trunk Show*.

The spokesperson did not offer a reason for Young's absence, but said festival organizers were hoping to announce a "spectacular" performer to take his place in the coming days.

Demme, director of *Rachel Getting Married* and *Silence of the Lambs*, will still appear in Toronto's Yonge-Dundas Square to introduce a free screening of his film, the spokesperson said. » CP

How many partners has Hef had? He's not saying

There may be other 83-year-old men hovering in TIFF's vicinity this weekend, but it's unlikely many of them will get the kind of attention expected to be lavished on Hugh Hefner.

The legendary Playboy founder is making an appearance in support of Brigitte Berman's new documentary, *Hugh Hefner: Playboy, Activist and Rebel*, which gets its world premiere at TIFF tomorrow afternoon. As he is most of the time in public, Hef will be accompanied by his Playmate entourage. The warren has been pared down in recent years – perhaps it's the economy – but three of the bunnies will be making the trip to Toronto: Crystal Harris, 23, and 19-year-old twins Karissa and Kristina Shannon.

And Hef may soon be an eligible bachelor again. He disclosed this week that he's finally filed for divorce, ending his 11-year estrangement from wife Kimberley Conrad.

When we spoke, I reminded Hefner that the late basketball star Wilt Chamberlain had once boasted of having bedded 10,000 women.

"No," he corrected me. "The figure was 20,000, and I've done the math on that and if it's true, he would literally not have had time to do anything else."

"Well, you know where I'm going with this," I said. "How about you?"

Hef paused for a moment and then said, "Well, I've always believed in quality over quantity." » Michael Posner

Hypnotist on hand for frazzled movie stars

Actors are streaming into the city – but are they ready for their closeups? Some are not, according to Georgina Cannon, a local hypnotist to the stars. "With something this complicated and this concentrated, they have problems with self-esteem," she says. "Will I look too fat? Too thin? Will they get a good angle? Suppose they don't photograph me at all?"

Cannon is the founder of the Ontario Hypnosis Centre, a clinic conveniently located in Yorkville. She says she usually works with one or two stressed-out actors every festival, but won't name names. "It's not fair to them."

According to the hip hypnotist, who does not swing pocket watches and who sometimes gets referrals from hotel concierges, the actors most susceptible to high anxiety are the young ones. "They don't have the theatrical experience of interacting with real-life human beings."

» Brad Wheeler