

So Much to See

THE FILMS OF MARK LEWIS

by NANCY TOUSLEY



The films of Mark Lewis
by NANCY TOUSLEY

SO MUCH TO SEE

MARK LEWIS is called moving images to identify what separates film, video and certain kinds of digital imaging from photography and painting. It is the characteristic that Mark Lewis, who began his career as a still photographer, foregrounds in all of his work. In his luminous colour films, motion is not simply a condition brought to life in the projector; the choreographed movement of the camera itself is often the main event. While this movement may be so subtle as to approach stillness—a contradiction, perhaps—it is a reminder that, after all is said and done, film is a sequence of still photographs projected at 24 frames per second in order to produce an illusion.

Cinema's impression of reality, which is a product of the cinematic apparatus, and the unique techniques, effects and history of film are the stuff of Lewis's art. The filmmaker, who may be better known in Europe than in Canada, was born in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1958 and currently lives in London, England. He has about him a touch of star quality, the confidence of a professional used to directing film crews and the acumen he displays as a founding editor of the respected art journal *Afterall*. He also has the modesty to say he feels lucky to have found, when he was 39, an art form he is good at and loves.

So Much to See, Summer 2009, pp. 48-49 / photo Hubert Kang

So Much to See, Summer 2009, pp. 48-49 / photo Hubert Kang

Close Move

Moving images are called moving images to identify what separates film, video and certain kinds of digital imaging from photography and painting. It is the characteristic that Mark Lewis, who began his career as a still photographer, foregrounds in all of his work. In his luminous colour films, motion is not simply a condition brought to life in the projector; the choreographed movement of the camera itself is often the main event. While this movement may be so subtle as to approach stillness—a contradiction, perhaps—it is a reminder that, after all is said and done, film is a sequence of still photographs projected at 24 frames per second in order to produce an illusion.

Cinema's impression of reality, which is a product of the cinematic apparatus, and the unique techniques, effects and history of film are the stuff of Lewis's art. The filmmaker, who may be better known in Europe than in Canada, was born in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1958 and currently lives in London, England. He has about him a touch of star quality, the confidence of a professional used to directing film crews and the acumen he displays as a founding editor of the respected art journal *Afterall*. He also has the modesty to say he feels lucky to have found, when he was 39, an art form he is good at and loves.

Lewis works with film as if it were a sculptural material. He demonstrates its inherent difference from other kinds of picture-making and shows how it works. See what the camera can do! Here is what happens when you pan and zoom, or split the screen or remake a famous tracking shot from

the Orson Welles classic *Touch of Evil* upside down. Lewis courts the impression of reality to show it off as an invention, to show to a spectator what he has seen, to revive the surprise and wonder experienced by the audiences of early film. His films are for galleries, not cinemas. It is in their nature to make a mobile, expectant, attentive and literate spectator.



So Much to See, Summer 2009, pp. 50-51

Lewis often names his films after the camera movements he uses to make them: *Downtown: Tilt, Zoom and Pan* (2005), for example. It is a way of encouraging spectators to look at how the films are made, to isolate the techniques used in their creation and make them visible. This destabilizes film's reality effect and makes depiction new by making it strange: in *Harper Road* (2003) Lewis rotated the camera 360 degrees, and in *Rush Hour, Morning and Evening, Cheapside* (2005) turned it upside down. He has made the technique of rear projection the subject of films such as *Rear Projection (Molly Parker)*, from 2006, and used it with subtle drama in his 2008 work *The Fight*. He investigates the effect once again in the films he has made for the 53rd Venice Biennale, where he represents Canada this summer.

The Venice project represents Lewis's largest commissioned work to date, and in it he turns the Canada Pavilion into a machine for showing moving images. The spiral floor plan of the 1958 building, which was designed by Italian architects, resembles a cross-section of a nautilus shell. Visitors traditionally enter the building through double doors at the wide end. For Lewis's presentation, spectators enter at the narrow end of the darkened pavilion and follow the curve into the larger space, where four films are projected on the wall. The overall title of the project is "Cold Morning." Lewis's documentary on the history of rear projection in classic Hollywood cinema, *Backstory* (2009), will premiere at the Auditorium Santa Margherita in Venice.

The four films that make up the project, *Nathan Phillips Square, A Winter's Night, Skating* (2009), *Cold Morning* (2009), *TD Centre, 54th Floor* (2009) and *The Fight* (2008) depict everyday life in modern cities: their utopian aspirations and failures as expressed through civic-spirited modernist architectural projects and contradicted by social conditions in



plain view on the streets. The city in the first three films is Toronto. The optimism it exuded in the 1950s and 1960s is embodied by City Hall, in Nathan Phillips Square, which was designed by the Finnish architect Viljo Revell and opened in 1965, and the banking, business and retail complex known as Toronto-Dominion Centre, which was designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and whose first tower was completed in 1967. Its failures come into view in the figure of a homeless person who camps on a subway grating on Bay Street, in the hub of the financial district. He folds up his sleeping bag while expensively dressed pedestrians walk past. Lewis often uses actors in his films, but not this time. Tensions created by racial difference boil to the surface in *The Fight*, which Lewis shot in Vienna. It re-enacts an incident he witnessed at an outdoor market in France: a confrontation between white working-class men and women and a Romany family.

The modern city—as a sign of capital and the locus of an everchanging modernity shaped by the economy—is a consistent motif in Lewis's work. He focuses on architecture, city streets, scenes of everyday life and, to a lesser but still memorable degree, landscape. Like early films, his works are non-narrative, short and silent. In them, the curious eye of the camera moves across or into or pulls away from its subjects with a deliberate slowness. They show rather than tell. The camera's pace heightens our sense of time passing; then, abruptly, the screen goes to black. When the films begin again after a short pause, Lewis offers us the miraculous recovery of time spent and the restoration of sight.

His films are apprehended as durations of real time that can be experienced anew and repeatedly. Their running times are anywhere from less than two minutes to 35 minutes, but most often they are four minutes, the length of time it takes a 400-foot roll of film to move through a camera. For the past year, Lewis has been shooting with a new HD camera, which changes things. In principle, if not always in fact—and in a reference to the still photograph and to early film—each film represents a single shot made in one take.

Lewis shoots his films in England, Canada and the United States, and his references are transatlantic. His studies in England in the early 1980s with Victor Burgin, an influential conceptual artist known for the rigour of his deconstructionist thinking about photography, and his friendship with the British film theorist Laura Mulvey have undoubtedly influenced his analytical approach to the cinematic apparatus. During a period he spent in Vancouver (from 1989 to 1997) Lewis was also introduced, through the practices of Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace and other Vancouver artists, to the portrayal of modern life and the city as subjects for serious art.

During the 1980s, Lewis made installations that addressed issues surrounding public art and the failure of revolutions. In addition to the Vancouver scene, he was interested in American street photographers like Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, and the appropriationist Pictures Generation artists like Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine. In the background were structuralist filmmakers such as the Canadian Michael Snow and the Americans Stan Brakhage and Andy Warhol.



There was also the avant-garde cinema of the 1920s and 1930s, classic Hollywood cinema and the histories—esthetic and social—of painting, photography and film. In retrospect, he was preparing himself for his future work.



So Much to See, Summer 2009, pp. 52-53

Lewis never aspired to be a filmmaker. He fell into it by accident, when a friend observed that an idea Lewis had—that public monuments become visible only when they are pulled down—would make a good film. His first film was the documentary *Disgraced Monuments* (1991), which he wrote and directed with Laura Mulvey, who was a prominent alternative filmmaker in the 1970s and 1980s and taught Lewis much about working with the medium. His first art film was *Two Impossible Films* (1995), a 28-minute piece shot with a professional crew, actors, sets, lighting and sound in 35-mm CinemaScope. The film consists only of opening and closing credit sequences—the creative spaces that exist in a film outside the main narrative. Lewis reduced the dramatic development to a sequence of three intertitles: “Story Development,” “Dramatic Conflict” and “Temporary Resolution,” replacing story with a description of the Hollywood formula. After dispensing with narrative, Lewis then eliminated sound in 1999. It was another extraneous element: the silence of Lewis’s work heightens its visual impact, focusing the spectator’s attention on the entirety of what is taking place within the frame.

Lewis’s films ask spectators to invest their time and attention in a fragmented visual world that the artist constructs. Time and duration, which are inseparable from movement, are a filmmaker’s major concerns, he says. He sees film as a dialectic between composition and decomposition, or we might say between “being and becoming” and “being and nothingness.” This idea is clearly expressed in *Algonquin Park, Early March* (2002). The film begins as a white rectangle. To make a photographic analogy, the image develops as the camera pulls back slowly. After several seconds, treetops appear across the bottom of the screen, then the dark edge of an island comes into view at the upper right. A dog runs in from the right side, followed by a corner of cleared



ice, and a second island shows at the top left. Empty whiteness has become a frozen lake with two islands, an ice rink and skaters. At that moment, just when the film has presented us with a beautifully composed picture, the screen goes to black.

Picturesque imagery is just one of the tropes to be found in Lewis's richly varied body of work. No two films are alike. The mobility of the camera—its ability to show the other side of an object or perspective, to move in and out of space, to connect distant points in a continuous flow of imagery—also animates and gives meaning to marginal places and overlooked corners of the urban fabric. In *In Children's Games*, Heygate Estate (2002), a point-of-view tracking shot leads the spectator along the notorious elevated walkways that traverse this dilapidated, impoverished council housing. Children can be glimpsed down below and between the buildings. We cannot help but be immersed in this place, a 1970s-era social project now deemed a failure, much as we are while watching *Jay's Garden, Malibu* (2001), which in contrast offers a lush, idyllic California landscape and a bucolic mood. The action is reminiscent of classic film narratives in which the camera follows elusive characters through a garden or forest.

Two different kinds of movement are placed in counterpoint in *Off Leash, High Park* (2004), in which an elegantly controlled crane shot angled down through the bare branches of a tree slowly rotates 180 degrees while underneath exuberant dogs run off randomly in all directions. Two films made seven years apart in the City of London, the historic core of the metropolis in which Lewis shoots many of his films, consist of circular journeys around triangular buildings. In the earlier of the two, *Smithfield* (2000), the camera peers in through the windows as though spying on the woman who is cleaning the floor inside. In the other, *Isosceles* (2007), the camera's gaze also takes in the miscellany of 19th- and 20th-century buildings that surround its subject, a boarded-up public toilet down the street from the centuries-old Smithfield Market, the oldest and only operational remnant of the industrial age in central London.



So Much to See, Summer 2009, pp. 54-55

In Lewis's rear-projection works, two layers of imagery are



superimposed and further complicated by the camera's movement. *Rear Projection (Molly Parker)* begins with the Canadian actress standing outside a rural gas station named Howlin' Wolf. The film is a portrait of Parker, who obviously is not in the same shot as the background. She is portrayed straight-on in the classic Hollywood method of framing a figure, both from the knees up and in medium close-up; the framing shifts between the two views. As the autumnal scene in the rear projection slowly recedes and rotates to show the gas station's proximity to the highway, Parker advances toward us. Then the rear projection changes to show us the scene under a blanket of snow and the camera's movement reverses. The film ends when Parker returns to her original position in front of the station. Lewis might have placed her anywhere: where was she really, when she was filmed? Film's old magic courts contemporary ambiguity.

For Lewis, film became modern with the invention of rear projection, when the medium began to quote itself within itself. The patent artificiality and flatness of this special effect, which came into use in the late 1920s and fell out of favour in the 1990s, suits Lewis's project. His films are a hybrid of old film techniques and new digital technologies. At the same time that they present a new, heightened experience of looking, they frequently refer to the history and origins of film. The centuries seem to collapse in *Lawson Estate* (2003), which shows us an image of lawns divided diagonally by a fenced walkway. On the right side of the fence, a man slowly mows the grass in front of a wall. Behind it is a modern apartment building. On the left, the shadows of a Victorian house and two men climbing up to the roof to repair a chimney fall across the grass. The shadows evoke the protofilmic "shadow show" and the "sun pictures" of William Henry Fox Talbot, one of the inventors of photography. The shadows, reflective effects and other magic tricks of proto-film appear again in the uncanny *Rush Hour*, with its confusion of shadows and people, and in *Gladwell's Picture Window* (2005), an even more complex confusion of inside and outside, of street activity and reflections of it. This work, shot through a steeply curved window, emphasizes the permeable nature of filmic space.

The film historian Tom Gunning describes the early film of the Lumières and Georges Méliès as presenting a "cinema of attractions," an "exhibitionist cinema, a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world to solicit the attention of its spectator." Lewis makes his own unique display of visibility. In focusing his spectators' attention and expectations, he proposes a poetics of film that takes movement as the starting point. The films seem so simple, yet there is so much to see.

- [Mark Lewis Portfolio: A Film Art Retrospective](#)

[Subscribe to Canadian Art today and save 30% off the newstand price.](#)



RELATED STORIES

[Mark Lewis Portfolio: A Film Art Retrospective](#)

Canadian Art's Mark Lewis cover story for the Summer 2009 print edition is supplemented online with a 23-image portfolio retrospective of Lewis' film-art work through the years.

On Newsstands & Online Now: Canadian Art Summer 2009

Canadian Art's summer edition goes on newsstands this week full of must-read articles on Mark Lewis, Liz Magor, Jack Burman and more. Online, Venice party pics and artist portfolios round out key knowledge for savvy summer gallery hopping.

Reverse Pedagogy

An art school for artists at the Banff Centre

[Report a problem](#)