

FALL 2009 PROGRAMME GUIDE OCTOBER 9 - DECEMBER 6 Volume 20 Number 1

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BACKSTORY:



Film Still courtesy the artist/Monte Clark Gallery (Vancouver)/Clark & Faria (Toronto)/galerie serge le borgne (Paris)

BACKSTORY

MARK LEWIS PRESENTS REAR PROJECTION'S GREATEST HITS

"It seems to me that film was already old fashioned when it was 'invented.' It did not have any self-consciousness, no possibility to incorporate negation, nor did it have any idea of expanded fields. It was just film, stranded on an island of its own. Then in the 1920s someone had the great idea to actually put film inside of film – in order to give the effect that someone was somewhere where they were not . . . They decided to just project films of a live moving background behind the actors in the studio. They called this process rear projection and they called the films they inserted 'plates,' a term that strangely emphasized their flatness. Now it seems to me that at this point film became fully and definitively 'modern.' By putting a flat image of itself inside of itself, it unwittingly participated in the great tradition of montage and self reference that had already enveloped pictorial art."

– Mark Lewis

"[Hitchcock] continued to use rear projection after it seemed antiquated to his technicians, critics and audiences . . . [He] used rear projection for its dreamlike qualities, the uncertainty that double filming brought to the cinema, and ultimately for its modernity."

– Laura Mulvey, paraphrasing Dominique Païni

SPECIAL GUEST: Mark Lewis, October 15 & 16!

Intellectuals from the contemporary visual arts have been in a state of great excitement lately about rear projection; it embodies a certain modernist paradigm leap for them, a sort of “proof” that film belongs to the vocabulary of art. This technique, a rather pragmatic way of creating spectacle on the cheap for Hollywood’s Golden Age, has not been a subject of enormous interest for film critics. Considered more a technical sleight-of-hand, its elevation questions auteurism itself (the “plates” are shot, at best, by a second unit) and undermines a belief in the greater authenticity of location shooting (per neorealism and Dogme). It also confounds ideas about when the moment of artistic inspiration occurs in the filmmaking process; if this “inauthentic” technique speaks so strongly to the visual arts community, why then should we so highly praise the cinematographer’s precise capture of an instance of light and shadow? If not exactly an embarrassment for film people, rear projection is usually thought of as simply one of many tools in the mid-century film director’s arsenal.

Rear projection is much more prevalent in the history of cinema than most casual film observers might think. Although entirely replaced now by green screens, CGI and other computer-based technologies, rear projection was among the primary special effects deployed from about 1930 until the late Seventies. 2001: A Space Odyssey began the transition to front projection and computer animation; Star Wars then more or less killed it off, except for later tributes from Quentin Tarantino, Austin Powers, and a few other throwbacks.

In its heyday, rear projection involved the collection of location-shot images – some stock footage, some shot specifically for use in a given film. These “plates” were then projected behind actors in a studio to create the illusion of filming on location, from Paris (*Ninotchka*) to the Wild West (*River of No Return*). The in-studio compensations required were legendary and genuinely amusing, with actors walking on endless treadmills, being violently shaken and of course learning to swerve, in situ, behind the wheel of a car.

Mark Lewis, Canada’s representative at this year’s Venice Biennale, has gone to great lengths to think through the contemporary value of rear projection (and cinema history in general). Through a combined gallery and cinema-based practice, he foregrounds the technique’s historical significance to validate rear projection as a source of artistic inspiration. For some time now, Lewis has made filmed art works that separate “the ungraspable enormity of the cinematic apparatus into parts” (Shepherd Steiner). According to critic Laura Mulvey, “For Lewis, this has involved making ‘part cinema,’ breaking cinema down into its constituent grammar, syntax, genre conventions and techniques, any of which can be isolated and mobilized to generate a stripped down, elemental work.”

Lewis, like many other significant Canadian artists (Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, Rodney Graham, Michael Snow, etc.), finds the history, culture, and technique of filmmaking irresistibly intertwined with his art practice. His first significant project, *Two Impossible Films*, sought a way to reconstruct infamous abandoned projects, involving Eisenstein, Freud, and Samuel Goldwyn. Another work, *The Pitch*, foregrounds extras as a man pitches a film about them. But the most famous (and exquisite) examples of cinema-inflected art that Lewis has produced are the long take films from the last decade or so, including the stunning *Algonquin Park*, *Early March* currently on view at the Art Gallery of Ontario (see details below). We see a motionless shot of a

blanket of snow, then the camera moves back deliberately, unhurried, to reveal a group of skaters, their playground carved from the white expanse. Silent and observationally precise, this particular work uses the simplest gesture to share delight in the narrative apparatus of cinema. Lewis has cited a famous painting, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin’s *Child with a Spinning Top*, as an inspiration, as a parallel moment when one could witness “art’s great shift from the ‘representation of drama to the drama of representation.’”

That drama becomes more complex with the move to rear projection. Lewis transitions the conversation with cinema from the pre-modern to the modern while echoing rear projection’s effect in even older paintings. There is “a certain kind of Renaissance painting, the figure or figures occupy the surface of the picture, celebrated as it were, in ‘close up,’ ‘superimposed’ on a far away landscape that stretches into the distance” (Mulvey). Jan van Eyck’s *The Virgin of Chancellor Rolin*, many of Velázquez’s portraits and especially Bellini’s *The Madonna of the Meadow* display this motif to great emotive effect. It is that injection of emotional, even spiritual, energy one feels in Lewis’s most recent work, especially the fleeting, buoyant elation elicited by his tour de force Venice piece, *Nathan Philips Square, A Winter’s Night, Skating* (2009), now on show at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto (see details below).

This involvement with rear projection has prompted Lewis to make films also explicitly for in-cinema consumption, which we feature in this series along with some of Hollywood’s finest examples of the technique, selected by Lewis himself. With *Backstory*, Lewis creates a documentary on the makers of “plates” that also serves as a kind of showcase; some of their most famous works play behind them throughout the interviews. *Cinema Museum* harkens back to his pre-rear projection investigations. It “comprises four nine-minute shots of a tour guide leading us around the labyrinthine corridors of a vast private collection of movie ephemera housed in South London” (David Company); its tracking shots stop and start as filmic treasures are found and processed, their value to the project of atomizing cinema somehow calculated on the spot.

Mulvey has a nice turn of phrase that speaks to Lewis’s exceptional work and the greater dance playing out between cinema and visual arts cultures: “Cinema has been the art with which the other arts have had to make peace.” This series serves as an offering towards that peace and we welcome Lewis as a presenter, speaker, artist and filmmaker to help us work out our collective next steps forward. – Noah Cowan

Citations: David Company, “Motion Pictures,” and Laura Mulvey, “Rear Projection: Modernity in Special Effect,” both published in Mark Lewis, *Cold Morning* (Toronto and Vancouver: Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and Vancouver Art Gallery, 2009); and Shepherd Steiner, “The Beautiful and the Everyday in the Films of Mark Lewis,” in *International Contemporary Art* (June 22, 2009). Film descriptions by Noah Cowan.

BACKSTORY: MARK LEWIS PRESENTS REAR PROJECTION’S GREATEST HITS is presented in conjunction with the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and the Art Gallery of Ontario who will present concurrent exhibitions of Mark Lewis’s work: *Mark Lewis: In a City*, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, University of Toronto, September 9 to October 26, curated by Barbara Fischer and presented in collaboration with the Toronto International Film Festival’s Future Projections Programme with special project support from the Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts and the Toronto Arts Council; and *Three Films by Mark Lewis*, Winner of the 2007 Gershon Iskowitz Prize at the AGO, Art Gallery of Ontario, September 9 to January 3, 2010; curated by David Moos, organised by the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Thanks also to Todd Wiener and Steven Hill, UCLA Film & Television Archive, Los Angeles, and Paul Rayton, Los Angeles, for their assistance in the preparation of this series.

MARK LEWIS IN PERSON!

SABOTEUR

Director: Alfred Hitchcock
USA 1942 108 minutes
Cast: Robert Cummings, Priscilla Lane

In *Saboteur*, Hitchcock "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."
— Dominique Paini, *Hitchcock and Art: Fatal Coincidences* (translated from French)

Hitchcock loved rear projection. There are plenty of incredible examples throughout his work, with *North by Northwest* and *Marnie* being obvious standouts. But there is something special about *Saboteur* and its reliance throughout on rear projection that supports and builds on Paini's comment. Not only does Hitchcock feature the technique (surely out of necessity) throughout the protagonist's cross-country flight but he uses the everyday stock-like footage to make the Nazi targets of sabotage (especially the Hoover Dam) that much more discomfitingly vulnerable. Of course, the tour de force finale atop the Statue of Liberty would be impossible without the technique and the dance sequence Paini cites is beyond delicious. ("I think this is my favourite rear screen scene actually, never really bettered," comments Lewis.) The plot, a rather simple cat-and-mouse game of a wrongly accused worker seeking the man who blew up his friend and an airplane factory, feels chillingly contemporary; its class politics — featuring New York high society as a narcissistic bunch of scheming fascists — equally prescient in the age of Madoff et al.

Thursday, October 15 7:00 p.m. Rated PG.
Mark Lewis will introduce tonight's screening.



BACKSTORY

Film Still courtesy the artist/Monte Clark Gallery (Vancouver)/Clark & Faria (Toronto)/galerie serge le borgne (Paris).

FREE SCREENING! MARK LEWIS IN PERSON!

BACKSTORY

Director: Mark Lewis • USA 2009 39 minutes

Preceded by

CINEMA MUSEUM

Director: Mark Lewis • USA 2008 36 minutes

These two short documentaries are much more than an amplification of Mark Lewis's lauded artwork, although they directly relate to the film installations that took this year's Venice Biennale by storm. They fuse his curiosity around historical filmmaking techniques with a carefully aestheticized approach to cinema as both a fan-based and industrialized cultural phenomenon. *Backstory* introduces us to the remaining stars of rear projection, a technique in which a second unit crew films a scene's actual location, like an Alpine slope, then projects their footage in the studio as a backdrop to actors' performances. The result is both narratively effective and obviously artificial, ideal fodder for an artist intrigued by modernism's contradictions. Lewis interviews the rugged, techie makers of these "plates" with some of the finest work from their archives as backdrops. The effect is uniquely beautiful; the faded, soundless images from a Hollywood past create a Zen like elegy for the ageing figures, as they recall the key moments of their profession and an unsung art form unto itself. *Cinema Museum* may indicate another path, or perhaps just a fascinating detour, for Lewis's cinema experiments. His camera follows, in a Kubrick-like tracking shot, the eccentric owner of a private museum of cinema ephemera in South London. As the deliberate camera finds labels and objects of interest, though, it pauses, reflects (on, say "Gulag Guns"), seemingly digests information for future use and moves on. One can feel the fertile mind of Lewis at work, mining cinema's history for nuggets to include in contemporary art's newest masterworks. This event is cross-listed with The Free Screen (pages 20-21).

Friday, October 16 8:45 p.m.

Mark Lewis will introduce tonight's screening.



SABOTEUR



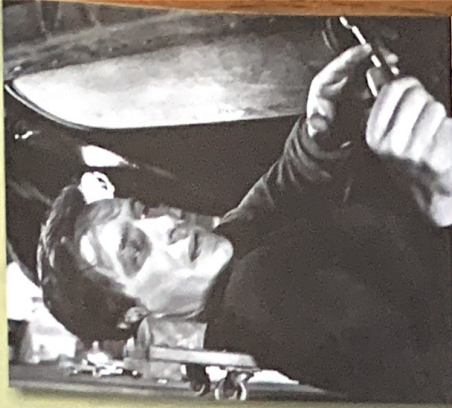
NINOTCHKA

NINOTCHKA

Director: Ernst Lubitsch • USA 1939 110 minutes • Cast: Greta Garbo, Melvyn Douglas

With Ernst Lubitsch and Greta Garbo at the height of their powers, one can be excused for overlooking the elegant rear projections that mark *Ninotchka's* earliest sequences (and influence much of Mark Lewis's recent artwork). But this (artificial) Paris never looked so good — especially as the camera spins out from the revolving door of the Hotel Clarence, home to much of this sparkling comedy's greatest high jinks and heartfelt emotion. Garbo in the eponymous title role is a stern "special envoy" sent from the USSR to replace three bumbling apparatchiks bamboozled by a smooth Parisian lawyer (Melvyn Douglas) out of a certain Grand Duchess's jewels. After a masterful flirtation in and around the base of the Eiffel Tower, one thing leads to another and the Communist and "typical Parisian man" fall into each others' arms. "Combining farce, romance and satire, yet still maintaining moments of that soaring Garbo intensity . . . *Ninotchka* is special indeed" (James Monaco, *The Movie Guide*).

Saturday, October 17 7:00 p.m. Rated PG.



THE KILLERS

Director: Don Siegel
 USA 1964 93 minutes
 Cast: Lee Marvin, John Cassavetes

Don Siegel's potboiler rethink of Robert Siodmak's film noir masterpiece is especially notable for two things: Casting Ronald Reagan and John Cassavetes as battling paramours of femme fatale Angie Dickinson, plus some of the strangest rear projection ever conceived, especially the hallucinatory cross-cutting of Angie Dickinson on a go-kart course. ("So sexy and so stupid," per Lewis.) Lee Marvin as a tough-as-nails assassin rounds out the all-star cast. In Siegel's version of the Ernest Hemingway short story, two hit men are shocked that their latest victim refuses to run. A short investigation leads them to a gang of hoods, long since dispersed around the country, a million bucks and a twist-filled tale of betrayal and lust. "It was planned as one of the first made-for-TV movies, but Siegel, with the perversity of a true auteur, went ahead and shot it in 'Scope anyway. Thankfully, Universal decided it was too violent and released it to theaters" (Dave Kehr, *Chicago Reader*).

Saturday, October 17 9:15 p.m.

RIVER OF NO RETURN

Director: Otto Preminger
 USA 1954 91 minutes
 Cast: Robert Mitchum, Marilyn Monroe

Otto Preminger's inspired use of rear projection in *River of No Return* adds to the bracingly modern flavour of this fascinating baroque western. Stripped down to the iconic tableaux of the genre, and with a plot separated into informal chapters by multiple "cowboy" songs from the lips of Marilyn Monroe, *River* often feels like a reductionist experiment in sexy cinema artifice. Never more so than in its enormously exciting rafting sequences, which not incidentally highlight Preminger's impressive ability to stage action and employ actors within the CinemaScope frame. These stunning rear projections do the heavy lifting of evoking the wonder of the American West, its menace and possibility, its spectacular natural beauty and power to make men do crazy things. The vistas put a thicker skin on the spare storyline of a woman of ill repute (Monroe), a stalwart farmer (Robert Mitchum) and his son chasing after the evil gambler who betrayed them all in the Canadian Northwest. The two actors were at their prime, gorgeous, larger-than-life icons and a fair match for their snow-covered co-stars, the Rocky Mountains. *River* was one of the great discoveries of TIFF Cinematheque's recent Otto Preminger series; here is a rare chance to see it one more time.

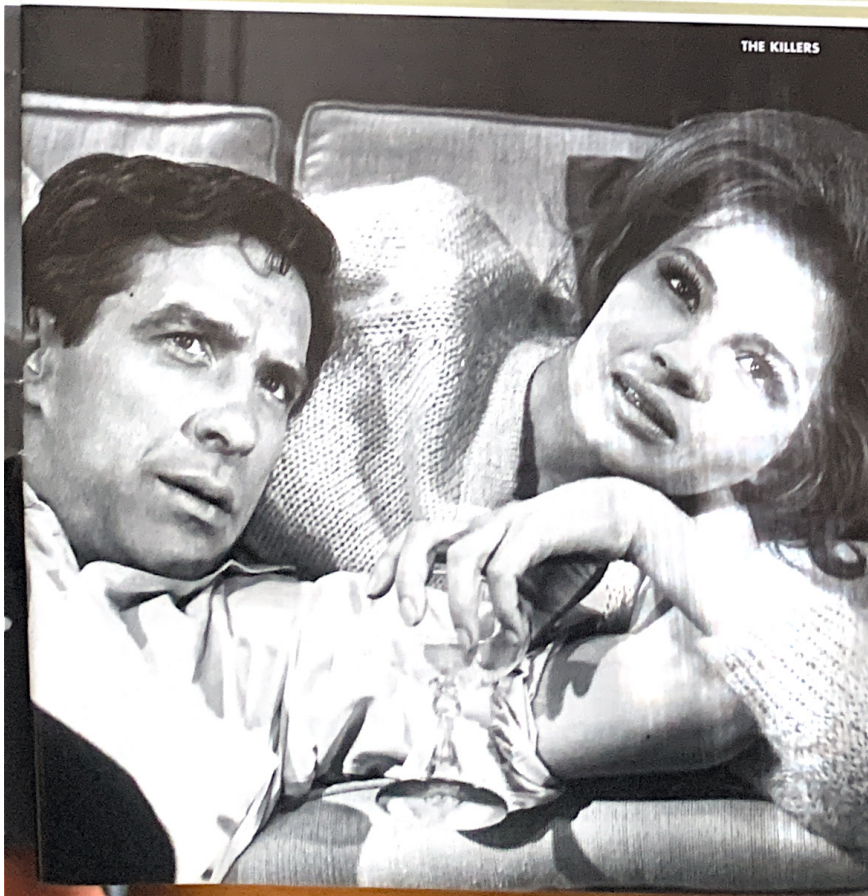
Monday, October 19 7:00 p.m.
 Rated PG.

HELLER IN PINK TIGHTS

Director: George Cukor
 USA 1960 100 minutes
 Cast: Sophia Loren, Anthony Quinn

This eye-popping Technicolor western from the great George Cukor, a big hater of the genre, is a bizarre mix of nineteenth-century classical theatre and rear projection-heavy gunslinger action. A majestic flop in its day, producer Carlo Ponti's paid-in-full vehicle for wife Sophia Loren features the super skinny starlet (she lost twenty pounds for the role) as Rossini, the vixen illusionist at the centre of Tom Healy's travelling theatre troupe. Anthony Quinn is Healy, who vies for her affections with Mabry (hunky Steve Forrest), a steely killer who wins her in a card game. An amazing array of "Cheyenne country" plates fights it out with Edith Head's grandest achievement as the greatest costume designer of Hollywood's golden age and beyond. Those unbelievably ornate performance sequences, employing a rainbow of costumes and ingenious staging techniques, probably win out in the end, although one scene brings it all together: rampaging Indians make an impromptu mountain Bacchanal out of the troupe's abandoned costumes in a transfixing, if politically problematic, tour de force. There's no other film quite like *Heller in Pink Tights*; its rough edges set the stage for Sixties Italian cinema's love affair with the western, yielding some of film's greatest classics in the years to come. It also marks one of Cukor's last big projects; what a pleasure to see the master play again with the colour palettes that make Fifties classics like *Les Girls* and *A Star Is Born* such a delight.

Tuesday, October 20 7:00 p.m.



THE KILLERS



RIVER OF NO RETURN



HELLER IN PINK TIGHTS