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Media Aesthetics
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mike hoolboom

(Zen Basketball, 2020)

Experimental film is by its nature very hit or miss. Whether that's because the concepts it lives through are too abstract to even be film (if that is even possible) or the techniques used to convey said messages stray too far from the homestead to be understood is up for debate. Although, it's probably a combination of the two. But when experimental films work, they work in incredibly profound ways because they thrive on this fine line between obscurity and new forms of expression. Mike Hoolboom's films navigated that line incredibly well, and I found the films to be deeply thought provoking and visually fascinating.

Not only do you lose them, you lose what they remembered about you

-Stephen Andrews

(Buffalo Death Mask, 2013)

I started with Zen Basketball, and what drew me into the film immediately, was the calmness of it all. This seemed to be somewhat of a common theme of Hoolboom's films, the base emotion of most of the films being a sort of calm. This worked extraordinarily well, because the content of his work is better understood and appreciated because of the calm that pervades the mood of. This calm is also used in a very Zen way, because when something loud, visually intense, or verbally intriguing happens, the calmness acts as a juxtaposed exclamation, sharpening focus to the moment. His work is masterfully balanced, which lets the truly experimental elements breathe, and leaves me able to comprehend messages a more hyperactive film would've muddled.

Before I move to the other films, the extended metaphor in Zen Basketball is absolutely worth speaking about. The idea that the basket-less defender is ever chasing a basket is a really brilliant way of exploring the human desire for what we cannot have, the dissatisfaction with what we have, and the exploration of the meaning-through-balance theory that is so pervasive in Zen Buddhism. There was also a beautiful irony in the strange sort of 'skill' that it would take to never make a basket, an almost fatalistic interpretation of what we want but cannot have. Lastly, on a purely aesthetic note, the visuals and acting in this film were entrancing to me, almost satisfying in a way.

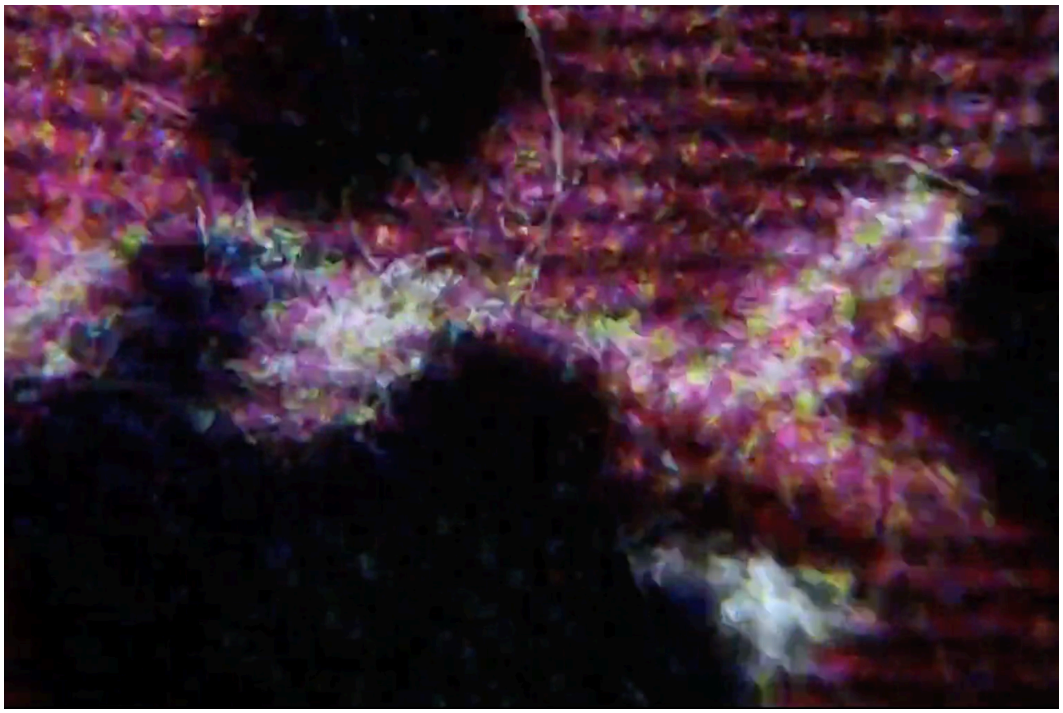
Citizen Poet was the next one that I watched, the concept of which was much more straightforward compared to Zen Basketball. The imagery of which was very well done and fit well with the poem itself but to me it was the least engaging. I believe it's because the use of voice in his films is really effective to me and perhaps voice in

(Citizen Poet, 2017)

general is a very effective tool to me, but in any case, I did enjoy it. The message of the poem was well received, the reimagining of the poetry being a slave to capitalism just as we are was very poignant in a time consumed by economic downturns and pandemics. But overall this film was less impactful to me than the next two I watched.

Language, not territory is a very intimate piece, critiquing the capitalist system not through the exposing of traditional sociopolitical shortcomings or the unnecessary ethical dilemmas one has to endure everyday in a capitalist system, but though the coping mechanisms and stories from women who have to exist in it. These stories do not even directly critique capitalism and where thoughtfully constructed that way, but they point to situations and events that could only come about through our current capitalist system, showing you the effect of the problems instead of just the problem itself.

The imagery is vibrant and varied, with each section corresponding to the tone and emotions conveyed by the speaker. The visual media in this film is used as an embellishment to the speaker, which proves to be extremely effective because of variance of each of these scenes. The scenes were also constructed with a certain element of rawness that I feel Hoolboom does quite well, using vintage cameras, and non traditional effects on the film to create a look and feel that, while clearly very polished and meticulously crafted, feels raw and allows the emotion of the speaker to become the emotion of the picture. Through this rawness two mediums of media blend together subconsciously and enhance both experiences. The sounds and music also enhance this effect, with the digitalized transitions allowing space from the previous clip to settle and letting the new quote prepare the viewer for the next one.



(Language, not territory, 2019)

Learning to enjoy whatever you can before it supposedly gets better is like dancing before the music starts

-Alexandra Gelis

Buffalo Death Mask was shockingly powerful to me. The entirety of the piece is focused on the HIV epidemic and the effect it had on both Mike Hoolboom and artist Stephen Andrews. Andrews is the focus however, telling stories about lost loved ones, the ineffectively of the early HIV medications, the horrible side effects, the symptoms of untreated HIV and the stigma that surrounded all of gay culture during the time. The interview almost sounds like an interview with a war vet, casually but painfully retelling some of the most painful moments, laughing at some of the lowest and darkest points. And remembering the ones he lost and how they reacted to him and his health, and what parts of his life they took with them when they passed. The imagery and music here is somber, teetering on happy and sad. The images much of the same, ethereal in their long atmospheric moods. All of it adds to a story much more about what people really mean to you in their life, and how much more they mean in their death. But also an appreciation of the fragility of it all, and how quickly people fade from our lives. And all of this, achieved through the calmness of it all, the space of the transitions allowing difficult quotes to settle in the mind.

This somber film, just as the others, is at its core a critique of this current system. A system not focused on helping its members, but focused on maximizing profits. A system that ignored a whole group of individuals based in large part on their sexual orientation, which when it concerns media and the arts, it wholly exploits, but when asked to care for and nurture, it rejects sighting lengthy moral texts written by sexist elites 1000 years ago. Mike Hoolboom is an excellent filmmaker that I will be a follower of for the rest of his career.