

# Tasman Richardson's Shadowplay

## A Consideration

By Clara Hargittay

A recent exhibition, *Grand Gestures*, featuring work of the video collective 640 480 at the Toronto artist run centre Gallery TPW featured nothing else but a shining solitaire diamond displayed on blue velvet on a pedestal under plexi-glass. One might ask what a diamond, a symbol of matrimony and wealth might be doing in a gallery best known for exhibiting cutting edge video installations and photo based art. Reading the didactic exhibition panel solved the mystery, as the visitor could learn that the diamond on display was in fact a sample, produced by a commercially available process that transforms carbon extracted from the ashes of the cremated human body and offers it as memento mori to a grieving relative for keep sake as a precious gem. The artists of 640 480, in an effort to conceptualize the physical materiality of video, turned some of the video tapes featured on Youtube as part of the exhibition into a glittering diamond as well. Does this gesture turn video into a nostalgic love object while simultaneously alluding to the technology's impending demise?

Another young Canadian video artist who is also concerned with the nature and materiality of film and video is Tasman Richardson. His 2006 work, *Shadowplay*, opens with an archival footage dating from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *The Felling of Forest Giants*, old growth trees harvested not for the quality and beauty of the wood but to be crushed and dissolved through toxic chemical processes and turned into celluloid, the material substance of film, in service of the demands of the new and rapidly expanding film industry. Thus begins a 17-minute whirling epic visual journey into the history, meaning and experience of a century of film, television, and video, through flashes of thoughtfully selected and masterfully collaged appropriated footage, music, and sound.

Richardson speaks about his practice as “work that focuses on the spectacle of a post-everything, tele-visionary existence, video editing as language, the strict unification of sound and image, micro subliminal composition and capturing illusive digital refuse.” He describes “a brave new world of artifice, emptiness and illusion where the magnetic ghost of civilization have conquered the living, and lays bare the post-human vacuity of pre recorded existence, echoing W.S. Burroughs’ reflection on modern civilization: “nothing here but the recordings.”<sup>1</sup>

And what an epic journey it is. *Shadowplay* reaffirms the enduring power of the image on the human brain and memory, as frame after frame it bombards our senses with images likely encountered in the past, which we can't help but greet with a 'shock of recognition'. They flash before our eyes just long enough to recall from a diverse archive of experience buried in our memories, signs, and emblems of a homogenous mass culture

that due to continued technological advances is expanding its boundaries around the globe with astonishing speed.

Richardson pays homage to W.S. Burroughs; to his pop mythology, his fictional treatment of time spanning from the Atomic Age to that of Virtual Reality, to the concept of the juxtaposition of visual fragments, contrasting and contradictory, and particularly admiring his questioning spirit, being skeptical towards everything predictable and considered as the status quo. Burroughs's denies hierarchy and embraces chaos. As Jenny Skerl writes, "The use of montage and improvisational structure of *The Naked Lunch*, are resulting in new mental associations that form an expanded form of consciousness which Burroughs uses as a weapon for attacking the social order."<sup>ii</sup> These are attractive and influential ideas and techniques that Tasman Richardson employs with considerable skill in *Shadowplay*.

Richardson borrows freely from a large lexicon of film and television with a critical eye. From the opening sequences of *The Twilight Zone* and *Nosferatu*; classic sitcoms and television commercials or the band Normal's *T.V.O.D.*; segments from films such as *Firenheit 451*, *Kill Bill I* and *Videodrome*, to the film *Network* and the dynamic musical theme of *A Clockwork Orange*, to name just a few of the many memorable clips, throughout, *Shadowplay* provides critical reflection on the evolution of Western mass media culture as steered by powerful corporate and political interests. He is aware of the insidious nature of television transmission into private space and sees it as an intrusion that "transforms the home into the host of foreign signal, foreign memory, and vicarious influence... People watching similar channels, similar programs, listening at the same time to the same commentary given without context or reflection, which television seems incapable of providing... Reality television and "live" news hysteria spreads into the homes of the isolated, the ignorant and the unknown."<sup>iii</sup>

Richardson has been influenced in his thinking about television by Jerry Mander, a former successful advertising executive who already became aware of the dangers and shortcomings of television in the 1970s. His influential and well researched book titled *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* was first published in 1978, and was reprinted in 2002 due to increasing demand as his arguments become more and more relevant in our image saturated 500 channel universe and World Wide Web explosion. His first argument *The Mediation of Experience* laments the disconnectedness of modern humans from the natural world. The artificial environments in which we now live create fertile conditions for the implantation of arbitrary realities, for which television is an effective instrument. Argument number two deals with the *Colonization of Experience*, the domination of television by a handful of corporate powers through a conspiracy of technology and economic concerns, while the third, *Effects of Television on the Human Being*, points out the negative cumulative neuro-physiological responses that technology produces in the people who watch it, and which effects, when present together, amount to conditioning for automatic control. Number four zeroes in on *The Inherent Biases of Television*, which due to the technological shortcomings of the medium makes it best suited for the gross, simplified linear messages which fit the purposes of its commercial

controllers. Jerry Mander sees television's highest potential in advertising, which is why he knows it can not be reformed. <sup>iv</sup>

While in *Shadowplay* the video artist, Tasman Richardson does not actually pick up the camera to shoot the scenes himself, at the same time he is using cinematic techniques to achieve cinematic affects. Explaining how cinema works, Claire Colebrook writes: “[Cinema] takes a number of images and connects them to form a sequence, and it cuts and connects sequences using the inhuman eye of the camera, which can therefore create a number of competing viewpoints and angles. What makes cinema cinematic is this liberation of sequencing of images from any single observer, so the affect of cinema is the presentation of an ‘any point whatever’...Cinema can present images or perception liberated from the organizing structure of everyday life and it does this by maximizing its own internal power. The maximization of internal power is the opposite of convergence.”

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By selecting the appropriated footage from films, television, and documentaries, and through the editing process splicing them together in a new order, punctuated by a radically new set of organizational rules and adding music and sound effects, Richardson gives new context and meaning to the original fragments and in the process creates a cinematic experience uniquely his own. This method of working has been made possible by relatively recent new technological advances, which made computerized non-linear editing available to artists and eliminates the laborious task of reassembling video images and sequences anew every time a change is made onto a master tape.

Writing about the opus of the influential French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, Clair Colebrook devotes considerable attention to the discussion of the two books that Deleuze wrote about cinema, which are of interest to us here. “Both of Deleuze’s books on cinema [*Cinema 1: The Movement- Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time- Image*] express some of the most crucial arguments regarding the capacity of life to go beyond its human, recognizable and already given forms. This is mainly achieved through the imagination of time, and it is cinema, according to Deleuze, that offers an image of time itself...In the time image we are no longer presented with time indirectly – where time is what connects one movement to another – for in the time-image we are presented with *time* itself.” <sup>vi</sup>

With its rich and colourful content, snappy editing, dynamic music and sound effects, and intelligent use of collaged effects, *Shadowplay* successfully evokes not only some of the most important key moments in the history of film and television, but also highlights social and political issues relevant for the times. At the beginning of *Shadowplay* the artist cites the following quote:

*Every generation is and must be competent to all the purposes which its occasions require. It is the living and not the dead that are to be accommodated. -Thomas Paine*

This is a message that Tasman Richardson has taken to heart.

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<sup>i</sup> Tasman Richardson, *Artist Statement*, 2007

<sup>ii</sup> Dr. Jennie Skerl about W.S. Burroughs, cited in *W.S Burroughs at the Front: Critical Reception 1950-1989*, Southern Illinois Press, 1991.

<sup>iii</sup> Discussion with Tasman Richardson

<sup>iv</sup> Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Perennial-Harper Collins Publishers, 1978 - 2002.

<sup>v</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, Routledge Critical Thinkers, 2002. p.31.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid*, p. 30.