

# Toronto: Correspondences #5 — Present Portraits, Grand Illusions

Frederick Wiseman offers a haunting portrait of small town America, Apichatpong plays with fire, and a 5-minute, 70mm short wows.

Daniel Kasman • 10 SEP 2018

*The Notebook* is covering TIFF with an on-going [correspondence](#) between critics [Kelley Dong](#) and [Daniel Kasman](#).



Monrovia, Indiana

Dear Kelley,

I'm glad you were delighted by *A Star Is Born*, a film I admit I reserve considerable skepticism for due to my love of the Janet Gaynor and Frederic March version from the '30s—as well as because I'm still lamenting the fact that Clint Eastwood's production, which was to star Beyoncé, never got made. I first need to see the Barbara Streisand version before catching the new one, but isn't it strange and wonderful how many times and through such different eras this story has been told? I look forward to this 2018 one and wonder what kind of artist the inevitable 2050 remake will revolve around—one can only hope some kind of populist A.I. hologram.

But back to the present epoch, one which, from the looks of the films I've seen, we need to approach with teeth gritted in repressed dismay and anger. Considering how utopian Frederick Wiseman's last documentary was—last year's *Ex Libris*, which posited libraries as American democracy in action—his new one comes as a shock.

**Monrovia, Indiana** takes the Midwestern town of 1,441 population as its subject, and comes as close as one could imagine this director from shedding his (in-fact erroneous) reputation as a fly-on-the-wall, hands-off observational documentarian.

Wiseman showcases Monrovia as having all the trappings and routines of a small American town, but, in a subtly disturbing evocation, is hollow at its core.

By visiting its two-block main street, corn fields, pig farms, churches, a meeting of the Masons and the Lion's Club, small fair and classic car show, several town council meetings, one wedding and a funeral, Wiseman offers few surprises to what constitutes a very white, very Christian, and very rural American town. It seems a bit isolated—surrounded by sprawling farmland—and depressed, as many small towns are, but not unusual. Yet every time Wiseman cuts to a crowd's reaction, whether a man being awarded for serving 50 years in the Masons, full bleachers watching a school band performance (playing, in a telling detail, the theme to *The Simpsons*), or a funeral, the people look utterly lifeless. And in fact the film is made up of a great deal of interstitial shots of Monrovia and its surroundings—crops, street signs, yards, silos, and so on—almost all vacant. No doubt this is normal for a town of this size, but it is emphasized so strongly it is hard to ignore: The institutions and clubs follow the same old rituals, the town council is unable to make a decision about its dwindling population, the old folks talk about getting older, and we feel like we are watching a slow death. By the time the film gets to a mass market supermarket that seems common to a fault, it is imbued with a vague, rattling ominousness, like something from *Dawn of the Dead*. Bringing out this feeling is one of Wiseman's most direct interventions in what usually seems (key word being "seems") a hand-off approach. He never goes so far as to mock or criticize his subjects here—though humor abounds naturally—but rather lets the lives that are taken as normal appear as they are. And in such stranded lonesomeness, they appear forlorn.

No one mentions Trump in *Monrovia, Indiana*, but by opening his film with a minister making an awkward case for the balm of religion in times of tribulation ("we bring the tribulation on ourselves," he concludes), and ending with an astounding funeral eulogy that promises a better life in the hereafter, it is impossible not to take this film as a slice of a specifically American kind of malaise, not the chic kind of Antonioni's rich man's ennui, but the deadening of the soul that can come from an average life being hollowed out, whether economically, culturally, or spiritually. The scale of the film is fairly modest for this director of sprawling inquiry, and runs shorter than most of his pictures, which means the film's articulation of this argument is less firm than its knife-like evocation of an atmosphere—but this is perhaps befitting a documentary that approaches the feeling, as a friend remarked, of a zombie film.

Another work of subtle national despair was by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, who lent some of his own evocative ambiance to TIFF's Wavelengths section this year with **Blue**, a new short film of simple means and considerable magic. It alternates between a shot of his wonderful regular actress Jenjira Pongpas Widner—laying in bed, closing her eyes, pulling up the covers, shifting and trying but unable to sleep—and various shots of an unused theatrical backdrop of a seaside road against the setting sun. Mysterious occurrences happen in both these scenes: in the latter, the mural is rolled up on its own, wheels squeaking, to reveal a second image behind it, of the path culminating in a golden pagoda. And over the other appears a small spark that lights on Jenjira's chest and grows to a fire, a flame that appears like it's roaring inside the sleepless woman. As with the shots of the backdrop, which makes no pretense to illusion and are shown with its lighting bare and other stage detritus around it, Apichatpong eventually reveals how he made the fire: a trick glass that in fact is reflecting a bonfire, making something without appear as if it were within. The parts of *Blue*, then, are simple: two paintings, a glass, a fire, a bed, a woman. And yet the connotations are sublime and ambiguous, speaking of spiritual conflagration straining for hopes of escapes and utopias. As with so many of this great director's films, it is fascinated by sleep, shown here as at once a refuge for dreams and a repository for consumptive anguish. All served with the Thai director's characteristic supple warmth, an easeful and humane compassion that enriches such a conceptual film, but one that also belies its surprising pain.

*Blue's* illusion is practical in nature and phantasmagoric in effect, but Wavelengths had other kinds of tricks up its sleeves, too. Those wanting a spectacle film at TIFF will probably head to Damien Chazelle's Neil Armstrong drama, *First Man*, but another filmmaker may have preemptively won the award for cinematic awe: German director Björn Kämmerer. His one shot, 5-minute long **Arena**, filmed and projected on 70mm film, is an astounding achievement in monumental optical illusion. Kämmerer is a conceptual and structuralist filmmaker who loves apparatus related to vision and seeing (past short films use lighthouse glass and colored blinds), as well as the puzzling and productive ways such things can interact with a camera. In *Arena*, both what Kämmerer stages and its effect on your perception are difficult to enumerate, which is part of its power and pleasure. What we see is some massive set of empty auditorium seats shown at an angle, and it feels like the camera slowly pans or dollies past them, right to left, such that our perspective on the seats change over the length of the shot, and with it, our perception of space: flatness transforms into depth, the number of seats somehow seems like it expands on the edges of the frame. In fact, Kämmerer filmed a unique theatre stage in the Czech Republic that rotates in a semi-circle. He then dollied the camera and shot at high speed while the seats rotated before him—an explanation that hardly deflates the bewilderment while watching the space accordion out and in.

Stranger still, the scale of the image and the intensity of the detail from the 70mm make such a grand scope of image that you may find your eyes, as I did, darting all around the frame, both because of the uncanny combination of uniformity and idiosyncrasy (seat numbers, a different colored seat, scuffs and scratches) and because the slowly shifting perspective on rows and columns creates surprising and disorienting optical illusions of false movement, expansion and contraction of what we're seeing. At certain points, what I knew to be seats no longer looked like real objects at all but rather abstract geometric patterns. We in the cinema are looking at empty seats before us, shifting and distorting under our gaze, literally showing that a camera's perspective distorts the appearance of its subject and cannot remain neutral. Ultimately, the lasting impact is the immensity of this empty space intended for watching warping before our own watchful gaze, in the our freedom to try to discern its spatial mystery by looking here and there, the puzzle of what we're seeing and what the camera is doing, and the remarkable effect that, the more places you look, the more disorienting it becomes.

I can't imagine you've seen anything literally so spectacular here so far at TIFF, Kelley, but hopefully films that figuratively knock you over, like these did me. *Arena* in its formalist play seems far removed from our current moment, where *Monrovia, Indiana* looks it squarely in the face and *Blue* takes a more sidelong approach. Are the films you are seeing representing our present in new and confronting ways?

Warmly,

Danny

## Tags

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