

Lion

A couple of weeks ago at the British Film Institute Daniel McIntyre's *Lion* premiered to the public of BFI Flare: London LGBT Film Festival. An experimental poem in seven short stanzas, the series ambitiously endeavors to find and record, on fluttering strips of gauzy film stock, the destructive effects of radiation on the human body. From the abandoned nuclear city of Pripyat right next to Chernobyl, through rarefied layers of Kodachrome, memory, and myth, *Lion* exposes with touching tenderness bits of those invisible, visceral forces presiding over issues of history and faith, family and destiny, bravery, sexuality, and so much more.

by Silvia Bombardini

Silvia Bombardini: Hushed, impalpable forces, floating among and through us, breaching our bodies and skin as if we were holograms wrapped in rice paper. Such radiation is at the core of your work. *Lion* reminds me a bit of Farrokhzad's *The House Is Black*, the poetic, sensitive depiction of a horrible and inexplicable threat. But what was it exactly that first drove you to this, to such dangerous, trembling grounds, to those of Chernobyl?

Daniel McIntyre: In all of my work I've had the tendency to attempt and replicate in a filmic environment a memory space, and that's perhaps the largest force that influences the aesthetics of my work. Throughout my early education I had a learning disability with regards to information processing. The best way I can describe it is that there's a membrane between myself and what I encounter, and not everything manages to pass through. I used to have difficulty remembering very basic things – conversations, time, places, people – but after working through it for so many years I've managed to function somewhat normally having found methods to deal with it. However, the way in which my brain records events and memories has remained largely unchanged. I've seen there's this sort of murkiness that colors a lot of what I see and think, especially when I remember it.

As for Chernobyl, it's something that has haunted me since childhood. My first encounter with it was through my father's *National Geographic* subscription. There was an issue in the early nineties where a photographer had begun documenting the area and people involved in the Chernobyl disaster. It showed people suffering from acute radiation poisoning – something there is no treatment or cure for other than pain management. There was an exploration of the legacy of the disaster, at that point only about seven years old (interesting to note is that I am the same age as the event). I remember seeing

images of people covered with "therapeutic" mud, recovering from surgeries, all from an invisible cause. When I started to work on *Lion*, it was just another exploration of something invisible, like memory.

SB: Seven short roars on 16 mm, the unusual, charming choice of an experimental film album, three years of research and mostly a one-man crew: how much of this was planned in advance, and how much came to you along the way? Who's the *Lion* of the title?

DM: The production cycle for *Lion* was a long and complicated one. The project was originally going to be a series of study-style works with little additional exposition. Within a month of writing the original proposal things shifted drastically. I began thinking about the project more, the fictions I wanted to incorporate, the stories I wanted to document. Then, my grandmother, who was the matriarch of our family, passed away. I witnessed her health decline first-hand, and her religious devotion struck me. It made me consider family and history more than ever – she was a woman who had documented our family history back several hundred years and written history books in Canada – and I couldn't help but feel the need to document what was happening to our family too. Looking back, some of it is rather startling in its own coincidence – my sister's cancer and radiation therapy, my tumor, my grandmother's pseudoscientific approach to healthcare and her decline in health – but it was all part of something I couldn't avoid keeping a record of. I eventually distilled the main concepts from a nebulous group of good and bad ideas, and sort of built *Lion* piece by piece.

The title *Lion* came out of me romanticizing my grandmother's religious devotion. Throughout my childhood we had been raised within the community of a church, where we learned all the stories and parables in the Bible. My favorite

was the story of Daniel in the lion's den, initially because we shared a name. The idea of your own devotion to a concept being enough to die for, to put yourself in harm's way, became a metaphor for *Lion*. I wasn't sure if I was capable of the same devotion, but I found the project led me on a similar path. When we were in Pripyat, the abandoned nuclear city, I knew my own devotion to this work had brought me there, and I was responsible for any harm that could come my way. It was terrifying but sort of unavoidable, I couldn't be haunted by this project forever.

SB: As the series progresses, the focus seems to swing back and forth between the universal and political and the particular, tender, and intimate. History and nostalgia, life in the Soviet Union and the bittersweet taste of dandelions. Memory is indeed, next to radiation, another major theme in *Lion*. The way you managed to portray something so complex, at once so personal and collective, is astounding. Has there been any other film on this subject that especially inspired you?

DM: Memory has always been a major force in my work, and I know that the same applies for a great deal of artists I admire. My approach for all of my work is to be as honest as possible. Everyone's experiences force them on a daily basis to confront collective thought, world events, and private emotions. I just balance them as best I can with how I experience them.

I've always been especially taken with Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*, which in my opinion is the most perfect film ever created. The film explores how the context of memory affects the perception of events and global histories. It jumps between places and times in a careful, deliberate way and I've been influenced by it since the first time I saw it in film school. I think everyone finds their own pacing, and as I generally edit my own work, I think I've come to a structure that feels right.

SB: A nearly tangible, glittering proof of your fascination with memory is the use of 16 mm film for your project. Ever since the dawn of the digital era and the discovery that even in archives film stock is not as immune to time as we had hoped, experts worldwide have mourned, with various degrees of despair, the so-called death of cinema. How difficult and how important was it for you to shoot in analogue, and how much of a purist of the medium do you consider yourself to be?

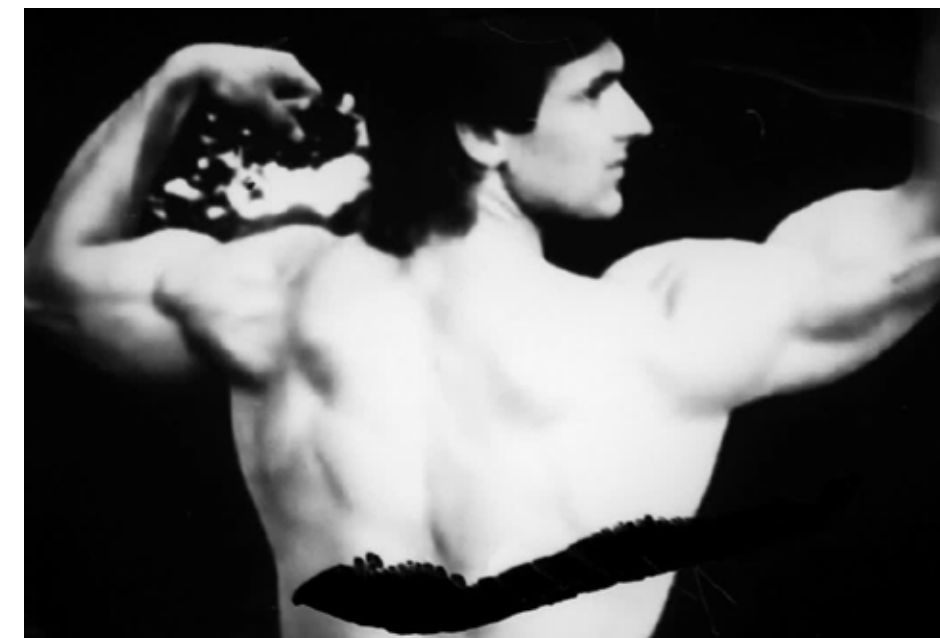
DM: First of all, during the process of completing this project, Kodak ended their production of my favorite film stock, which I had planned to use to shoot the majority of *Lion* on. Luckily, thanks to some tenacious peers, I was able to get enough for what I needed, but I still had to improvise. If that isn't a concise example of the decline of film, I don't know what is. For me, film is really my only option. While I do the occasional video work, it tends to be a medium that I'm not so comfortable with, and I can never get the images that I want. 16 mm is a living, breathing object and it was essential for *Lion*.

The experiments I was conducting could not have marked video in the same way, as in the end, the main method of affecting the image was chemical, in the darkroom. At the beginning of the project I knew the main goal was to find a way to re-create the effects of radiation that I was seeing in my research on new footage. I was seeing some similar effects on video, but it wasn't nearly as beautiful, it didn't capture life as well as the film footage did. There was a coldness to it. I liken the look of film to the sound from tube amplifiers – it's not something you can perfectly copy.

It frightens me to think that fewer people are using film; but I truly believe it can't go away, enough people will support it. There are some notable Hollywood features being shot on film this year and I am optimistic. That said, I try to keep a private stockpile, as do many people I know.

SB: Such concerns about the inner frailty of film have in fact encouraged a certain clique of experimental directors to further explore the matter – I'm thinking of films like *Decasia*, or *The Heart of the World*. "Faded films, decaying videotapes, projected videos that flaunt their tenuous connection to the reality they index," writes Laura Marks, "all appeal to a look of love and loss." The flimsy, ephemeral nature of cinema has been compared to that of the human body, if perhaps never as vividly as you did in *Lion*. Could you tell me something about your process: how did you research and actually echo the brightest effects of radiation on film?

DM: I have learned a lot from peers and films and workshops at the co-op that I'm part of in Toronto, and this community is where I started off researching the things I wanted to see on film. I had found photos and videos that had the effect I was looking for, and set out theorizing ways to achieve this and met with some artists I admired, to talk about their processes. Ultimately, the only way to go was to start experimenting, which was a slow, expensive, and frustrating process. I eventually settled on techniques that were giving me the results I wanted.



“I wanted the audience to be confronted with the embarrassing intimacy that I felt.”



The effects I was seeing were mostly streaks, pieces of film emulsion “missing” from an image, distortion, fogging. I liked the way hand-applying developer was a metaphor for contamination. I worked out a spray process that was intended to mimic the marks I would see in photos where it looked like it was snowing, but it was airborne particles overexposing specific parts of the emulsion. It had an unintended side effect of also partially solarizing the image if I was processing in a certain way, and gave the film a “paper cut-out” look, with particles dancing around in the air. My dip split process was meant to mimic the way energy from radioactive particles travels through the environment – in waves. I was also inspired by the rumors about one of the firefighters who was first at the plant: it has been said that due to the levels of radiation, his eyes changed from blue to brown before he died. It was the most difficult process to replicate in a predictable way but resulted in the image being split between positive and negative in the same strip of film. The rest of the ways were more manual methods to destroy and distort the images, especially for *Dust*. I hated the image of myself on screen and wanted to destroy it as much as possible. All in all, the methods were about calling attention to the physical format of the film these images were recorded on, and considering how the medium itself was part of the work.

SB: A home movie of your visit to the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, *The Weight of Snow*, is *Lion*'s centerpiece. You mentioned the tradition of the Escarpment School as your reference, but I couldn't help but remember Mekas's *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* as well. While not exactly a trip back home per se, what with you being Canadian, the tale of your time in Ukraine spoke of something extremely personal, emotional, and delicate too. What was the most memorable, moving, or rewarding moment of your stay?

DM: My stay in Ukraine was a really special time for me. Aside from the very real terror of actually travelling to the exclusion zone, it was one of the most beautiful travel experiences of my life. However, the strangest and most beautiful moment came when we were in the zone, driving around the abandoned smaller villages. We came across a wonderful old woman who was explaining the layout of where she lived alone, and why she came back to her home. She blessed us, wished us well, and slowly walked away, crossing herself at a roadside icon. It was a stunning moment that I've thought of many times since then. It was a heavy influence on why my grandmother is such a large part of a travelogue film about going to Chernobyl.

SB: A personal favorite of mine was perhaps the second film, *Water*. Such a noble and tragic story, almost mythical, and then those bruised, brilliant blacks and blues you've used to mirror Cherenkov radiation. What can you tell me about the genesis of this piece, and the heroic gesture of Alexi Ananeko, Valeri Bezplov, and Boris Baranov, who inspired it?

DM: *Water* was a surprise in many ways for me. When researching, I found out that the heat of the explosion had caused the melted core to move

downwards, breaching the containment vessel. Beneath the burning reactor there were floors of the building that were completely filled with water from the firefighting efforts, and if the core had reached the water it would have created a steam explosion that would have been many times worse than Hiroshima. The only way to avoid the situation was to manually open the drainage gates, and these three men volunteered. When they resurfaced they were met as heroes, but they died within hours.

They knew going in that the water was dangerously radioactive and because of this energy the particles had started to separate to hydrogen peroxide. It was a suicide mission, plain and simple. I couldn't help but wonder what was going through their heads when they went in to the water. I imagined they would be consumed with thoughts of whom they loved and what they were confronting and the film became a very blue collage of these things. The blue resulted from a cross process of using the incorrect developer for the stock it was shot on, which echoed Cherenkov radiation – a kind that is visible surrounding the radioactive core of an underwater reactor characterized by a blue glow.

SB: "From the bottom of your heart, pray to be released from image," preaches Derek Jarman in his own blue film, *Blue*, which was also shown at BFI this spring in connection with the retrospective that marks twenty years since his passing. The almost spiritual concept of self-obliteration through a medium as seemingly incongruously visual as film is the focus of the last work of your series, *Dust*. Maybe the most intimate, it links a study of atomic fallout in a faraway land to the most private longing. How does this idea of dissolution of one's own image appeal to you, and why did you choose for this piece to be silent?

DM: *Dust* is based on the concept of destroying a painful memory. I found myself at the beginning and end of this project with two nearly identical memories, private moments where I felt especially vulnerable. To me memories and feelings can become as destructive as any physical force, so I wanted to process these memories out of my body by destroying a deliberate recreation of these moments. I processed the image by “irradiating” them until the final looped image is obliterated into light. The moments themselves were silent in my memory and I wanted the audience to be confronted with the embarrassing intimacy that I felt when recalling these. I didn't want the comfort of sound to soften this, as the goal of my work has always been to share my internal experience with the viewer.

It's a stark contrast to the rest of the films in the series, where my brilliant composer Mark Savoia had created some very stunning, rich scores to accompany the image. He replicated my process by using magnetic tape and physically altering it, created several analogue and digital instruments, and rounded out the experience of *Lion*. We both agreed that for *Dust* the only option was silence, not even ambience. It would have removed affect from the images.

SB: It may be interesting to note that it was indeed at the Church of Self-Obliteration

that Yayoi Kusama presided over the happening *Homosexual Wedding* in 1968. While the queer factor in *Lion* may slip by someone who's not watching it at a LGBT film festival, a number of witty pop references in films like *Cowboys and Lodie* or *Cure* successfully lighten up the tone of otherwise such grave subjects. But do you consider your work gay cinema or just cinema, and how important is sexuality in the series?

DM: I've had a personal crisis in the last few years about the ghettoization of queer work and how it is exhibited. I've seen that incredible works get little play in “mainstream” festivals because of queer content, and I've had difficulty screening my work in some queer festivals too because experimental works don't fill as many seats as a romantic film. I think any work is inseparable from the identity of the creator, and for *Lion* it's impossible to escape some queer references I've made, even if the series isn't overtly queer.

I have the privilege of living in Canada where queerness doesn't mean direct persecution, but there's still a separation between “mainstream” and “queer” exhibition opportunities. My personal feelings are that as a queer person making work, I want the work to be the focus of what I'm doing, not the queerness of the creator. It may not be the most activist of statements, but I am tired of seeing things my peers do get overlooked because they're labeled as queer, regardless of their merits as artistic works. This being said, my biggest supporters have been programmers at queer festivals. It seems that they program experimental work because it's important for an audience to see, it's important to shift the modern queer narrative, and it's representative of the many facets of this community we're all supposed to be part of.

SB: Now that the series is over, looking back, what would you say is the most important thing you've learnt over the past three years? And do you have any idea yet what you will be working on next?

DM: The most important thing I learned from *Lion* was how to expand my art practice from short films to larger, more complex work. During the last three years I went through a vast range of emotions and experiences, and the process of trying to distil them into a palatable group of works was immensely challenging and finally rewarding. I especially learned a lot about editing for effect, and creating concise artistic statements that properly reference what I want, while leaving the rest of the concepts as contributing texture.

I still want to complete the vision of *Lion*, which involves printing a book on the processes and concepts behind it, as well as mounting a gallery exhibition. Moving forward, I think it was necessary after such an emotionally heavy project to work on something slightly more light-hearted. I'm working on a film about diamond heists, lies, and love. It'll be called *Famous Diamonds* and my process is going to involve kaleidoscopes and optical printing. After that, I anticipate there will be another large-scale project, either a second series or a feature.