

Remembering Mark LaPore

Sunday, October 12, 2008, 7:30 pm — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

Mark LaPore (1952–2005) was an uncanny observer, a profound wanderer and explorer. His work in film applied a fascinated observational patience, akin to that of Lumière and Warhol, to deeply explore the tangled relationships between ethnography and individual subjectivity while elaborating a complex philosophy of visual ethics. In anticipation of a larger screening series commemorating his work and relationships, we present *The Sleepers*, *A Depression in the Bay of Bengal*, *The Five Bad Elements* and *The Glass System*, four films—variously based on encounters and experiences in Sudan, Sri Lanka, Calcutta and New York—which reveal uncanny similarities between cultures as well as profound, possibly irreconcilable differences. (Steve Polta)

The Sleepers (1989); 16mm, color, sound, 16 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

Memory, as well as the residue of information in text and film from Sudan, led me to make *The Sleepers* in order to resolve the impression that the third world is present in the first world as an idea and a condition. *The Sleepers* is a film about how notions of culture are often defined by information received indirectly—information that frequently violates the particulars of people and place and makes questionable one’s ability to portray specific individuals as representatives of culture. *The Sleepers* concludes with a description of an African girl cleaning up after a meal being read over the image of a red storefront in New York’s Chinatown. Time and space contradict, then collapse to suggest a new third world city; a city of the imagination, where rural Sudan, China and Manhattan exist simultaneously. (Mark LaPore)

A Depression in the Bay of Bengal (1996); 16mm, color, sound, 28 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

A Depression in the Bay of Bengal is a twenty-eight minute color film shot while on a Fulbright Scholars Fellowship to Sri Lanka in 1993–1994. I went to Sri Lanka with the idea that I would remake Basil Wright and John Grierson’s 1934 documentary *Song of Ceylon*. After spending three months there I realized just how impossible that would be. Wright’s film was formally innovative and visually brilliant but his experience was not to be revisited. Each of the places he filmed still exist, but thirteen years of ethnic war have colored the way in which those places can be portrayed. I have made a film about traveling and living in a distant place which looks at aspects of daily life and where the war shadows the quotidian with a dark and rumbling step.

This film is both diaristic and metaphorical, both on account of my observations of everyday life as well as an indirect record of the war and of the tense atmosphere which permeates life there. The overwhelming sensation in the film is that of both physical and metaphorical distance: the distance between the traveler and Sri Lankans, the miles traveled as indicated by the persistent sound of trains, the distance between the camera and the subject, time as distance as evoked both by the historical footage and the notion of trains as a nineteenth century mode of transport, and by the black leader at the close of the film over which an article about an explosion in Sri Lanka is read. Past experience, whether local or far away, exists only in the mind and for the duration of the last three minutes of the film, mental images are the ones that play on the screen. (Mark LaPore)

The Five Bad Elements (1997); 16mm, b&w, sound, 32 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

“A dark and astringent film that allows the filmmaker’s personal subconscious drives and the equivocal bad conscience of ethnography to bleed through into overt content...

“The hand held camerawork and the particular leverage of *The Five Bad Elements* both pushes and works against LaPore’s previous tendencies in order to create compound fractures of potent abbreviations—seemingly dislocated images uncategorically taken and placed into ‘improper’ contexts, severed from a mappable space or geography—and overextended, unexpurgated scenes in which sight is caught actively probing or transfixed in seeming paralysis. By interrupting already truncated and mysteriously unmoored images with sections prolonging the durations and decay time of images normally torn from our sight, LaPore offers not provocation or obsession as much as permission to travel deeper into the image. The image as it pertains to actual experience—not only a filmic event or an approximate residue that stands in for something else as all images do. Refusing to satisfy curiosity with information, LaPore frustrates the usual complicities between image and documentary fact by dealing with representation as an execution of likeness, while still reckoning with the standard exchange rate of the image in its metaphoric fidelity to the real, the elusive and the tangible aspects of the image. LaPore’s audacities are almost camouflaged by his refined sense of restraint, his austerity and lyrical contemplativeness.

The title of the film is mischievously cribbed from a gang of troublemakers that appears in Chinese filmmaker Xie Jin’s film *Hibiscus Town* but also hints at the biblical concept of The Seven Deadly Sins, of universal ingredients—the four elements—earth, water, air and fire. Bad elements can refer euphemistically to a criminal milieu, ‘the wrong crowd’, as well as suggesting the antiquated medical notion of the circulating ‘humors’ that govern disposition and health. Going to the source of trouble was part of the filmmaker’s intent...

“By building the film on normally inadmissible evidence, telegraphed inferences, metaphoric leaps and omissions, damaged testimonies and scattered remains the film fabricates an impeccable and elegant architecture from a materially incomplete and unsound body. In the fragmented corpus of human beings and continents which is *The Five Bad Elements*, LaPore has created a film which itself acts as an absorbent object, a kind of metastatic sin eater that aims at expiation through its own contamination, redistributing poisons into a netherworld that still clearly resides at the core of its own physical and visible existence.” (Mark McElhatten, *The Films of the 35th New York Film Festival: Views from the Avant Garde*, 1997; filmlinc.com/archive/nyff/avantgarde.htm)

The Glass System (2000); 16mm, color, sound, 20 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

The Glass System, made from images shot in New York and Calcutta, looks at life as it is played out in the streets. Every corner turned reveals activities both simple and unfamiliar: a knife sharpener on a bicycle; a tiny tightrope walker; a man selling watches in front of a department store on Fifth Avenue; a hauntingly slow portrait of the darting eyes of schoolgirls on their way home; the uncompleted activities of a young contortionist. The sound in the film (which is from a Bengali primer written by British missionaries) is a meditation on how the English language teaches ideas about culture which are often incongruous. The disjunction between what you hear and what you see evokes reflections about the impact of globalization and the hegemony of Western-style capitalism. (Mark LaPore)

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