

emulsive trepidation: a hand processing primer.

Frank, an ex-high school quarterback, still wearing his letterman jacket, (sleeves now half way up his arms, colours as faded as his throwing arm) has spent the last two hours in the darkroom berating Radley as the poor fifteen year-old attempts to move a spaghetti of super 8 from the first developer to the stop bath in complete darkness. I am in the corner in an oversize shirt come lab coat wondering if it is the 30 hours travel from Perth to Manitou Springs (Colorado) that is making this moment appear uncanny, or if it is just the chemicals.

I decide it is probably a combination of both.

At the end of October last year, I attended The International Experimental Cinema Exposition's (TIE) Hand Processing Camp: A four day workshop in which the participants would shoot, process and edit both super 8 and 16mm film.

As an experimental film maker shying away from the instant gratification provided by video, I was attracted to this workshop primarily for one reason: hand-processing gives the artist control over the entire filmmaking process whilst still allowing for the excitement of invention and experimentation.

TIE was founded in 1999 to preserve experimental film and especially its exhibition, based on the idea that these motion pictures illuminate the truest form of cinema. For 2 years, TIE took place as an annual event in Telluride, Colorado, joining over 120 of the world's biggest names and newest innovators in avant-garde cinema, such as M. M. Serra, and former Colorado resident Stan Brackhage. Since the festival's inception, it has screened over 400 of the world's most cherished experimental films from the past and present. Last year, it was decided that rather than existing as a single event, TIE would run an ongoing series of film screenings, workshops, forums, and festivities, throughout the year at several unique venues in Colorado's Pikes Peak region.

Unique is the only way to describe Manitou: a quite mountain town full of new age weirdos, curiosity shops and amazing natural beauty. The kind of town where one minute you can be in awe of the 4000 metre plus peaks that surround it, and

the next be run down by a coffin race (an annual event held before Halloween). Unfortunately for me, four days to complete a film allowed little room for sight seeing as most time was spent in the confines of the Manitou Centre for Photography's darkroom.



The camp involved an initial introduction to the hand-processing technique, where we were instructed as to the function of each of the chemicals, and shown how to prepare each solution. Following this, as a method of testing our lab skills as well as the efficacy of each solution, we created a series of photograms using high contrast 16mm film along with assorted bottle caps, twigs, leaves and processed film. For a filmmaker such as myself, who had travelled to Manitou seeking a dogmatic rebirth of sorts, the photogram provided an ideal point of entry to the process. After all, what can bring an errant filmmaker back to his roots better than camera-less filmmaking?

After a mad day spent shooting in the Manitou area, it was back to the darkroom. Hand-processing black and white super 8mm (tri-x/plus-x) is a thirteen stage procedure requiring two developers (D19, Dektol, see outline below). The experience is visceral, almost alchemical, as one manipulates a mess of celluloid in toxic solution; a feel one simply cannot replicate with video. It is truly experimental, in that whilst a degree of control is maintained, it is impossible to completely predict the look of the final film due to dust, scratches and solarisation.

TIE's decision to run a hand-processing workshop is fuelled by resurgence in the technique that has emerged in force throughout North America. The quest for a dirty, scratched character in film can only be seen as a reaction to the ease with which a polished look can be achieved via digital production. One only has to look as far as commercial television to see how hand-processing, like any avant-garde device, has been absorbed into popular culture as the 'box' now holds many examples of advertisements where a hand-process look has been achieved digitally. Whilst in the commercial sphere, the attraction of hand-processing (or it's 'look) is its grungy appearance, this is not its only aesthetic effect, after all, hand-processing harks back to the very birth of filmmaking, and subsequently, films made using this technique offer an almost contradictory experience that is both retrograde and retrospective.

HAND-PROCESSING NOTES

- 1) 1st developer: D19 with Potassium Ferricyanide. (Developing time ~7 min)
- 2) STOP BATH: put film in water for a couple of minutes to stop developing process.
- 3) REVERSAL BLEACH (Potassium Dichromate) ~2 min. Turns print into positive.
- 4) TRANSPORT BUCKET TO STOP BATH, or use separate bucket for stop bath at this stage.
- 5) CLEARING BATH: Sodium Sulfit (gets rid of bleach) 1-2 min (80 gms to 1 gallon H2O) (Lights can now be turned on)
- 6) STOP BATH
- 7) SECOND DEVELOPER (DEKTOL, DILUTED) 30s-11/2 min.
- 8) STOP BATH
- 9) FIX: 3-6 min
- 10) STOP BATH
- 11) HYPOCLEAR (2 min) gets rid of excess fix
- 12) STOP BATH
- 13) PHOTOFLOW (only safe stuff) 30s

* 3.8L per gallon

*Hi contrast 16mm is ORTHOCHROMATIC, so safe light can be used during entire process.

* For every litre of D19 mix 2 gms of Potassium Ferricyanide. So 7.6 g for 1 gallon D19 mix.

THE FIRST DEVELOPER IS THE MOST IMPORTANT!!!

To keep in touch with all of TIE's upcoming events, join their mailing list at www.experimentalcinema.com Or contact festival director, Chris May at:

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