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Dispatches from the *Lens/Visions* virtual screening By Tyler Adair



龍少爺 Dragon Lords, *Deadly Shapes of Shaolin* (video still), 2020. Courtesy of the artists.

There is something both strange and exhilarating about the experience of attending digital film festivals forced to migrate online by the COVID-19 pandemic. While some critics have welcomed the respite from shuffling from screening to screening—or leaving the house at all—the future of film exhibition remains uncertain, to be determined by our ability to arrest the global spread of the virus.

Moreover, from our vantage point, all films, whether they engage with it directly or not, have become about the pandemic—whether as traces of a way of life or an experience of reality which has now disappeared, or worse, as harbingers of more bad things to come. And yet, historically, the cinema has always been impelled by crisis, whether aesthetic, social, political, or technological, and as the digital means of production continue to become more accessible, new—often amateur—filmmakers are converted to the medium daily, empowered to take up the lens in order to respond to these exigencies.

This was certainly the case in the inaugural program of *Lens/Visions*, a student film virtual screening, which held the character of a festival, curated by Roy Zheng. Transformed into an exhibition, *Lens/Visions* is on display at Union Gallery until December 18, 2020. The screening, which was initially broadcast live on Facebook last month, showcases eleven short works by Queen's University students while also attempting to preserve the collectivity and spontaneity which remain so crucial to the practice of cinephilia.

A common environmentalist thread weaved through the *Mobile Lens* program on night one—namely, a desire for communion with the earth and, equally, respite from the dulling effects of modernity and its alienating metropolises.

In *Fen and Moor* and *Spurs on in the Insinger Church*, both improvised site-specific films, Lexi Braden, Posy Legge, and Kitz Willman expertly use music and dance to facilitate an exchange of affects, gestures, and sounds between site—Yukon and rural Saskatchewan, respectively—performer, and audience. Meanwhile, Ming Xing and Siyang Hu ascend the mountains of Yunnan, China to document the daily rituals of the indigenous Lahu peoples in their pastoral *Lahu in the Clouds* while Jung-Ah Kim, wrestling with loneliness and double consciousness, offers up a variegated image of Chicago-as-hellscape in *Keu-ri-seu-ma-seu*.

As predicted, the present health crisis was front and centre in the *Critical Visions* program. James P. Hoban's *Dinner*, which shares its formal conceit with Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*—unfolding in a single take, uses its multilayered soundtrack and vertiginous cinematography to craft a work of tremendous emotional power. Similarly, Kushan Samarwickrema's *Lockdown Paradox* sardonically mocks the irony of normalizing what is otherwise considered neurotic or pathological behaviour to mitigate the effects of the virus.

Fearing an ironized, post-Tarantino excursion, I was pleasantly surprised by the screening's standout film: 龍少爺 Dragon Lords' *Deadly Shapes of Shaolin* which boasts both beautiful, verdant landscapes and remarkably choreographed—almost balletic—fight sequences which pay homage to the Kung Fu films of Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest. I was especially shocked to discover one of its creators is still in high school!

I anticipatedly await next year's program. My only hope is to be *truly* present.

Tyler Adair is an independent writer and curator from St. Catharines, Ontario. He is a recent graduate of the MA program in Screen Cultures and Curatorial Studies at Queen's University and during his tenure as a graduate student, he was part of the curatorial team for Garden Studies which ran from September-December 2020 at Queen's University's Agnes Etherington Art Centre. He also holds an MA in Comparative Literature from Brock University where he completed his undergraduate degree in Art History and Film Studies, and his scholarly interests include film theory, modernist painting, Marxism, and curatorial studies. He continues to research the films of Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet.