

## THE ENDURING

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*In April 2009, Cineworks participated in the 9th annual Signal + Noise festival. Titled *The Enduring*, the short program of short films featured Monique Moumblow's *Six Years* and Marianna Milhorat's *this is not an anchor, this boat is not an anchor*.*

The relentless, disinterested march of time colours all events in fading shades of grey. The majority of our experiences dim entirely to white, disappearing from both the subjective [the fodder of memory] and the objective [the fodder of archives] accounting of a life. These are all the endless hours at a job that cannot be recounted, or washing a sink full of dishes on what could be any day of the month. There are dishes in the cupboard and a paycheck to cash, but there is no meaningful sense of memory to dissolve the banal. But this is not the interim fate for all the dancing of being alive. There are some events that scar the mind deeply, either by want of their anticipation or the charge of their repercussions. Indeed, these dispositions push for the incorporation of an experience into the constitution of an individual. The encounters that come to matter in an understanding of ourselves are those that mark the incorporeal life of the mind, sometimes derivative of experience, other times the result of self-conscious reflection. This lack of a strict correspondence between the experience of a body and the content of a mind means that the connection between our memories and the things to which they refer is wholly underdetermined. Highlighting a tendency to privilege mental realities over physical ones, the films of *The Enduring* explore this fragile, mutual causality.

Monique Moumblow's *Six Years* [2008] presents the goings about of the body and the contemplation of the mind as softly discrete, juxtaposed realities. On the one hand, there are her movement images, which, more often than not, relate only duration in time. On the other hand, there is subtitled text, which is awkwardly being translated into Swedish on the fly. We are asked to observe the mundane details of the life of a family while simultaneously reading English subtitles that only sometimes relate in any clear way to the cinematic imagery. The text offers an inner dialogue, which is supposed to belong to the central female character of the work, thereby

making us privy to a private reality that could never be conveyed through movement. She often ponders things that the corresponding images do not corroborate: when she laments the smell of sour milk on her lover's flesh all we see is a long shot of an empty bed. There is a distance here between flesh and contemplation, between the figures we watch and the voice we hear, that resists a conflation of both as one.

Marianna Milhorat's *this is not an anchor, this boat is not an anchor* [2007] reveals itself as if it were a dream, a mindscape where the physical world is made strange. Milhorat's use of sound, however, maintains ordinary reality, as when a tipsy, slow boat ride through seemingly impenetrable fog is accompanied by all the requisite sounds of nature. The stillness of this boat ride, though, continues too long for what we are looking at to be a relation of scenery—the attention of the viewer shifts from looking for land to their own anticipations. The dreamlike quality of the work does not propound to be a document of space, but neither does it submit to a common romanticism about fantasy. We are not experiencing real time, but the intervening sounds of loons calling and frogs ribbiting trigger an anchor to the literal.

Both these films explore a divergence between mental and physical realities. This distinction between ideas and bodies is commonly interpreted as a stark separation between two substances. The Western medical tradition is often pejoratively characterized by a separation of mind and body, which yields a health care system that treats the body of the patient independent of their state of mind. The base assumption is that spirit and matter do not interact, that they are incommensurable. There is a long philosophical tradition exploring this trajectory, moving from the dualisms of Descartes [the mind and the body cannot be reduced one to the other], to the physicalisms that philosophy of mind embraces today [what we understand as functions of the mind are more precisely understood as functions of the brain]. Moumlow and Milhorat do not occupy themselves with constructing arguments for the truth value of these ideological claims, but both their films imply a use-value in adopting dualistic interpretations of human experience.

Milhorat plays a sleight of hand when practically half of *this is not an anchor...* passes without any satisfying movement to indulge the eye, presenting a landscape that endeavours to be almost anything but. Observation wanders back from an allusion of a familiar physical world to an interior realm of contemplation/agitation. Milhorat does not mean to present us with mere

information; she is scheming to instigate the workings of the mind back on itself, a consciousness observing its own meditations. For all of her display of the world, she does not intend to provoke the world proper. The clear line between the body and the mind is muddled by cause-effect relationships that pay no heed to a supposed incommensurability between spirit and matter. Instead, it is easy to understand how the mind is something that transcends the realm of ideas and impacts physical processes—like we act on our own volitions and either look away or look harder at the slow revelation that is the initial step of this film.

Similarly, *Six Years* demarcates the physical and the mental by pacing its introduction of the human form so that, nearly five minutes in, the viewer is jolted by a presence that couldn't be more ordinary. Though the central female figure is just making a morning cup of coffee, we realize that, up to this point, the subject matter of the film has been disembodied. The fact that her contemplative dialogue suffices for action draws attention to the gap that is often understood to lay between ideas and motion, or even script and performance. Moumlow massages this presumed disparity by way of Anna, the five-year-old daughter of the female lead. Her mother calls Anna's conception immaculate, alleging that her daughter is the result of a spiritual union, not a physical one. Also, Anna displays a particular musical telepathy when she hums the songs her mother has running through her head. While the first of these claims is understood as hyperbole, it is easy to imagine the sincerity of the allegation for a minor, paranormal, musical ESP. This telepathy cannot be reduced to the physical world alone—there is no ether by which ideas can move from one mind to another without the abstraction of language. The mind's ability to affect the world leads to the inference that these distinct properties cannot be understood apart from their contemporaneous unity in our human forms. To be sure, the stillness and subtitles that comprise *Six Years* exactly press for a nuanced integration of both dimensions, of what we observe with our eyes, and what we observe with our minds.

There is no action really in either of these films, and certainly no action that suggests narrative, but still identities cohere. Similar to how any set of Polaroids extracted from a particular life might not reveal a clean anecdotal structure, that life and those pictures amount to something singular, encapsulated in the becoming of the experiencer. These films illustrate the complexity of becoming that is not easily summarized by refusing forced narrative frames.

Instead they embrace the idiosyncratic composition that the experience of being alive amounts to. And what persists of having lived is not the events that mark the day-to-day, or even those that are remarkable, at least not the events themselves. Rather, each one of us accumulates a somewhat unpredictable anthology of what it has been like to interact with the world, crystallizing our identity along the way. Both *Six Years* and *this is not an anchor...* de-emphasize the action that typically fills memoir and concentrate instead on the subjective reckoning of encounters with the world. What endures through time is longing, learning, loss, or more precisely, the content of our self-conscious awareness. Neither of these films, however, draw this attention to the diminution of the phenomenal world. Quite the opposite. Both these films play at shifting the focus from psychological states to physical place by interrupting contemplation with prosaic considerations. Milhorat has said of her own work that it, "speaks to the power of imagination and the depths of reality but, also, to the need for the literal world in order to ground us and keep us from drifting away forever." <sup>1</sup> It is the sensible world that galvanizes metaphysical conclusions.

A corollary of Moumblow's and Milhorat's championing of mind and matter as distinct substances is that the connection between memory and the things to which it refers are fragile. This fragility collapses entirely in cases where the event is forgotten, so that personal history never amounts to just the facts. Facts are descriptive, but experience is meaningless outside of our renegotiations to phenomenal experience by way of our memories. "Facts are not the truth...facts are only part of it...sometimes facts are no more than pitiful consequences." <sup>2</sup> The objects of mental life have a different kind of existence than the objects of physical life do, and causality between mind and matter sometimes operates, for lack of a better word, as if by magic. An experience does not in itself determine the way it will be incorporated into the experiencer—it could be forgotten, but if it is remembered, it is assuredly rewritten. In some cases, experience does not even require perception and sensation because the mind has causal power of its own. The objects of consciousness constitute identity and these can be born of faith, doubt or inquiry as much as any phenomenal residue.

Moumblow conjures a compelling and common paradigm of this delicate implication by way of her central character's relationship with X, an absent, unnamed, haunting ex-lover. She falls in and out of an orderly address by shifting from telling stories to us, like the one about the

only love letter she's ever written coming after the end of the affair, and then to X, to whom she claims a relationship despite X's absence. Anyone who has ever been in love can testify to this: the madness that arises from distance, an imagined and irrevocable game of the mind played out in the lover for the loved object. "These various activities are the result of the complex form of my life with you. I should say: my lives. I have a life with your Presence and a life with your Absence, that is another kind of presence. Your second presence, in other words your Presence-in-your-Absence, your spiritual Presence commands the greater part of my active life." <sup>3</sup> It does not matter to Moumblow's lead that X is elsewhere; their relationship has marched on to the point that, "everything that happened between us, happened when you weren't here." <sup>4</sup> Flesh is not always requisite for matters of the heart. In truth, matters of the heart are often precisely matters of the mind and do not require any antecedent other than an object of affection. It might even be said that love cannot be love without this sentimental longing. Intimate relationships stand as exemplary of how immaterial experience asserts itself with as least as much force as the goings on of matter.

Even sensual occurrences, though, are subject to these types of multiple renderings. The events of, and meetings with, the phenomenal world accumulate as memory in the formation of an identity so that to be self-conscious means, "feeling the past to be as real as the present." <sup>5</sup> *this is not an anchor...* interrupts its own examination of the surface of the world to suggest that another reality be accounted for. Layering her own reportage of uncanny landscapes with archival sound, Milhorat suggests "buried layers, hidden histories and further mysteries to be uncovered," <sup>6</sup> so that even the hard and fast idea of documentation hints at an emergence that transcends the facts of the matter.

The divide between mind and body need not be severe. Both of these works offer up images of life as fundamentally composed of at least two essences—that of the physical world and that of the mind. Moumblow's work sets up a dichotomy between the subject of her work and our position as observers, while Milhorat's opens a self-reflexive psychological space where we can uniquely orient ourselves in relation to the film itself. Emphasizing the cooperative agency of the world and the mind in an understanding of reality, these films then privilege the latter despite the fact that the world is always already there before reflection begins. The lack of a strict

correspondence between experience and memory is enabled by the subdued distinction between the nature of minds and bodies. We are composed of more than matter, thus non-material causes must be given credence in an accounting of a life. This what is more, call it consciousness or spirit, seeps into the atoms that give rise to our shape, marinating the remnants of experience in a temporary, enduring magic.

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<sup>1</sup> From an electronic conversation with Marianna Milhorat, 16 April 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Marai, Sandor. Embers. Trans. Carol Brown Janeway. New York: Vintage, 2002, pages 43 + 112.

<sup>3</sup> Cixous, Helene. Love Itself in the Letterbox. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Cambridge: Polity, 2008, page 125.

<sup>4</sup> Six Years. Dir. Monique Moublow. Vtape, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Sontag, Susan. Reborn. Ed. David Rieff. New York: FSG, 2008, page 71.

<sup>6</sup> From an electronic conversation with Marianna Milhorat, 16 April 2009.