

## **After One Hundred Years of Chasing Its Tail, Cycling Toward the Year Two Thousand with the Black Maria Film/Video Festival**

By David Tafler (1993)

From early childhood comes an imperfect but persistent memory of a television program called *The Deputy*. At the outset of each episode, the Marshall (Henry Fonda) rides into town. Somehow, he actually mobilizes this one very reluctant shopkeeper, always for one last time, to fulfill a formidable mission that he gives him. At each program's episodic conclusion, the resentful, seasoned deputy returns, angrily tosses down his badge in order, allegedly, to forever return to his now disgruntled wife and civilian life. Despite the vow, the Marshall's philosophical and persuasive rhetoric always prompts the deputy to resume his law enforcement chores. This incursion repeats itself week after week, and the cycle endures.

Aside from the explicit play and implicit metaphor of the law, *The Deputy* depicts an individual stretched to assume unsolicited burdens. Confronting the challenge, hanging up his apron, donning his weapon, and taking leave of his family values, the hero, through his split commitments, rides narrowly through the canyons of concomitant judgments. Beyond the explicit challenges leaping out from every crossroad, underlying forces impact on his actions. As a consequence, all his decisions and their aftermath fall within that troublesome gray zone of interlocking events, with one shaping the next. Every autumn when the truckload of Black [Maria] Film/Video Festival entries ride into town and the formidable process of selection beckons, I often conjure up an image of that deputy. From the hundreds of assembled texts, from the burden and responsibility of processing their individual efforts, a similar unease prevails. Recruited over and over again, the same contradictory forces rip at the prescreeners' judgment when struggling to weigh each text against the other, all against some fragile determining framework operating within some hypothetical, community-based mindset.

Beyond this messianic agitation, the prescreening frenzy demands a sense of fanatical commitment, for the labor overwhelms everyday constraints. Day after day, from early morning into the late night, the prescreeners move in and out of the individual texts by over and over again beginning all over. At the conclusion of the prescreening ordeal, the lifting of that responsibility permits the restoration of dream time and other life priorities. While the prescreeners recoup, the momentum of the Festival persists into the judging and eventually the public screenings. Relentlessly, over the past twelve years this process has become a cycle that goes on, year after year.

Throughout its annual episodic cycle, the Festival lives and changes. Nomadic, unrestrained by cultural codes and weathered conventions, the Festival leaves home, hits the trail, makes its play, and moves on to the next town down the

road. Each screening site contributes another anecdote to that year's narrative. Each encounter becomes part of the folklore shaping the string of overlapping presentations.

The Festival's scheduled string of events implies a set continuity. Hardly the case, other forces affect the overall equation. Artists may occasionally change the parameters governing the distribution and screening of their work. Programmers at host locations exercise at will their own curatorial control. The Festival's writing of its own history has the flexibility to make the midstream changes. Before the story concludes, next year's festival begins to make its own demands. In that interim, the revived Festival, a somewhat transformed vision, gradually takes shape.

In the wake of outside changes, the Festival can never remain the same. It rides the divide between film and video, between industrial and electronic revolutions, between traditional and progressive values. Caught up in the political conflicts that rock all forms of cultural production, the Festival perpetually adjusts in order to move beyond its own late twentieth century constraints. Stepping outside the cycle in order to step inside, assessing the meaning of the process, examining the linkages binding the Festival's past with the remnants of its present and the traces of its future, a perpetual self-exploration weighs the driving visions against the mediating conditions.

Appropriately, after one hundred years of film history, Edison's swiveling studio, the Black Maria, still symbolizes this certain uncertainty. Blinded by the bright screen in the dark theatre, the sharp discretionary blade of selection falls between those formulaic systems that manipulate, that position an individual's thoughts and emotions, and the alienating morass of those fractured image fragments that accompany the noise, the anodyne or programmed sound. Questioning the open call, dead serious without taking itself too seriously, insignificant but meaningful, the undercurrents, the anxieties, the angst that fuels the process stretch beyond the screen.

This tentativeness implicates everyone, even the viewer. The viewer's tacit and unpredictable participation becomes part of the process, part of a community engaged in a low risk, but highly significant exchange of values. As an annual celebration, or ritual, catalyst or media circus, when the Black Maria arrives in town, that community comes together. Local media artists meet to discuss the eco-cultural terrain. Students of the respective disciplines converge with patrons and friends to study the ongoing changes defining the shape of time-based art. Tampering with systems, stretching controlled circumstances, situating uncertain outcomes alongside fluid values, no absolutes dictate the shape of any one specific encounter, discussion, screening, or viewing experience.

Unraveling the underworkings of this machine reveal the magic of its operation. First and foremost, the Festival celebrates the individual. Each work lives within

its own framework, singly weighed and presented. At the same time, the concept of the work transcends specific texts or individual artists. A purer scopophilic pleasure and curiosity underlie the reception process in the recognition and realization of the implicit mystery within familiar events.

Such a recurring cinematic Epiphany resembles my twenty month old niece Keagan's extraterrestrial contacts when coming into language. Every time she sees the moon, whether in a book or in the sky, Keagan spontaneously points to it and screams "mooooon." Riding in a car or walking along the shore, these repeated outbursts come fast and frequent, each playing on this recognition, renewing the contact, refreshing the relationship, and reviving our shared fascination. This fascination underlies the concept of the work.

When the audience gathers, the process reaches a momentary climax. From the works' performance, recollected traces form the denouement, the foundation for a group discussion. The concept of this traveling media theatre plays in a world where an endless television environment forms a relentless backdrop. On the road, spectacle and performance mix with the fixed vision(s) assembled from the work thereby stretching the frame and the parameters of the screen. Sitting in an audience, given the capacity to respond collectively, a commitment of time and an element of blind trust breeds a certain tension that can never exist in front of a private screen.

The tailored program begins. Avoiding formulaic patterns, the situation mediates the sequence. Never fixed, the collective assemblage of films and tapes evolves as a series of individualized screenings, each with its own dictates and personality. A certain randomness overlaps the blatant controls. Naturally, individuals within any audience may question the concept(s) motivating the program selection and arrangement. Scored, the program sequence frames the exchange between the work and the audience. Over the years, situations change, audiences shift and their dynamic response patterns conform to those changes. As the Festival revisits each site over and over again, scheduling criteria mutate to embody these new forces.

On the underside, the roots of the Festival stretch and stretch absorbing ever greater numbers of entries from an expanding circle embracing filmmakers from around the world. Reaching critical mass, the Festival currently travels to those corners of North America where it may best represent its contributors. This cyclical input-output pattern fortifies the concept of communication that motivates and drives the Festival from site to site. Another tentative thread, the Festival's year to year itinerary represents the ebb and flow of exhibition programs and their social-economic determinants.

Most important, ideals buttressing free communication remain fortified by fragmenting controls and constituencies. Support comes from numerous sources. Except for two or three organizations, the Festival has drawn from different

sponsors over the years. While the Festival travels down a multifaceted track, by not answering to any one source of support the process of selection may adhere to the spirit of independence embodied in risk taking exploration, rugged individualism and consensus.

The Festival sets in motion operations that reinforce its own future permutation. Filmmakers become jurors while programmers respond to collated sentiments. The judging infrastructure remains fluid, thereby guaranteeing that a timely responsiveness to individual constituents persists.

Rooted in its own history, the Festival's origin coincides with the beginning of the Reagan administration. Understanding the challenge of the Festival's free speech mechanisms means stepping into this context for some perspective. In a reactionary climate, minimizing economic constraints permits stronger organizations to consolidate their influence at the expense of relative newcomers representing diverse constituencies. Those in power establish (economic) governors to regulate the commerce and growth of free expression and thinking. By constantly reintroducing and reinforcing non-systematized values, the Festival defies the conventions that might favor a more benign community. With guiding principles applauding new grammar, novel vision, restriction-free content, with its values only compromised by the carefully balanced concerns of its own community of producers and programmers, the Festival, in and of itself, resists mainstream forces.

Out of the darkness, the symbol of the Black Maria embodies both the entrepreneurial spirit of Edison's filmwork and the Festival's sense of defiant commitment. Galvanized by the times, participation in the process comes from a sense of obligation. During the great living room debates of the Festival's first year, a half a dozen or so jurors would gather for innumerable sessions evaluating and discussing at length the over one hundred and twenty five submissions, all film in those days. Occasionally, the venue would shift from one residence to another, to yet another neighboring Edison's West Orange laboratories in northern New Jersey. Coming from all walks of the media community, the jurors loved film and passionately discussed the criteria for choosing specific texts from among the submitted work.

In that first year, the Black Maria Film + Video Festival had no experience driven formula governing its own process. The style and substance of the work meandered far and wide. Controlling the projection, the projectionist often had to determine when a film merited debate. Though two raised hands automatically called for discussion, body language would also expedite the process by signaling the attitudes of the reviewers. Vested with the added responsibility of shaping the Festival's identity, jurors had to select viable work from a large proportion of entries. After considerable haggling and debate, the jurors finally designated three films for special recognition within the program. The first, shot in a third world setting and titled *Crisis in Utopia* (by Ken Ross), presented a critique

of late twentieth century capitalism. The second (by Karen Nulf), *Letters to Two Young Women: Adele and Lan Kim*, offered a dual screen examination of the legacy of the Vietnam War. The third film, titled *The Man Who Could Not See Far Enough* (by Peter Rose), deconstructed its own filmic structure by traveling through the abstract, emotional, and meditative dimension of totemic light and space.

On the auspicious occasion of the first year's premiere screening of the selected award winners at the Edison National Historical Site, the festival director had to account for the jury's selection before a very inquisitive, and very traditional contingent of individuals representing some of the key supporting foundations. Despite the director's most diplomatic efforts to explain the panel's perspective when making its selections, this foundation support waned. As a consequence of its democratic convictions, the Festival faced a funding crisis, but managed to prevail. As the rigid tides withered, skeptical funding sources came back on line without demanding any compromise in the Festival's integrity.

Catering to a "cultural elite," the Festival in fact resembled a cottage industry. It began by capitalizing on local resources, neighbors and friends. As the Festival grew, the films and tapes for prescreening traveled up and down the neighborhood from the East Orange Public Library in a nearby town, where the post office dropped the entries, to the neighbor's front porch where the resident family registered the work. From the film festival home for prescreening and storage to the judging site at the regional community center, the work went up and down, back and forth, and eventually on the road or back to the library for redistribution to the submitting artists.

Pre-empting the Smurfs on Saturday morning, family turf values became part of the prescreening process. Sharing the family dynamic, raking leaves and washing dishes provided meditative space for processing hours upon hours of uninterrupted screening. Prescreeners shuttled back and forth from their big city apartments to the respective suburban home prescreening sites. Here, the relentless torrent of cinematic stimuli became a virtual equivalent to the dense concentration of sights and sounds left behind.

In that first year, the submission volume already outstripped the capacity of jurors to critically review each and every work. By the second year, implementing a prescreening process facilitated the jury by providing the jurors with insight as to the range and composition of entries. In the third year, the Festival expanded to include video submissions. That development changed the entire prescreening process.

With the introduction of video, the number of entries swelled. More significantly, the tabernacle of prescreening changed. In the absence of projector threading contests, the downtime between screenings diminished as tapes popped in and out of machines. With the proportional decline in the number of precious texts

(film), the very relationship with the material itself changed. Television took over. Laboriously positioning celluloid segments yielded in the wake of segmented analysis -- fast forward, fast backward, play, stop and eject. Redesigning evaluation forms, trying to effortlessly substitute traces of memory for holistic synopses became a continuous part of that reflexive operation which always questioned its own decisionmaking process.

Today, the scale nearly outstrips the prescreening process. The cabal of prescreeners continues to grow. Prescreening sites have proliferated up and down the east coast and westward. Despite the multiple venues, too many tapes and films require too many prescreeners. With that decentralization, the dialogue within any designated panel breaks down. The concept of evaluation, the rendering of descriptive meditation begins to take on new meanings plagued by a variety of conjectural overtones.

Other manifestations of growth move the Festival forward. With the formalization of an outside, dedicated, institutionally based office, a part-time staff, and a board of directors, the Festival looms on the threshold of either retrenched or expanded horizons. Will an entrenched festival lose its guiding principles?

Looking at the future also means reexamining the Festival's cyclical life. With physical parameters mediated by seasonal regularity, economic constraints shape the Festival's operation. Funding sources annually reorder the priorities and expand or shrink their bottom line. Like so many things patterned on solar movement, the soliciting and screening follows seasonal shifts and, perhaps, ignores the multiple year creative production and reception cycles of viewers and submittants. Though the Festival accepts work up to three years old, after a point the flow begins to resemble annual forces that mediate the submission process. With no reason to wait, new work hits the distribution circuit every year and the year's submissions represent that year's production. In short, the Festival has caught up. If insect breeding follows multiple year cycles, human production might similarly peak and drop in some aseasonal sequence.

During a twelve month annual operation, do specific operational phases naturally conform to seasonal prerogatives such as light and temperature? As a self-perpetuating engine, grant funding applications make demands in the spring, preparation and planning take place over the summer. With the fall announcement, entries begin to arrive and prescreening commences, climaxing on or around the Thanksgiving holiday. After the judging in early December, and the confirmation of screening sites, the Black Maria Film/Video Festival goes on the road throughout the winter and early spring, eventually overlapping the next grant application writing phase.

The true concept of cycle, however, operates outside of this revolving engine of activity. The Festival resembles a multi-layered dialectic, a complex forum for engaging the existence of work outside the system of reification or validation that

cuts across journalism's movie reviews. With no fixed categories, fluctuating value systems shape different festival programs that swing between formalist parameters and issue oriented concerns. With each cycle, the conditions change. As part of this mediation, film/videomakers annually review their commitments and reassess their position within the whimsical flux inherent in the value system staked out by the work, prescreeners, jurors, and audiences. Word gets out. Apart from the published results of the jurying process, the work travels. Artists review the chosen work and assess the impact of their submissions accordingly. Programmers review the traveling work and make their evaluations. In screening forums, audiences express their insights orally and occasionally follow-up in writing.

Throughout, a representative of the Festival, essentially the director, serves as a human interface between sites. Not the grand apologist all too often seen in other contexts, the intermediary remains accountable for the process. Not a smoothing, blocking mask, a single individual presents the production. Will the Festival continue to support the concept of a host?

From metromania, the Festival wanders in and out of the varying regions with a minstrel communicating tabs of reception at each way station throughout the cycle. Each group, the submittants, prescreeners, jurors, audiences, funding sources, can vent. Mediating arbitrated values with personal prejudices, the Festival becomes the pivot about which all of the respective forces congeal. In that epicenter ride the individualized visions and dreams of all of the participants.

Heading into the future, the Black Maria Film/Video Festival's historical record maps its own archive of information. Inevitably from this history, future research can track from those archives the Festival timeline, social trends and struggles, the politics of evolving media formats, the economics of haphazard growth cycles and the concomitant restraints. Will this information have any value in an information laden world? Since this Festival charts the fringe territory of that value system on the margins of mainstream media activity, it should. Despite its ties with other, larger works and their novel formats, the Festival represents a slowing down, retarding technological privatization by maintaining the act of stepping out, theatre. As part of the production process, it keeps alive a language of defiance by avoiding categorization and the fate of most museums and galleries, sites of packaged irrelevance. Unsettling the packaging of channels, the din/blend of voices become a chorus for resisting passivity and actively defining the shape of their own struggle, a struggle embodied in the work revisited.