

Lycanthropy

by Alex MacKenzie



The car's chassis scraped the sidewalk lip out of the parkade. I winced when the suspension seemed to settle even further as I veered onto the road. This load of 16mm films was too weighty a cargo for a rusting '82 Accord.

Yet another college trashing their entire collection.

“Come tomorrow or it's all going in the dumpster”.

In bulk, 16mm films are, frankly, a burden. The ribbon of film is so tightly wound on the reels that it could be mistaken for a solid block of dense matter. Add the metal reels and cans and you have a serious doorstep. Their shape—a circular disc over an inch thick—means storage is awkward and inefficient. Imagine an LP record at ten times the width without those perfectly flat edges and weighing a whole lot more. Stacking these reels one on top of the other renders them inaccessible, while an upright approach demands

specialized racks with wire spacers and carefully calculated gaps between levels to allow for every length of film.

I had started to collect relic educational films, industrial films and the like a few years earlier, with a plan to screen them in tandem with artist films. My hope was that the magical hand of serendipity would draw out interesting contrasts and strange parallels. At that time, I'd been running the Edison Electric Gallery of Moving Images in Vancouver for about six months. Weekend programs featured titles such as “Fluid Bodies and Bodily Fluids”, “Fashion Victims”, “Optical Seizures” and “Medical Atrocities”.

Through a strict regimen of poring over the titles on each canister, which collectively read like some kind of Brion Gysin poetry, the hope was that an intriguing title would yield some good content. But once loaded on the flatbed, it was utterly hit and miss. Who would have imagined that “Myocardial Infarction: The Nurse's Role” would deliver some of the best non-

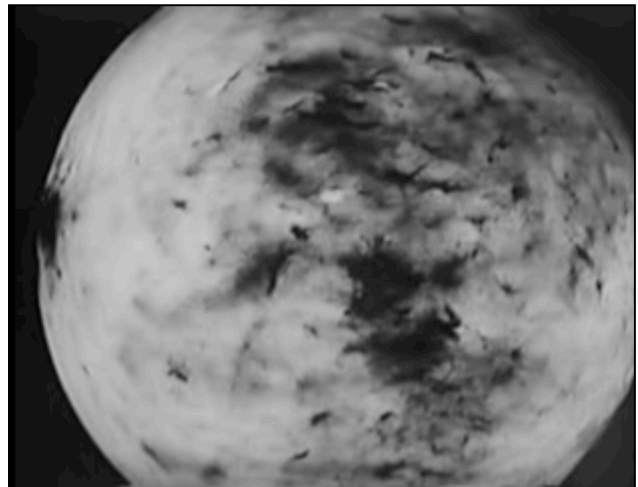
professional performances and awkward intimacies while “The Flavours of Neutrinos” offered only a dull professor and a chalkboard lecture? The film cans offered nothing more than a title—directors and production companies were either inconsequential or at best covered with a “property of” sticker, rendering them impenetrable and uninviting in their uniformity.

There were simply too many films to make any sense of. Fully grasping the value and limits of storage space along with a clearer understanding of use versus possible use (and better uses of my time), I feared the collection was getting out of hand. Still, I held on to the lot and continued accepting “donations”, ending with hundreds of films and at least ten distinct collections from sources as wide ranging as technical colleges (How To Braise Meat), and the Justice Institute (Riot Control: Your Role As A Peace Officer). While more than a few were gems (contextualized or not), it was always a surprise to find experimental films in the mix. Even more so to find them in near mint condition. It seems they didn’t get a lot of play at most institutions of higher learning. That was fine by me, though I did feel a certain sense of regret at their poor circulation.

When I came across “Fluxes” in this latest load, I initially mistook it for a film on soldering techniques. Or maybe a misspelled film on the Fluxus

movement? But that was probably a little optimistic. When I finally got around to running the film through a projector, and Arthur Lipsett’s name appeared in the opening credits, it finally gelled.

At that time I only knew his shorter works—compressed, sardonic and snappy audio-visual time capsules of a world in serious transition. I loved them all. Brief research and a few chats with the NFB led me to understand this longer film as a late and minor work, largely ignored and forgotten.



But I was feeling something more than this.

Bracketed by footage of monkey space travel experiments, the film begins and ends with dialogue excerpts from the 1935 film “Werewolf of London”. It succinctly sums up human perversity and the conundrum of so-called civilization: “The werewolf instinctively seeks to kill the thing it loves the best”.

Lipsett seems to be telling us that we are this werewolf, and the world we inhabit, the culture we have wrought, is the thing we love most. We are gleefully destroying it; imposing ourselves so completely upon it, celebrating its grand potential to such a degree, that we will end in suffocating the culture and planet entirely.

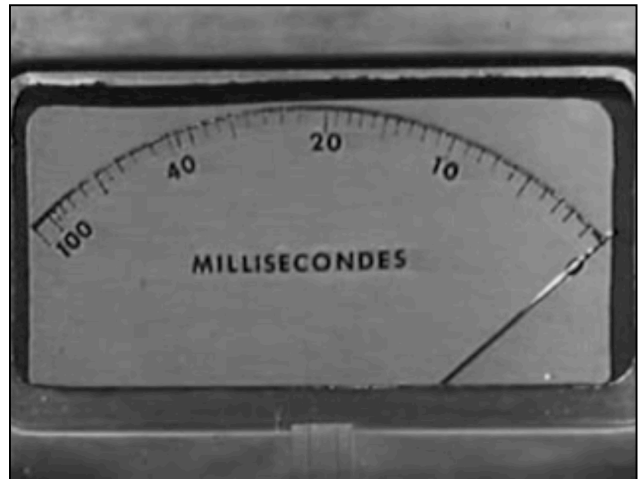
With “Fluxes”, the arenas explored are war, political deception, science, and a disposable and distracting first world culture. Nearly forty years later, we can ruefully observe that things have eroded past the point of dangerous, ignorant and selfish action, and on to the very brink of collapse.

There is no doubt the NFB was unmotivated to invest in this film’s difficult length—a full 24 minutes—and its’ less-than-snappy approach. While films like “21-87”, “Very Nice, Very Nice”, “A Trip Down Memory Lane”, and “Freefall” delight and despair in humankind’s death-wish and absurdisms, “Fluxes” seems at once more grave. Stretching these snapshots out, it lets them linger, making us more and more ill at ease with what we are seeing. Even in retrospect with the veneer of (now) vintage footage, these are dire scenes and desperate times.

Bombs drop. Bodies burn. Politicians lie. The band plays on.

Unafraid to let it rip, Lipsett found

himself without peers, lost in a private world and disconnected from past praise and support. “Fluxes” was a brave play, if possibly misguided under the auspices of an institution. And while he wasn’t alone in recognizing the cultural turbulence of the time, Lipsett’s was a much more comprehensively pessimistic vision of mankind. He saw a truth others weren’t as ready to contemplate. And while his mordant humour is still present, it is now rendered as a sickening self-mockery and study in our collective self-deception. We are being sold snake oil and it doesn’t come cheap. Expertise is exposed as farce, and science as a failure to measure anything that might lead to some enlightenment.



Tibet figures prominently in the second half, an allusion to the werewolf film again, where the infected botanists seek a cure to their lycanthropy. Is there hope in the East? But the West hasn’t the ears to hear.

I screened “Fluxes” many times over the years at both The Edison Electric and

The Blinding Light!! Cinema, and took it on an intimate European tour of underground artist centres, galleries and living rooms years later along with some of Norman McLaren's work. I even lifted a static shot from it — the pair of hands on a black background with a cut out #6 in the upper left corner — and used a cropped version in my film "Parallax". A tip of the hat to the master and a private joke, sampling the sampler.

The final shot of the baffled and terrified monkey hurtling through space stretches over a full minute and never ceases to destroy me.

Over these same images, the soundtrack lifted from "Werewolf of London" seems to bode ill for us, a studied hopelessness and helplessness:

-It blooms only under the rays of the moon.
-You actually believe that this flower takes its life from moonlight?
-I do.
-So far I have been unsuccessful in persuading mine to bloom by moonlight or any other kind of light.
-Whether you get it or not will not matter much... tonight.

We look to the moon for guidance, for hope, and in wonder. It offers back nothing but a reflection of our folly and doomed excess of ambition.

Lipsett was not a happy man, but the world was not a happy place. He shows us a society then, as now, bent on a

disastrous combination of arrogance and willful ignorance, maddeningly turning its ingenuity, innovation, creativity, and optimism to pointless and destructive ends.

(This essay will appear in the forthcoming book Strange Codes: The Life and Films of Arthur Lipsett, to be co-published by the University of Calgary Press and the Images Festival, and edited by Amelia Does, Chris Gehman and Brett Kashmere.)

