DONIGAN CUMMING

The Future of Documentary Video, or the Lack Thereof

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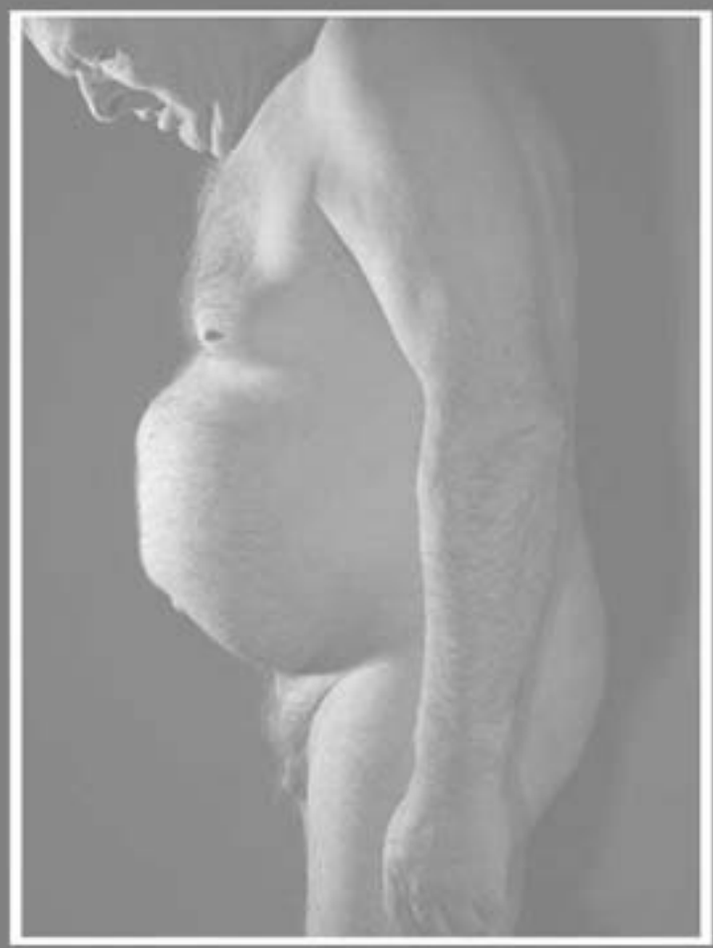

DONIGAN CUMMING: THE FUTURE OF DOCUMENTARY VIDEO, OR THE LACK THEREOF
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Although he's better known as a photographer, Montréaler Donigan Cumming has, since 1995, been creating a small but potent corpus of video. The work is difficult to classify, located in a murky netherworld between fiction and document, observation and artifice. They feel like documentaries, all of them shot with a small hand-held camera and seeming to document the smallest bits of their subjects' lives - the level of detail is especially high in Cumming's most recent work, *Erratic Angel* (1998). Calling these videos documentaries, though, doesn't do justice to the way that they revise the conventions of documentary film and video. Some of them - like *Cut the Parrot* (1996) or *After Brenda* (1997) - seem to be staged narratives, and, in all of them, basic assumptions about the role of subjects and artists are in play. This is a creative project not without its pitfalls, and Cumming's work has been criticized for the way that it portrays these sometimes desperate, sometimes confused people. Yet, I would argue that the relationship between subject and artist in these videos is so complex, so confused, that it's difficult to make these sorts of value judgments; traditional arguments about documentary ethics can simply find no perch here. Instead, what we get is an exploration of a bleak, mostly interior landscape, a kind of hidden Montreal. Cumming is entering into a dialogue with the place that he lives in, a dialogue that encompasses its social realities, its aesthetic traditions, and, most centrally, the effect that it has on the most private experiences of its most marginalized residents.

I discuss only Cumming's videos in this article, a strategy that admittedly neglects other important artwork that he's done over the last fifteen years, including photography and installation. I choose to do this partially because his photographs have already gotten a fair bit of exposure and discussion. His multimedia exhibit "Barber's Music," for example, ran at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography; he's also got a number of photography publications, the best known of which is *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (1986). His videos, though, are not as well known.[1] That's unfortunate because they ride a very fine line between convention and innovation, constantly shifting between the two. The constancy of that shifting, the way that Cumming relentlessly pursues a very specific set of priorities and questions while still managing to find something new every time he embarks upon that pursuit, is almost unique in the world of contemporary video. In this way he reminds me of Stan Brakhage, who critics complain has made the same film over and over again, but in whom admirers can see the painstaking efforts taken by someone who truly believes he has found a unique, worthwhile manner in which to use the medium and who is trying to get that manner right, knowing full well that only a lifetime of trying will even bring him close to that impossible, glorious goal.

Cumming seems to make documentary videos. Calling these works documentaries, though, doesn't leave much space to talk about the strange, troubling performances that happen in front of the camera. That Cumming is manipulating the situations he records is entirely obvious; the more interesting discussion begins when we try to understand how all the manipulations of reality that are going on here interact with one another. Documentary aesthetics, already having undergone radical changes in the wake of lightweight video gear, are almost but not quite absent here (despite Cumming's oft-stated project of revising the role of the documentary in his photographic work); they hang over the tapes like a ghost. For while these may look like expositions of squalor and desperation, fitting within a social realist/ liberal reformist tradition (a tradition especially important in Canada and, of course, in Quebec), what's going on here is more com-plex and troubling.

There are significant insights to be had by framing Cumming's cutting edge work in the context of Andre Bazin, whose work is too often characterized as retrograde. In one of his most important essays, "Ontologie de l'image photographique," Bazin writes:

> All the arts are founded on the presence of man; photography just gives us pleasure through his absence. It acts on us much as "natural" phenomena, like a flower or a snowflake whose beauty is inseparable from its organic or telluric origins. This automatic genesis has radically overturned the psychology of the image. The objectivity of the photograph confers upon it a power that is absent from all other images.[2]

Cumming's videos are full of moments that seem to invoke this passage; *A Prayer for Nettie* (1996) offers plenty of examples. Consider a sequence where an old man stands naked, holding a microphone and offering an awkward prayer for a woman he doesn't seem to have known. Offscreen we hear Cumming's voice interrupting him with directions: "Think of heaven, lift your chin." The camera moves around a lot, and slowly zooms in on his face. This is followed by a close-up of an old woman's belly button, a shot that zooms out to reveal that she is lying naked on her back — we understand this when we see Cumming's sandled feet perpendicular to her wrinkled body. Cumming is just barely present in these shots, but never visible. Given these sequences' artifice, their jagged combination of the staged and the spontaneous, not to mention the way that they make their subjects seem so vulnerable, so overwhelmingly present (nothing of them is hidden, it seems), Cumming's comparative absence is striking; you could say that the shots are founded on it. We are all, as I think Cumming knows, children of Bazin. That doesn't mean we all believe in the objectivity of the photographic image, but photography's claim to the status of truth is ever-present. By hovering on the frame the way he does in these sequences, and throughout his

work, Cumming is toying with just this sense of Bazinian absence, refusing to give his viewer a clear sense of the image's veracity. I know Cumming's improvisational, meandering style isn't exactly what Bazin had in mind (although it's not so far from the ideal of *camera stylo* proposed by Bazin's young colleague Alexander Astruc), but what we can see in many parts of *A Prayer for Nettie* are examples of the kind of radical psychological confusion that can occur when the "truth value" of the photographic image is invoked.

This tension between absence and presence also alludes to the collaborative nature of Cumming's videos. When Bazin draws attention to "a flower or a snowflake whose beauty is inseparable from its organic or telluric origins," he could easily be talking about the manic personalities and filthy apartments that give *After Brenda* its texture. There is a sequence in this video where Pierre, the "protagonist" of a sordid melodrama that is unfolding, is speaking on the soundtrack while the camera moves from the hallway to inside the apartment of his two friends. As Pierre details why he thinks his ex-girlfriend started cheating on him and eventually (allegedly) started working as a prostitute, we see close-ups of the domestic life that defines Pierre and his friends. The house is cluttered, the walls are filthy. There's junk scattered all over the floor. Cumming lingers on the overflowing garbage pail and then moves over to Pierre's friends, one of whom is an old guy lying on a bed with his shirt off (this is the guy, and indeed the position, that will form the entirety *of Karaoke,* 1998). These aspects of their lives elucidate the messy story that Pierre is telling in a way that has very little to do with either the visual/narrative coherence of Classical Hollywood (this narrative of Pierre and Brenda's affair and breakup is anything but efficient) or the visual/compositional clarity of a poetic aesthetic. This sequence gets its impact from the fact that the viewer focuses on the origins of the mess — life on Montreal's fringes — in the same way that Bazin's viewer focuses on the organic/"vegetative" origins of the flowers. Whether any of this narrative is "real" is unclear from the video itself, but it scarcely matters. The video is affecting not only because of what Cumming is doing with the camera or how he leads the narrative, but because of who these people he is recording seem to be. His subjects are just as responsible for the meaning of these videos as Cumming.

Much the same could be said for Cumming's three-minute, single-shot video *Karaoke.* This is comprised of Cumming slowly moving his camera in extreme close-up along the naked, sleeping body of that old man from *After Brenda;* on the soundtrack can be heard a recording of a folky song that is occasionally interrupted by a woman singing along. As his camera moves along this body and down the blanket, we eventually see a close-up of the old guy's toe, with long, yellow nails, tapping along to the beat of the tune. Cumming is again more or less absent from the frame. We don't even hear his voice this time, and the aesthetic itself is quite minimalist; the slow, gradual motion is notable for the way that it allows the subject's body to speak to us in a way that seems to have less to do with Cumming as an artist than with Cumming as a member of a community that happens to include this guy.

This is not to imply that Cumming is simply an objective observer, like many of the great documentarians thought they were (or at least wanted their viewers to think); he makes it clear that he's anything but. This is made clearest by the way that we hear him giving his subjects the occasional direction, or how at the end of some of his sequences we hear his voice trailing off, saying that was a good shot, that he'll keep that one. His role in both *After Brenda* and *Cut the Parrot* is difficult to ascertain; these videos seem to be narratives, but when his subjects are acting and when they are just sitting around talking to each other, well that's just an impossible distinction to make. That's why I have a hard time applying conventional ideas about the ethics of the artist or the agency of the subject; such concepts are all mixed up in these videos, there's nowhere to begin such an argument. Reviewing a 1994 exhibit of Cumming's photography (these images included many of the same people who wind up in these videos, and the same questions automatically present themselves about the electronic work), Guy Bellavance wondered:

> Were the subjects of these images consenting? Were they the object of manipulation? Did the models know that they were playing a role, were they advised of the uses that will be made of their image? Could this usage bring harsh judgment upon them?[3]

Speaking of the videos, about which these questions are no less relevant, the answer to Bellavance's first two queries is an unqualified yes. There is major manipulation happening here, but to say that the subjects are clearly consenting to that manipulation is an understatement; they are often participants in it, through their exaggerated, playful acting and performance as much as their impatience and disinterest in the proceedings. An early sequence in *A Prayer for Nettie* makes this abundantly clear: Cumming is off camera, talking at great length about Nettie's death to a friend of his, who is in a medium close-up and looking distracted. His friend is utterly uninterested in what Cumming is saying; he rubs his face, smokes, takes a drink, looks off into the distance, and gives only the most minimal, uh-huh, oh, is that right, eh? sorts of responses. The next sequence is of a different man, offering a prayer for Nettie that doesn't seem especially im-passioned or intimate (he keeps calling her "Nellie"); he doesn't seem to be taking this all that seriously either. So Cumming ups the ante a bit; the next sequence is the one I discussed earlier, where the guy is standing naked holding a microphone and offering a different prayer. This time, the prayer is even more rambling, he's still calling her "Nellie," and the artifice of it all is emphasized by that instruction of Cumming's to lift your chin and think of heaven. Who, exactly, it seems reasonable to ask, is being manipulated here? This guy, standing naked, taking directions? Or viewers who, like in all

CLOCKWISE: AFTER BRENDA, 1997, VIDEO STILL; CUT THE PARROT, 1996, VIDEO STILL; KARAOKE, 1998, VIDEO STILL; ERRATIC ANGEL, 1998, VIDEO STILL.

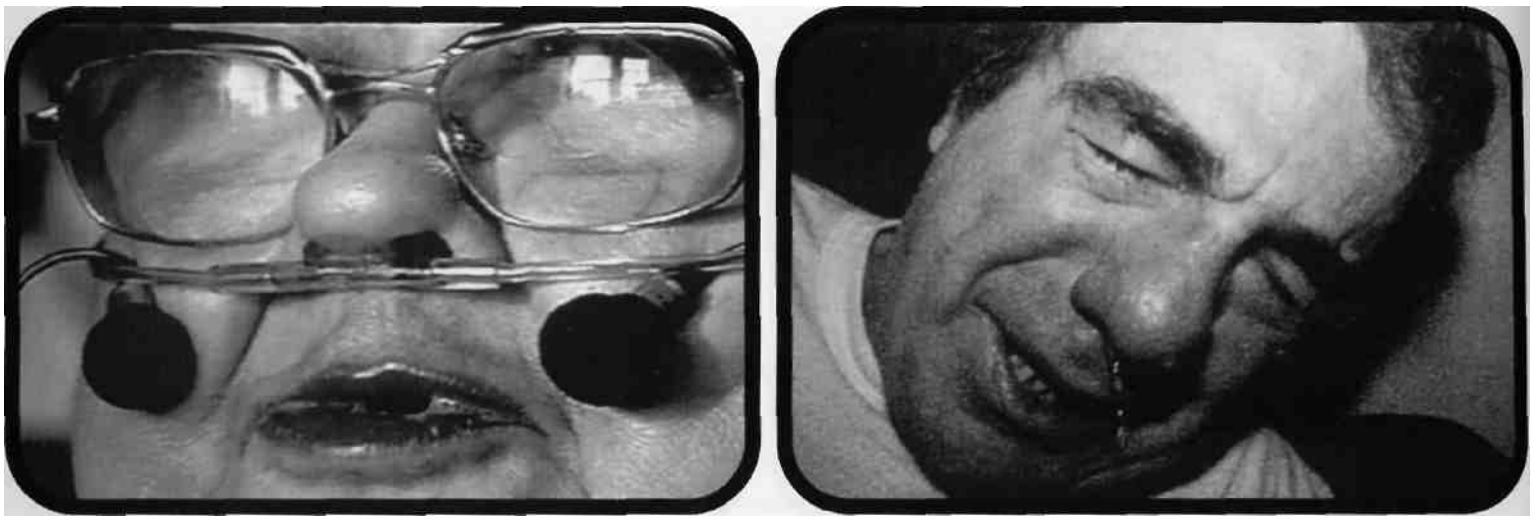
of Cumming's videos, are constantly having the rug pulled out from under them in terms of how involved they should become with these situations, how real they should think they are? Or is it Cumming himself who is being manipulated, since in sequences like these he ends up seeming to be the real eccentric in the crowd, with his tendency to talk a lot and to make bizarre requests of people who are all too happy to accommodate him?

I don't mean to skirt over the fact that Cumming, because he is the author of these works and therefore able to control what winds up in them, is both in a position of greater power than his subjects and in a position to benefit from the despair and melancholy he chronicles. Understanding these works as unambiguous pieces of manipulation, though, only as pieces of exploitation, is far too simplistic. I don't fault critics like Bellavance for asking the kinds of questions about his work that he does; they are important questions. Indeed, they are at the heart of Cumming's fairly unique videographic style. What's important to emphasize, though, is that in these works, such ever-present questions always remain unanswered. Nicolas Renaud, in a text written for Cumming's retrospective at the Cinémathèque québécoise, echoes this assessment when he states:

> This work whose subject is invariably social, even anthropological, demands attention by forcing open the doors of ethical debate. . . . There may be value in art that disturbs our values; even so, its working methods are bound to raise social and ethical questions that are not easy to resolve, and perhaps are not intended to be.[4]

What Cumming is nudging us towards is a new vision of the relationship between the documented and the documentary-maker.

Indeed, in trying to historically frame



DONIGAN CUMMING, A PRAYER FOR NETTIE, 1995, VIDEO STILL; PETIT JESUS, 1999, VIDEO STILL

Cumming's work, Renaud writes that:

> [L]ike when two cultures, two distinct groups col-lide, through ignorance of the other, sometimes until
>
> their destruction, there is still, strangely, an exchange, something that is born, and an entire chapter of ethnology is based on the study of this phenomenon. The films of Jean Rouch scoff at this tradition.[5]

I understand what Renaud is up to here; by invoking this great French ethnographic filmmaker, he no doubt has in mind the way that Rouch complicated subject/filmmaker relationships by applying ethnographic meth-ods to his own neighbourhood in Paris, or by showing the people filmed the raw footage and then filming their responses, thereby, like Cumming, involving them in the production of discourse about their lives. These Rouch trademarks, rightly centralized in the history of documentary filmmaking, are found in his classic I960 film *Chronique d'un été,* a work that simply could not be more different from Cumming's videos. The com-parison to Rouch is arguable; Cumming seems to have a similar interest in laying bare

the guts of image-making, in showing the viewer the process by which we come to understand a community, instead of merely making declarative statements and insisting that the viewer take what is shown on the screen to be real. Nevertheless, dwelling on it too long, making the mistake of thinking that these points of contact are central, would be to misread Cumming's very confusing, fragmented vision. Rouch, after all, always approached his cinematic project from the perspective of a politically engaged ethnographer; Cumming's videos aren't ethnographic, despite outward appearances, and they aren't political.

The question of the degree of political engagement illustrated by Cumming's videos is an important one, given the way in which he so closely details the material poverty of his subject's existence. The people we see in these videos all seem to be a bit down and out, many of them have problems with alcohol and drug addictions, and one of the subplots of *After Brenda* is how Pierre suddenly finds himself on the street. It's important not to make too much of these aspects of the narrative, though. Reviewing Cumming's recent exhibit of photographs at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Petra Halkes writes that his photos "block the smug feelings of sentiment or empathy with less fortunate fellowmen and women. So far so good, since such attitudes are shallow and not likely to lead to political change anyway."[6] Indeed not, and it would be a mistake to understand these works as pieces of emotionally manipulating exposé. The poverty of his subjects doesn't have an agitational effect on the viewer; instead, it contributes to the sense of shagginess and instability that marks all of these works on their visual and narrative levels. These are people whose lives are filled with junk that is falling apart, leading lives that are falling apart, and the subject of a video that, as it progresses, also seems to be falling apart.

This is especially true of *Cut the Parrot,* a video that in all the supplementary and secondary material I've read about dimming is inevitably described as his "comedy" *(After Brenda* is always described as his "romance"). The video has its funny bits, but what sticks in my mind the clearest is an odd sequence that comes in the middle of the work. Sitting in a chair, one of the female characters suddenly has an epileptic seizure; it's obviously and awkwardly acted, since she doesn't really fall to the floor (she almost climbs down) but she screams and hollers once she's underway. This is followed by a long take where she and

Cumming (Cumming behind the camera, she in close-up) talk about being happy ("I just like to be happy. I don't like crying, never did and never will), jealousy (would Cumming's partner be mad if she found out that he was here talking to her; uh, no, of course not), and on and on and on. Then, out of the blue, Cumming asks her to sing "Que sera sera," which she does (several verses!) in front of the camera. It is an indescribably powerful sequence, both lyrical and difficult to watch. The signifiers of Susan's poverty are inescapable: most of the shot is a close-up of her face so we can see quite clearly that she is missing several teeth, her apartment is tiny and just as squalid as the rest of Cumming's cast members, and she rambles and stumbles in such a way that it's hard to conclude she's not either drunk or mentally ill. None of the sorrow or anger that we might feel for these material conditions, though, can match the rawness of that deeply weird seizure scene, followed by that infuriatingly banal conversation, followed by that song. It's this kind of agitation that in-terests Cumming the most. His videos are centred around the delirious, semi-halluci-natory highs and lows that define these people's lives and that, whether we admit it or not, define everyone's lives in one way or another.

All of these videos feel like sketch work for what is without question Cumming's most accomplished, coherent video so far, *Erratic Angel. Cut the Parrot, After Brenda, Karaoke* and *A Prayer for Nettie* all dealt with death, imagined and actual, but in *Erratic Angel* death is embodied. That embodiment is in the form of Cumming's old friend Colin, whose life this video presents to us in excruciating detail. The lines between documen-tary and fiction aren't as blurred this time, but Cumming hasn't broken completely from the formal adventurousness of the earlier work; the video is still defined by a pronounced subjectivity that stretches documentary conventions. In place of fragmented improvisations, however, Cumming has opted here for dialogue with his friend. This means that Cumming's aesthetic flourishes not-withstanding (and don't get me wrong, he is often making choices that give the video real focus and beauty), *Erratic Angel* is so moving because, to invoke that Bazin schema again, of its origins in the material reality of Colin's situation. Finally, though, it's Cumming's influences that overpower the video, as it slowly becomes clear that his intention here is to mourn his friend, who we are watching as he slowly dies.

Once again Cumming's ostensible subject is the day-to-day life of people living in poverty and isolation, although in *Erratic Angel* the details of that existence are much more central. During many of his conversations with Colin, Cumming moves the camera away from the close-up of his face that he so often holds as he restlessly wanders along the little room his friend calls home. Like many of the dwellings Cumming has chronicled, it's impossibly cluttered, with open pill bottles and empty cigarette boxes everywhere. Over the course of chats and occasional rants, we learn just how complex Colin's life has become. "Being Colin is a full time job," Cumming said in a question and answer session following the video's screening at the 1998 Festival international nouveau cinéma nouveaux médias de Montréal, and that's made more than clear by the video itself. Like Cumming's other videos, the main subject here is the kind of chaos that overpowers and begins to destroy people. Unlike the other videos, though, chaos remains the subject of the work itself, not the video's overall modus operandi, as it was for the narrative structures of *Cut the Parrot* or *After Brenda.*

Indeed, there are no fragmented stories unfolding in *Erratic Angel,* only rambling, often angry discussions between two thoughtful men with great affection for one another. Colin, in distinction to the denizens of Cumming's other videos, has a lot of intelligent things to say, and has a good grasp on why he's wound up the way he has. The video's depth, its detailed sense of what can happen even in the most liberal welfare state, its complex vision of how personal responsibility and fate are hopelessly intertwined, is due very much to Colin himself, and his strange eloquence.

Still, though, there are some moments when Cumming's skill as a videographer takes centre stage: the best example of this comes at the end of the piece, when he and Colin are standing outside a Montréal hospital, right after the ice storm. Colin is really riled up at this point, rambling fast and furious about the indifference of some nurses to the plight of a woman he had helped into the hospital. Midway through the rant, Colin stops to admire some of the frozen trees. Cumming cuts to a shot of Colin inside on a bed, still talking, and after a bit Cumming fades to an image of the frozen trees, leaving Colin's voice on the soundtrack. He returns to Colin's face, but eventually lets his camera wander over to the window, and then moves back to Colin. Finally there's a brief fade to a gorgeous shot of frozen Montréal,[7] before Cumming closes with the shot that he opened with, a slow motion image of Colin's roommate, naked, jumping up and down. These images of the frozen city seem out of place, and as such they force the viewer to pull back, reminding us that this is a video, mediated by Cumming. But through this pull back, Cumming is not simply trying to assert his own voice lest he be drowned out by his verbose subject. Instead, he's trying to find some other expression for what his friend is experiencing, and trying to find such expression within the confines of his very spare cinematic style, a style that, despite occasional narrative messiness, he has consistently held to throughout his career. The aftermath of the ice storm, its craggy, jumbled beauty, serves as a spontaneous echo of Colin's life, but that symbolic gesture is made in such a way that it never strays very far from the simple, spare imagery of Colin himself.

There's a similar feel to a sequence where Colin goes to get a shave and a haircut. Cumming precedes the sequence with Colin talking about how depressed he's been feeling. This is followed by a series of images of Colin's haircut, of his beard half-shaved, of him wrapped in hot towels ("Wow, this is really working on my sinuses!") and of him chatting with the barber. Afterwards there's a shot of him lamenting that he'll be the

same in a few days, but the transformation is still remarkable - he's well dressed, thought-ful and thinking about the future (he says that if he has to do anything "official," like go to a funeral, he'll always get a shave and a haircut). Cumming invests this sequence with importance in terms of the video over-all, embellishing it with flourishes like fades and dissolves and toying with montage (this feels pretty lush in Cumming's spare aes-thetic universe, which is totally dominated by vérité-looking long takes), and inserting little bits of sensuality (like the hot towels shot). The impact becomes clearest when we see what a reborn guy Colin is, but that wouldn't have been as clear, as immediate,without Cumming's aesthetic intervention. Like the concluding sequence, the shave and haircut section is a potent example of what can happen when subject and artist are equal contributors to the final product.

Finally, though, this video belongs to Cumming, who seems to be making it as an act of mourning. Colin's life, we see over and over again, is now an empty shell compared to the intelligent, passionate guy he used to be. The mood that settles over the video is one of deep melancholy, an impossible desire on Cumming's part to recover the friend that's now lost to him, lost under the pile of pills and welfare appointments and arguments with nurses. Anticipating this use of the cinema, Bazin writes in that same essay that I quoted at the top of the paper that "since photography doesn't, like art, create eternity, it embalms time, it delays only its corruption."[8] There are no sentimental images of Colin's past that can recall better times; *Erratic Angel* is the cinematic equivalent of mummification, of embalming. It is, essentially, a dead object, but one so aestheticised that it suggests who the person was before he died.

I don't want to finally conclude, though, that Cumming's work is morbid, despite his ongoing concern with death. Instead, he makes videos that are deeply ambivalent, unafraid to express confusion about parts of the world that infrequently come into contact with mainstream society. One of the defining characteristics of that world is the constant presence of death. And I don't want to conclude that formally Cumming is rejecting everything that came before him in favour of a pared-down simplicity; his passion for collaboration and his love/hate relationship with photographic (videographic?) objectivity makes for a hybrid, conflicted style. To a certain extent, this is video degree zero, so I close with a quote from Roland Barthes:

> [I]n these neutral writings, called here "literature degree zero," one can easily discern the very movement of a negation, and the helplessness that accompanies it throughout, as if Literature, which has for a century tended to transmit its surface in a form without heredity, finds no more purity than in the absence of all signs, proposing then the fulfilment of this Orphic dream: a writer without Literature.[9]

Donigan Cumming is, in a similar way, a video maker without video art, refusing all but the most basic cinematic conventions and expectations. His work is important not because he makes use of flamboyant cine-linguistic demonstrations, but primarily because of the absence of such signs. His videos may look loopy, undisciplined and excessive, but a vision more consistent and pared down is hard to imagine.

NOTES

1. The invaluable Québec film webpage Hors Champ has published several essays about and interviews with Cumming, by Nicolas Renaud writing in French and Daniel Lynds and Sarah Rooney writing in English. Their address is www.horschamp.qc.ca.
2. André Bazin, "Ontologie de l'image photographique," in *Qu'est-ce que le cinema ? Tome 1. Ontologie et langage,* Paris: Éditions du cerf, 1958, p. 15. All translations in this article are by the author, unless otherwise noted.
3. Guy Bellavance, "Donigan Cumming," *Parachute,* # 73, January/February/March 1994, p. 43-
4. Nicolas Renaud, "Échange et conflit. Le rituel vidéographique de Donigan Cumming." Translation from exhibition notes for Cumming's "Barber's Music," Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1999, n.p.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Petra Halkes, "Photography," *Border Crossings,* #71, August 1999, p. 56.
7. Images of the ice storm are also the subject of Cumming's three-minute video, *Trip* (1999), which consists of him walking around frozen bushes in the city.
8. Bazin, *op. cit.,* p. 16.
9. Roland Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture,* Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1953/1972, pp. 9-10.

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L'auteur examine les récentes vidéos de Donigan Cumming, photographe cana-dien dont les portraits crus de gens pauvres et esseulés suscitent constamment la controverse. Ses vidéos poursuivent, et même accentuent, la morbidité de ses images photographiques par l'utilisation d'un langage documentaire dépouillé qui exacerbe la tension suivante : ses protagonistes sont-ils documentés de façon objective, acceptent-ils d'être mis en scène ou sont-ils manipulés? Selon l'auteur, les vidéos de Cumming sont importantes justement en raison de cette indétermination, leur force brute provenant du fait que l'artiste ne craint pas d'attirer l'attention sur des gens marginalisés et aussi d'exprimer un certain malaise.