

IN MY BACK YARD

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Abstract

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In My Back Yard is a documentary film that explores the changing landscape of the Mount Dennis neighbourhood in Toronto. This change is represented by the 54-acre Kodak site that is being transformed into the second largest transportation hub in the Greater Toronto Area.

The film employs a series of visual strategies and retells recent observations related to the impact of this massive infrastructure project on the people, the land and the urban wildlife. Local residents, politicians and community leader were consulted. Their interviews are combined with dioramas, archival photographs and time-lapse photography to express the multi-faceted list of community concerns.

This support paper attempts to define and analyse these struggles within the context of Leo Marx's 1964 work *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. This paper proposes that Marx's concept of the "middle landscape" helps to define the current struggle in Mount Dennis.

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Project Context

My property directly borders the Canadian Pacific, Canadian National, GO Transit, and Union-Pearson airport train services in the north-west Toronto neighbourhood of Mount Dennis. Specifically, my back yard runs parallel to these tracks. Stretching alongside the entire length of my 178-foot back yard is a 16-foot high noise wall that was installed by Metrolinx, the provincial transit agency in charge of the rail expansion. Prior to 2015 this area was a stretch of urban greenspace that had become home to hundreds of shrubs, weeds, grasses and trees as well as several urban wildlife species. This middle space had provided a naturalized buffer between the neighbourhood and the rail corridor for decades before the noise wall installation necessitated its clearcutting. By 2021 bisecting this rail corridor will be Mount Dennis Station. Slated to become the western terminus and maintenance storage facility for the Eglinton Crosstown Light Rail Transit line it will be the second largest transportation hub in the Greater Toronto Area.

The first rail line to run past what is now my back yard was built by the Grand Trunk Railway in 1856. Since then, the destiny of the neighbourhood has had a foothold in an industrial and subsequently post-industrial future.

In the Summer of 1913 The Eastman Kodak Company began construction on their new Canadian headquarters, which opened in 1916 and peaked to 3000 employees in the 1970s. By all accounts Mount Dennis grew up around Kodak. This large company created a critical mass for the neighbourhood that spurred on housing and retail development. Simultaneously, other industries took up residence in the area. The Canadian Cycle and Motor Company (now CCM) had their original factory just north of Mount Dennis and for a number of years was the only

bicycle manufacturer in Canada. By the 1950s the McQuay-Norris Manufacturing Company of Canada employed over 50 people producing automobile engines. All of this added to the development of the area and neatly divided spaces between industrial sites and suburban homes. Residential yards backed on to industrial grounds. Retail development came to thrive on the ever-increasing flurry of human ingenuity. People crisscrossed the railroad tracks gleefully on their way to school, church, and work. For a time, it seemed as though Mount Dennis actually achieved what Leo Marx defined as “the middle landscape.” In his 1964 book *The Machine in the Garden*, Marx characterizes the middle landscape as representing a harmonious space between the industries of men and a peaceful rural existence. Marx himself limits his ideas to rural America and views the middle landscape as likely unachievable: “After 1860...the middle landscape was no longer a realistic cultural ideal but a cheap rhetorical device masking a very different reality.”¹ Others, however, have picked up his ideas and applied them to non-rural situations. Howard Segal alters Marx’s language and asks us to consider the contemporary urban context. Instead of the machine in the garden he refers to the machine as being beside the garden. “Where the original version - Marx's exclusive version - of the middle landscape meant a fusion of nature and civilization, or garden and machine, the urban version meant instead the juxtaposition of them.”² As such, located adjacent to the rail corridor, my back yard is an “urban version” of the middle landscape.

All back yards, like ancient gardens, are an attempt to distill the idea of a middle landscape into a manageable experience. Back yards are real spaces, but they are imbued with subjective hopes and expectations. They claim to be natural, but they are also expected to be safe and tame.

¹ Howard P. Segal, "Leo Marx's "Middle Landscape": A Critique, a Revision, and an Appreciation." *Reviews in American History* 5, no. 1 (1977): 141.

² IBID

They are an admission that we must live in a society but also a refusal to give up the benefits of a more pastoral era. It is a compromise based on values. These values, however, are at times in direct conflict with each other.

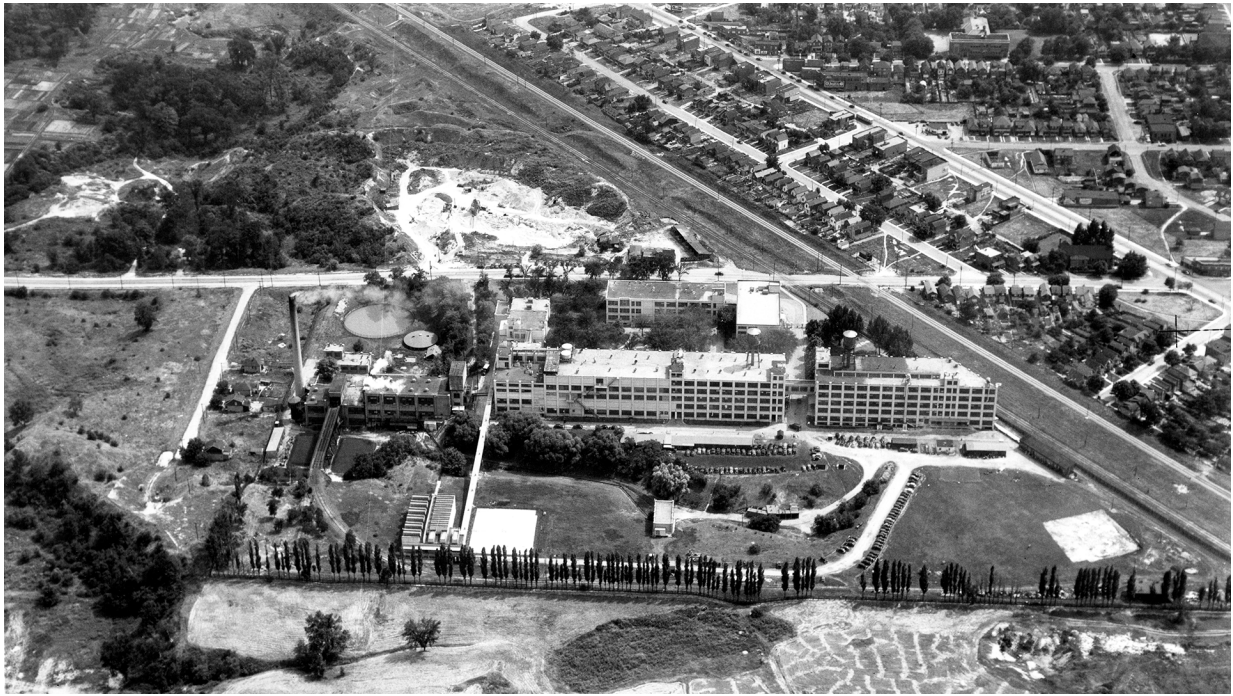


Fig. 1: Kodak Heights Campus 1937

In My Back Yard explores these conflicting values. It can also be viewed as my own search for a contemporary middle landscape. As Marx makes clear, the middle landscape does not allow for pastoral expectations but rather looks to balance the forces of nature with those of industrial progress. Industrial progress, however, constantly pushes these boundaries creating further incursions into the middle landscape.

These incursions prompted my engagement with local community organizations. It made me realize that my proximity to Canada's largest public infrastructure project made it essential to get involved and make myself aware.

The new LRT project serves as a symbol with a double meaning. To some it will help make the neighbourhood great again, a way to regain some of its lost urban vitality. To others it is the mournful and inevitable march of progress further destroying what little peace was left in the neighbourhood.

In Praise of the Common

In *The Machine In The Garden* Leo Marx describes the steam engine in the American landscape. He thinks of it as symbolizing the promethean progress of “advancing man” whose “invention of the mechanical art” has harnessed natural powers into a locomotive monster. This fire-powered, smoke-bellowing iron creature is thrust forth into an innocent and unsuspecting landscape. The pastoral illusion of the land is immediately erased “by the light fire and smoke which [the steam engine] vomits forth.”³ For Marx, the train pierced the serene countryside with progress. This progress occurred either temporarily with noise and smoke or more permanently with development and densification.

This is particularly true in the case of Mount Dennis and its big brother to the north, the town of Weston. In 1838, the town of Weston, which is located two kilometers north of Mount Dennis, donated the land to create the rail corridor for the Grand Trunk railway. Despite being a profitable rail company at the time, this was a seemingly essential gesture required to bribe the company into building the railway on the east side of the Humber River instead of the west side.

The history of the North American city seems to reflect this tension between building up society and longing for a return to the pastoral, even if this return is largely symbolic as in the case of the grey squirrel. The eastern grey squirrel was first introduced in the North American urban setting artificially in Philadelphia in 1847.⁴ The squirrels were captured in nearby forests and set loose in the city in order to appeal to city-dwellers’ pastoral desires. Initially, it was not

³ Leo Marx. *The Machine in the Garden*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 207.

⁴ *99 Percent Invisible*, Episode 342, “Uptown Squirrel,” directed/written/performed by Roman Mars & Kaitlyn Schwalje, aired April 30, 2019, on Radiotopia, <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/uptown-squirrel/>.

successful, and the squirrels mostly met tragic ends. This is because urban areas of the time lacked some of the re-naturalized amenities that we now take for granted; the main ones being greenery to hide in, clean water, and nut-bearing trees. It was not until the redesign of parks such as in Central Park in New York City in 1859 by Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmstead that squirrels and other urban wildlife started to thrive.

In My Back Yard is a film depicting everyday and common elements that are undervalued and overlooked in city life, elements such as urban habitat and wildlife. It is an exploration of what happens to the small things of value when put up against the mega forces of corporate capitalism. These are not simple battle lines, and the issues are not quite as clear cut as this David and Goliath image may imply. Take trees for instance. One of my subjects, Simon Chamberlain from the Mount Dennis Community Association, points out that even initiatives such as saving trees in the rail corridor can be controversial: “Some people hate trees”, Simon tells me, “because the roots get in the sewers... and one person said ‘they bring raccoons, and we don’t like that.’ So mixed feelings.”

In narrative we tend to position forces and characters as either good or evil. Narrative makes filmmakers reductionist. It is worth asking “what gets lost when story structures prevail?”⁵ as Alexandra Juhasz does in her *Beyond Story* manifesto. When freed from narrative structures, Juhasz proposes that “documentaries can prioritize spatial, graphic, interactive, atemporal, aesthetic, and abstract associations.”⁶ In narrative we must reduce our ideas to a series of chronological (or seemingly chronological) events. Then we must cut away from our subjects’ thoughtful oral record any phrase, word, or even syllable that does not serve the structure, which

⁵ "Beyond Story." Alexandra Juhasz. Accessed June 20, 2019. <http://alexandrajuhasz.com/curatorial-projects/beyond-story/>.

⁶ Ibid.

is an approach that is apparent in both broadcast and festival documentary work. Often this includes streamlining a story to focus on one main plot, providing a moral context for the world of that story and adhering to a predetermined amount of linear time. These conventions are important and cannot be easily discarded as they predate moving image narrative and draw from theatre. There, artists and producers always had a functional and tacit pact with the audience. It is possible and often desirable to challenge or even break these conventions, but doing so can burn up a considerable amount goodwill and make audiences ill at ease.

With *In My Back Yard* this problem prompted an ethical consideration. How do I keep my narrative engaging for the audience but still communicate accurately the greater complexities that my subjects are expressing?

When I make a list of the forces of good and evil present in the film, we see an uncomfortable amount of crossover. For example, the forces of good include the revitalization of Mount Dennis through the completion of this long-awaited transit project. It is expected that the LRT will usher in a return of jobs, increase property values, and return the neighbourhood to an era of vibrancy. The forces of evil include the loss of habitat and wildlife that is also the direct result of the implementation of the same transit expansion.

So, do squirrels serve as a symbol of the failed pastoral dreams of early European colonists to North America, or do they reflect a society vigorously searching for a middle space to live out their lives? If squirrels are a reminder of the failed pastoral ambitions of our colonial predecessors, trains then are a synecdoche of these early corporate industrialists' Promethean values: "To see a powerful, efficient machine in the landscape is to know the superiority of the

present to the past.”⁷ The struggle between the forces of pastoral romanticism and capitalist progressivism continues to play out in our landscapes, both external and internal.

Today new technologies promise us progress and connection. Devices such as smartphones that connect us to friends, colleagues, and family also tend to promote isolationism and detachment from one’s natural surroundings. This is sometimes to a point of self-danger as in instances of distracted driving or distracted walking. We keep stealing fire with no regard for what we are burning down, for what we are losing. In the Greek myth, Prometheus pays dearly for his decision. When and how will we pay for ours?

⁷ Leo Marx. *The Machine in the Garden*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 192.

Decline of the Inner Suburb

“As an inner-suburb, Weston-Mount Dennis manifests a spatial narrative that is in conflict with its current social realities. As in many North American cities, local industry has vanished and waves of immigration have dramatically transformed the urban social fabric.”⁸

In the mid-1990s, with the further decline of the manufacturing industries right across North America, Mount Dennis started to change. In 2005 Kodak closed its doors for good and moved to a small corporate office in the nearby City of Mississauga. This was the final nail in the coffin of Mount Dennis’ industrial era.

One of my film’s subjects, Mike Sullivan, is past Member of Parliament for York-South Weston. He sums up the demographic shift that has happened over the past 15 to 20 years in Mount Dennis. “The community is changing. It’s no longer the white middle class community it used to be. The community is changing from a manufacturing hub in the city of Toronto. All that stuff is gone. So we end up with a community that doesn’t have any jobs in it.”

What happens in a jobless community? House prices drop. Industrial properties are abandoned and left to become derelict. Healthy retail businesses move out and more predatory ones such as pay-day-loan outlets move in. This is the state in which we find Mount Dennis at the beginning of *In My Back Yard*.

⁸ Sarah Sharkey Pearce. "Weston Public and the Visualization of Social Processes", MFA Documentary Media, Ryerson University, MRP, 2010, p.6.

With the decreased property values and lack of industry, the population and character of Mount Dennis had changed. An increased number of high-rise apartments were built, and a large percentage of new Canadians, particularly from the Caribbean and Somali communities, took advantage of the cheap rent and relative proximity to downtown. The neighbourhood became under serviced by the municipality, and it started to fall into disrepair. Mount Dennis was practically abandoned by public officials. At one point in the 1970s the Richview Expressway was slated to demolish most of the neighbourhood. This project was stopped with the help of activist Jane Jacobs who was also instrumental in stopping the Spadina Expressway, a more well-known project that would have had a similar negative effect on vibrant local communities.

In recent years and mostly thanks to Hip Hop recording artist Aubrey Graham (more commonly known by his stage name Drake), Toronto has become popularly referred to as “The 6” or “The 6ix”. From his 2016 song “You and The 6,” Drake pines to his mother “Yeah, this is a crazy life / But you and the six raised me right / ‘Don’t ever take advice,’ that was great advice / You and the six raised me right, that shit saved my life”⁹ Here “The 6” means Toronto, but there is a double entendre. First, it refers in reductionist slang to “416”, Toronto’s main area code. Second and more importantly it refers to the six pre-amalgamation municipalities that made up the old Metro Toronto: Etobicoke, Toronto, York, North York, East York, and Scarborough.¹⁰ Whether by accident or as an intended socio-political comment, Drake deserves

⁹ Drake (Aubrey Graham), “You & The 6” Track 15 on *If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late.*, Cash Money Records, 2015, iTunes.

¹⁰ On the May 12, 2016 (se3 ep147) edition of The Tonight Show, Drake told host Jimmy Fallon ““Yes, our area code is 416....at one point Toronto was broken up into six areas (Old Toronto, Scarborough, East York, North York, Etobicoke and York), so it’s all clicking man.” (source: May 13, 2016 *Toronto Sun*: <https://torontosun.com/2016/05/13/drake-finally-explains-the-six/wcm/14bd7267-22e9-40b8-91db-54372acb32fa>)

credit for drawing attention to one simple fact: most people traditionally think of Toronto as geographically restricted to south of St. Clair Avenue, east of Dufferin Street and west of Woodbine Avenue. This psychological geography only includes the old City of Toronto and one pre-amalgamation city - the City of East York. The vast geographical and cultural significance of the other four inner suburbs is promptly disregarded and ignored. Could this be related to the racial and cultural make-up of these communities? My subject, Ahmed Abdi, thinks so. As a local resident and immigrant from Somalia Mr. Abdi grew up in north-west Toronto. He went to elementary school and high school here. All of his family and friends live in the area. In many ways Mr. Abdi is one of the most "Toronto people" I know. However, he finds that opportunities tend to bypass him for other people who are from the outer suburbs and beyond. In the construction industry Mr. Abdi describes a tribal mechanism. It seems the trade unions in the city would traditionally search as far as Barrie and Windsor for people rather than provide outreach to the local community. "All the people getting big money are from out of the city. They all throw shit at Toronto left and right and centre every chance they get ... 'Toronto is shit – I would never live here.' But people come work here." These individuals from Barrie and Windsor were not more qualified than Mr. Abdi, but as a person of colour, they were much more white than he is.

METHODOLOGY

The Film

In My Back Yard takes a personal “come follow me” approach to documentary filmmaking. It starts with a 45 second archival shot of a Grand Trunk Railway steam engine making its way across the Canadian landscape. Accompanied by what initially seems like a “voice of god” narration, a commonly held belief about rail development is expressed: “trains bring prosperity”. The film does not dispute this claim, but rather moves immediately to ask the question “prosperity for whom?” The film begins in earnest with a diorama of a pink house followed by an image of me raking leaves in my back yard. *In My Back Yard* employs a variety of visual styles including time-lapse photography, traditional journalistic interviews, found video footage as well as five dioramas.

The film describes our reasons for moving to the neighbourhood. A brief history and geography of Mount Dennis is conveyed by weaving together my voice-over and an interview with Toronto City Councillor (and past Mayor of the now-amalgamated City of York) Frances Nunziata. Councillor Nunziata is pro-development and makes that clear in my film. She is also very responsive to the community’s concerns and sees herself more as a problem solver than a flag waver of any political stripe.

The inciting incident of the film happens at the four-minute mark with the intrusion by a Metrolinx contractor into my space while I was filming his crew removing my neighbour’s tree. As I stood in my driveway with the camera rolling, the contractor approached me, asked why I was “taking pictures” and proceeded to thrust his hand in front of the camera lens. I responded with playful resistance at first but then conceded and stopped filming. This incident is the only

moment of true conflict in the narrative. It is affective because it is visceral. It is also exaggerated due to the proximity of the subject to the camera. Although the scene begins with a reasonably portioned medium shot (an image that becomes frozen in time in the second diorama) the subject quickly moves directly into the camera, intentionally trying to block my view of his workers with his body.

I believe it is DSLR camera technology that allowed the scene to be captured. The camera I was using (and used for much of the making of this documentary) is the Canon 5D MKii. It was designed as a professional still camera and very much looks like a still camera. The video function was an add-on in the original 5D model that proved revolutionary. The full frame sensor that records to 1920x1080 pixels at 23.976 frames per second combined with interchangeable photography lenses changed video making in many ways. The least of which is that it often gets taken for a still camera and not a video camera. Such was the case with this Metrolinx contractor.

As you can hear him say in the film: “Why are you taking pictures of my operation?” It is clear that he believes I am taking pictures and he does not realize that I am actively recording video and perhaps more importantly audio. In many ways his intentions are best captured in the audio recording. It is also this recording that I showed to the constable from the Toronto Police Service. It is this evidence that made my claims of physical contact indisputable and why ultimately the Metrolinx contractor was issued a warning for assault.¹¹

This incident launches the audience into the main action of the story. What follows is a series of interviews, more voice over, archival video footage, and stills. Through this material, I present a homeowner who is trying to come to grips with an unexpected reality. More deeply, it

¹¹ Constable Kaplouk(9308), Toronto Police Service. Incident Report#: 2015-539537. April 3, 2015.

is a quest to understand and recapture my own private middle landscape while accounting for larger political and social forces that exist outside of my back yard.

Gathering the Raw Material

In My Back Yard's narrative is spiral shaped. The story moves outwards from my back yard in a circular pattern and often returns to my yard. I use this as a device to seek out each subsequent interview with the next neighbour or community leader. This is function of the narrative, but also is true of the method I employed to gather both the audio, video, and graphic raw material which would eventually become this documentary film.

My research path starts with my neighbour a few weeks after the incident with the Metrolinx contractor and then leads me to her colleague and fellow tree advocate Simon Chamberlain who is a longstanding member of the Mount Dennis Community Association executive. He recommends that I pursue my research with two further individuals: David Watkins, a local volunteer from the Toronto Zoo and past Member of Parliament and poverty activist Mike Sullivan. Mike Sullivan then leads me to Toronto Community Benefits Network and Ahmed Abdi.

Making this documentary was a political act. It is the continuation of my own engagement with civic affairs and local politics that began in 2015. The film is intended to reflect and retell a drama that plays out in similar ways for thousands of other Canadians who have large public infrastructure projects in their proximity. It is the story of individuals who have or want to have a stake in building their community but who are often pushed aside by the large machinery of government and industry.

This film problematizes the planned gentrification of Mount Dennis as depicted in artist conception drawings and government PowerPoint slide decks in which the massive infrastructure project is made to appear idyllic. This stands in contrast to a visible and underwhelming reality for most people on the ground. This is in part why you will not hear from any representative

from Metrolinx in *In My Back Yard*. Instead the film gives voice to individuals and community leaders. These people have varying perspectives on the incoming light rail transit project and are all directly affected by it in one way or another. Despite this level of community involvement, *In My Back Yard* is told from my point of view. The film makes no claim to be balanced journalism and is literarily told in my own voice. Although I aim to tell my own truth and reflect the truth of the other subjects, objectivity does not exist in this film. Arguably objectivity is not even relevant to storytelling as every narrative is told with a particular voice. As documentary theorist Bill Nichols suggests, “voice is the means and ‘grain’ with which we speak and can never be added to or subtracted from what is said by the embodied self.”¹²

The decision to exclude Metrolinx interviews from the film (though not from my research) also brings up the issue of access. My access is minimal. I was introduced to both the community relations staff and some construction management and engineering staff at Metrolinx. I am a vocal critic of the project and take the time to call and email when I have concerns or questions. It is my feeling that the staff, as nice as they have been, view me as an adversarial local resident who needs appeasement. Anytime I have filmed Metrolinx staff on their job sites, I was told several times by multiple people that I would need to clear any footage with them before I even posted it to social media. As such, I did not want to give anymore screen time to their public relations machinery and decided to have local city councillor Frances Nunziata speak to the positive vision that she shares with Metrolinx. She has more credibility than any Metrolinx public relations representative could in these matters.

¹² Bill Nichols. "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject." *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 1 (2008): 9.

Interview Process

I conducted six on-camera interviews over a period of eight months with neighbours and community leaders in the area. Five of these interviews appear in the film. I also conducted three research interviews (audio only) with other community members. These individuals proved to be in some way either a double up of a perspective I was getting from another individual or whose perspective and key area of interest was just too far off topic to be included in my documentary.

With the exception of Simon Chamberlain, I conducted a pre-interview session with all of my subjects. Most of these took place at Supercoffee, a local coffee shop that opened just weeks before I moved to the neighbourhood. By now Supercoffee has quickly settled in to serve as a neighbourhood hot spot for an impressive cross section of individuals, though it bears the scent of gentrification. Conducting these interviews at Supercoffee was important as it accomplished two things: 1) it strongly tied the interview to the location of the documentary (the front window has full view of the Mount Dennis station construction site as well as a partial view of the old Kodak lands/Maintenance and Storage Facility site), and 2) it kept the interview informal and conversational.

Despite the lack of formality, I did bring a prepared list of interview questions. This list usually contained eight to 12 questions related to personal biography and knowledge of the subject area. I found that having taken the time to compose and type out the questions that I only had to refer to the page infrequently.

The on-camera interviews were conducted much more formally in a prescribed location with a crew of two to three total. For indoor shoots I used two 600w LED lights and shot primarily on the Canon 5D MKii. At the end of the interview, once I was finished with my list of questions, I asked the subject if there was anything else that they wished to add. Several subjects had an

additional five to ten minutes of material to offer. Some of this became integral to the narrative of this film. This was the case with Frances Nunziata's story about the cancelling of the original Eglinton subway line.

Another technique I employed was to ensure that I acquired two types of shots: 1) active shots of my subject doing something related to my area of interest and 2) silent onscreen shots of my subjects. These are sometimes referred to as “hero shots” in reality television or “video portraits” in sports television. These shots are meant to elevate and isolate the individual in a stylized aesthetic. They present the subject as both central to the story and their character is slightly deified.

Activity shots are important to my editing approach. They also give the viewer a context, however small or peripheral, for each individual. These were acquired either in the style of a tour of a certain landscape or as a reenactment as in Ahmed’s case. In his interview, we filmed him putting his coat on in the parkade and driving away as he would on a regular workday. The interview was conducted on a Sunday and the performance was staged for the camera.

I also took the time to compose, with the help of my camera operator, at least two different silent onscreen or “hero” shots of my subjects. These are generally medium to close shots of the individual in a meaningful environment or context. The most important part is for the subject to not be speaking. They are useful as introductory images. The challenge is to compose an image that is slightly heightened and dramatic without being condescending.



Fig. 2: Mike Sullivan “hero shot”



Fig. 3: David Watkins “hero shot”

Editing Approach

My original intention was to have as little of my voice in the film as possible. I had hoped that all of the speaking would come from my interview subjects. This was both an ethical concern as well as a stylistic preference. My thinking was that it is better that my interview subjects speak for themselves. What I came to realize is that the need for efficiency imposed by my chosen narrative structure overruled my stylistic and ethical desire to have my subjects speak for themselves entirely. As the project progressed, the feedback I received kept urging me to connect the dots more directly for the audience. As I did so with more voice-over and eventually using more cut-away shots of myself, the response was positive. Colleagues started to say things such as “I never really got that before, but it’s very clear now.” I felt it served my subjects well to provide direct set-up to their points. This has turned the film much more into a personal journey than I had ever anticipated. I had always wanted the film to be a discussion about the unexpected and often negative way in which this rail expansion project has impacted a handful of people, some of whom I already knew and some of whom I have come to know. Using my own story as a frame on which to hang these other perspectives seems like a reasonable structural solution, if a bit simplistic. It does have the positive impact of laying bare my own self-interest. Having some knowledge of this provides the audience with a frame of reference. My hope is that it also makes the issues more relatable.

Despite being rooted in a personal narrative, *In My Back Yard* embraces a variety of visual styles. These include journalistic-style interviews, micro-drone footage, time-lapse photography, Google Earth map animations, archival video footage, found still photos, and archival newspaper articles.

To counter the ground-level perspective of the film, one of the most important shots is a micro drone shot. This shot reveals the proximity of the old Kodak lands and future Mount Dennis LRT station. Despite experimenting extensively, only three short drone shots are used in the film. Ultimately, I found that Google Earth Pro was able to provide a better resource for high quality aerial photography.

Google Earth Pro map animations are available free to anyone who is inclined to learn the interface. It produces images that are up to 3840 X 2160 pixels at 168Mbps. In my case, these video animations were imported into Adobe After Effects and cropped accordingly for a 1920x1080 HD AVID Media Composer timeline. I use three short animations from this interface to help illustrate a change in location, to show the changing landscape of the Kodak site over time and to show the proximity of the tracks to people's houses.

Time lapse photography is also used. I acquired this by way of a raised platform specifically installed for filming this project. It sits nine feet in the air, giving me access to the top third clear acrylic portion of the Metrolinx noise wall. This photography shows the progression of Canada's largest public infrastructure project over a three-month period. It is intended to offer the viewer a further sense of proximity and a sense of the huge scale of the Eglinton Crosstown LRT project.



Fig. 4: Filming platform

Found still photos, newspaper articles, news clips, and archival films are all used within the film. This mélange of material serves one main purpose - communicating context. Whether these are still photos acquired from my neighbour, newspaper clipping on the civic issues or Peter Mansbridge talking about Mayor Mel Lastman, they are all used as quick “cheats” to lend my argument credibility.

Diorama constructions are also used as a stylized way to change scenes and continuously return the documentary to my back yard. The technique involved building five customized dioramas. Each are based on the composition of an ending or beginning frame from a scene in the film. This allowed me to blend the actual scene with the diorama. Then the camera pulls out to reveal that the diorama is actually (and sometimes strangely) placed in my back yard.

This visual strategy achieves two structural necessities. First, it provides me with a way to visually represent a scene or situation in which very little authentic visual material is available. This is employed most essentially in the inciting incident scene with the “guy from Metrolinx.” In this situation I have 18 seconds of video to work with, yet the scene required 213 seconds of explanation. The diorama allows me to expand visual time. By cutting together a sequence of this still scene of the diorama from different angles, I was able to keep the visual story moving alongside the voice-over.

The dioramas are used in a second way that was key to the structure of the film. They provide me with a technique to return the story visually back to the back yard. This allows me to pivot the story in any direction. An example of this is the transition from the scene with David Watkins and the bat house to the scene with my neighbor Gladys Azucena. The bat house appears in my backyard tree, and the film’s locale is seamlessly altered without verbal explanation.

Employing these dioramas in this way moves the film into a very performative style and into the “representational”¹³ camp of documentary. “The fundamental issue with documentary film is the way in which we are invited to access the ‘document’ or ‘record’ through representation or interpretation.”¹⁴ Stella Bruzzi pits representational films up against evidentiary ones whereas I attempt to merge the two forms by directly overlaying an element of performativity on top of a functioning piece of video evidence. My short 18 second video of the Metrolinx contractor is the Zapruder film of this narrative. It did in fact function as evidence when officers from the Toronto Police Service were called and faced what initially appeared to be a “his word against mine” scenario.

¹³ Stella Bruzzi. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2011. 12

¹⁴ Ibid.

In the film however I do not dissect this video evidence itself to draw out the narrative. Instead I impose a falsified and expressionist version of the same evidence through the creation and showing of the diorama. This is a clear signal to the audience that we have left the land of the evidentiary and ventured into the valley of the representational.

The dioramas were custom built by artist and ex-Cirque du Soleil performer Eric Goulem. Goulem is currently a home renovator and aspiring animator. We became friends while working on the installation crew at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in the mid 2000s. We reconnected when I discovered some of his recent diorama work on social media, including one depicting a scene from the AMC TV show *Breaking Bad*.



Fig. 5: *breaking bad* by Eric Goulem

DOCUMENTARY RELEVANCE

Personal Storytelling

“These new self-reflexive documentaries mix observational passages with interviews, the voice-over of the film-maker with intertitles, making patently clear what has been implicit all along: documentaries always were forms of re-presentation, never clear windows onto "reality"; the film-maker was always a participant-witness and an active fabricator of meaning, a producer of cinematic discourse rather than a neutral or all-knowing reporter of the way things truly are.”¹⁵

John Grierson, who first coined the term “documentary,” was brought up in the Calvinist church. It seems likely that this deistic and anthropocentric understanding of the world influenced the development of Grierson’s own “voice of god” narration strategy. Bill Nichols defines this voice-over style as “overwhelmingly didactic,” and says “it employed a supposedly authoritative yet often presumptuous off-screen narration.”¹⁶ This type of voice-over was acceptable in a time when documentary film’s purpose was “to embody a truth about historical experience.”¹⁷ This style of top-down authoritative voice-over reigned over a film’s direction, style, and images. Eventually this style fell into ill repute as documentarians worked through what Nichols called “a process of evolving alternatives.” Nichols does not go so far as to directly attribute this to the emergence of rights-based societies after the Second World War but it seems

¹⁵ Bill Nichols. “The Voice of Documentary”. *Film Quarterly Vol 36, No 3* (Spring 1983) 18.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Michael A. Unger. “The Extreme Subjectivity of Ross McElwee: Home as Docu-Movie”, *Studies in Documentary Film, Vol. 9, No. 3.* (2015)191.

logical that this change in style and substance is somehow linked to the rejection in Western nations of most forms of overt totalitarianism. As technologies advanced, so did new audio strategies and techniques. As non-didactic forms of documentary grew, these new self-reflexive documentaries that Nichols refers to start to emerge.

In My Back Yard is an act of personal storytelling. It is diaristic but not confessional. It uses my personal story to provide a structure on which to hang the key elements of narrative and character. In both my filming and post-production processes I have been inspired and influenced by the techniques of several filmmakers studied over the course of this degree. In this I have benefited from the work of Michael Moore and Ross McElwee. The narrator returns in such films as Ross McElwee's *Bright Leaves* and Michael Moore's *Roger and Me*, but they are no longer the disembodied authorities of knowledge.

Michael Moore personifies a genre of the "doofus documentary." He has impact thanks to his low status and he uses the trope of the powerless citizen railing against the faceless corporation to maximum effect. The notion of the lowbrow citizen filmmaker bumbling up against the powers that be seems to ring true on some level with my approach to *In My Back Yard*. Positioning oneself on the side of the community grants a filmmaker both credibility and access. Credibility because by the very act of making the film you are voicing a protest. It is this credibility that will often grant access and make others in the community feel as though the filmmaker is on their side or at least sympathetic to their cause or beliefs.

Ross McElwee is another filmmaker whose work I can cite as similar in form. This is particularly true in his 2004 film *Bright Leaves* that explores his community's relationship to the tobacco plant. McElwee's own interest in the subject is prompted by the discovery of the Hollywood film "Bright Leaf." This film, his cousin proposes, may have been based on their

great-grandfather's own rise and fall in tobacco industry. Through this singular issue McElwee reaches deep into his community and his personal life to look at the issues of racism and commerce from some unexpected angles. The local, the personal, and the political all blend to form a poetic essay on the topic.

Like my own, McElwee's personal journey meanders throughout the landscape, stopping to talk to almost anyone that will speak to him. There is no real plot. However, the journey does culminate around a set of themes and ideas that are considerably larger than a slice-of-life micro-biography of the filmmaker.

Sharon Roseman says McElwee "not only seems to comment on the routinized lives of those presented but also questions the possibility of representing them"¹⁸ and points to the need to balance authenticity with actual truth. Documentarians such as McElwee are criticized for lacking "verifiable knowledge"¹⁹, but his creative treatment adds to the importance of his quest. The seeming smallness of McElwee's narrative journey provides us with authenticity and gives us a reason to care.

McElwee's films set up a struggle between objective truth and subjective reality. This a struggle that is present in my film as well. There is a need for balance when attempting to convey the truth through diaristic filmmaking, but it is through the admission of subjectivity that the audience is given the appropriate filter with which to decide the greater thematic truths. Linda Alcoff tells us that "the neutrality of the theorizer can no longer, can never again, be

¹⁸ Sharon R Roseman. "A Documentary Fiction and Ethnographic Production: An Analysis of *Sherman's March*." *Cultural Anthropology* 6, no. 4 (1991): 517.

¹⁹ Michael A. Unger. "The Extreme subjectivity of Ross McElwee: Home As Docu-Movie", *Studies In Documentary Film*, Vol. 9, No. 3. (2015): 90.

sustained, even for a moment. Critical theory, discourses of empowerment, psychoanalytic theory, post-structuralism, feminist, and anticolonialist theories have all concurred on this point. Who is speaking to whom turns out to be as important for meaning and truth as what is said.”²⁰ The spirit of the “objective” has been exorcised. In response, *In My Back Yard* attempts to provide a transparent positionality and clearly state (even through the title of the film) that this story is told from a very specific geographical position and personal point of view. Rather than negating objective truth altogether, this fore-fronted admission of overt positionality proposes one of many possible truths and invites the layering of other perspectives by both its subjects and the audience.

Though a personal story, *In My Back Yard* attempts to move out of the back yard and into the larger community. My back yard becomes a symbol for many different neighbourhood concerns. In this way, I use my positionality (and my proximity to the project) as a proxy for some of the other concerns in the community.

Like McElwee and Moore, I employ a dialogic literary voice-over that is “obviously written, recorded and performed carefully after the shooting of the scene or event, but delivered in the present tense.”²¹ Both use voice-over for irony which in some cases is comedic as in McElwee’s. For example, in *Bright Leaves* (2004), McElwee says: “I am being dogged by my own self doubts” as he is being chased by a small dog in a field.²²

²⁰ Linda Alcoff. “The Problem of Speaking for Others.” *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (1991): 12.

²¹ Michael A. Unger. “The Extreme subjectivity of Ross McElwee: Home As Docu-Movie”, *Studies In Documentary Film*, Vol. 9, No. 3. (2015): 193.

²² Ibid, 194.

McElwee uses two different voice-over strategies: direct address to the camera as well as post-written literary voice-over. His voice-over at times even comments on his direct address as in *Time Indefinite* (1993) when his voice-over actively criticizes his direct address, wondering if what he says is “too morose.”

In My Back Yard makes full use of a literary voice-over that is not dissimilar to those of McElwee and Moore. It is employed with full knowledge in a post-production setting. Although I am speaking directly to the audience, this is never done on-camera directly. Mostly it is used for efficiency: teeing up subjects’ comments by providing context and summary.

I too make attempts at ironic comedy as in the joke about the Mayor of Toronto calling in the army when I spot armoured military vehicles being transported through the rail corridor.

The dioramas present in an ironic manner, both by their animated, comedic visual nature and by the placement in the frame. This is particularly apparent when the diorama is revealed to be placed in the wider context, often haphazardly.

Irony provides an immediate source of comedy and as such is innately emotional. Accessing a viewer’s emotional response is advantageous. Comedy, when successful, breeds trust and encourages an audience to let down their guard. This receptiveness serves the film’s narrative and encourages communication.

(Re) Staging Reality

“Bill Nichols recalls for us the Aristotelian triad of proofs operative in the documentary: ethical, emotional, and demonstrative. We can be persuaded by the ethical status of the filmmaker or interview subject, by the tug of heartstrings, or by a barrage of bar graphs “²³

John Grierson infamously coined the term “documentary” and then went on to define it as the “creative treatment of actuality.”²⁴ While the film *In My Back Yard* is certainly not short on creative treatment, there are two overtly presentational elements. Each involves a theatrical re-staging of events for the camera. They are the use of five dioramas and the use of a dramatic reenactment.

Other documentary artists have used dioramas. The diorama concept can be seen rooted in two distinct documentary works: Rithy Panh's *The Missing Picture* and Jeff Malmberg's *Marwencol*. These works use the strategy of visual replacement through crude animation to help their audience see a hidden aspect of their stories.

In *The Missing Picture*, Panh uses figurines created by Sarith Mang to reimagine the missing histories of victims of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. These figurines feed into dioramas and eventually take on a life-like feeling. “The clay figures embody two challenges of

²³ Michael Renov “Toward a Poetics of Documentary” *Theorizing Documentary*, Routledge, New York, 1993. 30.

²⁴ Susan Kerrigan & Phillip McIntyre. (2010). “The Creative Treatment of Actuality: Rationalizing and Reconceptualizing the Notion of Creativity for Documentary Practice.” *Journal of Media Practice* vol 11 no. 2 (2010): 113.

representation: the one that occurs when the magnitude of history (and its horrors) defies contained expression and the one that addresses a still-current experience of trauma that requires integration into a personal narrative.”²⁵ In Panh’s case this presents his audience with an alternate visual history, which may allow them to reimagine a forgotten truth. This truth, however, is not presented as an alternate propaganda. It is an exploratory and participatory truth in which we see the active hand of the filmmaker who is crafting the story before our eyes. This is represented by the actual on-screen hand of figurine sculptor Sarith Mang who we see painting and inserting the figurines. This signals to the audience that there is more than one truth and that the official history may be called into question. This brings into question the validity of some of the archival footage that Panh himself presents throughout the film. By presenting conflicting accounts, Panh seems to be juxtaposing the official version with the multi-faceted mutable version of his subjects in order to get his audience to question where the truth actually lies.

The 2010 bio documentary *Marwencol* by Jeff Malmberg shows how a subject uses toy figurines and dolls to understand his own strange narrative trajectory. The film's subject Mark Hogancamp was nearly beaten to death outside a bar in a small New York town. Having suffered a brain injury, Hogancamp's life is forever changed. Aside from working at a local restaurant, much of his time is spent repositioning his dolls and figurines as if they were living characters affecting his own life's problems.

In all of these cases, the miniature renditions function as a way of dealing with personal trauma. This creates an effective counterpoint in these films. There is a contrast that exists in the child-like whimsical nature of the miniatures and the weighty stories they tell.

²⁵ Leshu Torchin. " Mediation and Remediation: La Parole Filmée in Rithy Panh's *The Missing Picture* (L'image Manquante)" *Film Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (2014): 7.

Instead of the dioramas representing moments of trauma in my film we see the inverse. My dioramas are moments of curiosity or inquiry, such as with the second and third dioramas: the Metrolinx contactors and the woodpecker in the bat house. By taking scenes out of the context literally and physically, the dioramas accomplish two things: 1) This promotes the image to icon status and, 2) this freezes that moment in time for examination. It breaks down the fourth wall with the audience in a Brechtian manner. This “making strange” allows for momentarily reassessment of the character and the narrative presented. In my film, for example, turning the Metrolinx contractor into a pseudo-animated entity is both disarming and alters the power dynamic. It removes the tension that is present in the actual scene and replaces it with an editorialized visual signifier of the scene. The “danger” sign for example is highlighted in the diorama, as is the contractor’s grimace. This moment dissipates the tension and provides comic relief. It allows for distance to emerge and for critical assessment to occur.

In addition to the use of dioramas, *In My Back Yard* employs the use of dramatic reenactments of three minor events: the rattling teacup, fake yard work, and Ahmed’s driving.

The rattling teacup would never rattle in the location in which it is shown. This is a distilled representation of a series of aural and vibrational intrusions that we have experienced since moving to our house. These vibrations vary but are all a direct result of the expansion of the rail corridor. The thud-thud of the passing train is felt in our kitchen and living room every 15 minutes and is a direct result of Metrolinx’s failed promise to install anti-vibration ballast mats on one of the four track beds. In actuality, the vibration rattles the pots and pans that hang in our kitchen and even shakes spices out of the rack some days, but it does not spill tea in the way depicted on camera. This device amounts to a highly stylized distillation of a series of real but difficult to visually depict actualities. These are mostly vibrational in nature and are often not

even capturable by audio recorders. The shaking teacup encapsulates the essence of the industrial vibration and noise that regularly interrupts our domestic landscape.

The yard work I perform throughout the film is also staged for the camera. In fact, the shooting of these activities had the opposite impact and actually made the yard messier. The shoot necessitated a day of walking back and forth across the yard while it was over saturated with groundwater from an unseasonably rainy spring. As a result, some minor damage to the grass and shrubs occurred.

During the interview session, I request that my interview subjects partake in at least one staged activity in order to provide meaningful context and b-roll to inter splice in the cut. For technical purposes this helps cover interview jump cuts. I employed this technique with most of my interview subjects; however, there are only two that remain in the final cut of the film. An example of this is driving to work with Ahmed which starts and finishes his interview. This event was staged.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The Problem with Narrative

Narrative when at its best engages in a search for truth. This is the case in theatre and literature as well as both fiction and non-fiction film. In his radio essay “The Vestigial Tale” documentary-maker Chris Brookes surmises that our species’ ability and obsession with storytelling has been an evolutionary advantage. Narrative, Brookes proposes, was used to convey complex process-based information that allowed early hunter-gathers societies to cooperate on tasks such as hunting large game. Narrative functioned as an educational system that allowed our ancestors to engage in an ever-growing number of “complex resource extraction techniques”²⁶ and provided an advantage in natural selection.

Narrative is a powerful form and like most powerful elements it has often been co-opted to intentionally mislead or negate reality instead of representing it. This is overtly the case with propaganda. The films of Leni Riefenstahl are one example. But narrative suffers from another, more subtle shortcoming. This shortcoming paradoxically is also its advantage. Narrative exists in linear time. Not every story has to be told chronologically, but every story acknowledges and pays homage to the fact that experiential time travels in a linear manner. Even in films where time is given an innovative treatment, it inevitably points back to the presupposed function of linear time that film-based media is locked into.

Narrative is a restrictive mechanism for discussing ideas. Narrative time, however, offers an advantage. In film, time acts as a container in which the audience agrees to immerse oneself for

²⁶ Michelle Scalise Sugiyama. Accessed June 20, 2019. <https://pages.uoregon.edu/mscalise/>.

a finite period. They are assured that a conclusion will be drawn or at the very least that the film will end. Unlike conceptual art or experimental films, for example, narrative films do most of the mental heavy lifting for their audiences. This can be viewed negatively as pandering or conversely positively as providing a benefit and easing a burden. Narrative must serve two masters: both the conceptual framework of the filmmaker as well as the interests of the audience. Alexandra Juhasz rejects narrative structures because they tend to not allow for “new spheres for reality-based expression,”²⁷ However, I aim to make use of these structures to do just that – create a semi-fictional space that draws out the real.

In My Back Yard is not meant to present the truth. The words and actions of myself and the other subjects of my film are certainly rooted in real experience and convey real events that actually did happen. However, the more prevalent meaning is derived from its creation as a film. On screen my subjects combine with my literary voice-over, the five dioramas, authentic and found sound effects, as well as some other gathered visual material such as photographs and Google Earth animations to create an expressive version of reality.

Documentary itself may be viewed as searching for its own unachievable middle landscape: stuck between the natural world and the simulacra of mechanical representation of the world. “As with the locomotive, the exemplary ‘machine in the garden,’ the mid-nineteenth-century camera represented both the triumph of scientific progress and a key productive agent in the generation of images of nature and culture.”²⁸

²⁷ "Beyond Story." Alexandra Juhasz. Accessed June 20, 2019. <http://alexandrajuhasz.com/curatorial-projects/beyond-story/>.

²⁸ Deborah Bright. "The Machine in the Garden Revisited: American Environmentalism and Photographic Aesthetics." *Art Journal* 51, no. 2 (1992): 6.

Using the machinery of cinema, *In My Back Yard* records a moment in history that will have a profound and permanent impact on my community. Roland Barthes said “Historical discourse does not follow reality, it only signifies it. It asserts at every moment: *this happened*, but the meaning conveyed is only that someone is making that assertion.”²⁹

By making this film I am a witness to this changing landscape. I am also attempting to assert my back yard (and by extension other private and public spaces in the neighbourhood) as a site of resistance to the forces of industry and commerce that willfully ignore community values.

These values are in themselves nonhomogeneous and take effort to ascertain and unpack. One of these values is depicted in the final scene of the film in which a cardinal and her mate return to the yard to eat from the birdfeeder I installed. The female feeds the male and domestic harmony briefly returns only to be interrupted by the passing train. This is the rhythm of the middle landscape. This is the rhythm of my back yard.

Word count: 8644

²⁹ Roland Barthes, "Historical Discourse," *Introduction to Structuralism*, ed. Michael Lane (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1970), 154.

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