



Shorts Program 8: Meditations (Experimental) – (CIFF 2018)

*reviews of BLUE, THE REMEMBERED FILM, OPTIMISM,
CREATURE COMPANION
by Jim Laczkowski*



As I sit down to write this, I realize that things have gone from difficult to semi-difficult in my life as of late. Favorite distractions like film, music and podcasts are not working the way they used to. No need to elaborate, but let's just say that I've been better and most days feel like a struggle and a challenge. Sitting down to write reviews is something I enjoy, while watching movies, even when it's many in a short span of time, I enjoy even more of course. But I hit a wall. I was sitting down at the AMC River East in a great mood after one screening, when the shorts program began.

There were a lot of attendees of different personalities, including what I assumed to be was a filmmaker in the row behind me since they were handed a hard drive from a friend that contained 1 TB of video footage as labeled on the front. When the first film began I almost

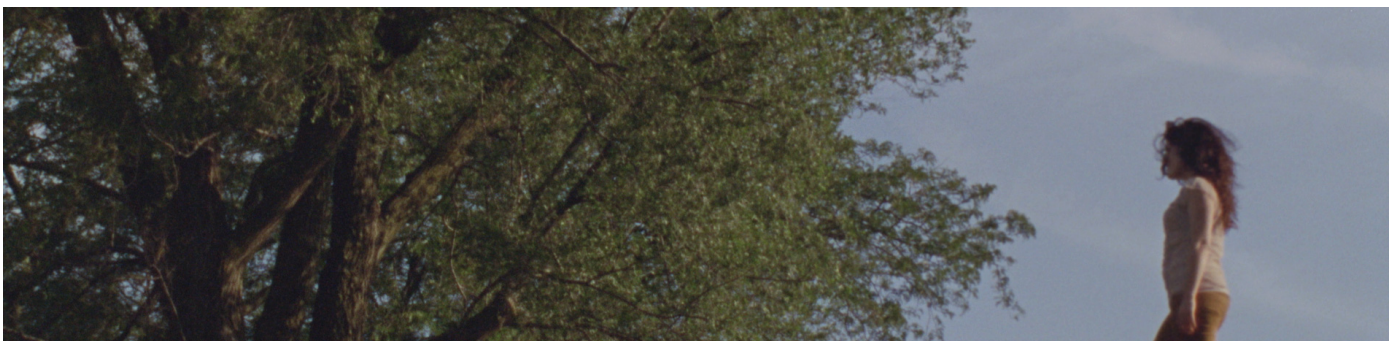
sensed immediate joy and to some degree, a little trepidation. The joy was from the experience of seeing something that was less about traditional storytelling and more about mood. The trepidation came from the fact that I knew I would have little to no clue as to how to write about any of the films, because they are not based in action or words for the most part. Yes, there is dialogue spoken or recorded throughout each short, but they're something far more cerebral and distinctive. I know "experimental" was in the title of the showcase but they were all awe-inspiring in their audacity. It was like a light switch turned off all of my personal concerns and anxieties and a different part of my brain was engaged for the nearly 80-minute running time. I knew deep down I was going to try and "review" each film separately, without taking notes or letting myself be distracted. There was one distraction, however, since the viewer next to me was pretty much perplexed from the get-go. His body language, showcased to his friend, was evident. I think he more or less accepted the first feature, but the last two, which I consider to be monumental achievements, this guy was just not having it. Arms went up in disbelief. His head would consistently shake with disapproval or he would bury it in his lap. Never before had my peripheral vision been exposed to such rubbery Jim Carrey-esque antics and expressions that can only be read as "WTF am I watching?"



That's the joy and the thrill of attending a film festival, particularly Chicago's. You will not likely get another chance to see these types of films from Belgium, Thailand or the US on the big screen, at least in a row. Thankfully there are ways to catch these films if you do your research but like most films, they benefit from the distraction-free theater experience. Granted, the first film, *Blue*, was conceived by the great Apichatpong

Weerasethakul who is responsible for *Cemetery of Splendour* among many other brain busters that are exercises in meditation and quiet stillness. Since I find the process of disturbed sleep and deep dreaming endlessly compelling, even in this kind of milieu which is exquisitely crafted from the start, I was in for this slow burn that ends with a sigh. It's short, sweet, and mesmerizing in its simplicity. Like all of the films, I don't know specifically how to recommend it in a way that would make sense and like his previous work, I could see it being completely distancing. I almost liken it as literal meditation brought to life visually right before our eyes mixed with a restless need for calm. Which doesn't hold true for the next feature, *The Remembered Film*. This one remains the most accessible of the bunch though my least favorite. There are laughs and memorable imagery to be certain but I didn't feel quite as challenged in a way that made as strong of an impression as the other selections. Not to discount its subtlety but there was a stretch of dialogue spoken to the camera that felt a little lost in the shuffle. It's more of a lighthearted film connecting invention and storytelling to the uncompromising reality of war. A bit of a blend of non-fiction and what I presume to be, improvisational recounts from young faces. It was worth a look but not quite in the same league as the rest.

The last two are really something special in the way they play with narrative, expectation, time but in dramatically different formats. *Optimism* came to my attention based on the name Deborah Stratman, whose phenomenal documentary, *The Illinois Parables* remains a masterpiece and a breakthrough in the majestic execution of how various historical retellings can be fashioned. The same holds true with her latest in its challenging, fractured style, equipped with Super 8 footage shot in a short span of time that delves into the world of Dawson City in Canada. Again, Stratman wants to make you think without easy answers or overt context. I sensed some political undertones with the creation of a particular item in the end and the use of music from a particular Chaplin film also felt timely, adding layers to the many that are already inviting. Watching a Stratman film is what they mean when film is described as an "experience" versus an A-B-C story. You practically experience someone's subconscious edited together, complete with DIY sound recordings and unexpected shots that look like grainy paintings, yet seem so haunting and oddly captivating. Like the final film of the program, I couldn't wait to think about it more and for me, that's the sign of a great experience and I'm convinced Stratman is taking the medium in places it needs to go. Every time I see something by this director, I feel like applauding for her audacity to approach documentary film-making in a way that is enlightening and difficult to digest in one sitting. Can't wait to rewatch *Optimism* and see what is taken from a second viewing.





Our bodies, ourselves, our prison? Melika Bass's *Creature Companion* is a wholly original beast in its own right that made me uncomfortable and consistently intrigued me the longer it went on. There's something dark beneath the imagery that is hard to define, and that's a good thing. It's ineffable in a way that I think made some viewers consistently question Bass' intent, and I felt that same curiosity too. What's potentially difficult to wrestle with is the idea of intention not being spelled out as the images are presented to you for the first time. Again, Bass wants us to think in the moment and after we leave the theater. Throughout the entire film, pieces are presented and the thrill comes from wanting to see how they fit. It's also a showcase of interiority and primal sexuality without necessarily calling attention to its themes directly. Part of me likened it to *Dogtooth* without the catharsis (or maybe there's a quick release of spit to indicate otherwise). It was a rejection of a lot of what we're used to, from the encased shelter of the suburban home as well as the liberation of body and spirit. Like a lot of meditative works that test patience (in a good way), *Creature Companion* left me hypnotized, relaxed and shaken. There is clearly an anxiety to the graceful gestures of the two women that hints at a deep dichotomy about being a woman or simply being human in this taxing environment, a time and space that can take its toll on any psyche. While *Optimism* hints at an anxiety and complacent comfort contained in a town, *Creature Companion* does that with two women inside a domesticated space, eager for freedom possibly.

Again, a lot of these viewing experiences are so incredibly subjective but the latter two in particular really tore deep into me during a vulnerable time. However, the individual sitting next to me could not wait to get to his smart phone where Facebook messenger provides instant gratification and makes more sense in a straightforward transaction. Personally, I was moved and thrilled by watching true artists experiment with the form. Between moving this summer, losing / leaving a job a few months later, and trying to stay in tune with my need for rest and recovery, I haven't been as fully present with watching certain movies as I normally would be. But this program of shorts revealed a lot of emotions that I am eternally grateful for to have seen on the big screen. The first was about my need for sleep and dreaming in order to heal, while the latter two seemed to indicate that the worlds we live in are ridiculously complex, each with their own history and internal damage. The need to create thrives inside of me, but since it feels inaccessible lately, I am extremely

pleased that artists like the ones mentioned above in this shorts program exist to profoundly capture a lot of concerns and possibilities in ways that one rarely gets to witness. I can't go on record in saying that people will adore *Blue*, *Optimism* and *Creature Companion* in the same way I did since they are not traditional in any sense, but I feel like now more than ever, they are each vital in their own amazing way. You have another chance to experience them yourselves this Sunday at 1pm by clicking the link below or just put all of these titles in your subconscious for safe keeping in hopes of seeing them in any capacity down the road.

[Screened as part of the 54th Chicago International Film Festival](#)

