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Interview with Jon Gartenberg, Tribeca Film Festival



Light Plate

By **Gary M. Kramer.**

Jon Gartenberg had been curating experimental films for the Tribeca Film Festival since 2003. He previously curated film at MOMA. For this year's program, *Let There Be Light: The Cycle of Life*, Gartenberg scoured hundreds of submissions and winnowed them down to 13 films from Canada, France, Sweden, Russia, Italy, The United Kingdom, Finland, Hungary and America. In a recent phone interview, he talked about how he curates the festival's experimental film program.

Gary M. Kramer: How did you come up with the theme for this year's program?

JG: When I do this program, I get inspired. I want to bring viewers through a journey. The films are constructed to go through this passage—a whole progression. This year's program, *Let There Be Light*, is about the quality of the light. It's all about the vision, and seeing—by the light of the sun, the reflective light of the moon, and the eye of the camera—how this all relates to the cycles of life. The program covers a broad panorama from found footage films to animation and live action. It's about sensitivity to light and how light gives life. What the filmmakers are doing, and how they treat [light] thematically, differently, creates an arc. The first film in the program, *Sight* is about a filmmaker possibly losing her sight, and the last, *Look Inside the Ghost Machine*—captures images on film like ghosts. It's not monolithic.

GMK: How do you think these non-narrative films, which use sound, light/color, words, music, create emotion?

JG: Film is alternating images of light and dark. *Light Plate* is being shown in 35mm, and the filmmaker, Josh Gibson, used special film stock, and treated it. The industry dictates that films should have a plot and two main characters and follows them through a story. In this program, there are three films only with two main characters, and I pose the question: Why does a film have to have two characters in it? Why can't it just be expressive? In poetry, novels, and music, words can be used to express a feeling and a sentiment. [Non-narrative] films can touch us deeply, too. Sometimes people have a misconception that the experimental films have very narrow sense, but

it's a rich art form.

GMK: Several shorts I previewed were done in luminous black and white? Do you think that working in black and white enhances experimental short films?



Lunatic

JG: Some are black and white and others are in color. It's the creative decision of the filmmakers — what is their subject? What camera/format they are working with? They work outside the commercial industry to have the creative freedom to make what they want to make. You can't over-read the use of black and white, but for films dealing with the quality of light, and the contrast and density, it is important for these filmmakers.

GMK: What are your criteria for experimental shorts?

JG: The richness of the films is a tribute to the individuality—that the films are different. There is something organic in how these programs evolve, and it should be represented in a variety of style of films, filmmakers—more abstraction, more live action—a whole range of work.

GMK: How many returning filmmakers do you have in the program?

JG: This year has one of the smallest numbers of returning filmmakers. I don't pre-judge, but I include returning filmmakers like Félix Dufour-Laperrière to show the evolution of his career, and a new direction. A lot of narrative short filmmakers will go make features, but experimental filmmakers keep making shorts. There are a number of first timers, and younger filmmakers, like Taylor Dunne (*Corn Mother*), who is just out of film school as well as the older generation.

GMK: How do you think audiences respond to experimental shorts? Are they an acquired taste?

JG: I have had many experiences where people are confronted with these films and they don't have the vocabulary for it. They know they are seeing something very stimulating, different, and original. The other thing that's very important is that this program is within the context of the other shorts programs—it's not its own sidebar. They are all eligible to win the prize for Best Short Film. One year, an experimental film did win the Best Short at the fest. These are artists who make experimental films. They don't get shown very much, so to have it as a showcase in Tribeca is important.

Gary M. Kramer is the author of *Independent Queer Cinema: Reviews and Interviews*, and co-

editor of the forthcoming *Directory of World Cinema: Argentina*.