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SARAH BLISS: UNLESS YOU'RE LIVING IT

An Ordinary Day Film Festival, Stockholm, 2022

Sarah Bliss' *Unless You're Living It* is the portrait of a small town, Mount Forest, in rural Ontario, shown through street interviews with its residents, many of whom are itinerant or live on the margins of society.

But it is not a journalistic documentary. Bliss's interventions—jump cuts, undercranking, backwinding and double exposure, tinting and toning—confront the limitations and warped ethics of realist observation in the context of profound suffering and marginality. It is, in fact, through virtuosic sound and picture editing, and the use of a Bolex 16mm camera, that the film offers a sobering and critical depiction of its subject matter.

The film opens with streaks of drop-like vertical scratches on clear leader. The residual water stains of hand-processing glide past, revealing a man washing storefront windows. Figuratively and literally, filmmaker and subject labor in layers on the same frames. Their work of hands is for a moment joined together in doubled ablation of window and film.

It is the start of a new day, as "Mount Forest" announces itself in the storefront lettering. The sign serves as an establishing shot, orienting the viewer to a more nuanced, incidental revelation than a descriptive caption would have provided. Bliss lets the town offer its own name—a decision that shows the filmmaker's regard for Mount Forest and the dignity of its residents. This relationship is not over-determined but simply made visually available, asking gently to be noticed.

What follows is a collage of diegetic but asynchronous audio. Multiple stories unfold at once in the film's uncoupled sound and images. Other than a single word spoken simultaneously with an interview subject (listen for it), Bliss gives the entirety of the soundtrack to voices of residents and the sounds of their town. Like the town of Mount Forest, they speak for themselves. It seems clear that no one who speaks has been urged into discourse. Yet this leaves us as viewers in a more complicated, ethically charged position of knowing that we are hearing privileged utterance. At times the stories seem almost confidential, almost confessional. Are we witnesses, or voyeurs, or both?

Perhaps the oddity of street-filming with a Bolex in the 21st century has made the trust of these interactions possible. Bliss

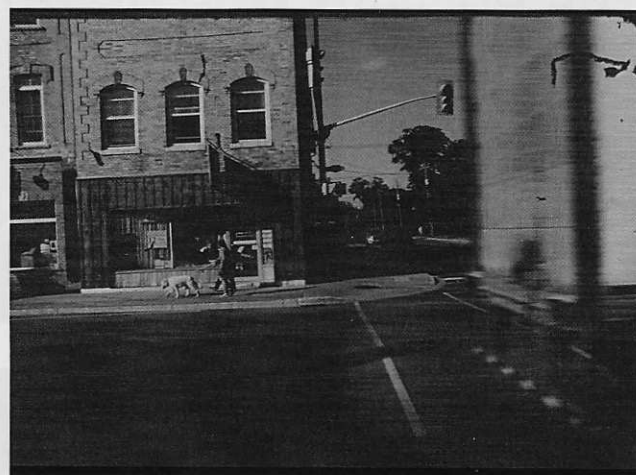
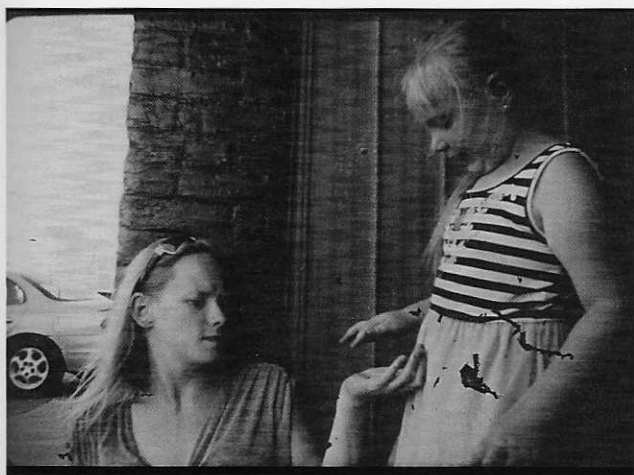
gets close to the people of Mount Forest in a way that perhaps only analog film and the short minimum focusing distance of a 10mm lens can provide—no telephoto journalism from the other side of the street. This technique yields many striking and expressive medium close-ups. In what may or may not be an innocent gesture, one man rubs his nose just after the narrator discusses the town's hidden drug problems.

A theme of social immobility recurs throughout the film, as Bliss counterposes pedestrians with street traffic. "If you're here and you don't have a car, you can't get out." We hear this dire pronouncement over a shot of an empty alley showing a late-model luxury truck pass by. Later, we look at a surreal advertisement showing an army recruit in digital camouflage walking straight out of a wall, offering more than one impossible promise.

Glimpses of Bliss and her Bolex in reflection offer brief reflexive markers. Just after the above pronouncement about vehicles, for example, she captures her own image in a driver's side car mirror. This is an allusion to the filmmaker's conundrum of perspective and privilege, once again communicated through understated visual metaphor.

Bliss is always toying with screens and reflections, at one point violently splitting the frame down the middle as the audio doubles over itself. Inside a sequence of fast edits, there are a few tantalizing frames of fruit-shaped candy inside a 25¢ glass dispenser. We then hear the doubled narration describe the "candy-coated" duplicity of this apparently "dreamy town" that is in fact plagued by drug abuse and homelessness.

At certain points, the lack of full image reversal causes shadows to flash forth. What some might consider a "flaw" in hand-processing compared to seamless lab development becomes, on the contrary, a critique of normative realist strategies. This play of shadow and light implies that a small town such as Mountain Forest resists easy visual capture. Likewise, the small black bits of emulsion damage that distort and cut across the frame are highly evocative. "He cut me here," someone pronounces almost inaudibly, as a slice in the celluloid crosses a woman's face. Through showing its own overlaid wounds, the film becomes



Sarah Bliss, *Unless You're Living It* (2019), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.

an medial interlocutor, alluding to real wounds that remain undisclosed, unseeable.

Over further narration of domestic violence, bursts of red and blue—the colors of blood and bruises—tone the frames. “My husband is abusive and we had to get out of the house,” we hear, followed by a rush of wind, a burst of color, and a cut to empty crossroads as the narrator continues, “I didn’t know where to take the girls.” In another sequence of splices and layers, we see the hand-manipulation of sausage going through a grinder. There is again dark irony and social critique offered when the color goes off its rails just as a Benjamin Moore paint store sign rather prominently reads, “The Colour Experts.”

Finally, The film’s heartbreaking titular phrase about the pain of existing on the street—“You don’t see it unless you’re living it”—is powerfully combined with a high angle shot through the texture of a window-shade down onto Mount Forest’s main thoroughfare.

Among the most haunting images in this short film is its final sequence showing mother and daughter, accompanied by a small electronic toy dog. Earlier, the mother gives a somewhat guarded glance while handling her mirrored sunglasses—an obvious metaphor for her ambivalence toward the camera. The daughter, too, appears shy. Eventually, however, she offers a fleeting gesture—a small wave—and eventually gazes back at the camera with a smile.

In its closing shots just before a *da capo* of the street sweeper, there is a curious geometry of expression created through eyelines between mother and child. This child, tending to her electric dog as they walk together, turns back to smile at her mother. Her mother leans around the bare brick wall to smile in return. And through the intervention of the camera, we are allowed into the exchange, if only for a moment.

DAVID BENDIKSEN