

On some landscapes and urban shots by Mark Lewis

I like the slowness with which Mark Lewis takes me through the landscapes he has chosen and I revel in the unlikely scenes he has built up. The former gradually gives physical density to my gaze, while the latter calls for reflection and awakens the visual memory, this library of images that we carry around in our heads and whose stacks fill up more or less intentionally. The means Mark Lewis brings into play for this double game between the body and the intellect are deceptively straightforward: a direct take, a camera that is still nearly all the time and an action that fits in naturally with the scenery. The films are short. Between two and six or seven minutes, very occasionally ten. But they are the end result of a lengthy process of photographing and researching a location and its background, as seen in the many fine **Location Photographs** published recently .

The visual material thus framed is then animated through often discreet, meticulously prepared and controlled actions, based on either real-life or imaginary situations and often referring to old painting and the cinema.

Thus in **Algonquin Park, Early March** (2002), the camera zoom gradually reveals a grandiose landscape in which, in an almost surrealist way, ice skaters are introduced into a small rectangle designed for the purpose.

This final scene inevitably reminds me of the famous painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. But I never tire of feeling my gaze become engulfed in the initial white screen, to my eyes becoming successively nothingness, sky and frozen lake.

However, I do a double take. These skaters are not impossible, just unlikely. Like the apparently providential passage of a boat on the sublime location where **Algonquin Park, September** (2001) was shot. In Mark Lewis's films, the actions are not chance occurrences, but based on a light, subtle, well-nigh invisible scenario.

This invisible quality may come from a form of mimicry, and hence from my no longer seeing, by force of habit. For I view vast quantities of images, on television, at the cinema, through advertising. And Mark Lewis's films are not far from being like them.

In **Windfarm** (2001), for instance, it was a while before I took in the incongruity of the scene: a horsewoman accompanied by her dog appears to inspect her set of windmills, the way a cow-boy might round up his flock of Longhorns in the great tradition of the American western. Or in **Airport** (2003), the comings and goings of vehicles on an airport strip seem to be building up to something, yet nothing happens - a common ploy in TV soaps - and it is only after a while that the repetition and overlapping rhythms tell me that the movements of aircraft and cars are following some artificial, computerized routine.

But this is not Hollywood, with the advertiser's fool's paradise of living happily ever after; there is no resolution with Mark Lewis. The camera in **Jay's Garden, Malibu** (2001), shot in an imaginary pornographic film location, explores the site, while catching nothing but the gaps and harmless conversations between the actors. And all of a sudden, this morally infamous place is turned into a timeless, endless garden of Eden.

When Mark Lewis takes the city as his set, nothing unusual seems to happen. Against a backdrop of buildings in some London suburb, children play with a ball in **Tenement Yard, Heygate Estate** (2002). There is some coloured washing hanging out on the nondescript balcony of an equally nondescript block of flats. There is nothing here to surprise anyone. But some characters appear, almost unnoticed, lugging some large white panels down the open corridor of the building. In the twinkling of an eye, the scene changes from being some crude document to being a painting, one that I can look up references for in 17th-century Dutch genre scenes or 19th-century English or German pictorial realism. It could be because Mark Lewis's films are slow to imprint themselves on my brain that they stay there so long.

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