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Connecting with Cinema

By Kim Skene, Program Manager, Tom Thomson Art Gallery



Still from the *Gabrielle*

Round table discussions are an integral part of how we work here at the TOM. Not only does this approach ensure that we are all engaged with the many great things going on at the gallery, in the community and in the world of arts and culture at large, it also guarantees that the very best ideas get brought to light and shared. And, it encourages us to share our enthusiasm - excitement is contagious!

Lately, we've been talking a lot about "audience engagement". Who is our audience? Who *should be* our audience? Has our audience changed? How do we engage them? And why would they want to engage with us? The online Oxford Dictionary defines "engage" as to "establish a meaningful contact or connection with." The Gallery's commitment to audience engagement is reflected in our mandate to "connect people to art." But what does that really mean and how does that translate into some of the programming that we offer?

For me, right now in the midst of Reel Festival planning, that means connecting people to film. Film contains many different art forms: language, dialogue and performance; music and sound; lighting, graphics and special effects; cinematography; production and costume design. Being an amalgam of the arts, Cinema is accessible to a wide audience, appreciable by everyone. Cinema consciously acts as a reflection of ourselves, for better or for worse, and often provides social commentary and provocation; ambitious films scream for social change, subtle films aim to share a conscience. Films can educate us, anger us, and make us laugh, or make us cry. Movies can enlighten, captivate, transport and entertain us. And at varying times, we are all the appropriate audience for these many levels of engagement - as my Scene, Netflix and Amazon accounts, can all attest to.

A good film offers a unique and affecting narrative with memorable images along the way. A great film envelops us completely in an immersive experience, and as an audience, we are blissfully unaware of its various components. A wonderful film, does all this, and then, makes us want to share it with others. Alone together, in the dark of the theatre, we share the same experience, take the same journey, but perhaps arrive at a slightly different conclusion, or an altogether different destination – and that not only connects us to the film, but in the dialogue that ensues, allows us to connect to each other.

In conjunction with the Toronto International Film Festival and as a member of its Film Circuit - whose mandate is "bringing Canadian and International Cinema to light" - the Gallery, through various film programmes and presentations, brings the best of Canadian, foreign and independent film to the region that would otherwise not be available to area cinephiles.

This weekend, the TOM presents Owen Sound's Reel Festival at the Roxy Theatre, where we will be screening seven of these wonderful films. There are two domestic films that will surely delight based on their Canadian-ness alone. Two documentaries will profile some recognizable faces and voices, but surprise us with their untold stories. A special Belgian film will ask some tough questions about love, life and death – all to a Bluegrass soundtrack, no less. And, two indie-American films will showcase new talents and veteran geniuses. There are Oscar contenders, toe-tapping soundtracks, beautiful cinematography, smart dialogue and award-worthy performances. We will laugh, cry, react, agree and disagree. We will be transported, captivated, challenged and entertained. We invite you to come and connect with us, and some great Cinema, this weekend at the Reel Festival.