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FILM

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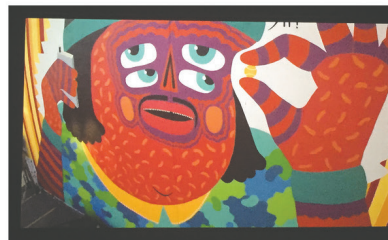
FROM ABOVE: The First NYC Drone Film Festival

by Anna Gurton-Wachter

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At the Director's Guild Theater press pavilion, I hear people speaking Japanese, Spanish, Italian, and German. To my left a conversation in English about how the US government is inhibiting this pilot's artistic talents with overly conservative drone restrictions. The pilot excuses himself to walk the red carpet where flashes and news cameras abound. He pulls a young stylish man into the spotlight and declares the young man the "pioneer" who first enlightened him to the worlds of cinematic beauty made possible by drones. This young pioneer is Randy Scott Slavin, the founder of the first New York City Drone Film Festival. I seem to have entered an alternate drone reality.

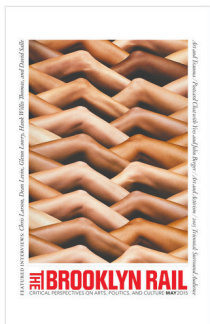
Leading up to my attendance at the NYC DFF, I spent some time trying to decipher the intentions behind the festival. On the website Slavin is quoted as saying, "I'm tired of drones being synonymous with questionable legality and FAA regulation. I want to celebrate the art of aerial cinematography." Is that what drones are associated with? I know I have always associated drones with war and politics, power and disassociation—with privacy and Amazon's robotic future. This perspective is not absent from the festival, with some drone pilots referring to the linguistic negative association (is anything ever *only* language?) and one film called *Our Drone Future* which plays up drones' more sinister involvement in surveillance and violence. Additionally the festival includes a short presentation on the future humanitarian ways we will use drone cameras: to monitor deforestation, to survey ecological crises, and to act as first responders.



Graffiti City.

While Slavin seems to be imagining a future drone cine-paradise, I'm off thinking about the past. How often have people attempted to capture aerial point-of-view shots before, and what makes using a drone different than these previous methods? Is it simply agility and speed? Or altitude? I'm picturing the opening shot of *The Shining* or even further back to Vertov's *Man With A Movie Camera* superimposing a camera over an entire tiny city. Can't we celebrate all aerial cinematography without isolating the drone?

The festival is split into several categories, which Slavin describes as having emerged naturally after submissions were in. Some categories seem more intuitive, like "x-factor" or "architecture" and others are a little more difficult to define like "proximity" and "travel" (what is travel if almost all of the films are shot in strange locations?). The rules are that each film must be no longer than five minutes and must be shot at least 50 percent with a drone. The "x-factor" category starts us off and it is thrilling and beautiful, with magnificent stunts of people bike riding on craggy rocks and tight-rope walking between cliffs. The category is well matched to the medium, with the way the performers must surrender some amount of control mirroring the way the drone operator must let the camera go off on its own. One overlooked gem, Shaun O'Callaghan's *Yasur Volcano*, even involved getting closer and closer to an active volcano as it erupts. The risk and beauty are so intense that I'm a little disappointed when the winner is announced and it's the band OK Go, for a music video. Don't get me wrong—it is a beautiful, Busby Berkeley-style, humans-as-patterns kind of production, but it feels a little bit like a letdown that the film that seems to be the biggest budget commercial venture wins. It's been made clear that a democratization of the drone equipment is being imagined, but it is still an extremely expensive enterprise. I start to realize this is not the last

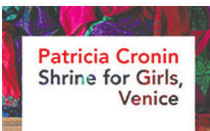


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moment of the festival where I'll be thinking more about money than I want to be. At many points I feel like I am watching a car commercial or a commercial for a resort getaway vacation. A really well-made commercial, but still a commercial.

The other thing that starts to happen as the festival progresses is that I begin getting more and more nauseous. Of course! Do you know that feeling when you go to see a movie in 3D and it's clear that the filmmakers want you to really feel the reason why they needed to make it in 3D continually showing people leaping off of cliffs and small particles flying towards you? But a movie couldn't be made up *only* of such reminders because you would start to get really nauseous and overwhelmed. I start to wonder if I was at a festival that was only fish-eye lenses, say, or only black and white, if I would start to get similarly overwhelmed. Even at documentary film festivals I sometimes start to crave fiction. The NYCDF is long. I am trying hard to continue to see the films with a freshness and attention that they deserve, but it isn't just the duration that is exhausting me—it's also that the same types of shots are shown over and over again. Everyone seems to have the same ideas about what would be great to shoot with a drone camera: buildings with points on the top, lone bicycle riders, and cars driving, people skiing or mountain climbing.

I start to think about the early days of photography, when people were trying to prove that taking a picture was worth doing, that it might even be considered art. These pilots seem to love what they are doing and be genuinely excited about the medium and you can feel it. In one film a pilot says to the camera that shooting with the drone makes him feel almost as ecstatic as the day his kids were born! This group of pioneers (almost all men, I feel inclined to point out) are undeniably having a great time. I'm a little bit jealous, sitting in my seat, kind of bored, wanting to fly. And there is something sweet about these guys accepting awards who are mostly unaccustomed to being in the position of making an acceptance speech. Several award-winners awkwardly thank Slavin for bringing this new community together for the first time. Are they pilots, directors, or cinematographers? I'm still not sure.

I start to think about Busby Berkeley again. Before he was orchestrating swimmers into patterns for his films he was organizing military troops into coordinated marches for entertainment. It's not a coincidence that he went from military choreographer to visual pioneer—both jobs involved seeing everything from above. Whatever Slavin may say about freeing drone cinema from connotations of militarism, it's also not a coincidence that the films that stand out at this festival embrace and work with the power dynamics inherent to the art form. *Superman with a Gopro* takes the iconic superhero's point of view as he saves and flies above us lowly humans, while *The Fallout* hovers eerily above the abandoned Chernobyl site. The drone seems to unlock the inner dominating superman in many a cinematographer, freeing a certain tendency to view the human world with condescension. Another stand out in my mind is *Graffiti City*, a meditative exploration of murals in Montreal, which makes me feel like a fly on the wall somewhat amused by the colors painted there but equally interested in just being in the air. *Graffiti City* is also the first film that makes me wonder—is shooting this with a drone necessary? But then I realize that the murals are flat and the drone makes them feel more three-dimensional, shifting and pressing up against all the ways we might look at art. It's a counterpoint to all the shots that seem to press down from above, this film that seems to add depth to a previously flat surface.

Shortly after the festival ends, I race outside to get some much needed air. In midtown, the large skyscrapers dauntingly look down on me. A few days later I see an announcement for an art show at The Knockdown Center in Queens where sculptures are being created that are being made specifically for drone cine-viewers. Is this the newness and creativity I am searching for? Will these artists get closer to answering my question: what does it mean to use a drone rather than some other method of getting high?

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