

A conversation with Étienne Lacelle



Étienne telling and listening to stories at Canal Lachine

A red winged blackbird calls as if asking a question before dropping from the near by branch to cut through the air over the softly drifting canal and perch effortlessly on a piece of decaying world jutting out of the waters edge. It teeters like an ancient shattered spear. A line of ants strategically move a molding crumb between bottle-cap, glass shard and tree root to make way toward the sun setting over their impossibly small labyrinth of drifting chemical trails...

*Oh your back great! No, no, I was having a wonderful time watching you work in the moment like that. In truth I was filming you from back here... something rustles in the bushes and a ray of light bounces off the curvature of a hidden lens... (*Note: This was written to remind Etienne of a time when we had met in person to talk, though the interview was conducted remotely through electronic mail)*

- Interview by Daniel Crawford (Aug/2020)



Still from: *Racine / D'une opaque épaisseur sonore* (2017) <https://vimeo.com/205148235>

Ahhh here we are at the canal, tucked down by the shore. Is your rock comfortable? Oh yes thank you for letting me sit on your skateboard, it is an excellent piece of mobile furniture. No, please go ahead, I'll wait here with my drink and thoughts while you hop down the embankment to help a smoker in these distanced times...



Quarantine

What have you been working on over quarantine?

Man... that's a good question ! The lockdown blurred the horizon of my more elaborate film projects. I've been working on a feature film for a while, but now that wasn't going to happen soon. I decided to come back to the basics : a camera, a day and a vision. I started to make a film a day and posting them on social media. You could call it instant-cinema or ephemeral-films, as the films only live for a few hours in the torrent of content flowing on these online platforms.

How has your creative process been effected? Did your access to space and in person collaboration effect your process?

For sure ! I think to try to create a piece every day trained my creative impulse. Had to try it out to see if the idea worked. Some days were better than others... but it also taught me to confront my fear of being in front of the camera. In the beginning, the only subject matter I had access to was me. I had to point the camera inward for the first time of my life.

Going to school and sharing ideas was the best haha... I also realised how much of a social enterprise a graduate program is. I am curious about online teaching but there is nothing like in person brainstorming and crits. The facilities I miss deeply too haha !

Does this work respond directly to isolation? (Are you being creatively influenced by the situation generally or addressing its influence through the subject matter of your work) Explain?

That's a good one... Maybe the audience would know better ! But I think it does respond directly to isolation because it was also a way for me to communicate ideas and feelings to my little audience.

We were all isolated, communicating to our family and friends through screens. When I started the videos, the feedback was great. People loved it and it made them feel better about all this. That was fuel to continue doing it.

How does your Vlog relate to your other works? Is it self contained or do you see it growing into a feature or short that could be played in festivals and galleries?

I am always questioning myself on the new paths cinema is taking. For me, the Vlog is the same as other projects, only compacted in a very short creation time. It's like working on a little piece of ceramic every day. Maybe one day the mosaic will be interesting... who knows

One thing I like about the Vlog is the direct communication with the audience. You are your own channel and don't depend on juries or galleries to validate what you do. You post and then focus on the next one. I see it as a training ground and an opportunity to nourish an audience that might come along for longer projects.

Stills from Étienne's 'Eshenlshell' Vlog on Instagram (2020)

Influences and Inspiration:

What draws you to a subject? How do you find subjects of interest within the world and within yourself? How do you use the camera to explore this meeting point?

Man... I am always so fascinated by the origins of my interests. It is one of the most puzzling questions for me. Why are we interested in certain things and not others? We have no power over what interests us ! But we can cultivate our interests and see where they take us. I think documentary filmmakers or photographers have a little instrument inside their gut, guiding them towards characters... stories... I think it's about curiosity and a will to capture something worthwhile on camera. In a way, you always think about a future audience and what they would want to see. The camera for me is the perfect excuse to create a connexion with strangers. Then this captured moment as the potential to express something universal.

Is your work inspired by other art forms? Which? Do you use other works to think through your own projects? (Are films/books/music/paintings/sculpture of other artists catalysts?)

I think the strongest influence is music. Music is so abstract, pure feeling. I often use music to dream on film ideas. It can set the tone for new cinematographic worlds.

What are you listening to right now?

Summer vibes : Eleventeen Eston – Indian Blue <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JhfuaJIKo8>

What are you reading?

Brave New World – Aldous Huxley

What is a movie you have seen recently that left a deep impression?

I recently watched Beau Travail by Claire Denis and wow... a real coup de grace... so stylish !

Portrait of the artist as a young lens

When did you first start making videos and movies?

When I was about 13 skateboarding with my brother J.

What were some of the early influences in the way you made your work?

The early influences were skate films, especially Mind Field by Alien Workshop. Check out the intro on Youtube it's amazing!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySB0IA9hZ3k>



Gilbert (2012) <https://vimeo.com/54484640>

When did you feel like you had made your first intentional work? What was it?

I think my first intentional work was a documentary portrait called "Gilbert". I grew up in a suburban neighbourhood surrounded by a private golf course. There was always this weird separation between the Golfers and us. They would miss their shots and hit our windows, they were rude etc. When I grew up, there was this outcast guy, half bald always dirty, that would scavenge the lost golf balls in the woods and sell them. We were scared of him. But when I got to CEGEP, I had to make a documentary portrait for class. And I spent an afternoon with him, Gilbert, and got to experience his side of things. It was amazing.

Current project and ways of making



*My understanding you began your practice making more documentary work, but from the pieces I have seen such as *les Beiges* and *En el tumulto de la calle*, there is a strong and evident presence of the author's gaze. Watching them, I feel the presence of an inner landscape being reflected in the framing, colour and rhythm of the pieces, how does this relate to your new fiction project?*

Thank you Dan, I think my new project "Condamné au temps" is the project where I claim the most authorship with the world being created on screen. Of course there is elements of reality contained in it, but this time I want the freedom to explore with no boundaries or attempt at representing the "real world".



How is this presence (your gaze) shaped in the different parts of the creative filmmaking process (conceptualization, pre-production, shooting and post production)?

I think the best part of a documentary experience is the ability to adapt. Now I am planning a script, but on set I would like to let things happen, as if we were shooting a documentary. I love immersion and intimacy in filmmaking.



What excites you about your latest project, what was the spark of inspiration, and what is the enduring fuel that you feel will carry you to the end?

Damn that's a good one... I think this new project is really a culmination of my life and worldview so far... It is apart of me ! I'm in no rush, it will continue to evolve and change as time goes by ;)

"Condamné au temps" (2020) <https://vimeo.com/311240837>

Proust Questionnaire

Do you have a recurring dream/nightmare in your sleep?

Nope.

Best places to “accidentally” bump into you?

Canal Lachine

What historical figure, living or dead, would you most like to have dinner with?

Diogène de Sinope

If Hollywood made a movie about your life, who should play you?

Colin Farrell

If you could reincarnate as a plant, which one would you be?

Weeping Ground

If you could be texture, what would it be?

Fur

Which superpower would you like to have?

Capture video with my eyes

Do you believe that alternate universes exist, and if yes, what universe are you currently in?

I don't know.

Is there any artist that you would like to share your studio with?

Richard Mosse

If a wizard ambushed you in the park and made you choose, what category of food would you give life and be forced to keep as your best friend?

Merges sausage

What is the oldest piece of art that you have kept of your own creation?

My baby book

What is the most bizarre thing that you've ever done that most other people probably have not done?

Paint warhammers