

A REVIEW OF ALBERT KISH'S SHORT FILM "THIS IS A PHOTOGRAPH"

Do pictures really speak a thousand words?

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Albert Kish, the Hungarian-Canadian film director has managed to encapsulate the universal feelings of alienation, initial discomfort, hope/relief and freedom among immigrants in his 10 minute short film/documentary "This is a Photograph". The short experimental film uses a simple formula of music, voiceover and snapshot images (taken by Kish himself throughout the years) and a splash of colour to explain and showcase a European immigrant's first five years in Canada.

In 1964 Albert Kish joined the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as a film editor and soon after, in 1967, he joined the National Film Board of Canada where he stayed for a distinguished amount of time in his career, directing and editing over 30 films — one of the first being 'This is a Photograph'. Released in 1971, the documentary was one of Kish's first nominated short films, showcasing his photography, ingenuity and personal experience. The documentary opens with a

black and white photograph of two parents holding their child with, what I found to be, quite eerie music, followed by a voiceover of a teacher in a languages class, teaching English. It goes on to reveal the protagonist's journey, captured in solely black and white photos, with a wash of watercolour — added in post-production — from travelling on a boat overseas, to apartments and close-ups of cafés, grocery stores and classrooms. Kish uses humour and insight to reveal the protagonist's reaction to the country and environment he accepted, and the Canadian customs and habits he tried to adapt to. In the beginning everything seemed strange, adjusting to new settings, scenarios, ways of life, and getting accustomed to the initial 'Culture Shock'.

First coined by Kalervo Oberg (1960), he explained culture shock as the consequence of strain and anxiety resulting from contact with a new culture and the feelings of loss, confusion, and impotence, which are due to loss of accustomed cultural cues and social

rules. It implies that the experience of the new culture is an unpleasant surprise or shock, partly because it is unexpected and partly because it can lead to a negative evaluation of one's own place in society and happens especially when individuals have totally faced a new culture, such as first-generation immigrants.¹

In my opinion, the music score by Alain Caver was unsettling and jarring at times, which although I found unpleasant, helped increase this idea of culture shock throughout the piece. It helps to bolster the themes of alienation, panic and foreignism, and I thought the inclusion of similar sounds and melodies to polish folk music/polka song was felicitous. The score works cohesively with the rest of the film, which is important when exploring such a widely experienced topic. I enjoyed the fact it comes from an immigrant's first-hand perspective. The polka music is almost used to pay homage to Eastern European immigrants and the concept of uniting them together. The voiceovers that run throughout—provided by Ronald A. Javitch and James Carney—include a mix of English, Polish, German and various other languages that filter in and out, almost a Pidgin English, allowing for a further

¹ L. I. Dongfeng, "Culture shock and its implications for cross-cultural training and culture teaching.", *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 8.4 (2012) 70-74.

sense of community and recognition of other nationalities.

As someone who grew up with immigrant grandparents and was brought up in between two cultures - Greek and British, I must agree with one commenter on the video, Lois Segal, who said, 'Anyone who has been an immigrant can identify with this film.' Despite being a third-generation immigrant, I still felt a sense of validation and relatability. It is certainly a film my family as well as other immigrants from different backgrounds - especially the generations above me - can resonate with. Although the film focuses on and perhaps caters more to immigrant audiences, I still think that it's a film that all people can enjoy and learn from, as it's not too long or heavy to get through.

The entire, quirky, composition of images does do a fantastic job of creating a sense of familiarity and nostalgia, and is a pleasure to marvel at, from the snapshots of foreign bakeries, butchers, and communities of immigrants sitting together, or with one another outside, posing with/in front of cars and western products/commodities. I believe the reason it was so successful is because it comments on and explores the shared experiences of those migrating, such as citizenship tests, going to English language speaking lessons, reciting the Oath of Allegiance, and socializing with other immigrants of your own heritage. Kish has not only summarized and paid homage to the

immigrant experience but also created such a saturated sense of community in what is basically a 10 minute slideshow. I would say it's definitely worthy of its win for 'Best Theatrical Short and Best Sound Re-recording'

at the Canadian Film Awards in 1972, as well as a place in Canadian Film and/or Culture studies.

REFERENCES

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