

Acropolis Cinema presents



May 29, 2018 ~ 8:00pm ~ Downtown Independent

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Intrepidly excavating the far reaches of pop culture and the darker corners of the American unconscious, Los Angeles-based filmmaker Michael Robinson has over the last fifteen years produced a sizable catalogue of singularly strange and intoxicatingly affecting short-form film and video works. Working largely with repurposed footage sourced from a variety of sources both recognizable (music videos, vintage television programs) and vaguely familiar (instructional videos, PSA clips), Robinson, through a shrewd blend of music, memory, and dark humor, manages to unearth something miraculous from these otherwise mundane materials. Filtered through his at once playful and incisive eye, these inherently nostalgic trappings take on an unexpectedly sinister dimension. Tonight's program, Robinson's first solo show in Los Angeles in seven years, covers over a decade of digital work, and includes the local premiere of his latest, the highly acclaimed *Onward Lossless Follows*. Total running time: 76 min

In Conversation Michael Robinson with Z.W. Lewis

The following article was originally published by the Brooklyn Rail, Dec 17-Jan 18

Z. W. Lewis (Rail): A few of your films have been gaining awareness outside the usual experimental film crowd. What has the experience of "going viral" been for you?

Michael Robinson: Oh, have I gone viral? I don't know. I feel like the work that I've had online that's gotten significant play hasn't broken through into actual internet fame or anything. I did share a clip from *The Dark, Krystle* on Instagram that then got turned into a meme briefly. That was maybe getting millions of views, but there was nothing attaching that to me or to the film or anything. It was just like an "Alexis is drinking, TGIF!" kind of thing. That felt pretty weird because I was like, "What the hell, can't I get something out of this?" But the nature of making this kind of work is that it's not really going to make any profits. I don't want to spend time thinking about how to make the most out of something like that. I feel like it would be great to go viral with videos, but I still feel like the headaches that might come with that are significant.

Rail: Why do you think people gravitate toward *Light is Waiting* in particular? That's the one with the most views on your Vimeo page.

Robinson: Yeah. I think maybe the way that the beginning moments of that film are unaltered is pretty easy to get into. I mean, you are essentially just watching TV for two minutes before [an aggressive flicker effect] kicks in, and I think the sort of joke of it is so easy and obvious. You know, just the kind of pulling apart of the dumb sitcom is accessible enough. But I also think people's relationship to that show, whether they know it well or not, is kind of specific. It's a pretty satisfying thing for people to experience—seeing something that squeaky clean and aggressively banal turned on its head. I mean a lot of people seem to think of that as a pretty psychedelic druggy film or something? The joke of *Full House* becoming an acid trip is appealing in some way. I don't think the psychedelia in my films is all that related to drugs at all, but I think just in terms of the pairing of that material with that treatment is a joke that people get. Also, that was on *Artforum's* website, and I know it gets a lot of use there still, so it's just a matter of when I put things online and what stuck and what didn't.

Rail: There's a very specific way those early videos look—especially *All Through the Night* (2008) and *We All Shine On* (2006). There's a texture like having the camera too close to a CRT television, and so you get those scan lines. Is that a particular texture that you want to come back to?

Robinson: I guess the experience of being close to a TV like that usually would mean you're obsessing over something or have recorded something off the TV, or are trying to find something in an image that I think can lend a level of urgency or maybe perversion to film. I spent a lot of those years staring at a TV, playing video games, or watching the same movies over and over again on degrading VHS tapes. In some ways the aesthetics of older TVs maybe does feel kind of emotional in some way.

Rail: Your films are also very musical. The films themselves kind of follow the rhythm of a song, and they usually have some sort of crescendo. Do you have this sort of rhythm in mind when you're starting a project, or does it naturally fall into place with your material?

Robinson: I think that falls into place as I edit. I often start with more of a feeling that I want to encircle than a rhythm. Something like *These Hammers Don't Hurt Us* which has lots of little pieces coming out of darkness and a sort of more open moaning on the soundtrack. That came about where I had many chunks and versions and slowly moved things together to see what created a kind of forward momentum. And something like in the new film *Onward Lossless Follows*, which also has a lot of distinct sections, but they're longer and allowed to be themselves.

Rail: Can you speak about narration and the wild stories in your most recent work? I'm thinking about *Mad Ladders* (2015), *Line Describing Your Mom* (2011), *If There Be Thorns* (2009), and *Onward Lossless Follows*.

Robinson: I tend to think of the work as narrative from the get-go. I feel like the emotional build of the film only happens through having enough sense of narrative that there's something at stake. I get a lot of inspiration and satisfaction from narrative, and that seeps into my work pretty directly. I like the idea of having the semblance of a narrative without actual characters or plot that carves out the feeling and the emotional thrust of storytelling. It comes out of editing and gravitating towards specific moments or specific lines of voice or text. The ghost of a narrative happens in the films through the process of figuring out the image and the sounds, too. I knew I wanted *These Hammers Don't Hurt Us* to feel like Liz Taylor taking Michael Jackson into the afterlife, but I didn't know how that would come about.

Rail: *Onward Lossless Follows* is a strange title. Would explaining it take away part of the mystery here?

Robinson: I mean, I started with the title, which is often the case. A title will arrive from wherever, and I'll sit on it for a while until a given film kind of feels like it belongs. I guess there's two ways in which you can read it. There's "*onward lossless will follow*" meaning that I can keep going because the future will be better. There's also "*onward lossless follows*" where "follows" is more in the social media sense—sort of submitting to the present as a way to get out of it. That's probably the more accurate interpretation.

Rail: What's the source of all the astrology talk in the beginning? Where'd you find that?

Robinson: The preacher? That I found online—I can't remember his name. He was like a radio, a preacher out of a church in LA in the 70s and 80s and his sermons are all archived online, but I had heard that one in particular while I was driving across country. I think I was in Tennessee and was just totally struck by how strange the mix of religious anger and all this talk of Venus and what felt pretty anti-science and anti-astrology. I listened to a couple of hours of various sermons, but none of them had anything that really spoke to me in that way, so I just used this one and edited out most of the religious details.

Rail: I remember that "Stranger Danger" clip that you used very well. The text conversation that comes after makes it both so disturbing and hilarious.

Robinson: Yeah, I mean, it's obviously not funny subject matter but the combination of cheap production value and non-professional actors is so charming and strange and kind of overrides whatever is happening. I can remember watching those types of films as a kid, too, and I mostly gravitated toward how weird the whole thing felt.

Rail: You used the flicker effect to a particularly violent degree here, but not as one of your crescendos, like whenever it's used in *Light is Waiting*. What's your relationship to the flicker here? Why institute it in this film?

Robinson: Generally, I feel like it's a way to add a level of overwhelmingness and chaos to a part of the film. Often that does occur as more of a crescendo, but it sort of arranges various parts of the storylines in *Onward Lossless Follows*. I like the way it starts with the flicker and then returns half-way through for a while and shows up a little bit at the end. It felt more like one of the many pieces that pops in and out and slowly forms a relationship with what's around it. I don't have an exact "the flicker means this" kind of definition.

Rail: I like to imagine *Onward Lossless Follows* as almost a Western. You have a lot of desert traveling shots, the horse at the very end, a couple of guys doing manual labor, and America's "Horse with No Name."

Robinson: I like that. I've been living in LA for a few years now, so I feel like I have spent a fair amount of time going out to the desert. The spirit of the love story that takes place, that kind of spacey Western feeling, and the preacher talking about drought and outer space also feels like a Western.

Rail: I'm kind of surprised this is your first time using stock video footage in a film. That seems like something you would gravitate towards, and here it's used to a cheesy end, like to show a cartoonish version of celebration. People ecstatically staring at their laptops and clapping.

Robinson: I wasn't aware you could browse so much stock video online. I was instantly amazed at how much there was of this specific thing, particularly women at computers ecstatically celebrating. I mean it is a pretty gendered thing, there are definitely lots of businessmen doing similar, but it's not the same throw-hands-up-in-the-air celebration. With them, it's way more fist pump: "Yo bro, I did it!" It felt like a weirdly dark and commercial ceremonial thing. Usually these are geared towards the idea of business success, or money coming in, or getting the deal in some way. That combination of person-computer financial success felt really dark to me. I imagined them as the choir or the audience of the preacher's sermon. ♦

Coming Soon to Acropolis:

-In the Intense Now (dir. João Moreira Salles)—June 12, Downtown Independent

-Mrs. Hyde (dir. Serge Bozon)—June 27, Downtown Independent



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