

Immunity System as Embodied Documentary: Steve Sanguedolce's *Dead Time*



Dead Time (2005)

Kalli Paakspuu

What I would really like to do is to make a film that would cure hang-overs....A film you would want to put in your toolbox. A film you could eat if you had to. I'm interested in the notion of a medicine, of a kind of cinema that could be used to heal ailments.
-Steve Sanguedolce (quoted in Hoolboom, 126)

In a Canadian artisan tradition, Steve Sanguedolce's *Dead Time* (2005) conjoins documentary to avant-garde film practice in a candid surveillance of urban

drug subculture using immune system theory (Jerne 1985) to a network-body. Nobel prize-winning immunologist Neils Jerne discovered that our body's immune system reflects ourselves, "then produces a reflection of this reflection": both images give rise to distortions that enable a recognition of non-self (Jerne 1984, 19—20). *Dead Time* collapses the "us" and "them" and regulates itself through a "semiotic excess" (Fiske 1989) of naming as a critical means of maintaining bodily coherence (Haraway). "The network theory differs from other immunological thinking because it endows the immune system with the ability to regu-

late itself using only itself” (Golub 379). Acquaintances, hairdressers, addicts-in-recovery sought out cinema priest Sanguedolce with no holds barred stories. Their confessions, recorded by Sanguedolce in a makeshift booth, became compelling backstories to a kaleidoscope of scratched, hand-processed tinted film, surround sound electronica and silent film reenactments. From the heart of Toronto *Dead Time*’s hard hitting anti-drug message has at its core a radical conception of human connection.

An obsession with home movies led Sanguedolce to be the family documentarian. Twenty years ago at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario, he immersed himself into the personal documentary ethos and optical printing of the “Escarpment School” that included Jeffrey Paull as the teacher of Phil Hoffman, Carl Brown, Mike Hoolboom, Gary Popovich and Ric Hancox. “Rhythms of the Heart” (1990) followed the break up with his girlfriend and was described by Sanguedolce in an interview by Mike Hoolboom: “First we shot ourselves working together, then we started shooting everything—drinking, fucking, sleeping, crying, laughing—everything that lovers do.... We both held the camera, both equally vulnerable” (qtd. in Hoolboom 123). Like Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak in their artist video, “In the Dark” (1983), the filmed performance questions the conventional morality of sex as an act that is private, to be hidden away and censored. Blending autobiography with the paradoxical, a later collaboration with Mike Hoolboom produced “Mexico” (1992) which started out as a film about love, but ended up addressing a traveller’s inability to see anything but where he’s from—because home is packed in the suitcase with the underwear and shaver. *Dead Time* takes autobiographical testimony into a fiction with medicinal agency; the filmic excesses regulate an immunity system that makes us self-aware.

The titular, *Dead Time*, refers to the jail time custody before trial—anywhere from days to years. Jail life and “making it” or “losing it” become transitional zones in a filmic hypertext where marriage partners are interchangeable cyborgian monsters that break down private and public spaces (Haraway 218). The poetic revelations of eight year heroin addict Wendy (Anna Myszowski) and her sister Julie (Amber Patterson), a visual artist who experimented with ‘bennies’, amphetamines, speed and weight-loss pills, collide with confessions by Mark (Tim Bolen) and Reg (Chris Welsh). The dissolve of body inside and outside enacted in sun drenched residential neighbourhoods, hospital beds, jail cells and dark basements has an immunity effect where the body is not clearly organic against an exterior not-self (Haraway). A nervous laugh quickens to graphic violence. Transmagoric distortion precipitates rec-

ognition of the non-self through a stark juxtaposition of unspoken and throbbing emotion, drug euphoria and autotopographical meditation. Normativity is questioned and yet marked.

After *Smack* (2000) which, like *Dead Time*, was filmed and processed in Sanguedolce’s basement, the director gave in to the bizarre demand to open his studio for “confessionals”. Sanguedolce recalls “the four subjects were people I knew and they basically came into my studio and just told me their life stories.... I never asked them questions” (“Artist’s Talk”). The inescapable sameness in their narratives and their interchangeability became pathways of unspeakable traumas that fit together like a puzzle. In a Canadian documentary tradition of reenactment that includes National Film Board productions such as *Les Ordres* (Dir. Brault, 1974) and *Talk 16* (Dir. Lundman and Mitchell, 1992), Sanguedolce’s *Dead Time* takes the documentary beyond research for a drama: he incorporates the original confessional voices, their intonations, stutters and pauses into the dramatic and musical core of a cinematic experience. Monologues collected over four years are transformed into conversations between characters unknown to each other; yet their journeys cross and cross-reference one another.

The film’s opening credits state: “The events you will hear are true and told by the people who lived them” and “interpretively presented as the characters Mark, Wendy, Julie and Reg.” After staccato guitar plucking, the first monologue is spoken over shimmering black and white images of water—hand processed to cobalt blue alternating with copper red.

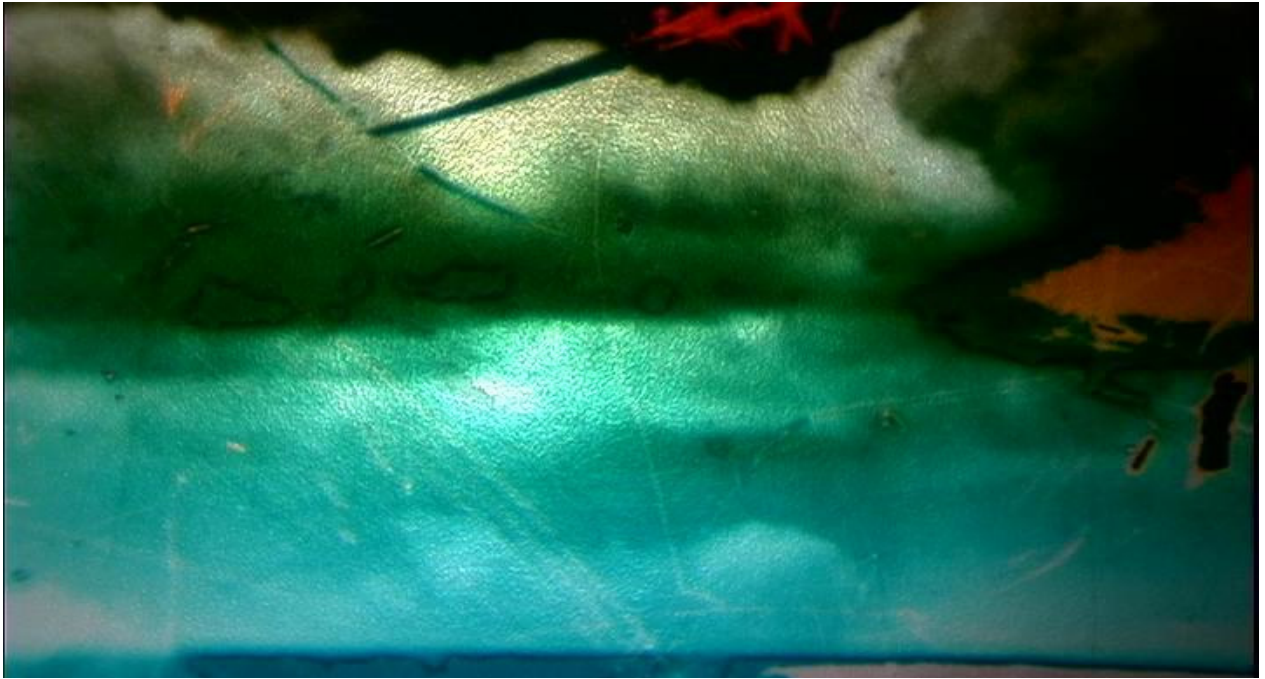
Mark (VOICE OVER)

And every once in a while there’s a life buoy just when I’m drowning.... I wasn’t afraid to grab on and clean up my act.... It was a war of attrition and drugs are a very powerful adversary (Dead Time).

Portrait stills of Mark and Wendy are followed by the couple staggering on the curbside, hailing a ride. In the back seat of the sedan the couple nod off in a drugged slump and Wendy’s monotone voice carries the backstory.

Wendy (VOICE OVER)

That’s when things kind of got ugly. They got worse before they got better with him. I used to think I was gonna die.... I used to do, you know do a really big hit, and I’d sit there with tears coming down my eyes. I wasn’t a happy junkie, that’s for sure. (Dead Time)



Dead Time (2005)



Dead Time (2005)

Wendy and Mark become a “married couple” framed in domesticity or on the move. These powerful stories are made more expansive and potent by the fact that they are neither acted (as in the voice over), nor written. The presence of other marriage partners and life traumas are acknowledged through comparisons and differences that negotiate other meanings by an immunity system which recognizes a non-self. Sanguedolce found that throughout years of collecting interviews any eight people would have weird and striking similarities: “Everyone tells their own story but Mark and Wendy the couple who were married off at the top, they have never met in life” (“Artist’s Talk”). *Dead Time* is heavily voice-based, but the filmmaker does not allow the words or the rhythmic pulsating score to dominate. Referring to the style of his earlier films, Sanguedolce describes the symbolism: “The images aren’t literal, they’re quite abstracted, but they speak of what’s inside[...], I think that’s what the landscape work is doing: it’s taking the outside and moving it through the veins” (qtd. in Hoolboom 123). A scopic lens frames, composes and candidly witnesses incest, murder, rape, theft, incarceration and death which is reiterated in the breaking rhythms of breaths between words and ambient music.

The characters’ actions invite viewers to reassess and renegotiate their own understandings about the drug underworld. As with Errol Morris’ *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) the film’s open text is a public stage where viewers improvise a position on the abuse before their eyes and then revisit these earlier perceptions. Sanguedolce, also the sound designer and co-editor (with Jeffrey Paull) for *Dead Time*, assembles a critical civic dialogue where dichotomies blur and the audience must re-interpret.

Characters become post-human bodies where social and ethical boundaries are monitored. Mark’s doctor sends him to the psychiatrist for treatment for substance abuse and the psychiatrist tells him his problem is depression. Later, after his marriage has failed, he phones his dad from a foreign country after bouts of drinking and drugging. Dad’s words “Come home!” are synched as spoken words in a brief moment when silent film illusorily becomes talkie. Over scenes of Mark pacing in the mental hospital Julie’s voice over describes a parallel desperation: “the only thing that keeps you a singular person is your integrity” (*Dead Time*). The character narratives overlap and converge as human palimpsests and their individual disengagements accept “others”, or outright reject them. Words are flushed with pleasure and pain in a visual and aural language that separates the inside and outside (Kristeva 61). The represented body becomes a material abjection

of psychic distress, wherein that which repels also attracts very strongly.

The technological gaze of *Dead Time* exudes horribly fascinating places of choices made and foregone: the camera’s views, the trans-human marriages and the surrounding emotions are washed by a phantasmagoria of the painter’s palette where character self-affirmations become sites of euphoria.

Julie (VOICE OVER)

Sometimes you can take the most heart wrenching, dismal situation and perceive it as part of a process of evolution, of resurrection through death or despair.... (Dead Time)

Sanguedolce’s *Dead Time* makes us question the basic conditions and needs of human entitlement. Like a call and answer pulsating in green, yellow and red - *Dead Time* intensifies the horror of addiction. Here the “other” side is a sun baked hell of limitations where beauty and disgust coexist, attract and repel like a bad drug. A mesmerizing underground antidote, *Dead Time* is made more powerful through a critical intervention by its immunity system discourse. Sanguedolce obliges us to identify as citizens of that other place of punitive or sentimental fantasy, if only to recognize that the cyborgian monster is a dissolution of its separation from ourselves.

Works Cited

- Fiske, John. *Understanding Popular Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989.
- Golub, Edward S. *Immunology: A Synthesis*. Sinauer Associates, 1987.
- Haraway, Donna. “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse.” *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. Ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick. New York: Taylor and Francis 1999.
- Hoolboom, Mike. *Inside the Pleasure Dome: Fringe Film in Canada*. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2001.
- Jerne, Niels K. “The generative grammar of the immune system”. *Bioscience Reports* 5, (1985): 439-451.
- . Nobel Lecture, 8 December 1984. “The Generative Grammar of the Immune System”.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982..
- Sanguedolce, Steve. “Artist’s Talk”, York University, Toronto, 24 October, 2007.
- Terauds, John. “The best kind of filmed downer.” *Toronto Star* [Toronto] 5 March, 2005: G9.