

BRIAN GANTER / The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Binner

During a rare moment of repose in the 2008 Canadian feature-length documentary *Carts of Darkness*, the camera stands at a roadside lookout-point on the edge of the curved road leading up to Cypress Mountain, gazing outward from the slopes of the North Shore. The vantage point of the camera's view is familiar to any touring visitor or urbanite who has set out from Vancouver to nearby Cypress for an afternoon of winter sports. This particular gaze has become a tourist destination in itself. It directs our eyes to the immaculate top floors of the expansive Vancouver downtown, merging, on the West End, into the forests and foliage of Stanley Park, framed on the left by the grandeur of Lion's Gate Bridge.

The view is predictable, clean, and camera ready, free from obstructions, and painterly.

Yet the full enjoyment of the tourist gaze we may usually experience is blocked. Sitting between us, the film audience, and this picturesque cityscape is the main protagonist of *Carts of Darkness*, "Big Al." Al is at the centre of a community of homeless North Van binners who serve as the film's subjects. To clarify, the "binner," a collector of cans and bottles found in trash and recycling bins for income, is to be distinguished from the " dumpster diver" whose primary object is the pursuit of food for subsistence—a subculture portrayed with equal intimacy by the French documentarian Agnès Varda in her acclaimed 2000 documentary *The Gleaners and I*.

Most of the subjects of *Carts of Darkness*, all of whom are men, describe themselves to varying degrees as "homeless" not by accident or misfortune but by choice ("getting away from my wife and children"), or by principle (avoiding the "9-to-5" life). In Heideggerian terms they are "dwelling" in order to "build" rather than housing themselves in a "building" in order to "dwell."¹ The film dives full-on into the intricacies of binning, from the mundane aspects of rooting through area suburban neighborhoods—some of the wealthiest in the city—for cans and bottles to fears of police or homeowner harassment to the thrill of a large payoff day ("Canada Day" we will not be surprised to discover is the most lucrative binner day of the year). However the main focus of *Carts of Darkness* is not binning but its relationship to one of this small community's more eccentric and extreme pastimes: riding shopping carts at recklessly high velocities of up to 60 or 70km/h down the long, steep streets of the neighbourhoods of North Vancouver.

The film is shot and voiced by its director Murray Siple, a North Van resident and Emily Carr University grad, as well as a former snowboard videographer and sports film director. Personalizing the documentary, Siple

¹ Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," *Basic Writings*, ed. D.F. Krell (London: Harper Perennial, 2008).

makes his way slowly into the film in stages, first in the form of disembodied voice-over, introducing his subject matter against the background of rolling skies and clouds of the mountain ranges that back the North Shore. Shortly thereafter he makes his appearance in the film as embodied participant. Reflecting at Seylynn skate park, Siple links the cart riders to the “outlaw” ethos that once attracted him to skating and snowboarding. Then, as Al, hunched over the shopping cart handle, feet straddling the siderails, cowboy-style (“Yeehah!!”) rides his cart down the steep grades of Mountain Highway and Keith Road, Siple jumps full-frame into the film, following in his van, leading the shoot, and clocking cart speeds, which he dutifully discloses at the end of each run. Gradually as the film goes on Siple becomes the binner community’s trusted interlocutor, and eventually confessor to the audience, disclosing to us the roots of the link between his interest in this *nouveau extreme* sport and the auto accident that abruptly ended his days of snowboarding.

If the response of the festival circuit is any measure, *Carts of Darkness* is already being seen as one of the stand-out films of 2008 BC cinema, and for some, of Canada as a whole. The acclaim surrounding it could easily be chalked up to the timeliness of its subject matter. On the one hand the encroaching 2010 Olympics have mobilized Greater Vancouver’s urban transient population, housing resource coalitions, and First Nations and other land-rights advocates. On the other hand the financial crisis sweeping through North America, driven by housing foreclosures, has ever-so-crudely

put matters of class and economic vulnerability into the media foreground. One of Siple’s interviewees seems to be inadvertently referencing the larger financial cataclysm as he outlines his philosophy of binning: “The only true value in this society is the value of a can. A beer can is worth a dime. And a pop can is worth a nickel. It’s the only value that’s stable, and that’s my business.”

Carts of Darkness does not stake any interest in addressing the larger issues surrounding the politics of social displacement and economic dispossession facing the binner community. Its focus instead is on their joys and pleasures. As a result, mainstream reviews have largely celebrated what they see as the film’s realist, humanizing qualities. However, the visual style of the film, which includes oblique POV shots (those from under the wheels of racing carts, for example) to a near-farcical conversation on the dangers of alcoholism, led by Al while wearing a large-font “Budweiser” t-shirt, tend to subvert the realist, empathetic tone present in other such social realist and humanizing “people on the streets” documentaries—films like *Streetwise* (1984) or the classic *Dark Days* (2000). Culture critics, from Bahktinians to Žižekians will likely interpret the film as a homage to the carnivalesque culture of the working poor, a tribute to the radicalizing qualities unleashed by an act of pleasure, desire, and *jouissance*—the joyful hijacking of that transcendental signifier of consumer culture, the shopping cart—an act that further underlines the bidders’ refusal of the coded certainties of the 9-to-5 life—

not to mention scaring the hell out of casual Sunday drivers.

Putting pleasure and affirmation back at the centre of our politics is a theme revisited with increasing frequency in cultural theory.² It has also returned in a more colloquial idiom in Barbara Ehrenreich's recent book *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*,³ a book which in part implicitly chides the contemporary left for its somber tones ("If I can't bring my iPod to your revolution I don't want to be part of it"). But hasn't this become the equivalent virgin-whore dualism to which political cinema, storytelling, and image-making has allowed itself to be railroaded into: either melancholic realism or joyful carnivalesque?

Makers, viewers, and critics of film alike should move beyond such reductive dualisms. In this light, the reference points for considering the significance of a film such as *Carts of Darkness* should be neither the moralizing traditions of traditional realist documentary/cinema vérité (mourning and melancholia)

nor postmodern political *jouissance* and the rupturing effects of bodies that matter (the collective joy and pleasure generated by hijacking and subverting the signifiers of consumer culture). Another way to enrich our interpretation of *Carts of Darkness*, is to put it in a frame of those films that have addressed the vastly unexplored links between sports and social marginality: from economic exploitation to racism to disability and its discontents.⁴ *Hoop Dreams* (1994), *When We Were Kings* (1996), *Murderball* (2005) are only a few of the stand-out documentaries of the past few years that have all touched on this linkage in productive ways. Standing above all of these fine films however is the non-documentary classic, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, director Tony Richardson's take on marginalized working-class youth enlisted to run cross-country for the traditionalist reform school in which they find themselves collectively imprisoned. If *Carts of Darkness* were to have an unacknowledged and somewhat distant cinematic cousin, I'd like to think that film might be it.

² For example, Lauren Berlant, "Critical Inquiry, Affirmative Culture," *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (Winter 2004): 445-51.

³ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008).

⁴ Dave Zirin, "What's My Name, Fool?" *Sports and Resistance in the United States*. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005).

