

## Shooting Himself in the Mirror: The Obsessive Cinema of Alan Zweig

Curated By Kevin Nikkel

*A curatorial essay by Kevin Nikkel to accompany retrospective screening of the films of Alan Zweig at the Winnipeg Cinematheque Feb 11-13, 2011*

There is a great moment half way through Alan Zweig's film *Lovable* that grounds his mirror documentaries. He is setting up for his trademark on-camera video diary, and in the process he tests out the view of several different types of mirrors. Some mirrors are more ornate, some simple. After selecting the right one, he takes out a Windex bottle and begins to clean the mirror. In his voice over, he is talking about relationships, and his own desire for companionship. It is at this moment, when he is being most vulnerable about his own life, that he fittingly needs the cleanest mirror to see himself best with his camera, and we can see him most profoundly.

Zweig's films have played festivals and art house venues across the country, including numerous screenings at the Winnipeg Cinematheque. His most recent film, *A Hard Name*, earned him a Genie Award in 2010 for best long form documentary. This retrospective focuses on his four mirror films. Three are well known to the Canadian independent film scene, and one is a never before screened alternate take. Each film focuses on an aspect of human experience through interviews with characters that relate to the particular topic. In *Vinyl* (1999), Zweig interviews record collectors to provide an understanding of the implications of compulsive behavior on human relationships. *Vinyl: The Alternate Take* (1999) is made up of out-takes from the original feature, probing deeper into the habits of record collectors. *I, Curmudgeon* (2003), a collection of interviews with grouchy people, explores how people respond to the disappointments of life and the hypocrisy of the world. *Lovable* (2007) contains interviews with women who are not in relationships, and asks how can a person handle the human desire for companionship, during the times of life when you are single.

During the interviews, we hear Zweig sharing his thoughts/feelings with the interviewee, setting up an expectation of intimacy. He is putting them at ease, offering follow up questions that lead to incredibly personal answers. He calls out questions on the topic, subtly pushing individuals to reveal more about themselves. While each film has a pretense that takes us from interviewee to interviewee to build his exploration of something like record collecting, the personal core of each film is the autobiographical reflections of Zweig on human experience. One character in *Vinyl* begins to catch on that there is something deeper going on with the film:

Collector: Wait a minute, because we're getting off track. What is this film really about? Is it about music? Is it about records?

Zweig: No it's not.

Collector: Or is it about collecting?

Zweig: it's not about music.

Collector: It's not about music. Ok we're clear on that. If it's not about music what am I doing in it?

Zweig: 'Cause you're a collector.

Collector: Well, you see, I'm interested primarily in the music. If I weren't interested in music, why would I have the records?

Zweig: Well. Good question. Good question.

If the interviewees are asked to reveal a lot about themselves, Zweig himself goes even deeper to share his own struggles. Like a personal Greek chorus, his reflections take us beyond what may be a symptom or behaviour, such as the compulsion to buy too many records. His purpose is to get to the heart of the human experience and address his cravings for relationship and intimacy. He achieves this with his simple framing device. The central motif in these four films is his shooting himself in the mirror with the camera.

Watching these films becomes a bit like peering into a therapy session in progress. Zweig's questions are leading his interviewees to explore their humanity, but Zweig is trying to figure this out for himself as well. It becomes a mutual self help session.

In the movie *Vinyl*, Zweig suggests that the compulsion to collect is a diversion from his deeper social needs. In a scene with a record collector, who lives alone in an apartment crammed full of records, Zweig talks to him about how he really is a decent guy and should buy some shelves, clean up the place, so he can have people over. Zweig knows the collector is too insulated at home and must be lonely. Zweig can say this because of his own personal revelations about his own anti-social behaviour. These personal revelations give him the grounds to exhort others on the same issue.

The personal terrain of the film *I, Curmudgeon* (2004), deals with disappointment. Zweig reflects on various incidents of his life, and his aspirations for a film career that have left him melancholy. He interviews other people who are also known for being pessimists and people who can't help but tell it like it is. Throughout the film he is trying to figure out why/how he doesn't fit in to a society he feels is full of hypocrisy. He is confused why he cannot help himself by speaking up to complain about what he feels is an obvious problem with the world. *I, Curmudgeon* is the epilogue to the *Emperor Has No Clothes* fairy tale. Zweig and the curmudgeons tell it like it is, but this leaves them isolated.

The other re-occurring theme for Zweig is the desire for intimacy. In *Lovable* (2007), he interviews many women for a composite reflection on his and their desire for companionship. Middle-aged women discuss how they handle the fact that they are single, and may remain so. As Zweig frames himself in a small round mirror to begin a new a monologue, he interrupts the sequence to place a small Bonsai tree next to the mirror. It was the last gift he ever gave his mother, who had died 3 weeks prior to the taping. As he proceeds to speculate on what he longs for in a female companion, someone like his mother, the Bonsai tree sits as a quiet symbol of an absent companion.

With *Vinyl: the Alternate Take* (1999), Zweig continues his exploration of record collectors. A second feature film of original content on the subject says a lot about the extent of Zweig's cache of footage used to make the original *Vinyl*. There are still moments of mirror reflections here, where Zweig explores his rough psychology of record collecting. Characters boast what is in their collection and their strategies and habits of finding vinyl treasures. Yet this second *Vinyl* film, of which Zweig says is "actually about record collecting", has some unexpected aspects to it as well. A blind man who collects records points out that besides appreciating the music, he values the tactile quality of certain vinyl. For instance, he really likes the inside beveled centre of the single *When you Dance* by *The*

*Turbans*. The film recognizes the artifact-ness of vinyl. A particular flat round black disk can carry tremendous significance to an individual. Filmmaker Atom Agoyan is interviewed in the film and talks about how a good part of his childhood record collection remains in Victoria where he grew up, because they belong to that part of his life and wouldn't fit if he brought them to his home in Toronto. He says, "Artifacts of a certain culture have most resonance when they're kept within the context that they were first unraveled in, or discovered in." *Vinyl: the Alternate Take* suggests that records are more than a source of music, but can be objects with particular meanings for the keeper and collector.

Zweig speculates while talking to a woman in *Lovable* that his film should be shown in high school health class for kids to see the true meaning of relationships and the reality of singlehood. If there were a list of films about the stages of North American adult development, his films should be added for essential viewing. Zweig provides a frank primer on how to face adulthood reality, free of the sensational content dominating consumer culture. Whether dealing with obsessions, disappointments and longing for relationship, Zweig's mirror films are distinct in their maturing style. Zweig evolves from the Lo-Fi grit captured on Hi-8 of the *Vinyl* films to the more polished *I, Curmudgeon* and *Lovable*. While his latest film *A Hard Name* loses the mirror diaries, his disarming interview techniques remain and are successfully directed to the lives of convicts. Zweig reports that he continues to keep a regular video diary of his life, hinting that there may yet be another mirror film to come in the future.

*Kevin Nikkel February 6, 2011*

#### *Background on Kevin Nikkel*

*Kevin Nikkel is a filmmaker and curator from Winnipeg. His films include narrative drama, animation and documentary. He juggles his time between filmmaking, parenting, and teaching part time.*