

Toronto: Wavelengths Preview — "We Do Not Care if We Go Down in History as Contrarians"

An early look at all of the short and feature films in the Toronto International Film Festival's most essential section, Wavelengths.

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The following review of Colophon is part of a larger article previewing the films at the Toronto International Film Festival's 2018 Wavelengths program.

Dorsky's newest film is intended to serve as a coda to his monumental *Arboretum Cycle*, although it also serves as a coherent work in its own right. Seen either way, there is a remarkable coherence to this film that should certainly not surprise anyone familiar with Dorsky's limpid, formally exacting cinema. At the same time, for a filmmaker who has tended to restrict himself to series of present moments that hang together according to strictly cinematic logics – rhythm, composition, duration, and the like – there is something uniquely rhetorical at work in *Colophon*. This three-part film feels in part like an exegesis on behalf of a particular kind of filmmaking, as well as a particular perspective on the world.



The first part of *Colophon* is decidedly urban, and as a chronicler of the designs and patterns of San Francisco life, this is not new territory for him in and of itself. However there is an unusual emphasis on flatness, especially as reflected in digital signage. We see reflections of actual moving people and vehicles, but almost all of it is channeled through large-scale video monitors displaying ads. This results not only in disparities of scale, with large human images often looming over the actual living figures in the frame. It also coats much of the first part of *Colophon* in horizontal scan lines, as if the city (and the film) were being colonized by video technology. (In one key shot, we see a woman waiting on a street corner as she is emblazoned with an overlay of such digital images, and it feels like a visual bombardment.)

This is not to say that the digitized urban images do not have a beauty of their own. But it is a highly mediated beauty, sifted through layers that interrupt one another, clashing rather than harmonizing. This sets the stage

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for the second part of *Colophon*, which represents a return to direct natural imagery. Several things happen in this second part that are noteworthy, and that lead to this question of at least partial argumentation on Dorsky's part. First, there is the respite of getting away from the televisual and back to what we have come to expect from Dorsky's recent film work: exquisite cinematic examinations of flora, serving as opportunities for studies in light and space. But these initial expectations are themselves soon upended by *Colophon*.

In several shots, Dorsky introduces broad, all-over fields of color, hazy and indistinct. Very gradually, out of black, he fades in on an image that reveals a group of flowers or a patch of underbrush. (One such shot has hints of motion, which we come to recognize as bees traversing the meadow once the focus is clearer.) What is happening in these shots serves to echo the scan line shots in the first part of the film, as if to demonstrate that cinema can replicate the fuzzy patches of dots and lines that *is* digital imagery, and can do it with more control, provided one knows how to use its tools. The dominance of video is less a question of convenience than one of a generalized rendering of the visual world in standardized, repeatable patterns – “seeing between the lines” – that militate against wonder and discovery.

From there, Dorsky provides a kind of master class, displaying the multitude of ways that cinema can alter our perception of things. He employs slow fades-in, rapid differential apertures, time-lapse, light bleed onto the edge of the frame, and again, various patterns of rack focus that bring otherwise still phenomena to life before our eyes.

In the final part of *Colophon*, Dorsky shows us what appear to be expanses of algae on water, and the formal control with which he brings these visions to the screen is simply breathtaking. We see individual bubbles of aerobic respiration, behind which we see the water, and trees above the water reflected in the surface of the pond. In addition to the multitude of deep greens transmitted in these shots, they also communicate unexpected depth along the humblest of surfaces.

This is perhaps where we can take *Colophon* itself a bit more deeply, as postulating a philosophy of seeing. It's not just that things are more complex the more you look at them, although Dorsky's cinema certainly bears out that truism. It's that we are actively encouraged to see the world around us as flat, unidimensional, reducible to pure data. In fact, most of our dominant optical technologies are organized to encourage such cursory scansion. One could argue, as I think Dorsky's films implicitly do, that there is a unique richness to the cinematic image that reinvests the visual world with a depth and tenderness that other media cannot quite match. But more than this, *Colophon* is a three-part poem of protest that pleads for a particular form of sensual engagement, a look of love and investiture, over and above the instrumentalist glance. Dorsky shows us that time is what allows the world around us to return our gaze, to love us back.

