

FILM

The Quiet Man

Bill Horrigan speaks softly but carries a big reputation while making the Wexner Center into a leading (but sometimes locally overlooked) outpost in the world of avant-garde film.

by Charlie Toft

The film world is filled with all manner of extroverts and egomaniacs. In such a milieu, Bill Horrigan, curator of media arts at the Wexner Center for the Arts, stands out by not standing out. "There are moments when you sense a preternatural shyness in Bill, the feeling that he might be happier holed up in an atelier filled with books and smoke," says Sherri Geldin, director of the Wexner Center.

While Horrigan's low-key personal style is far from glitzy, he has retained the loyalty of dozens of artists, many of whom received a helping hand from the Wexner Center on their way up. "There's no question that our prominence in film and video emanates from Bill's presence here," says Geldin. In one curious homage, Orchard, a New York artists' collective, recently produced an exhibition inspired by Horrigan's relationship to artists he has promoted.

One of Horrigan's most rewarding professional triumphs resulted from one of those relationships. In 1995, Horrigan curated the video installation *Silent Movie*, created by the French filmmaker Chris Marker. "I think that's Bill's crowning achievement," says associate curator of media arts David Filipi. "It's far and away the most traveled Wexner Center-organized gallery show, and it's generated a lot of brilliant scholarly work."

Now in his 80s, Marker is known as a recluse who responds to requests for a photograph by providing drawings of his cat. He isn't a household name, but Horrigan believes Marker to be a titanic figure on the scale of Hitchcock and Godard. So it came as a gratifying surprise to Horrigan that they struck up a friendship. "This one time I was visiting him in Paris and I gave him a present of some sort," Horrigan says. "So he gave me a present, too, and actually gave me a picture of himself. I was speechless." He also persuaded this world-class artist to draw a cat to appear on Wexner Center T-shirts.

The last remaining member of the Wexner Center's original senior staff, Horrigan has built a film and video program at an arts complex whose signature feature has been its revolutionary gallery space and headline-

grabbing exhibitions within. And he's done it on a campus and in a city without real histories of support for avant-garde film.

And while a major exhibition can run in the galleries for months, and thus penetrate the local consciousness, individual films come and go almost daily. Even after nearly 20 years, it's not uncommon for people to express surprise that films are screened at the Wexner Center. After all, the prototypical offering by the media arts department is the sort of film that wouldn't even be screened by the Drexel, much less the average multiscreen theater. Typical fare is more like the monthlong retrospective of South Korean director Hong Sang-soo or the World War II-era documentary called *Hitler Lives*—written by Theodor Geisel (better known as Dr. Seuss) and directed by Don Siegel (who later did *Dirty Harry* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*).

"Whenever there's a focus group," Horrigan says, "there's always some information that sort of suggests people . . . aren't aware of what we're doing. You have to take it seriously because that's people's perception, but after a certain point it's baffling to me."

When the Wexner's three-year renovation was completed this past fall, most of the work and attention focused on the building itself. The reopening also brought, however, some changes in the film and video program. The theater was revamped with new lighting and seating for patrons, and the glass in the projection booth was brought up to current standards. "It was necessary after 15 years to replace things like the seats, and we took care of some of the design drawbacks that were present from the beginning, too," Horrigan says.

The major new initiative of the media arts department, though, is The Box, which debuted at the same time of the galley reopening. The small space with limited seating is a literal box just outside the gallery entrance, where videos run continuously during building hours. In March, the featured film was *el mundo no escuchará*—55 minutes of people in Bogotá, Colombia, singing karaoke to songs by The Smiths, a 1980s British rock band.

For the past two years, the Wexner Center has tried to expand its audience by presenting the Columbus International Children's Film Festival in early December. "The germ of the idea was as simple as: We should do more children's film programming," says Filipi. "But we didn't just want to do just old Disney films; we wanted to do something completely different that no one in Columbus was doing." The focus on international films—such as the Finnish film *Pelicanman* in 2005—gives the festival a Wexner spin while still providing a family experience.

Since 2000, the Wexner Center has been featuring retrospectives for many of the leading figures in independent and foreign cinema, which generally run for a month and feature screenings of the artist's films and an appearance by the artist (Gus Van Sant and Jim Jarmusch, for instance). "One of the ones people still talk about is the Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami," says Horrigan. "It was amazing because in a lot of people's estimation Kiarostami is one of the two or three greatest filmmakers working today, and we had him right after he won the grand prize at Cannes."

The Wexner Center has developed some film programming, particularly during the summer, that is geared toward a more mainstream audience.

"For the most part, they're more accessible films—or our version of more accessible," says Filipi. Programs of B-movies have proven popular, and the Wexner also has featured rock documentaries and "cool guy" actors, such as Robert Mitchum and Steve McQueen. "We expect it to be more popular than a series of experimental videos," Filipi says. "But it's not necessarily to make more money, it's just that it might be a way of getting people who have never been here before."

Geldin calls Horrigan "a rare creature, the quintessential Left Bank intellectual who found his way to the heartland and stayed here." His demeanor does connote sophistication and studiousness, but with the exception of a brief sojourn to Hollywood, Horrigan has spent his adult life in the Midwest.

A native of Chicago, Horrigan attended graduate school at Northwestern and headed to Minneapolis in 1981 to work in the film and video program at the Walker Art Center. In 1986, Horrigan went to Los Angeles to the American Film Institute's education department, writing, among other things, study guides about the recipients of the AFI Life Achievement Awards.

In 1989, two old acquaintances from the Walker came calling: Robert Stearns, who was the Wexner Center's first director, and Sarah Rogers, its first curator of exhibitions. Horrigan accepted the offer to become the media arts curator without any qualms about leaving the capital of film. "I had never been to California when I moved there; I had never been to Ohio when I moved here," says Horrigan. "Basically, it was the promise of the job: the potential of working at the beginning of a new institution. And it was pretty much a blank slate here in terms of our department. And that was pretty exhilarating, the challenge of starting a media arts program."

Horrigan's initial task was determining where it should fit into what he calls the local "media ecology," the range of arts events taking place in Columbus at any given time. "So the first years were extremely eclectic, because there wasn't a huge kind of art film exhibition scene here. There was essentially no kind of venue for older films; there weren't really many kinds of venues for avant-garde or experimental films. So there was a huge deal of things we thought we should try."

Horrigan also was instrumental in developing the Wexner Center's reputation as a venue for supporting filmmakers through its studio and editing facilities. "None of this was actually written down at the beginning, that we would do these things. But they said, 'If you had a media arts program, what are some of the things you *could* do?' And it's become clear over the years that two things we can do—and we do them pretty well—is basically run a film/video screening program and support artists through the art and technology residency program."

Dozens of snapshots of filmmakers who have availed themselves of the studio and editing facilities at the Wexner Center line the hallways of the media arts wing, a testament to careers launched and projects brought to fruition. Horrigan says the facilities quickly became well known in the film community because artists are trained to sniff out sources of support: "When someone works on a project here, we request an end credit that says, 'Support provided by the Wexner Center Media Arts program.' Media artists, people in our field, we actually *read* credits. And so people we never heard of would start seeing this credit and then contact us."

Despite the day-to-day work required to run the department, Horrigan makes time for a busy travel schedule and to write articles for magazines and retrospective booklets. "Bill works in the film area, which is a dream for a lot of people, but he's an academic and a writer at heart," says Ron Green, professor of film studies in the OSU history of art department. Horrigan also has curated gallery exhibitions that involve artists who work in film, such as the current exhibition by South African artist William Kentridge.

"Even though we have these four main departments in the Wexner Center, the walls between those departments can be porous in productive ways sometimes," says Horrigan, referring to the Wexner's media arts, performing arts, education and visual arts sections. "Because more and more people in the art world are working in moving image media, it makes sense that our

"In the Media," *wexarts.org*, July 2007

department would have an interest in facilitating that work being shown here."

Those who know Horrigan say that despite his shyness, he has an understated humor and strength of purpose that set the tone for media arts. "Bill has been the main figure in keeping serious film conversation going at Ohio State," says Green. "He really made the film and video department an equal partner in the Wexner Center's portfolio of offerings. He has credibility with artists and critics, and people like to work with him."

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