



courtesy Benjamin Ross Hayden

# Trans-human film returns for CIFF

An experimental, expressionist odyssey through the ethics of technology

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Local film producer and director Benjamin Ross Hayden has taken his recent short film, *Agophobia*, around the world and back. Hayden, a recent University of Calgary bachelor of film studies graduate, is returning for the Calgary International Film Festival, Sept. 19–29, before heading to Spain for the 46th Sitges Film Festival. He's already taken *Agophobia* through the 66th Cannes Film Festival and has just returned from the Montreal World Film Festival and Monterrey International Film Festival. *Agophobia* won Best Experimental Film at the 17th Rhode Island International Film Festival.

Hayden's short film *Agophobia* is set in the distant future, within a virtual realm. The 27-minute experimental film explores humanity's relationship with technology while following the RAM, a digital avatar, through different segments of the virtual world. Along the way the RAM encounters different avatars and aspects of the computer system.

"The RAM is the agent within the system that is pushing the system forward and acting within the system," Hayden says. "It is not the storage, it is not the memory, it is not the matrices that construct what it is, nor is it the circuitry that creates the fabric of the world."

As the RAM travels between sections of the system, it interacts and changes the world and entities it encounters.

The title of the film, *agophobia*, is a term that Hayden created for the film, a combination of different words to form a new meaning. The term means a fear of the past.

"The fear is of what ethics today are leading us towards that point," Hayden says, "those things which are changing us today with our behaviourism, our social colloquialisms,

how we interact with one another, how our perception of our environments have somehow been changed in the digital era."

The different regions of the virtual world divide the film into different parts which deal with different traits of modern technology. Hayden says the film deals with issues of obsolescence, digital duplication, technological hybridity, the obsession with social media and our own relationship with technology.

"What these characters are," Hayden says, "are personifications of these relationships that we have with technology played out in expressionistic ways."

Hayden used five of the realms from Theravada Buddhism representing hell, ghosts, nature, humanity and divinity as inspiration for the structure of his five techno-realms.

In developing *Agophobia*, Hayden was inspired by his classes with U of C film studies professors George Meinyk and Charles Tepperman — from expressionist performances in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* to ideas of harmonic resonant energy in Stanley Kubrick films like *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Barry Lyndon* — as well as the neuroscience work of U of C faculty of medicine professor Naweed Syad.

"I was interested in creating a sci-fi odyssey that was an immersive experience where you're really at the ground level looking around in this place," Hayden says. "And why there is more of an expressionist experience — something sonic, something synesthetic — is because my logic for the future was: would verbal communication not be obsolete by that point in the future? I feel that there would be a better way of communicating at that point. It was that kind of psychic relationship that I was interested in exploring."

*Agophobia* is screening at the Calgary International Film Festival on Sept. 21 during the Alberta Spirit series.



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