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## The Real Toronto

BY DAVID TOPPING



The *Real Toronto*'s hook is relatively simple. Filmed in the summer of 2005 by a now-24-year-old Russian immigrant nicknamed Madd Russian, it aims to show that "Toronto, known to most as a world class city has another side to it. This movie shows the reality of living in housing projects and some of the most run down areas in the city. This footage includes interviews with gang members, drug dealers and some of the realest street rappers in Toronto. From Scarborough to Etobicoke this movie will take you through hoods in 9 different locations to show you."

Unsurprisingly, discussion about the film exploded when it was released on DVD a year and a half ago. The Star, Globe and Mail, City TV, CBC, and many other media outlets covered it--Torontoist, too, had a **quick mention**--but attention and outrage both disappeared after a few weeks. In the months since, the video has slowly spread online, and can now be found in clips on YouTube or in its entirety on [Google Video](#) and some BitTorrent file-sharing sites. While *The Real Toronto* may have faded as a source of interest, its subjects--crime, poverty, gangs, and drugs--continue to see an unparalleled amount of attention from the media, from politicians, and from the public. While Toronto is an overwhelmingly safe city, progress towards making it even safer has been glacial, and problems persist two years after the media-appointed "Summer of the Gun" during which *The Real Toronto* was filmed. Precisely because of all of this, *The Real Toronto* warrants more attention, more consideration, and more scrutiny than it originally received.



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Structurally, the film is simple: each location featured (like Jane and Finch, Scarborough, and Parkdale, to name a few) has residents who serve as *The Real Toronto's* tour guides. Some of those residents are rappers, some are gangsters, and some are just residents. There's no narration or other commentary provided anywhere by Madd Russian; for the duration of the film he's invisible and almost entirely inaudible, preferring to let his stars do all the talking. As the film goes from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, it stays around just long enough to give some sense of the people and places in each location, before the whole thing quickly wraps up after sixty-something minutes.

The film's ethics get messy immediately. While the opening shot is a disclaimer that "This DVD is not meant to glamorize violence, its purpose is to bring awareness to some of the issues that people in certain areas of Toronto have to deal with every day" (a statement that echoes what Russian has said to the media since the film's release), the very next shot is of a masked man holding a huge assault rifle. Russian continues this technique throughout the film as a kind of editing style, cutting from something completely un-gun-related to shots of people brandishing guns, then back again. And then there's the matter of **the DVD's cover**--a lone bullet on cement that seems to completely contradict the film's disclaimer.

The idea that the film serves as a genuine account of life in Toronto is also troubled by the endless showmanship on the part of its subjects. Everything in *The Real Toronto* is always for the camera: people talk to the camera, show off for the camera, freestyle for the camera, hide from the camera. The second that the camera shows up, whatever is going on in front of it becomes mediated by it. When the guns do come out, they're always being shown off; it's never casual, it's always an event, troubling and surreal as it is. Amazingly, few documentaries do a better job of presenting the biggest problem with the genre: if a camera is there, how can what is being filmed be really real?

The complete lack of diversity of *The Real Toronto's* subjects also becomes clearer and clearer as the film goes on. Those on-screen in the film are overwhelmingly black and male. Though other groups are talked about (one guy boasts about a fight his friends had with "the Sri Lankans"), we never see them. Women are even rarer: the only ones we ever see, with two exceptions, are hookers.



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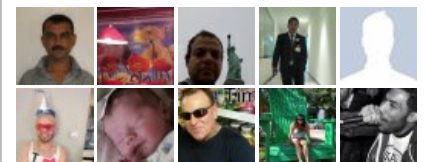


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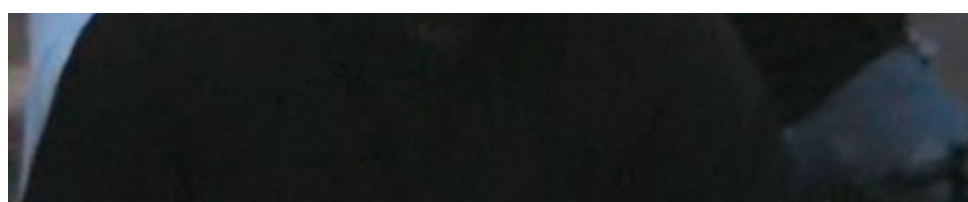
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The film's biggest strength and the reason why it is worth watching, however, is that it does something that is extremely uncommon in Toronto when it comes to high-crime areas: it lets people speak for themselves. To Madd Russian's credit, he lets the camera record endlessly as people talk, and keeps entire speeches in, often long enough to catch speakers dropping their guard.

Aside from the overwhelming importance of community that exists in any poor neighbourhood ("there's no 'I' over here," says one man), there is one message that is repeated over and over and over again, from a number of different guides in a number of different neighbourhoods. "If you ain't a drug dealer, you a baller; if you ain't a baller, you a rapper," one guy at Jane and Finch says, his friend adding, "niggas don't make money out here." At a different location, another says, "niggas ain't got nothing to do." Another one tells the camera that a lot of people are just "try[ing] to get the fuck out of here. Most don't, some do." In one of The Real Toronto's strangest and most eye-opening moments, a group of guys in Black Creek--the same guys who, two minutes before, were brandishing guns and joking about a superintendent who was pushed off the roof of their building--take Madd Russian to a government-owned community centre that has been shut down and abandoned for the past two years. As they point out the lock and chain keeping them out (pictured below), one demands, pissed off, "Someone tell us what the fuck we're supposed to do." His friend adds, "we trespassing, and we live here." Towards the end of the segment in Black Creek, another masked kid from a different group of guys brags about how he's a "gunner" and how he's destined for fame, while his friend explains, very matter-of-factly, "we got kids to feed, and we got dreams."



That, in the end, is the film's biggest dose of reality: there is an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and victimhood on behalf of all of the speakers, even when they or their friends are brandishing guns (or rapping about them). They aren't asking for pity, by any means, but that's the emotion that a lot of them end up drawing out. Of course, the circumstances that The Real Toronto's subjects are in serve as no excuse for crime, but the film does complicate the idea that any one possible solution (be it gun control from the left or harsher prison sentences from the right) will really do much to fix what's wrong when the problem is societal. There must be a middle ground our city can find between apathy--those who think that gang members should just kill each other off--and sympathy--those who think that it's not the gang members' faults, but that of our society. There must be a way we can start to chip away at the culture that is moulding good people into criminals.

After the DVD was released, Paul Nguyen of Jane-Finch.com [described the film's importance better than most members of the media:](#)

As a person who isn't involved with the gang life, but who lives in a poor neighborhood and sees things, these DVD's don't shock me. It's actually about time that these videos came out. It's a wakeup call to the media and politicians, to show them that a bigger problem exists in their backyards. Not that there are BAD people among the streets of Toronto, but that there are places in the city where people are left to defend for themselves. These so-called thugs live in really bad conditions, where education, money and security are not things taken for granted. We don't have dog walkers. We don't have parents that can buy us cars or send us to college. The guys, AND girls, in these videos are just expressing themselves. Some of them have busy parents working 2-3 jobs, so the TV and internet raises us. We're just copying the States.

Instead of branding these people as public enemy no. 1 to the city of Toronto, the politicians who REALLY want to help should see the bigger picture, and that's of a picture of a people in need. The politicians need to stop talking and start walking. These politicians should start by coming to the 'hood and taking a look around before they can start thinking of what needs to be done.

Though it may not intend to be, a "picture of a people in need" is precisely what The Real Toronto is. In the end, the film is an important text, one of the few of its kind, and the speakers ought to be listened to--not necessarily followed, just listened to--because they reveal the absence of any kind of dialogue in Toronto between richer and poorer residents. Whether the film's portrayal of neighbourhoods is accurate or not is up for debate, but what is unquestionable--what is really real--is that we, as a city, still have a lot of work to do. All images are stills from The Real Toronto.

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