
Tam Giles, Peter Wollen On Tina Keane's 'Shadow of a Journey'

"Shadow of a journey" begins, visually, with a movement of watery images flickering across the screen; and meanwhile, on the sound-track, a woman sings a gaelic song. Shadows on the sunlit water are identifiable as those of a ship's railings, a life-jacket, and one or two passengers. Evidently the film was shot from the ferry whose passage is causing the water to churn across the picture. The film locks into the viewer's continuum and the lilting song is complementary. The apparent situation is the familiar one of a journey during which the passing scene is registered but only partially engages the thoughts.

During a break in the sound-track the mechanics of the film can be more clearly appreciated: it is made up of a series of repeating sequences which are processed in such a way that the discreet frames are almost distinguishable; the separation of light and dark is exaggerated; and visually the result is a series of images which remind me of some abstract paintings. This is interesting but the effect on the eyes hovers on the border of discomfort. When the sound-track resumes, there is a dislocating shock; for what is now narrated is the traditional account, verbally transmitted by the female generations, of an episode which took place on the Isle of Harris some 130 years ago when a rapacious laird, with the assistance of the British Army, evicted thirty families from their crofts. The slight visual disturbance caused by the film now relates to the much greater one caused by the pathos of a story which is one tiny specific instance of the sum of misery caused by exploitation and greed.

The dislocation of one's perception from the real time continua set up by the film into the past of the historic episode is achieved by skilful timing and juxtaposition so that a single image (the water) is seen to belong to both film and story. It is that of the channel being crossed in the ferry; it is also the Atlantic which the evicted crofters had to cross in mid-winter to exile in Nova Scotia. Furthermore, as the narrator describes the flames of the burning crofts fired by the Red-Coats, the colours of the film change from greens to purples and pinks transforming the images so that now there is a resemblance to flames. The visual imagery therefore has a dual existence both as a record of a recent real time experience to which we can relate directly and as

a part of the story: it becomes, as it were, a bridge by which the viewers can cross, from their own personal reality, to that of others many years ago and imaginatively share in the horror of the experience.

The strategy of juxtaposition of two separate elements, one a specific focus, the other a continuum, is a familiar feature of Tina Keane's work. In "Shadow Woman" a recitation of the events of life for the immanent female was juxtaposed with a small girl who played through the sequences of hop-scotch as we watched. This game is as old as recorded history so as many generations of girls have played this game as women have passed through the shadowy life of the recital. Gradually the real child lost her identity and was transformed from an individual at the beginning of her life-adventure to an anonymous unit of repetitive history. In "Playpen", a pre-recorded video of females aged from 6 months to 80 years was juxtaposed with Tina Keane herself sitting in the playpen with a camera placed so as to pick up this scene for relay on a second monitor. By manipulating a mirror she was able to interfere with the camera's angle of vision and feed into the monitor the reflections she picked up with the mirror. The reflections were of course of ourselves and we became both observer and observed. (I was reminded of the last scene of Virginia Woolf's "Between the Acts", where mirrors were used to make the audience see themselves as part of the pageant of history. In fact, there seems to be much in common between these two women artists: Woolf also typically sets minute fragments of real lives against a continuum: e.g. "The Waves", "To the Lighthouse", etc.)

The full significance of Tina Keane's work does not lie in any of the separate elements but in the resonance of the juxtapositions she contrives. And I use the word "contrive" deliberately, for there is nothing random about the formal devices she deploys to effect her fusions. But these are not immediately obvious. They are there, but fastidiously understated. The burden is on us to pick up the clues and mentally and imaginatively effect the significant combinations. It is *what happens within our minds* which is important. Her work is a sum of magnitude which greatly exceeds the unassuming parts she puts together.

Tam Giles

AFTER SEEING 'SHADOW OF A JOURNEY'

1. What are films but shadows? Shadow-shows. "The proper name of my exhibition is *Lez Hombres* or the *Shades*; that's the proper name for it, for Baron Rothschild told me when I performed before him. We call it the Chinese show". The showman Mayhew talked to in 1853 wanted to put on a shadow-play with human figures instead of cut-outs, but the theatre cost too much to rent – a disappointment, it would have been "one of the most beautiful scenes in the world". According to tradition, the shadow-show was invented in the reign of the Emperor Wu Ti, more than two millennia ago. For so long the sight of moving shadows has been one of the most beautifullest.

2. What are films but journeys? There is a strange effect of movement in 'Shadows of a Journey'. The moving ship (its shadow) is stationary on the screen, but the sea across which it travels is moving. The sea is a screen which rocks and laps and the shadows thrown on it seem to float on an imaginary surface.

3. In 1969 P. Adams Sitney wrote a notorious article in which he defined 'Structural Film': "Four characteristics of the structural film are a fixed camera position (fixed frame from the viewer's perspective), the flicker effect, loop printing (the immediate repetition of shots, exactly and without variation), and rephotography off a screen". 'Shadows of a Journey' is fixed-frame, looped and re-photographed. It is tinted, it has a grainy texture, it changes time, it is reflexive, showing us the shadow of the camera which is shooting the film. Yet when I saw it, I didn't think of 'structural film' at all. In fact, it seems forced to mention it now, though it fits Sitney's criteria better than many films he and others have deemed 'structural'.

Photograph by Rose Finn-Kelcey.

4. The story of the Clearances and the sound of the song in Gaelic give the film a particular meaning. It is a link in a chain ("As I have heard from my mother as she has heard it from her mother") of women's unwritten memories taking us back into the historic past, itself a precarious journey. The '45 is at the far edge of memory, as the island of Harris is on the far edge of the continent, the last inhabited place. Even there the homes of the people were burned and they were driven out. We journey to hear of another journey, across the sea to Cap Breton, exile and yet further hardships.

5. "The horrible old days. . . It is, I think, better forgotten if one could do it". But she can't: the story is "indelible in my memory", anguist medicine does not know.

6. I said to Tina that it sounded as if the story was being read, and she replied that it is told in Gaelic: its speaker had to write it down to tell it in English. The story was heard and spoken in its own language, Gaelic, and to record it in English meant to deviate through writing and reading. Soon afterwards I met a friend whose family came from Cap Breton. His grandfather had fled there from the Black Hundreds. "He spoke three languages: Russian, Yiddish and Gaelic. He thought Gaelic was English because he knew they spoke English in Canada".

7. "The one good thing about Cap Breton was that you didn't notice the Depression". Art is one way of noticing hardships and beauty is one resource for combatting them, even the beauty of shadows, mere moving shadows.
Peter Wollen